

Ordaining married men isn't a top issue for Canada's bishops

Canada's bishops will monitor next month's Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, but the issue of ordaining married men is not a priority for bishops here, said Archbishop Richard Gagnon of Winnipeg.

"This hasn't really been a focused topic in Canada in that way," said the vice-president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCC) at their annual plenary.

Gagnon acknowledged the vast Amazon region is similar to Canada's North in that both are sensitive ecological areas, with vast resources and are home to many differing Indigenous peoples.

Northern dioceses face huge distances between far-flung communities, most of them comprising various Indigenous communities. Like the Amazon region, they face difficulties in transportation and shortages of priests.

The 45-page working document for the Oct. 6-27 synod, to be attended by more than 200 delegates, proposes an examination of the possibility of priestly ordination for Amazon elders who are respected in the community, even if they are married. Pope Francis has said he opposes "optional celibacy" for priests, but wants to study ordination for married men in remote locations.

This suggestion has already stirred debate among Catholics who fear ordaining married men in any circumstance will lead to the eventual end of a celibate clergy.

The president of the CCCC, Bishop Lionel Gendron of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, Que., was named Sept. 23 as a synod delegate by Pope Francis. The Pope also named former Development and Peace executive Josiane Gauthier, a Canadian currently living in Brussels where she is secretary general of the international development agency CIDSE. Gendron was unavailable to discuss the synod.

Gagnon said Pope Francis, "being a good Jesuit, he raises certain topics and throws them out there, and then there's a lot of discussion about that on various levels."

The Pope mentioned the issue of ordaining married men when Canada's Western bishops made their last *ad limina* visit to Rome in 2017, the archbishop said. He also raised the issue of "the role of women in the Church at every level."

"These are things we'll hear something about in the Synod on the Amazon for sure," he said. "I think the Amazon synod will have something to say to the Church of Canada."

Several Catholic bishops from Northern dioceses have raised the issue of ordaining married men over the years, as recently as this past June, because of an acute shortage of priests in far-flung communities.

None of the five bishops from Northern dioceses raised the issue on the floor of the plenary. Instead, Archbishop Murray Chatlain of Keewatin-Le Pas requested the bishops in the South offer more priests on loan.

"It's a big ask," he said. "There are not extra priests lying around."

Many dioceses have been relying on missionary priests from the global South.

"It is a challenge," he said, describing the difficulty of explaining to an African or an Asian priest what to expect when they land in a place like Whitehorse.

Chatlain said sometimes God gives a "call within a call" to go North, and if the Lord is encouraging priests to go North, the bishops could help by putting the invitation out and allowing priests to come for a period of two years.

All five Northern bishops spoke of dioceses encompassing huge territories, serving small Catholic populations which house many Indigenous communities. Transportation is mainly by plane and the cost is high. Other transport modes such as snowmobile or driving on winter roads can be dangerous.

Bishop Jon Hansen of MacKenzie-Fort Smith said his diocese includes the entire Northwest Territories and part of Nunavut and serves 20,000 Catholics with six priests, three religious and many part-time lay pastoral workers. The diocese is looking forward to welcoming two new priests from Toronto, he said.

"It is a feeling of tremendous gratitude for the generosity I have witnessed to this point," Hansen said.

Living in the North is a constant struggle, said Bishop Robert Bourgon of the Hearst-Moosonee diocese. Medical services are virtually non-existent, and food and other essentials are extra costly. He said the diocese has nine reserves that are not served.

"There is a tension in the communities I serve," Bourgon said. "The people generally feel the church is the heart and soul of the community. If they lose the church, they lose the soul of their community."