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Why bishops won't talk about celibacy

By Tom Fox, NCR publisher

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Part One of Two Parts

Our bishops have become cafeteria Catholics. They seem to think we can do without the Eucharist.

There is increasing talk these days about the growing priest shortage and the closing of Catholic parishes. Most of it, however, seems to come from the laity, little from the bishops. Why?

Because to say one is worried about dwindling Eucharistic communities or the closing of Catholic parishes is to imply criticism of the decades' long resistance by many bishops to talk of the issue of mandatory celibacy. A number of studies have shown that optional celibacy would swell the ranks of the Catholic priesthood and, therefore, make the Eucharist more readily available to most Catholics.

The bishops, however, are so resistant to considering optional celibacy that they view Catholics who raise the issue as "having an agenda," implying that those who seek change really, deep down, want to hurt the church, not extend its mission to build the Reign of God.

This is crazy. No, it's worse. It's scandalous. Let me be clear: to place an arbitrary church discipline in the way of the building of Eucharistic-centered Christian communities is offensive to God.

Clearly, not all the Catholic clergy are against opening discussions on clerical celibacy. However, they live in a climate of fear, a climate antithetical to Christian community. Many are afraid to speak their minds. Doesn't this alone tell us that something is dreadfully wrong?

One priest who has not been afraid to speak his mind is Milwaukee Capuchin Franciscan Michael H. Crosby who for many years has advocated the church take up the issue of celibacy. Crosby is a man of singular courage. He has no ecclesial ambitions. He speaks and writes out of gospel values.

Crosby, 63, has written more than a dozen books. He leads workshops and retreats worldwide on topics from biblical spirituality to socially responsible investing.

On both social justice and ecclesial issues, Crosby brings rich Christian faith and values to his keen analyses. He is one of the most important figures in our church today.

Don't, however, expect him to become a bishop anytime soon as have other members of his order including Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput and Boston Archbishop Sean O'Malley.

More than a decade back, Crosby wrote a landmark book that poked holes in the dark clouds that were already covering the issue of celibacy. *The Dysfunctional Church: Addiction and Codependency in the Family of Catholicism* portrays the church as an "institutional addict," addicted to "preserving the male, celibate clerical model of church." Crosby argued that this addiction had led to a structured abuse of authority.

A dozen years later, he takes up his analysis again in the recently published *Rethinking Celibacy, Reclaiming the Church* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon). Crosby now argues that the imposition of celibacy has revealed a deeper issue beyond the abuse of power: the abuse of women and homosexuals in the church.

Yet, Crosby is not without hope. He writes, "The current crisis around celibacy has made me conclude that this is the moment of grace given us by the Spirit to reclaim the Catholic Church for Jesus Christ and his gospel of liberation from all sinful forms of control."

In tomorrow's Today's Take, I'll have an interview with this visionary priest.

Tom Fox is NCR publisher. He can be reached at tfox@natcath.org