

Most Priests Happy with Roles

Bishops' Survey Finds Morale High Though Optional Celibacy Is Favored

Washington, D.C. —(RNS)— Two comprehensive, parallel studies sponsored by the U.S. Catholic bishops have strongly challenged several popular notions about the priesthood, but affirmed that most priests favor optional celibacy and artificial birth control.

Among the more striking disclosures were findings that priests' morale is high, most are satisfied with their priestly role, and while most believe priests should have the option to marry, the majority also believe that celibacy is essential to their ministry.

The two studies, one sociological and the other psychological, were formally released at a press conference at the U.S. Catholic Conference here.

While tending to support a claim by the National Federation of Priests Councils that the majority of the nation's Catholic clergy believe priests should be free to marry, the studies also indicated that only one in five would do so if given the choice.

The studies also asserted that Pope Paul's position on artificial birth control does not claim "majority support among the priests" in the U.S., and maintained that conflicts with bishops over authority are more demoralizing and frustrating than the celibacy issue.

At the same time, the studies tended to debunk several popular notions, noting that the exodus of priests is less than previously estimated, that priests maintain a "high degree of personal morale" despite growing tensions, and that only two in five priests who have left the ministry would return if given the option.

The two studies are part of an overall seven-part report scheduled to be presented at the Detroit meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops next week. The report will culminate four years of research at an expenditure of about \$500,000.

John Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia, who presided at the Washington, D.C., news conference, chaired a 14-member ad hoc committee of priests and bishops directing the studies. Other studies to be submitted are historical, theological, ecumenical, scriptural and pastoral.

The sociological study was directed by Father Andrew Greeley and conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. It included interviews with 5,000 active priests, 800 who had left the ministry, and 250 bishops.

Father Eugene C. Kennedy of Loyola University in Chicago conducted the psychological study using a sub-sample of more than 250 priests from the group used in the sociological study.

Paramount among the psychological disclosures was the finding that a "large proportion" of priests are psychologically "underdeveloped" persons who are often incapable of making full use of the freedoms available to them.

Also important were the indications that most priests who leave the ministry are satisfied with their decision and new life styles, and only 40 per cent

are interested in returning as married priests.

The sociological study pointed out that priests and bishops tend to disagree strongly on sexual morality and that there is a definite shift by priests toward favoring artificial birth control methods and more liberal church positions on divorce.

There is "little evidence," however, that priests are changing their positions in the areas of abortion and pre-marital sexual relationships, the study said.

On celibacy the two studies treaded much common ground.

The sociological research disclosed that "more than half" of the priests surveyed favor a change in Church policy while bishops remained "strongly opposed." Younger priests, 26 to 35, came out 84 per cent in favor of optional celibacy.

The study noted that an "overwhelming majority" of priests regard celibacy as an advantage to their ministry and would not marry. However, they feel that celibacy is not essential to the priesthood and that the lack of option is keeping many possible candidates out of the ministry.

Observing that restrictions on priests by higher authorities are "more apparent than real," the study suggested that basically the problem is not the exercise of authority but the fact that many priests with "underdeveloped" personalities have an "ambivalent and unresolved attitude toward it."

The psychologists indicated that the problem of "incomplete growth" among priests could be solved by delegating more responsibility to them and allowing greater freedom, especially in life-styles.

Psychologists, elaborating on

the two thirds of the priesthood that could be described as "underdeveloped" psychologically, said these have not developed full maturity. The marks of underdevelopment, they added, include immaturity, self-doubt, uneasiness about interpersonal relations, and a tendency to identify with the priesthood rather than as individuals.

Noting that such tendencies are not limited to priests, the psychologists indicated that the causes for the condition are essentially "isolation and protection from normal, socially developmental experiences," which curbed personal growth.

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POPE, HUNGARIAN TO MEET

Vatican City —(RNS)— Foreign Minister Janos Peter of Hungary, during an official visit to Italy, was received by Pope Paul VI in a private audience on April 16. According to Vatican sources, this was the first visit by a top-ranking Hungarian official to the Pope since the end of World War II.