

Synod affirms priestly celibacy, other rules: Catholic bishops embrace traditional teaching

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As more than 250 bishops filed into St. Peter's Square for the late October mass that concluded the first synod of Pope Benedict XVI's reign, there were few signs of the lively debate that shook up the assembly's launch.

After weeks of soul-searching that identified Catholicism's global priest shortage and the sacramental status of remarried Catholics as top concerns, the bishops came full circle, reaffirming traditional teaching, based on Christ's example, as the best answer to the challenges of modernity.

"The synodal work allowed us to deepen the salient aspects of this mystery, given to the church from the beginning," said Benedict October 23 to the synod's bishops, who convened in Rome three weeks earlier to advise the pope, not set policy.

At the start of the worldwide gathering, bishops had jockeyed to set the synod agenda and test the limits of their freshman pontiff. Issues often ducked during John Paul's 26-year reign took center stage as bishops pondered the possibility of introducing exemplary married men known as "*virii probati*" into the priesthood as a means of stemming the priest shortage.

One bishop even challenged the theological validity of the priesthood's celibacy requirement. Others noted that the shortage undercut their ability to distribute the Eucharist. Bishop Roberto Camilleri Azzopardi of Comayagua, Honduras, reported having one priest for every 16,000 Catholics in his diocese.

Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Imus, Philippines, reported that in 40 of the 60 parishes he oversees, lay people regularly distribute communion in the absence of priests—a fact that he said diminishes the sacramental value of the Eucharist. "In the absence of the priest, there is no Eucharist. We should face squarely the issue of the

shortage of priests,” Tagle said at a press conference.

But in the end, the bishops were not ready to take dramatic action at the synod, which traditionally convenes every two years. As an advisory body, the synod prepared a list of 50 propositions for the pope. Benedict was expected to reflect on the propositions and give his official response, which is generally released a few weeks after the synod.

Vatican cardinals who pushed for a crackdown on politicians who stray from Catholic morality in their legislation succeeded in having the issue addressed at length in the proposals. But the final document did not recommend the adoption of worldwide norms. These questions, it said, are best left to the individual discretion of bishops, who “should exercise the virtues of firmness and prudence, taking account of concrete local situations.”

The proposals also dampened hopes that divorced and remarried Catholics might be readmitted to communion. Archbishop John Atcherley of Wellington, New Zealand, had suggested that the church should rethink its ban.

But shortly after the synod closed, an influential Vatican cardinal said a rethinking of church policy on divorced and remarried Catholics is still possible. Walter Kasper, who oversees Vatican relations with other churches, told a news conference October 24 that the status of divorced and remarried Catholics represented “an emerging pastoral problem” that should be studied beyond the synod. *-Religion News Service*