

An Open Letter from the People of God to the Bishops of the United States

Dear Bishops:

On a trip home from Tel Aviv, Pope Francis stated, "Celibacy is not a dogma of faith, it is a rule of life that I appreciate a great deal and I believe it is a gift for the Church. The door is always open given that it is not a dogma of faith." And in a recent conversation with Bishop Erwin Krautler, Pope Francis discussed the priest shortage and future of the priesthood in Brazil urging the Bishop and all local bishops to be "courageous" and to make concrete suggestions on the possibilities available to assist in this crisis, including expanding the priesthood to include married men.

Now, we are looking to you, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to follow Pope Francis' call to be courageous in seeking solutions to our growing priest shortage and to present these solutions to Rome.

As you know well, over the past forty years, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and worldwide has experienced a steadily worsening priest shortage. At first, the process was so gradual that it was hardly noticed. But now, the rapidity of the decline is having a devastating impact on parish and sacramental life.

According to a 2008 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate study, half of the 19,302 active diocesan priests plan to retire by 2019. We are ordaining about 380 new diocesan priests each year. In just eight years, we will have only 13,500 active diocesan priests to serve our 18,000 parishes, presuming ordinations remain constant, as they have for over a decade.

Following Pope Francis' model we urge the USCCB to undertake a fresh examination of our early church tradition of a married and celibate priesthood, a diaconate served by women and men, and invite priests who have married back to ministry. Please encourage local bishops to open this important dialogue at a diocesan level particularly in the areas most affected by the priest shortage.

We also ask the USCCB to open a discussion of these issues at their general assemblies with a view to presenting concrete suggestions for opening ordination to Pope Francis.

We call on you, our bishops and brothers in Christ, to encourage discussion of the genuine reform so necessary to the future of the Church. We have an opportunity to save our church from a future wrought with priest-less parishes and Mass-less Catholics; we urge you go take action now.

May God bless our Church with people of vision, wisdom and courage.