Priestly ordination should be decided by entire Church, says bishop

Any decision on married priests should begin with a global synod of bishops, rather than a regional assembly like the synod on the Amazon, said the past president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Ordaining married priests and giving women leadership roles to serve in remote regions was approved by synod fathers in Rome at the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, but whether, when and how those changes might take place remains unclear.

Bishop Lionel Gendron of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, Que., who attended the synod, told Canadian Catholic News before the vote that as far as he’s concerned, a regional synod can’t make a change to how the priesthood is conferred. Most voting members at the synod came from the nine countries that encompass the Amazon rain forest.

“The synod that can take this decision, it should be a universal synod,” said Gendron, whose term as CCCB president ended in September. “So we’ll see.”
Gendron was speaking after receiving the 33-page, 120-paragraph set of recommendations to Pope Francis the night before the vote.

In the end, he was in the minority. The proposal to ordain married men received the most no votes of any of the 120 paragraphs, but the tally was still 128 in favour and 41 against — well above the two-thirds majority necessary.

The final synod document voted on by synod fathers consists only of recommendations to the Pope. Whether he accepts any recommendation is left entirely to him.

At the end of the synod, Pope Francis told participants he hoped to publish a post-synodal exhortation. “A word of the Pope about what he has lived in this synod might do good,” said Pope Francis. “I would like to do it before the end of the year, so that not much time goes by.”
On giving women more prominence in the Church, Gendron was enthusiastic. The synod fell short of recommending women deacons but suggested the creation of an “instituted ministry” of women leaders to be active in “evangelization and community care.”

“We’ll see what the commission is going to do, but for us, at least for our (French and English language discussion) group, this would be urgent,” Gendron said. “If it’s possible, if Pope Francis wants it, this is for us urgent.”

Since the 1970s Canadian bishops have blown hot and cold on the *viri probati* proposal that would ordain married men of proven virtue for service as priests in their own, remote, Indigenous communities.

Bishops from Canada’s North made the proposal at *ad limina* visits to Rome and elsewhere between 1971 and 1989, but have in recent years remained quiet on the subject.

“Canadian bishops have been making requests for decades… politely but firmly proposing that an exception (to the law of celibacy) be made for sacerdotal ordination for aboriginal men,” said Canadian Church historian Michael Higgins,
distinguished professor of Catholic Thought at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut.

“These efforts went nowhere. Perhaps now they can be reconsidered in the light of the Amazon synod.”

Sheila O’Kane, a parishioner at Our Lady of Victory in Inuvik, N.W.T., doesn’t think there’s much to debate.

“In two words, past time,” she said.

Inuvik already has a married priest in the form of an Anglican priest who decided on the Catholic Church later in life.

“He came over from the Anglican Church with his wife and he still has her,” O’Kane explained.

For O’Kane, even ordaining married men is not enough: “Just open up the priesthood,” she said. “To non-married men and married men and women. End of comment. Now I will be excommunicated. That’s all right.”

For American missionary Rev. Barry Bercier at St. Stephen’s in Igloolik, Nunavut, the need to ordain married men is clear. But the execution is complicated.

“That particular canon law (against married priests) is just canon law. It came about for historical reasons that for the most part I don’t think really apply any more,” he said.

But Bercier, a member of the Augustinian Assumptionists living under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, said finding people who can tackle the academic side of training for priesthood will be difficult in the North.

“There should be married clergy. I think that should come though with a lot, a lot of other big changes over the next generation,” he said.

The legacy of Church-run, government-instituted residential schools has poisoned the very idea of education in Canada’s North, said Bercier.

“Books haven’t been part of the tradition,” he said. “If you’re going to get a trained clergy up here, it’s going to be a major project. It comes with a whole number of difficulties. ... If you’re going to do this, it has to come with some very significant other changes in the way the Church understands itself.”