

Vatican by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

Month-long Synod closes in Rome

African prelates voice the reasons for keeping priests celibate, in the "dehumanized sexuality" of today's culture.

The work of the worldwide Synod of Bishops, which met in Rome from Sept. 30 to Oct. 28 to discuss the figure of the priest in today's world, has ended. The Pope, in a Latin speech, concluded the Synod by announcing a scientific study on the problem of vocations. He also reiterated the Church's commitment to priestly celibacy, a position reaffirmed by nearly all of the bishops. Widespread rumors feeding speculation that the celibacy requirement might be abolished were thus laid to rest, at least for the time being.

At a press conference during the Synod, the African Cardinal Christian Wiygan Tumi, speaking in his position as delegate chairman of the Synod, read a statement saying that celibacy of priests must be considered "law without exception" in the Church. In the few cases in which married men have been allowed to be ordained, the cardinal said, the conditions imposed—acceptance of celibate life, written consent of the family members, separation from the wife—"confirm that the law of celibacy prevails and must be observed even in these cases."

Another question, the cardinal added, is that of some pastors who are already members of other Christian churches, and are admitted into the Catholic Church. In their regard, a directive issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is observed.

The energetic African cardinal had stood up to the insistent questions of reporters who accused the Church of considering the sacrament of mar-

riage as inferior to that of priestly ordination. "A priest who lives in fidelity to his celibacy is an encouragement also to laymen that they should live in fidelity to their marriage," answered Cardinal Tumi, because "fidelity is a universal value."

We asked Msgr. Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, archbishop of Kisangani in Zaire, to comment on the surfeit of media interest in the celibacy question. Because sexuality is being dehumanized and turned into a consumer product, he said, a certain public opinion tends to view the priest mainly from the sexual angle and hence focuses on celibacy. In fact, the celibacy of priests, monks, and nuns, disturbs today's pansexual culture and puts it ill at ease. So every weakness of the priest, in terms of chastity, is brought out, because they want the celibacy option to be taken away, so that priests will be like all other men.

I am convinced, he said, that the less our contemporary culture shows itself able to grasp the prophetic value of celibacy as an evangelical novelty, the more we need priestly celibacy.

The African monsignor added that if we want to talk about lapses and infidelities of some priests, these are persons we all have to treat with understanding and fraternal charity, recalling above all the words of Jesus: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." The fact that someone falls does not make the ideal futile, nor the fall normal, but opens to the sinner the way of conversion, which by virtue of baptism is the normal itinerary of every Christian path.

Pasinya went on to say that there is a more serious aspect in the relation between priesthood and marriage which must be considered: that of witness. The priest who is true to his vow, his promise to God, recalls to men their true, transcendental destination. In the economy of salvation, restored by Jesus Christ, some people must give up matrimony in order to remind wedded folk that marriage is a sacrament, a privileged place of encounter with God, a healthy way which must lead married people into the Kingdom where there will be no more marriages.

The collapse of Eastern Europe's communist regimes made possible the participation in the World Synod of Bishops representing the persecuted Churches of those countries. But the bishops of Communist Asia, China, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, countries where the brutal repression of believers continues, were absent.

In China, since the anti-Catholic "Document No. 3" of February 1989, which became fully operative after the Tiananmen massacre, a new wave of arrests and harassment has descended on the Catholic Church. Many clandestine churches, priests, and laymen who want to remain united with the Pope and the universal Church have been arrested and vanished. The situation in Vietnam differs. The government has shown a certain opening toward the Church, by allowing an official mission of Cardinal Etchegaray to visit the country in 1989. This year, Vietnam was about to give the green light to an *ad limina* visit by Vietnam's bishops to Rome, but it was blocked at the last minute for "internal security" reasons. Better news came in the last phase of the Synod's work when two delegates from the Bishops Conference of Vietnam, Bishops Nguyen Van Hoa and Le Phong Thuan, arrived in Rome.