

More prayer, outreach to youth could help priest shortage, pope says

By Zita Fletcher

Catholic News Service

ULM, Germany - Shortages of priests and rumors about possible female deacons were among the highlights of Pope Francis' exclusive interview with Germany's Die Zeit magazine.

"The call for priests represents a problem, an enormous problem," especially in Germany and Switzerland, Pope Francis said in the interview, published March 8 online and in print March 9.

"The problem is the lack of vocations. And the church must solve this problem," the pope said.

He expressed the view that an increase in prayer and youth services could change the situation.

"The Lord has told us: Pray! That is what's lacking: prayer. And also lacking is the work with young people who are seeking direction. Service to others is missing," said the pope. "Working with young people is difficult, but it is essential, because youth long for it."

He added that youths are the ones who lose most in many modern societies because of a lack of attention.

Asked whether appointing married men of proven virtue could be a solution to the priest shortage, Pope Francis replied that the church needs further time to consider the topic in detail.

"Then we must determine what tasks they could undertake, for example in far-off communities," he said.

Pope Francis clarified a report concerning his possible approval of women deacons. Last May, the pope said, he met with leaders of religious orders to have an open dialogue; they discussed the existence of deaconesses in early church history. Pope Francis agreed to establish a commission to research what exact roles these women played. The commission is an ongoing project.

"It was about exploring the subject, and not to open a door," Pope Francis said of the commission. "This is the task of theology - it must research to get to the foundation of things, always. That also goes for the study of the sacred Scriptures. ...

What does that mean today? Truth is to have no fear. That is what historical truth and scientific truth tell us: Don't be afraid! That makes us free."

Pope Francis also discussed his personal faith experiences and beliefs about God's mercy, saying that an individual's faith grows throughout a lifetime.

"Faith is a gift. It will give itself," said the pope, adding that faith is to be prayed for and not bought.

He said he does not like to be idealized by others, saying that idealizing a person leads to aggression.

"I am a sinner and I am fallible," he said. "When I am idealized, I feel attacked."

He said that he views himself as a normal person trying to do his best.

He also added that he does not become angry at people who disagree with his opinions and believes that diverse opinions are good for the world.

"Since I was elected pope, I have never lost my peace. I can understand if some people do not like my own way of going about things, and that is completely normal," said Pope Francis.

"Everyone may have their own opinion. That is legitimate and humane and enriching," he said.

In response to a question, Pope Francis said he is not able to visit Germany this year for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, despite an invitation from Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"The appointment calendar is very full this year," he told Die Zeit.

Asked whether he would visit Russia, China, India or other countries perhaps this year, Pope Francis replied: "To Russia I cannot travel, because then I would also have to travel to Ukraine. Even more important would be a trip to South Sudan, but I don't believe that is possible. Also a trip to the Congo was planned, but that will also not work with (President Joseph) Kabila. So remaining on the program are India, Bangladesh and Colombia, one day for Fatima in Portugal, and as far as I know, there is still an educational trip to Egypt. Sounds like a full calendar, right?"

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