

Bishop urges church to face tough questions

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

ARLINGTON, Va. — Bishop Matthew H. Clark, chairman of the bishops' committee on women, urged the church Nov. 29 to explore "fully and courageously" questions facing Catholics today, including those related to birth control, abortion, ordination of women to the priesthood and priestly celibacy.

The bishop also told women gathered at a national symposium sponsored by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Women in Society and the Church that in his view the local church should have some say in selecting its bishops.

"The church is most alive when she is expansive and inclusive, when she stands in dialogue with the time and the culture in which she is enfolded, when she searches for truth wherever it may be found," said Bishop Clark, who is also a member of the separate committee of bishops writing a pastoral letter on women's concerns.

The church is at its best when it "finds room for all manner of diversity, disallowing only those points of view or directions which deny central mysteries of our faith," he said.

Bishop Clark made the comments during a keynote address the first day of a Nov. 29-Dec. 2 symposium titled "The Wisdom of Women" held in Arlington, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C.

The church should be "slow to draw lines defining the spiritual condition of her members or to exclude people from her communion," the bishop said.

Nor should the church "decide complex issues before she has heard all appropriate voices in the community or before the issue at hand has come to maturity," he said.

Bishop Clark said that it was his understanding that "the practice of large numbers of Catholic people" is not in accord with official church teaching on birth regulation.

"In my opinion, that is unfortunate for all of us because it tends to separate bishops from the people and to weaken the teaching authority of the church," he said.

He said he was afraid the "gulf" between church teaching and popular practice

"depresses our capacity to address credibly other topics in the area of sexuality."

"People say more often than I would like to hear: 'you do not understand sexuality in marriage' or 'we cannot possibly live up to that,'" he said. Then there are others who will simply no longer talk to church representatives on the subject, he said.

Bishop Clark lauded Archbishop Rember G. Weakland of Milwaukee for his archdiocesan meetings with women on the subject of abortion.

"My particular hope is that we will do a better job than we have done in hearing the women and men of our church on this issue," he said.

The requirement of lifelong celibacy for ordained priests "is yet another issue where the church needs to be open to hearing the concerns and questions of her people," he said, adding that a clergy shortage may result in a change in the eucharistic nature of Catholicism.

The question of women's ordination to the priesthood "is without question a lively one among very large numbers of Roman

Catholics," the bishop said.

He said it was clear church arguments for the ban on women's ordination "are not persuading many of our faithful people nor are they finding wide support in the community of scholars."

Bishop Clark said the church has experienced "great loss in morale and in members" due to Catholics' reaction to the church position on women's ordination.

"For that reason and several others, I hope for a fuller ecclesial discussion of this question," he said. "In my opinion, until we have it our problems will only increase. To declare a matter closed does not close the matter, nor does it stop the questioning of the faithful," said Bishop Clark.

He called for steps to be taken to allow the local church a say in choosing its own bishops.

Bishop Clark noted that throughout church history the selection of bishops has been done using a variety of methods, "from acclamation to our present system which is not highly participatory."

"I am not exactly sure how episcopal selection might best be done but I think it

would be good for the health of the church were we to reform this process," he said.

In addition, Bishop Clark said, it was his hope that local churches "continually become freer than they presently are" in making pastoral judgments. "The more particular the matter, the more freedom should the local churches enjoy," he said.

Bishop Clark said the church should allow people "to be full active participants in the life of the church."

Currently, he said, the "people's practical understanding of the official magisterium of the church is often that it is embodied" only in bishops. The magisterium is the teaching authority of the church.

There is a feeling, he said, that the bishop "by virtue of his ordination" and because he is "called to be the first teacher in the local church" is somehow the "best informed and most faithful member of the community."

Instead, Bishop Clark said, emphasis should be given to the "privileged relationship" and interaction the bishop has "within the community of faith."

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