

New head of clergy congregation defends celibacy

VATICAN CITY - Two months after taking over as head of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes has issued a strong and lengthy defense of priestly celibacy.

"Priestly celibacy is a precious gift of Christ to his church, a gift that must continually be meditated upon and strengthened, especially in the deeply secularized modern world," Cardinal Hummes said.

The cardinal made the comments in a full-page article he wrote for the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*. It was published Feb. 14 under the headline "The importance of priestly celibacy."

Cardinal Hummes, formerly the archbishop of Sao Paulo, arrived at his new Vatican post last December, shortly after telling a Brazilian newspaper that priestly celibacy was a disciplinary norm and not a church dogma and was therefore open to change.

Vatican officials were concerned, and within hours of arriving in Rome Cardinal Hummes issued a statement emphasizing that priestly celibacy was a long and valuable tradition in the Latin-rite church, based on strong theological and pastoral arguments.

The cardinal's newspaper article was written to mark the 40th anniversary of "Sacerdotalis Caelibatus," Pope Paul VI's encyclical on priestly celibacy, issued June 24, 1967.

Cardinal Hummes reviewed what he said was strong evidence that priestly celibacy has its roots in apostolic times, not later centuries.

The cardinal said celibacy represents "a more full configuration with the Lord Jesus," who lived his own life as a celibate, and is a sign of the total love priests give to the church. For all priests, he said, celibacy should be a call to happiness and not a burden of suffering.

Cardinal Hummes said celibacy is also a sign of pastoral charity.

“Common experience confirms that it is easier to open one’s heart to one’s brothers fully and without reserve for those who have no other emotional attachments, no matter how legitimate and holy, except the attachment to Christ,” he said.

Cardinal Hummes reviewed Pope Paul’s reasons for confirming priestly celibacy 40 years ago and said the same reasons were still valid today.

At the same time, he said, Pope Paul also recognized that celibacy is not required by the nature of the priesthood itself, as shown by the fact that the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church allow the ordination of married men.

Cardinal Hummes reviewed various discussions on celibacy over the last 40 years, particularly in synods of bishops and other Rome meetings. On every occasion, he said, the participants have ended up confirming the value of priestly celibacy.

At the 2005 synod on the Eucharist, some bishops wanted a discussion on ordaining married men in certain circumstances, but the idea was rejected as “a road not to travel,” he said.