

Cardinal Egan says possibility of married priests not to be dismissed

ALBANY, N.Y. – The possibility the Catholic Church will allow married priests shouldn't be dismissed, New York Cardinal Edward M. Egan said March 10 during a radio interview.

"It's a perfectly legitimate discussion," he said during a talk radio program in Albany hosted by Fred Dicker. "I think it has to be looked at."

Cardinal Egan was in the state capital as part of a legislative lobbying visit. He also discussed various New York legislative issues as well as the broader picture of the church's public policy on topics such as same-sex marriage and access to abortion for minors.

Cardinal Egan's resignation as head of the New York Archdiocese was accepted by the pope Feb. 23. He will serve as apostolic administrator of the archdiocese until April 15 when Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee will be installed as his successor.

In the radio show's final minutes, when asked about priestly celibacy by Mr. Dicker, who also is state editor of the New York Post newspaper, Cardinal Egan said he thought the subject would be coming up for discussion by the church's hierarchy.

"I'm not so sure it wouldn't be a good idea to decide (whether priests can be married) on the basis of geography and culture, not to make an across-the-board determination," the cardinal said. He noted that priests in the Eastern Catholic churches – such as the Romanian, Maronite or Melkite churches – are allowed to be married with "no problem at all."

The Eastern Catholic churches often admit married men to the priesthood in their regions of origin but do not permit marriage after ordination. Outside their regions of origin, the Eastern churches may not admit married men to ordained ministry without a dispensation from the Vatican.

Some married clergymen from other Christian faiths who have joined the Catholic Church have later been ordained as Catholic priests.

In 1980 the Vatican approved special provisions under which former Episcopal priests who had become Catholics could apply for ordination in the Catholic priesthood. Since then several dozen married former Episcopal priests have become Catholic priests, including Father Stephen R. Sutton, the associate pastor at St. Ignatius in Hickory.

In addition, a few married former Methodist and Lutheran ministers have been ordained Catholic priests.

Frederick J. Luhmann, an author and researcher who has kept track of the ordinations of married men for more than a decade, told Catholic News Service March 11 he counted 93 former Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist clergymen among U.S. Catholic priests currently serving the church.

In 2002 Mr. Luhmann wrote a book titled "Call and Response: Ordaining Married Men as Catholic Priests."

In a 2006 interview with the Brazilian newspaper O Estado de Sao Paulo, Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, who had just been named head of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, said that "even though celibacy is part of Catholic history and culture, the church could review this question, because celibacy is not a dogma but a disciplinary question."

The newspaper went on to quote Cardinal Hummes as saying the shortage of priests in some areas of the world was a challenge, and the church was not "immobile" but "changes when it should change."

However, a couple of days later he issued a statement to clarify his remarks, saying priestly celibacy was not currently up for discussion by church authorities. He emphasized it was a long and valuable tradition in the Latin-rite church, based on strong theological and pastoral arguments.