



September 15, 2008

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, OFMCap
Chair: Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations
2121 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02135-3193

Dear Cardinal O'Malley,

In view of a priest shortage which increasingly compromises the ability of the faith community to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, we respectfully request that you and your brother bishops use your pastoral and apostolic authority to call for a serious ecclesial review of mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests. We do so because we feel compelled to exercise our responsibility as mandated by the Council: *To the extent of their knowledge, competence and authority, the laity are entitled and indeed sometimes duty-bound to express their opinion on matters which concern the good of the church. (Lumen Gentium 37)*

We appreciate the charism of celibacy as a unique gift to be freely embraced. For those to whom this gift is given, it can become a special quality in their personal relationships with God and with others, manifesting itself in a joy and compassion that enhances their ministry. But for those who have not received this gift, it is experienced as burdensome to their vocation of priestly ministry.

For many young men, the requirement of celibacy is a major obstacle preventing them from responding to a call to the priesthood. We have seen a 60 % drop in vocations in the past forty years, adding considerably to the workload stress of an already overburdened and aging priesthood.

Solutions that have been proffered, such as recruiting non-native priests from poor countries, substituting communion services for Mass, lowering standards for admission to seminaries, parish closures, and priests pastoring multiple parishes, fail to address the long-term systemic issues that are at the root of the problem.

Additionally, we point to what many believe are other consequences of the discipline of mandatory celibacy, such as a clerical environment in which many diocesan priests feel unsupported by their bishops, are distanced from their brother priests, maintain few close personal friendships, and look forward to retirement, only to find it a time of illness and loneliness.

More is being written and openly discussed about priests' health and well being, with increased reports of stress, depression, heart attacks, and even suicide. We express our

growing concern about how difficult it can be to work and live in a clerical culture that on some deep and profound levels seems to be unhealthy and dysfunctional.

We also believe the discipline of mandatory celibacy fosters a culture of clericalism which enables church leadership to put the needs of the institution ahead of the needs of the faithful, including victims of clerical sexual abuse. This clerical culture can also put the needs of the institution ahead of the need for due process and justice for priests accused of such abuse.

We believe many of you share these concerns, but for reasons we cannot fathom have not found a way to address them in a meaningful and pastoral way.

We believe our Holy Father Benedict XVI demonstrated during his visit earlier this year that he will not turn a deaf ear to the voices of his flock. We trust he will heed the voices of his brother bishops as we trust you will heed ours.

Respectfully,



Dan Bartley, President, Voice of the Faithful



John Ryan, Chair, National Working Group for Priest Support, Voice of the Faithful

Cc: Members of Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations
Bishops in the U.S. Dioceses

Electronic copies of this letter also have been sent to 280 individuals in leadership positions at 250 Catholic organizations and media and to 210 Catholic individuals who are authors, theologians, clergy, and laity in regional or national leadership positions.