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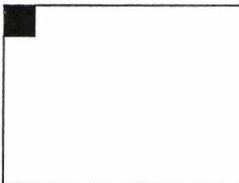
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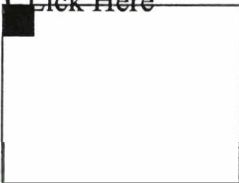
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Celibacy on the agenda for Vatican discussions

April 20, 2002

BY ALEXA CAPELATO AND PATRICIA MONTEMURRI
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Pope John Paul II long ago took discussion of priestly celibacy off the table, but some of his top leaders have put it back on the agenda, spurred by the Catholic Church's worldwide sex-abuse scandal.

Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony told journalists he plans to raise it during extraordinary meetings next week among a dozen U.S. cardinals, — the pope and top Vatican officials.

Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, an American who heads the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Laity, told the New York Times that celibacy would be discussed next week.

But not everyone, even proponents of a married priesthood, is thrilled that the taboo topic is being openly discussed in the context of the church's anguish over predatory priests.

Cardinal Edmund Szoka, former leader of the Detroit archdiocese, said Friday from Vatican City that he doesn't want to see it confused with the problem of priests who sexually molest minors.

"It has nothing to do with the celibacy of priests. Pedophiles aren't pedophiles because of celibacy. It's a sickness. You find it in every group of people," said Szoka, who oversees the administration of Vatican City.

Both Szoka and Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida will participate in next week's meetings, scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday.

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People who for years have advocated a more diverse priesthood are celebrating Mahony's openness as a precursor of reform. But they also are cringing because the topic has been swept up with the sex-abuse revelations.

"People who are in favor of expanding criteria for the priesthood don't want it too closely connected to what's going on currently," said David Yamane, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame and editor of the forthcoming book, "Goodbye Father: The Celibate Male Priesthood and the Future of the Catholic Church."

The danger of raising the issue now, Yamane and others said, is that doing away with celibacy might mistakenly be considered a solution to the sex-abuse crisis. The only proven link between the two issues is the church secrecy that has governed both, they said.

"There might not be any more pedophiles in the Catholic Church than in the Anglican Church, but the secrecy in handling these people, there's a connection between that and the unwillingness to discuss the ordination of married men or women," Yamane said.

Advocates also argued that pondering change now glosses over more valid reasons for reform: a severe priest shortage, lack of a clear scriptural basis for celibacy and urgings **from** a majority of **U.S.** Catholics that priests be allowed to marry.

The Rev. John Budde, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church in Novi, told parishioners in his newsletter this month that it is a mistake to say celibacy caused the sex-abuse scandal.

"The reason for making it optional, and the only credible reason as far as I'm concerned, is so that the Eucharist can be celebrated in every Catholic community on a weekly basis," Budde wrote, referring to the shortage of priests. "To insist on celibacy to the detriment of the Eucharist is not only bad theology, it is just plain wrong."

The Rev. Victor Clore, pastor of Christ the King Church in Detroit, said Friday that change, if it comes, will be in incremental steps.

Laypeople have taken unprecedented leadership roles in parishes during the past few decades, in part to make up for the declining priesthood. With each new ministry a layperson takes on,

Clare said, the church moves a step closer to change.

"It will be in slow motion, and you're not going to get whiplash watching it, that's for sure," Clare said. "But 50 years from now, 100 years from now, we will see quite a different manner and model and mode of ministry."

Clare said the historic meetings next week in Rome may mean church leaders are open to adjusting policies, but they will start with more practical issues like seminary training before tackling a hot-button issue like celibacy.

In a letter that will be read in 310 parishes in southeastern Michigan this weekend, **Maida** says Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit will strengthen its screening process and better prepare men for ordination as priests. On Friday, the leader of Sacred Heart said he accepts the challenge of doing both.

"Taking up this charge is of the highest priority for the leadership of Sacred Heart," Auxiliary Bishop Allen Vigneron wrote in a statement. "We are confident that we are doing a good job in preparing our future priests to live healthy and happy lives in the celibate state. . . . We will assess the elements of our current celibacy formation program and make all possible improvements."

The Rev. Joe **McCormick**, pastor of St. Clare of Montefalco Catholic Church in Grosse Pointe, said limiting the priesthood to celibate men places limits on the church as a whole, especially in the United States, considered a beacon of diversity.

"It's very possible we might even get more single men to enter the ministry once the church shows it's open to diversity, because then the ministry gains credibility for all people," **McCormick** said. "I don't think we're going to get more celibate males by keeping the system closed."

McCormick and other priests said they know discussion of change is only talk and likely won't come for decades, if ever. But the sex-abuse crisis has set the church on a course toward more openness, better discussion and less secrecy, they said.

Szoka, for one, would like to see the celibate, male priesthood remain.

"Celibacy frees us to give ourselves completely to the Lord and the service of his people," he said. "I don't think you can do this as a married man."

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