

Synod asks pope to drop restrictions on married Eastern-rite priests

VATICAN CITY - Members of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East formally asked Pope Benedict XVI to change Vatican rules that technically prohibit the Eastern Catholic churches from ordaining married men outside the traditional homeland of their churches.

In one of 44 propositions presented to Pope Benedict Oct. 23, the synod members - the majority of whom were Eastern Catholics - said, "With a view to the pastoral service of our faithful, wherever they are to be found, and to respect the traditions of the Eastern churches, it would be desirable to study the possibility of having married priests outside the patriarchal territory."

After Latin-rite bishops in North America and other areas told the Vatican that the presence of married Eastern-rite priests was creating confusion among their faithful, the Vatican in 1929 issued an order that prohibited the Eastern churches from ordaining married men in the West and from sending married priests to the West.

In 1998, the bishops of Australia issued a formal statement saying they had no opposition to married Eastern priests in Australia. The U.S. and Canadian bishops have expressed similar opinions, although not as formally.

And for at least the past 10 years, some Eastern Catholic bishops have been ordaining married men in North America or accepting married priests from their church's homeland.

In 1998, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, then Vatican secretary of state, ordered Ukrainian Catholic bishops in Poland to use only celibate priests and to send their married priests to Ukraine. He said the bishops could not “unilaterally modify the practice in use.”

At the Middle East synod’s closing news conference Oct. 23, Cardinal-designate Antonios Naguib, patriarch of the Coptic Catholic Church, said, “It’s a practical problem; it is not a theological problem.” If it were a theological problem, he said, the Eastern churches could not have married priests in their home territories.

“The whole Catholic Church confesses and confirms the richness and the gift of priestly celibacy for the life and mission of the church,” he said, but the Eastern churches also value the ministry of their married priests.

Melkite Bishop Cyrille S. Bustros of Newton, Mass., told reporters that especially at a time when the Latin-rite church is accepting and ordaining married former Anglican priests, it does not make sense to tell Eastern Catholics that they cannot exercise their tradition of a married priesthood.

“In the past, only Eastern-rite priests could be married,” he said. “But now with the admittance of former Anglicans, we ask that these old prohibitions change so there would be equality” between what the Latin and Eastern bishops are allowed to do.