

Rome Dominicans surprised at Dutch proposal

VATICAN CITY – The general curia of the Dominicans expressed surprise over a booklet published by its order in the Netherlands recommending that laypeople be allowed to celebrate Mass when no ordained priests are available.

In a written statement released by the Vatican Sept. 18, the Dominicans' Rome-based leaders said that, while they "laud the concern of our brothers" over the shortage of priests, they did not believe "the solutions that they have proposed are beneficial to the church nor in harmony with its tradition."

The statement, dated Sept. 4, acknowledged the Dutch Dominicans' concerns about the shortage of vocations to the priesthood and the difficulty in offering the faithful in the Netherlands a wider celebration of the Eucharist.

But while the statement said Dominican leaders shared those same concerns it said they did "not believe that the method they (Dutch Dominicans) have used in disseminating" a booklet to all 1,300 parishes in the Netherlands was an appropriate way to discuss the issue.

An open dialogue about the availability of the Eucharist and the priestly ministry should be carried out through a "careful theological and pastoral reflection with the wider church and the Dominican order," the statement said.

"The booklet published by our Dutch brothers was a surprise to the general curia of the Dominican order," it said.

In late August, the Dominicans in the Netherlands distributed a 38-page booklet, "Church and Ministry," that proposed parishes in need of an ordained priest choose their own person to become the Mass presider. The parish could then present such candidates – "women or men, homo- or heterosexual, married or single" – to the local bishop to ask that they be ordained, according to the booklet's summary on the Dutch Dominicans' Web site.

However, basing its recommendation on practices within the early church, the booklet said if the bishop chooses not to ordain the candidate – for example, because the person cannot meet the requirements of celibacy – then the elected candidate and the congregation could speak the words of the consecration together.

"What is important is an infectious attitude of faith," the booklet said.

Because of the priest shortage in the Netherlands, some parishes have a Liturgy of the Word and a Communion service with preconsecrated hosts. In some cases, local church officials advise Catholics to drive to a nearby parish that has a priest.

In an interview posted on the Dutch Dominicans' Web site, Dominican Father Harrie Salemans, one of the booklet's authors, said: "The church is organized around priests and finds the priesthood more important than local faith communities. ... This is deadly for local congregations."

The issue of priestly celibacy and the potential role of married priests came up at the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in late 2005. Both synod participants and Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the obligation of celibacy for priests in the Latin rite.

The pope's 2007 apostolic exhortation, "Sacramentum Caritatis" ("The Sacrament of Charity"), and his special November 2006 meeting with top Vatican officials reaffirmed the value of priestly celibacy.