



*Cardinal Robert Sarah (R) attending the Oct. 5, 2019, consistory for cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica, stresses, 'One is called by God, and the Church confirms this call. Celibacy guarantees this call.'*

IN PERSON

**Cardinal Sarah: The Priesthood Today 'Is in Mortal Danger'**

**In an exclusive English-language interview, the African cardinal discusses his new book, the status of the Catholic priesthood, and addresses those who say he opposes Pope Francis.**

**By Edward Pentin – Posted 2/8/20 at 3:03 AM**

*VATICAN CITY — Cardinal Robert Sarah has made a further impassioned plea not to weaken the mandatory celibacy*

rule for priests, saying it would be a catastrophe that would amount to an “attack on the Church and her mystery.”

In an exclusive Feb. 7 interview with the Register in advance of the publication later this month of the English translation of [\*From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy and the Crisis of the Catholic Church\*](#), his new book on the priesthood with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in English, the Guinean cardinal explains why he and Benedict wrote the book – namely to warn that separating celibacy from the priesthood, even just as an exception, would remove the priest’s imitation of Christ as spouse of the Church and turn her into a “mere human institution.”

And, in advance of next Wednesday’s release of Pope Francis’ post-apostolic exhortation on the Pan-Amazon synod, Cardinal Sarah, the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, also explains how the exception proposed at the synod is different to previous exceptions and the situation with the Eastern Churches, and he notes that even when there were married priests in the early Church, they lived chaste lives.

He also discusses what he sees as one of the most serious problems facing the priesthood today: lack of apostolic fervor in the Church and lukewarmness. He urges radical discipleship and priests who are “radically saints.”

Cardinal Sarah also touches on the fracas over the book’s launch in French, stressing there was no misunderstanding but rather “sordid machinations” enacted by “opponents of the priesthood,” intent on diverting attention from the “content of the book.”

“They know their arguments are based on historical errors, on theological misunderstandings,” he says. “They know that celibacy is necessary for evangelization in mission countries. So they try to delegitimize the book itself.”

***Your Eminence, why did you want to write this book?***

Because the Christian priesthood is in mortal danger! It's going through a major crisis.

The discovery of the great number of sexual abuses committed by priests, and even bishops, is an indisputable symptom of this. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI had already spoken out strongly on this subject. But then his thinking was distorted and ignored. Just like today, attempts have been made to silence him. And like today, diversionary maneuvers were mounted to divert attention from his prophetic message. Yet I am convinced that he has told us the essential — what no one wants to hear. He has shown that at the root of the abuses committed by clerics, there is a deep flaw in their formation. The priest is a man set apart for the service of God and the Church. He is a consecrated person. His whole life is set apart for God. And yet they wanted to desacralize priestly life. They wanted to trivialize it, to render it profane, to secularize it. They wanted to make the priest a man like any other. Some priests were formed without putting God, prayer, the celebration of Mass, the ardent search for holiness at the center of their lives.

As Benedict XVI said, “Why has pedophilia reached such proportions? In the final analysis, the reason is the absence of God. It is only where Faith no longer determines man's actions that such crimes are possible.”

***Precisely how poor has this formation been that you mention, and what have been the effects?***

Priests have been formed without teaching them that God is the only point of support for their lives, without making them experience that their lives only have meaning through God and for him. Deprived of God, they were left with nothing but power. Some have fallen into the diabolical logic of abuse of authority and sexual crimes. If a priest doesn't daily experience he is only an instrument in God's hands, if he doesn't stand constantly before

God to serve him with all his heart, then he risks becoming intoxicated with a sense of power. If a priest's life is not a consecrated life, then he is in great danger of illusion and diversion.

Today, some would like to take a further step in this direction. They would like to relativize the celibacy of priests. That would be a catastrophe! For celibacy is the most obvious manifestation that the priest belongs to Christ and that he no longer belongs to himself. Celibacy is the sign of a life that has meaning only through God and for him. To want to ordain married men is to imply that priestly life is not full time, that it does not require a complete gift, that it leaves one free for other commitments such as a profession, that it leaves time free for a private life. But this is false. A priest remains a priest at all times. Priestly ordination is not first of all a generous commitment; it is a consecration of our whole being, an indelible conformation of our soul to Christ, the priest, who demands from us permanent conversion in order to correspond to him. Celibacy is the unquestionable sign that being a priest supposes allowing oneself to be entirely possessed by God. To call it into question would seriously aggravate the crisis of the priesthood.

***Does Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI share this point of view?***

I am certain of it, and he has told me so, face-to-face, on several occasions. His greatest suffering and the most painful trial of the Latin Church is the crime of pedophile priests, priests who violate their chastity. One only has to read all that he wrote on this subject as a cardinal, then during his pontificate, and, most recently, in *From the Depths of Our Hearts*.

He never ceased to stress the importance of priestly celibacy for the whole Church. Let me remind you of his words: "If we separate celibacy from the priesthood, we will no longer see the charismatic character of the priesthood. We will see only a

function that the institution itself provides for its own security and needs. If we want to take the priesthood in this light ... the Church is no longer understood except as a mere human institution.”

But they wanted to muzzle Benedict XVI. I must confess my revolt at the slander, violence and rudeness to which he has been subjected. Benedict XVI wanted to speak to the world, but they tried to discredit his words. I know that he takes on everything that is written in this book with determination, and I know that he is delighted with its publication. He wanted to write and publicly express this joy, but they would like to prevent him from expressing it. But to recount in detail, hour by hour, these maneuvers is useless. I prefer not to dwell on these sordid machinations, for which those responsible will one day give an account before God.

### ***What is behind this opposition?***

The opponents of the priesthood don't want to get to the bottom of the debate. They know their arguments are based on historical errors, on theological misunderstandings. They know that celibacy is necessary for evangelization in mission countries. So they try to delegitimize the book itself. Having nothing to oppose in the text, they attack the cover. What a pity! They make the pope emeritus out to be an old man. But have you read what he writes? Do you think one can write pages of such depth without having all one's faculties? Some people want to pass us off as naïve. They try to make us believe that our publishers have manipulated us and have taken advantage of a misunderstanding to mount I don't know what kind of communication stunt. This is totally false! There is no misunderstanding. Our French publisher has simply implemented what I personally worked out with the pope emeritus. I've already mentioned this. I would like to pay further tribute to the loyalty and professionalism of all my publishers, especially my French publisher.

All these polemics are a diversionary tactic to avoid talking about the essential, the content of the book.

***In view of the timing of the book, coming just before the Feb. 12 planned publication of his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, which may accept the synod fathers' proposal to ordain some married men in the Amazon as priests, did you want to put pressure on Pope Francis?***

I have already written that “whoever is against the Pope is outside the Church,” but I am always made out to be opposed to him. I am even at the top of the list of opponents of Pope Francis. These accusations break my heart and sadden me deeply. But I remain serene and confident that the Pope pays no attention to such false insinuations.

I am in no way in opposition to Pope Francis! Those who claim I am are trying to divide the Church. They lie and play the devil’s game. I have written this book in order to humbly and filially offer my contribution to the Pope in a spirit of true synodality. I challenge you to find in everything I have written a single line, a single word of criticism against the Pope!

But I am uneasy. In Germany, a strange synod clearly envisages the questioning of celibacy. I wanted to cry out my concern: Do not tear the Church apart! By attacking the celibacy of priests, you are attacking the Church and her mystery!

The Church does not belong to us; she is a gift of God. She perpetuates herself through the ministry of priests, who are also a gift of God and not a human creation. Each priest is the fruit of a vocation, of a personal and intimate call from God himself. Benedict XVI explains this in depth in this book. One does not decide by oneself to become a priest. One is called by God, and the Church confirms this call. Celibacy guarantees this call. A man can only renounce starting a family and having a sexual life if he is certain that God is calling him to this renunciation. Our

priesthood hangs on God's call and on the Church's prayer for vocations.

So to question celibacy is to want to make the Church a human institution, within our power, within our reach. It means renouncing the mystery of the Church as God's gift.

***The Amazon synod did not propose a general questioning of priestly celibacy, but only to allow for exceptions to deal with a shortage of priests. Does this seem possible to you?***

The ordination of married men is a fantasy of Western academics who are in search of violations. I want to affirm it forcefully: The poor, the simple, rank-and-file Christians do not demand an end to celibacy! They expect priests to be saints, to be entirely given to God and his Church. They expect celibate priests who incarnate among them the figure of Christ, spouse of the Church. I wanted to affirm in this book that we must help Pope Francis to be on the side of the poor and simple and refuse the pressure of the powerful, those who have the means to finance media campaigns. Some Church organizations which handle a lot of money believe they can put pressure on the Pope and the bishops. We see it in Germany. Some want to impose their projects on the whole Church. Let us pray for the Pope; we must help him to resist the pressures of these rich and powerful ecclesial bodies. We must help him to defend the faith of the simple. We must help him to defend the poor of Amazonia against those who try to exploit them by depriving them of a priesthood fully lived in celibacy. This book was written above all to support the Pope in his mission.

On the other hand, as Pope Francis pointed out at the end of the synod, the real problem in the Amazon is not the ordination of married deacons. The real issue is that of evangelization. We have renounced proclaiming the faith, salvation in Jesus Christ. Too often we have become humanitarian assistants or social workers.

In Amazonia, we lack laypeople who take their missionary vocation seriously. We need catechists. Allow me to refer to a situation that I personally experienced. At the beginning of 1976, my experience as a young priest brought me into contact with remote villages in Guinea. Some of them had not been visited by a priest for almost 10 years, because the European missionaries had been expelled in 1967 by Sékou Touré. The catechists continued to teach the catechism to the children and to recite the prayers of the day. They recited the Rosary. They met on Sundays to listen to the word of God. I had the grace to meet these men and women who kept the faith without any sacramental support, for lack of priests. I never forget their unimaginable joy when I celebrated the Mass that they had not known for so long. I believe that if married men had been ordained in every village, the Eucharistic hunger of the faithful would have been extinguished. The people would have been cut off from the joy of receiving, in the priest, another Christ. Yes, with the instinct of faith, the poor know that a priest who has renounced marriage gives them the gift of all his love as a husband.

As for the priest shortage, it is real. But I believe that Pope Francis is right when he writes: “Many places are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This is often due to a lack of contagious apostolic fervor in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 107).

***But what about exceptions to the law of celibacy that already exist, for example in the Eastern Catholic rites or the Anglican Ordinariate?***

An exception is transitory by definition and constitutes a parenthesis in the normal and natural state of things. This was the case of Anglican pastors returning to full communion. But the lack of a priest is not an exception. It is the normal state of any nascent



Church, as in the Amazon, or dying Churches, as in the West. Jesus warned us: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” The ordination of married men in young Christian communities would prohibit the raising of vocations of unmarried priests. The exception would become a permanent state. A weakening of the principle of celibacy, even if limited to one region, would not be an exception, but a breach, a wound in the internal coherence of the priesthood. On the other hand, the dignity and greatness of marriage is increasingly better understood. As Benedict XVI points out in this book, these two states are not compatible because they both demand an absolute and total gift.

In the East, some churches have married clergy. I do not in any way question the personal holiness of these priests. But such a situation is only livable because of the massive presence of monks. Moreover, from the point of view of the sign given to the whole Church by the priesthood, there is a risk of confusion. If a priest is married, then he has a private life, a conjugal and family life. He must make time for his wife and children. He is unable to show, by his whole life, that he is totally and absolutely given to God and the Church. St. John Paul II stated it very clearly: The Church wants to be loved by her priests with the very love with which Jesus loved her, that is to say, with an exclusive spouse’s love. It is important, the saintly Polish pope said, that priests understand the theological motivation of their celibacy. He said: “Priestly celibacy should not be considered just as a legal norm or as a totally external condition for admission to ordination, but rather as a value that is profoundly connected with ordination, whereby a man takes on the likeness of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and Spouse of the Church” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 50). This is what we wanted to recall with Benedict XVI. The true foundation of celibacy is not juridical, disciplinary or practical; it is theocentric. On this subject I refer you to the extraordinary speech of Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia on Dec. 22, 2006.

Celibacy for God is an absurdity in the eyes of the secularized and atheistic world. Celibacy is a scandal for the contemporary mind. It shows that God is a reality. If the life of priests does not concretely show that God is enough to make us happy and to give meaning to our existence, then who will proclaim him? More than ever our societies need celibacy because they need God.

*What do you say to the view that priestly celibacy is a relatively recent norm in the Catholic Church?*

We are often victims of a profound historical ignorance on this subject. The Church had married priests during the first centuries. But as soon as they were ordained, they were required to abstain completely from sexual relations with their wives. Benedict XVI reminds us of this very clearly in this book. Everybody knows his deep historical culture and his perfect knowledge of the ancient tradition. This is a certain fact and is proven by the most recent historical research. There was no taboo in this requirement, no fear of sexuality. It was a matter of affirming that the priest is the exclusive spouse, body and soul, of the Church. From the historical point of view, things are very clear: from the year 305, the Council of Elvira recalls the law, “received from the apostles,” the continence of priests. As the Church was just emerging from the age of martyrdom, one of her first concerns was to affirm that priests must abstain from sexual relations with their wives. Indeed, the Council states: “It was unanimously agreed that bishops, priests and deacons, that is to say, all clerics constituted in the ministry, should abstain from their wives and should not bear children; whoever has done so [had sexual relations] should be declared to be deprived of the clerical office” (Canon 33). If this requirement had been an innovation, it would not have failed to provoke widespread protest among priests. On the whole, however, it was received peacefully. Christians were already aware that a priest who celebrates the Mass, that is, the renewal of Christ’s sacrifice for the world, must

also offer himself to God and to his whole Church, body and soul. He no longer belongs to himself. It was only much later, because of the corruption of the texts, that the East would evolve in its discipline, without ever renouncing the ontological link between priesthood and abstinence.

***You return several times in this book to the necessity of radical evangelism. Do you believe we are facing a lessening of apostolic fervor, that the Church has lost her salt?***

I'm glad you asked that question. It is certainly the most important aspect of this book, but no one has noted or commented on it. We are content with secondary and sterile polemics. I think we've been overwhelmed by lukewarmness and mediocrity. We must aspire to holiness. Benedict XVI, with prophetic courage, dares to affirm that "without the renunciation of material goods, there can be no priesthood. The call to follow Jesus is not possible without this sign of freedom and renunciation of all compromises." He thus lays the foundations for a true reform of the clergy. He calls for a radical change in the daily life of priests as he continues: "Celibacy cannot attain its full meaning if we conform to the rules of property and the attitudes of life commonly practiced today." I am convinced that in truth it is the radicality of this call to holiness which is disturbing and which we do not want to hear. This book is disturbing because the pope emeritus offers a demanding and prophetic perspective.

For my part, I have tried to develop this call by emphasizing that priests must find concrete ways to live the evangelical counsels. Bishops must reflect on this, for themselves and for priests: We must concretely put God at the center of our lives. The life of priests cannot be a life according to the world. "No one can serve two masters." The West is out of breath. The West is old, with all its renunciations and resignations. It waits, without perhaps being aware of it, for youth, for the rawness of the

Gospel's demand for holiness. So it waits for priests who are radically saints.

*[Edward Pentin](#) is the Register's Rome correspondent.*

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