

Watch: Priests should have option to marry – Archbishop Charles Scicluna

He called for 'serious discussion' on centuries-old celibacy rule

7 de enero de 2024 | [Mark Laurence Zammit](#) | 212

The Church should look into revising its rules to allow Catholic priests the option to get married, Archbishop Charles Scicluna told *Times of Malta*.

The time is ripe to “discuss the issue seriously” and “take decisions on it”, he said, adding that he has already openly spoken about it at the Vatican, but acknowledged it is ultimately not his decision to make.

“This is probably the first time I’m saying it publicly and it will sound heretical to some people,” said the archbishop, who is also a respected Vatican official.

“Why should we lose a young man who would have made a fine priest, just because he wanted to get married? And we did lose good priests just because they chose marriage.”

The centuries-old rule on priestly celibacy has been publicly debated for decades but local Church authorities had, until now, always defended it, insisting a priest’s life should be exclusively dedicated to the Church and his community.

It was optional for the first millennium of the Church’s existence and it should become optional again- Archbishop Charles Scicluna

In an interview with *Times of Malta* this week, Scicluna acknowledged celibacy still has and will continue to have a place in the Church, but said he learnt from experience that priests should also be given the option to marry, just like in Catholic Churches of the Oriental rite.

“It was optional for the first millennium of the Church’s existence and it should become optional again,” he said.

“A man may mature, engage in relationships, love a woman. As it stands, he must choose between her and priesthood, and some priests cope with that by secretly engaging in sentimental relationships.”

He was fielding questions about Catholic priests who secretly live in a romantic relationship while they publicly continue to serve their duties as priests.

Priests who have children

Some of them have been in a committed relationship for years and others even secretly had children from those relationships.

“This is a global reality; it doesn’t just happen in Malta. We know there are priests around the world who also have children and I think there are ones in Malta who may have too,” he said.

The 64-year-old archbishop and lawyer is no ordinary prelate. Apart from running the Church in Malta, he also serves in one of the most influential positions at the Vatican – as Adjunct Secretary of the Holy See’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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The Roman Catholic Church in its Latin rite is the only Christian religion that requires all its priests to be celibate – to abstain from marriage and sexual relations.

But it was not always like that.

For the first millennium after the death of Jesus, priests were generally allowed to marry and have children. It was in the 12th century that the Church definitively introduced the rule.

But it is merely a rule – not Church dogma – so it can be changed by Pope Francis, although the 87-year-old Pontiff seems yet unconvinced.

Vatican came close in 2019

The Vatican came very close to changing the rule in 2019, when the Synod of Bishops overwhelmingly voted to allow married men in the Amazon region to become priests to help meet the needs of the Church there.

But despite resembling a parliament of bishops, the Synod is not a decision-making authority and the final say on rule changes in the Church lies in Francis’s hands, who did not go ahead with the change at all.

The archbishop said, however, that the Pope is right in insisting such a change should not be about mitigating the vocation crisis. Vocation has everything to do with faith and a person’s relationship with God, and the rules should not be changed to merely attract more men to priesthood or to fill in the gaps.

Known in Church circles as the Vatican’s most respected sex crimes expert, Scicluna enjoys a respectable reputation among the Holy See’s highest echelons and is often summoned by

Pope Francis to launch investigations into some of the most high-profile, international abuse cases in the Church.

Look out for our full interview with Archbishop Charles Scicluna, out soon on timesofmalta.com

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