

Does the ancient Church still serve as a model?
Will elders and married men return as presbyters?
Will we rediscover itinerant ministry for the new evangelization?

Viri Probati

The future of the Church in light of her beginnings

A study on Ordained Ministry by Oliviero Gulot

A synthetic presentation on the study of

Viri Probati

and ordained ministry, local and itinerant
(an evolving discussion)

Viri Probati [the Latin for “experienced men”] are married men or widowers experienced in the Faith and of good repute who, during various periods of history, were selected by the Church to preach,¹ to catechize, or were even ordained priests for the celebration of the Eucharist in the community at a time when the diocesan clergy was not so readily available.

“The Question is Debated.”

This discussion was taken up at the Second Vatican Council and in the following years in an effort to find a solution to the lack of priestly vocations. Many bishops held that a return to *viri probati* would signify an abandonment of the discipline of clerical celibacy in the Catholic Church, while, at the same time, the differing discipline of the Eastern Churches, which has been a practice ever since the early church, was considered legitimate. The question of the continence of married presbyters during the first three centuries, as well as in the following centuries, was not taken into consideration. Paul VI posed some questions to the bishops concerning the risk of a temptation for the clergy of that time which was then disoriented. Now, perhaps, there can be a more serene response. Added to this would have to be the worry of dividing the presbyters into different classes for economic, social, and familial reasons. One would also have to take note how the risk of young, married presbyters could open questions concerning inheritance in

¹ Already in 1206, Innocent III ordered that certain “viri probati” be singled out so that they could dedicate themselves to preaching as “paupers” as a witness against heretics.

parishes.² It is, perhaps, due to these reasons that the last Synod of Bishops in 2005 considered the option of *virī probati* “a road upon which not to travel.”³

“Which Model of Church?”

We should clarify right away that this present study does not intend to put to question priestly celibacy. Rather, this study desires to reflect upon the role and function of ordained ministers which are to be wholly recovered in light of the example and model of the early Church as acknowledged by the Synod of Bishops in 2005,⁴ reinserting the role of the itinerant, which disappeared for centuries, into its precise manner of being exercised. This undoubtedly efficacious solution is valid today as it was then.⁵

“Distinct Ministerial Roles”

We may define the roles of the ministers during those fruitful times as “itinerant” in regards to evangelization and the periodic visits of the communities, and as “local” in regards to the pastoral leadership of those same communities with presbyters, true elders (*presbiteroi*) who were usually married. The head of the presbyters, *episkopo* (bishop), was the “overseer” of doctrine and who was served by deacons who were responsible for works of charity. In the first place, celibacy was and is indispensable. Virginity became a preferential choice and signified one’s total belonging to Christ as “eunuchs...for the sake of the kingdom of heaven;”⁶ In the following centuries, virginity would become a condition for exercising ordained ministry in the Church.

“Ministers, Celibate and Elders”

If this type of organization would be taken up, with well distinguished ministerial roles, in addition to eliminating the unjustifiable fears concerning celibacy, it would become an indispensable tool for the Catholic Church operating as itinerants for the Kingdom of God just as Jesus and the Apostles had done. It is equally just as reasonable and obvious that the older men of the community, the so-called *virī probati* who, free from familial responsibilities and faithful

² Cf. *Storia della Chiesa*, Ed. SAIE – Vol. XII/1 (*Istituzioni ecclesiastiche della Cristianità medioevale – 1130-1378*) Ch. 107, p. 203f, “*La Chiesa paventa il peso dell’eredità, specialmente presso i figli dei preti.*” “The Church fears the weight of heredity, especially among the sons of priests.” One may also read pp. 108-109.

³ Cf. Synod of Bishops 2005, proposition 11: “the Fathers requested that the reasons for the relationship between celibacy and priestly ordination be properly explained to the faithful, in full respect of the tradition of the Eastern Churches. Some have alluded to the “*virī probati*” [priestly ordination of married men of proven virtue], but this theory has been considered as a path that must not be followed.”

⁴ *Ibid.*, proposition 30: It is intended to help the faithful to consider as paradigmatic the experience of the primitive community and that of the generations of the first centuries.

⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, Catechesis on the Church Fathers: “We ought never to forget that the Word of God transcends time. Human opinions come and go. What is today considered very modern will become very antiquated. The Word of God, however, the Word of eternal life, carries in itself eternity, that which endures forever.”

⁶ Cf. Mt. 19:12, “Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.”

witnesses to Christ, would, like before, take on their role as leaders and presiders⁷ of the Eucharist in the local Church.

“*Semper Reformanda*”

The church does not run itself but is guided by the Holy Spirit who “makes all things new”⁸ and who guides us to “all truth.”⁹ In this way, the Word of God confirms for us that the organization of the early Church, which is our model, is the only theological solution to the problems the Church faces today! If we are convinced that the Church is “*semper reformanda*,” then why ought we to arrive at certain situations constrained with choices that are not always ideal? In dioceses in which the recently formed Pastoral Communities operate, itinerancy is already made obligatory for many priests and could mark the beginning of a new evangelization if they are substituted by *viri probati* who would, in turn, act as the local presbyters. Could this possibly be a sign from the Lord? Placing aside pragmatic options,¹⁰ one may be able to engage in a clear biblical exegesis and historical analysis on the roles of ordained ministers and, thus, by such merit, arrive at better decisions.

“The Priesthood of the Baptized”

In the texts of the Council, the term “presbyter” was applied to the function of the “priest” at the altar. The origins of this term date back to when the Church (legalized in the fourth century by Constantine) began to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice publically in new places of worship. We know, however, that in the beginning things were not quite so. After some time, the baptismal priesthood of the faithful, becoming known as the laity (people), was eclipsed by a growing clergy (separated), despite the fact that the clergy, like the laity, were disciples of the Lord.¹¹ Even the architectural structures of churches betrayed the separation between the clergy and the laity.

At this point, this discussion deserves to be reconsidered with new and reasonable explanations.

⁷ Cf. 1 Tim. 5:17, “Presbyters who preside well deserve double honor, especially those who toil in preaching and teaching.”

⁸ Cf. Rev. 21:5, “The one who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” Then he said, ‘Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true.’”

⁹ Cf. Jn. 16:13, “But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.”

¹⁰ Cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 25: “The situation [concerning the scarcity of priests] cannot be resolved by purely practical decisions.”

¹¹ Cf. *Presb. Ord.* II, 9: “Though priests of the New Testament, in virtue of the sacrament of Orders, exercise the most outstanding and necessary office of father and teacher among and for the People of God, they are nevertheless, together with all Christ's faithful, disciples of the Lord, made sharers in his Kingdom by the grace of God's call.”

“The Elders and Wisdom”

The early Church did not face vocational problems with regard to the ministry of the Eucharist: they broke “bread in their homes¹²...with exultation and sincerity of heart.”¹³ Presbyters (= “elders, those who see far off”) in the communities of Jewish origin would not have been less than 40 or 50 years old (and now?), the age of Counsel and Wisdom. No one thought so as to abrogate, in the new faith, the normative dispositions ¹⁴ of their centuries-old religious culture which derive from Scripture (“...observe all things whatsoever they tell you...” Mt. 23:3). The problem, rather, is found in communities of pagan origin which were deprived of biblical knowledge and tradition, as well as instructed elders or “scribes of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“Itinerant Ministry”

We shall again place our attention on the ITINERANT ministry of the Apostles (Messengers of the Good News) which, in action, conforms to the ministry of Jesus. Some of the apostles were married and left their families, others were celibate, and still others free from familial ties. Their collaborators were often celibate young men (such as Titus and Timothy). After the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, and after the authoritative and often violent Christianization on the part of Charlemagne during the eighth century, the Christian world no longer seemed to need any of these messengers of the of Kingdom. Overlooked, the countryside remained mostly pagan. Nevertheless, in this case, Grace did not miss its chance to raise up people like St. Francis who, throughout the Church’s history, have performed as itinerants those things that others ministers should have done renouncing power, profit, and worldliness.

“Local Ministry”

Local ministry, on the other hand, is entrusted by the Apostles to the Bishops or “overseers” of Doctrine and heads of the Presbyters (elders) who were generally married and leaders of the community. It is they who are the “*virī probati*,” pious men, experienced in the faith, and active Christian witnesses with all the experience and characteristics necessary to take care of the difficulties of the faithful. Hence St. Paul’s the categorical affirmation, “for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of the church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5). And what is more reasonable than the Word of God? Why, then, was the disposition toward married elders who are ideal for local ministry ignored? The ecclesial situation of the past does not differ from the one today and so this eternal Word comes to favor the reflection on and acceptance of this Pauline recommendation.

(the past, the present, the future)

¹² Cf. *Sacr. Caritatis* 27 (in reference to *Lumen Gentium* 11) – The family – the domestic church – is the primary sphere of the life of the Church.

¹³ Cf. Acts 2:46, “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart.”

¹⁴ These oral rules which were later written down come from the Mishnah-Avoth 14 Greatest of the Fathers – schools of Hillel and Shammai during the time of Jesus.

“Diakonia and Vocations”

With the diaconal ministry reinstated, not all of the socio-economic tasks that the Apostles had delegated were taken away for, even today, bishops, the Apostles’ successors, and presbyters are obliged to perform such tasks. Thus we see the need for an indispensable ministry, a ministry accessible to those who are married. Greater vocations to this ministry ought to be encouraged by Pastors by means of public outreach, along with less cultural obligations yet with a greater pastoral interest and acceptance by the clergy. Confronting the current reality of reinvigorating these ministries and engaging the life of the church which calls for an evangelization of those who are distant, a reason and fruitful solution lies in the full reality of the role of the Ordained Minister, within which role is distinguished “itinerant” from “local.” Just as in the past, both of these can exist now, without any fear of creating different classes of ministers, as some would say.

“Mission and Young Priests”

“The Church is a missionary [Church] (= itinerant!) by its very nature, always and everywhere, and now, in particular, in a de-Christianized society which necessitates a new evangelization” (John Paul II, November 12, 1990). In order to obtain this, however, the necessity of the itinerant ministry may not be denied. How can one deny that which was exercised by Jesus, by the Apostles, and by the first Christians? What sense would speaking of a new evangelization have, not to mention the explicit invitation of Christ: “Go...”?¹⁵ What other possibilities exist? **This is the true ministry for young celibate priests.** Having rediscovered with enthusiasm this ancient novelty within the Church, these young celibate priests would have the right gratifications hoped for by the Lord, while enduring inevitable yet fruitful persecutions. Some pressing tasks for them would be: to care of churches entrusted to them, to sustain the local presbyters by a certain permanence in that specific place, to reconcile divisions, to help the faithful recognize their own charisms, to preach the Good News with youthful joy and vigor, and to call the “lost sheep” back to the fold. How would they be able to hear the message of salvation without anyone announcing it?¹⁶ By confronting the problem of the de-Christianization of society, they will certainly discover a great desire for God and for the sacred in the people.

“Proclaiming Jesus is the Ideal”

It must be confirmed, therefore, that the choice of celibacy for the itinerant minister is, besides being both a gift and a challenge, simply incompatible with family responsibilities. This joyous work absorbs the fecundate energy of sexuality with the promise to receive children, brothers, sisters, and mothers¹⁷ generated by the proclamation of the Kingdom. This is quite appealing as a true ideal for young men because it fills the heart much more than babysitting at an afterschool

¹⁵ Cf. Mt. 28:19, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...”

¹⁶ Cf. Rom. 10:14, “But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?”

¹⁷ Cf. Mk. 10:29-30, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands...”

program, for instance. We cannot forget that conforming oneself to Christ is, in the first place, itinerancy in the power of the Holy Spirit which accompanies everyone who proclaims the Kingdom of God!¹⁸ Will fear, timidity, or inferiority complexes get in the way of this proclamation? How else could the Lord's command, "Go," be put into action? Authoritative magisterial documents speak to priests about being conformed to Christ the Good Shepherd. But how many "sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 10:34), abandoned, alone and without love are there who lie as prey to "ideologue wolves?" To reduce the Eucharistic rite to a mere "perfection" of conformity to Christ does not exhaust the principle action of the Church¹⁹ who calls her ministers to itinerancy. This option, while casting aside carelessness and presumption, necessitates a special gift of grace.²⁰

"To Preside with Diligence"

The rite, then, cannot overlook the human, religious, and cultural context that Jesus was a part of. St. Paul thus suggests, in reference to the presbyter-elders, "if one is over others [presides at the Eucharist], with diligence"²¹ does he preside. In the first place the heads of the family in their houses, then the presbyters or the *seniores* (Tertullian), those who are "appointed" (Justin), all of these, as it is depicted in the catacombs of St. Priscilla, obeyed Christ's command, "Do this in memory of me."

It cannot be denied that the sacrament of Holy Orders is identified, then, with two different conditions and roles, both of which are indispensable, both of which coexist and work together so that that proclamation of the Gospel and the Eucharist are never lacking. *Sine dominico non possumus* (We are not able to exist without Sunday) – so said the martyrs of Abilene and so echoes Paul VI²² and canon 213.²³

¹⁸ Cf. *Pres. Ord.* III, 10: "The spiritual gift which priests receive at their ordination prepared them not for a sort of limited and narrow mission but for the widest possible and universal mission of salvation "even to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), for every priestly ministry shares in the universality of the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles."

¹⁹ Cf. *Sacrosanctum Conc.* 9: "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church. Before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion."

²⁰ Cf. *Optatam Totius* IV, 10: "Let them deeply realize how gratefully that state ought to be received, not, indeed, only as commanded by ecclesiastical law, but as a precious gift of God for which they should humbly pray." Cf. Lk. 14:28, "Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?"

²¹ Cf. Rom. 14:8, "if one is over others, [it must be] with diligence."

²² Cf. *Presb. Ordinis* I,6: "No Christian community, however, is built up unless it has its basis and center in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist..."

²³ Canon 213: "The Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments."

“Deciding or Withering Away”

If we do not tread along the same path as those who have before us, the danger of more communities withering away becomes even more of a reality and, in a sense, already is. What has brought us to this point have been incomplete reflections, uncertainties concerning lived historical facts, disciplinary dispositions theoretically open to reform but distracted by the rebuke, “I was hungry and you gave me no food” (the bread of life).

“Recognizing Vocations”

God is not deaf to prayers for vocations, nor does he permit that his church be lacking in ministers²⁴ that are present in the Church as Cardinal Martini used to say, but we must know how to recognize them.²⁵ Yet are they not recognizable perhaps by what has been written here? How is it that we do not believe that in the families of future local presbyters, if married, there will be born also from them future young itinerant ministers and future bishops?²⁶

“Matrimony and Eucharist”

Presenting the role of the local presbyter as a married or widowed elder, it is difficult to see that a new spirit sheds light on the rapport between Matrimony and Eucharist. In past centuries, the erroneous Manichean interpretation of “impurity” in Leviticus 15,²⁷ and of do “not touch a woman” in 1 Corinthians 7,²⁸ both of which specifically criticize concupiscence and contamination, has obscured the sanctity regarding the Christian conjugal act in relation to the Eucharist.

The Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* and certain papal encyclicals (*Familiaris Consortio* and *Sacramentum Caritatis*) have contributed to a needed theological clarification concerning a Sacrament that is “a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church” in the

²⁴ Cf. *Optatam Totius* III, 6: “In the entire process of selecting and testing students, however, a due firmness is to be adopted, even if a deplorable lack of priests should exist, since God will not allow His Church to want for ministers...”

²⁵ Cf. Cardinal Martini, “A Pastoral Letter to the diocese of Milan.”

²⁶ Cf. Lev. 15:18, “If a man has sexual relations with a woman, they shall both bathe in water and be unclean until evening.” [the seed is life and its death, with emission, recalls sin]

²⁷ Cf. 1 Cor. 7:1;6-7, “Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman...’ This I say by way of concession, however, not as a command. Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” [this is Paul announcing the Gospel as an itinerant]

²⁸ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 48-49: “Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love... and structured as it is on the model of His union with His Church... Authentic married love is caught up into divine love... as spouses fulfil their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ... Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God... [and] the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church,(9) and as a participation in that covenant, will manifest to all men Christ's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church...”

intimate spiritual harmony of the spouses.²⁹ The icon of Christ as faithful spouse of the Church is already found depicted with love by the Fathers, but is later rationalized by the Scholastics and rigorously placed in a juridical spectrum by Gratian's canons. Marriage, then, appears only as a Sacrament in the twelfth century. It is not clear, then, why a witness of this kind of spousal love expressed in the Eucharistic rite by a married, elder presbyter is less meaningful. This is certainly another valid icon!³⁰

“Overcoming a Negative Past”

A local ministry newly entrusted to mature and well-seasoned (60 years of age?)³¹ *virī probati* to preside over the celebration of the Eucharist does nothing but affirm the truth of a constant choice of the past even, if often, badly organized. This kind of ministry was disfigured historical events concerning power, disorder, and economic interests on the part of the clergy who, though justly, forced the papacy to excluded married men from the priesthood. These clerics were often young men tempted to satisfy personal desires and conserve family inheritance, going so far as to practice nicolaism, simony, and concubinage. These things occurred from the eighth until the thirteenth century mostly under the influence of powerful lay feudal lords.³² As a result, the Church, mainly for the reason stated above, was forced to place regulations on priestly ministry, entrusting it only to celibate men instructed in their local churches and, after the Council of Trent, in seminaries. Today, however, the situation is totally different: the faithful are catechized, there is a reality of prepared lay people who are often involved in ecclesial movements within a church better equipped. The elders of a community, then, who are usually retired and, as a determining factor, self-sufficient and free from family responsibilities, would be able to help the Church save resources that can be used to address other needs.

“Ratzinger, a Prophet”

In one of his books written in the 1970s, the then professor and theologian Msgr. Joseph Ratzinger spoke of a Church that would come forth out of a smaller crisis, that would begin again starting from the top, and would recognize “new” forms of ministry and would ordain

²⁹ Families constitute the first seminary (*Optatam Totius* II, 2).

³⁰ Cf. *Sacram. Caritatis* 27: “The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage. A deeper understanding of this relationship is needed at the present time... Pope John Paul II frequently spoke of the nuptial character of the Eucharist and its special relationship with the sacrament of Matrimony: ... ‘It is the sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride.’” (See also *Familiaris Consortio* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*)

³¹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, 1031: “The presbyterate is not to be conferred except on those who have completed the twenty-fifth year of age [?] and possess sufficient maturity.” (DO the young people of this day possess sufficient maturity? Does the life experience of the elder, pious, and married man not serve any purpose?)

³² Cf. *Storia della Chiesa*, Ed. SAIE – Vol. VII (*La Chiesa in balia dei laici 888-1057*) – *il nicolaismo* – 473-475 and following. Vol. IX/2 (*Dal I Conc. Lateranese all'avvento di Innocenzo III*), Ch. 579 *Il clero contaminato dallo spirito del secolo* – Vol. XII/1 – (*Istituzioni ecclesiastiche della Cristianità medioevale* – 1130, 1378) – *Abozzo della realtà* Ch. 111, *La categoria dei chierici* – 112 *Celibato e concubinato* – 113 *Cultura e ignoranza* – 114 *Correzione ed eccentricità*.

experienced or “proven” Christians.³³ Now that he is Pope, may the Holy Spirit grant him the possibility to place him along this very path.

“The Spirit Enlightens.”

I will now begin the conclusion by thinking about the perplexities that would arise from that this study has been made by one who is self-taught and lacks superior academic qualifications. What consoles me, however, is an affirmation from *Dei Verbum*³⁴ which speaks about the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the believer who studies. I trust, therefore, having merely indicated a renewed discipline of priestly ministry for the good of all, not to have fallen into any doctrinal errors. Furthermore, I can say that, concerning this discussion, on the one hand, I have not been given any significant admonishments. On the other hand, I have received several kind approbation and encouragement. May it be clear that I have an enormous respect for Church Authority. Yet, as Benedict XVI said, the authority is only such insofar as it respects the reason that comes from God.³⁵ Does it not seem that he expressed reasonable concepts that are also theological and doctrinally correct? This is nothing new! The Church came to be in this way!

“Old Age, Vigorous and Thriving”

I am convinced that a new youthfulness will come to be in the Church when the wisdom of the elder who fears God and his ancient ecclesial role are explicitly reevaluated, as the Psalm says, “They shall bear fruit even in old age, they will stay fresh and green, To proclaim: “The LORD is just” (Ps. 92:15-16). Old age, exalted in the Scriptures, ought to seek, today, a specific and authoritative call from the Magisterium.

Young itinerant ministers could live their gratifying ideal with the certainty of the loving respect of fathers precisely from these presbyters. This is what St. Paul manifests in a letter to his dear young collaborator Timothy.

“Conclusion”

I believe that I have demonstrated how necessary it us to take up again the efficient organization of the early Churches ministries for the purpose of an new evangelization and for a presiding

³³ Mons. J. Ratzinger in *Faith and the Future* (1971) says the following regarding the future of the Church: “From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning... As a small society, she will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members. Undoubtedly she will discover new forms of ministry and will ordain to the priesthood approved Christians who pursue some profession [*viri probati*?]. In many smaller congregations or in self-contained social groups, pastoral care will normally be provided in this fashion. Alongside this, the full-time ministry of the priesthood [itinerants?] will be indispensable as formerly.

³⁴ Cf. *Dei Verbum* II, 8: “This tradition which comes from the Apostles develop in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts.”

³⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, Audience on Duns Scotus, 10 June 2009: ““Let no authority intimidate you or distract you from what makes you understand the conviction obtained through correct rational contemplation. Indeed, the authentic authority never contradicts right reason, nor can the latter ever contradict a true authority. “The one and the other both come indisputably from the same source, which is divine wisdom” (I *PL*122, col. 511 B).

over the Eucharist carried out by distinct roles; those being itinerant ministers who are necessarily celibate and presbyters who the elders of their local communities. Celibacy is to be exalted in its principle goal. There does not seem to be another solution to the problem of vocations and to the necessity of invigorating the primary mission of the Church willed by its Teacher. It is worth mentioning a thought that is expressed in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 24, “It is not sufficient to understand priestly celibacy in purely functional terms. Celibacy is really a special way of conforming oneself to Christ's own way of life. This choice has first and foremost a nuptial meaning.” This is conformation to Christ the spouse. Holiness, however, is a common journey for all the faithful. Even the one who is married must live as a spouse in a manner of life similar to Christ.³⁶ In old age, then, having absorbed all pious wisdom, free from family responsibilities (children) and, if not a widower, protected and cared for by she who has loved him throughout life with the love of Christ and conformed to Christ, would not even the old man feel the embrace of Christ in the way of life? He, also, has endured crosses in the matrimony and, perhaps, has suffered them more greatly than many priests. Thus it has been said that marriage, “demands notable virtue.”³⁷

“The Possibility in Canon Law”

Lastly, we recall that this possibility of the renewal of ministries is expressed precisely at the end of the preface to the Code of Canon Law in which it is affirmed that Canon Law itself, “is fully pervaded by charity, equity, humanity and a true Christian spirit, [and] it attempts to correspond to the divinely given external and internal characteristics of the Church. It also seeks to take cognizance of the conditions and needs of the contemporary world. But if on account of the excessively swift changes in contemporary human society certain elements of the new law become less perfect and require a new review, the Church is endowed with such a wealth of resources that, not unlike prior centuries, it will be able to undertake the task of renewing the laws of its life.” May God will it! This would be a great start in applying canon 1047 art. 3, which reserves the dispensation regarding the ordination of married men (I would add: even married men who are older and free from family responsibilities) to the Holy See. So when one speaks of these priestly vocations in our assemblies we should know that a new ecclesial reality has come into place. Pastors should understand what the Council intended when it invited them to discover the charisms of the faithful.³⁸ Even the Liturgy ought to be privy to more meaningful homilies with reflections and comments on the part of well-formed lay people (can. 230.2) since

Eph. 5:25-26, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word.” Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 48: “Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of divine love and structured as it is on the model of His union with His Church. For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity...”

³⁷ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 49: “The constant fulfillment of the duties of this Christian vocation demands notable virtue.”³⁷

³⁸ Cf. *Presb. Ord.* II, “While trying the spirits to see if they be of God, priests should uncover with a sense of faith, acknowledge with joy and foster with diligence the various humble and exalted charisms of the laity.”

not all priest celebrants know how to speak to the lives and hearts of the faithful.³⁹ We cannot hope in this and in its “accelerated” acceptance. What a grace would it be, then, to bring back to the ministry those married priests who, now old, continue to love the Church. Canon 213 refers to this in regards to the spiritual necessities of the faithful when there are certain situations and compromises. Ought we to forget all of this? The salvation of souls is the greatest law of the Church (can. 1752).

Oliviero Gulot

P.S. On 29 June 2010, the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Holy Father Benedict XVI decided to institute the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization for a de-Christianized Europe. May this study be able to stimulate reflections among responsible pastors.

Who I am

Married with 5 children, one of whom is a priest, and with many grandchildren, I live in a small town of Lombardy where I work as a small business man. I am a self-taught student of the Word, way, and salvation of my life. I have participated in leadership and evangelization in ecclesial movements.

*This synthetic study on Ordained Ministry is the fruit of long reflections born particularly from a specific and provocative question posed by St. Paul, “if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim. 3:5). Vocations, now much less numerous than before, ought to be examined and brought back to predetermined roles existing in the ancient Church, distinguishing between young celibate men destined for ecclesial itinerancy and married or widowed elders (presbyters) who would oversee local pastoral needs and the celebration of the Eucharist. These latter are pious men of faith, rich in experience, strong and thriving, able to proclaim how great the Lord is. My research seeks to rediscover the identity of “viri probati” as elders within the framework of the early Church and often referred to by the Magisterium. With this, I was supported by authoritative opinions which did not discern any doctrinal or disciplinary problems in regard to the reasons for celibacy. Already in 1971, in his work *Faith and the Future*, the then-Monsignor Ratzinger held a perspective not so different from the one written here.*

Only my love for the Church has driven me to write the text present here and a similar text on the website.

www.viriprobati.it – scrivi@viriprobati.it

³⁹ In the Italian newspaper *24 Ore*, Fr. Rigoldi, while ill, speaks of a homily heard on television given by a bishop and three priests: “This ‘absent style’ is very common among the homilies of bishops and priests in our churches. There is no lack of Biblical references, doctrine, or prayer. Rather, there is distance...when one speaks of the Gospel, its form is also its substance...one must dialogue with the people who are in front of him.”