

International

The idea of married priests raises fears of Church split

The emotive issue could fracture the Catholic Church, critics warn

VATICAN CITY: An idea to fill empty pulpits in remote locations by allowing married men to become priests is bitterly dividing a Vatican assembly, with critics warning the emotive issue could fracture the Catholic Church. The hot-button topic of whether an exception can be made to the centuries-old custom of celibacy in places where there is a shortage of priests has dominated the start of the three-week "synod" on the Pan-Amazonian region.

Austro-Brazilian bishop Erwin Krautler said Wednesday he estimated some two-thirds of the bishops in the region support the idea of "viriprobat" (married "men of proven virtue") as candidates for priesthood. "There is no other option, indigenous peoples are clearly asking for it," the former bishop of Xingu in Brazil told journalists. Pope Francis has suggested those at the assembly consider the possibility of ordaining married men for remote locations, such as the Amazon or the Pacific Islands, where communities seldom have Mass due to a lack of priests.

Only priests can consecrate the Eucharist, which is a key part of Catholic Mass. Krautler and other supporters of the idea say the Eucharist is more important than celibacy, which is not a Church law and only dates back to the 11th century. "Just as the magnificent jaguar faces exile from its habitat, the ecclesiastical ecosystem no longer manages to arouse and support

enough priestly and religious vocations," a person who attended the synod debates cited an unnamed Spanish-language bishop as saying. "We are witnessing a sort of deforestation of Catholic culture," he added.

'Crusade'

The synod's chair, Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, said Monday the Church needed to "define new paths for the future" in response to the calls not only for married priests but also for suitable ministries for women in the region. The Roman Catholic institution is concerned about the sharp increase in the Amazon region of evangelical Pentecostal churches, which do allow married men to serve as pastors.

The Church has been flexible on the issue before, allowing married Anglican priests to convert to Catholicism. But the issue deeply upsets some traditionalists, who argue that making an exception for the Amazon would open the door to the end of celibacy for priests in general. They say priests are supposed to be married to God.

One of the pope's fiercest critics, US Cardinal Raymond Burke, called last month for a 40-day "crusade of prayer and fasting" over "serious theological errors and heresies" contained in the working document for the synod. He made a public appeal to Francis not to allow any excep-



VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis (right) arrives with prelates to attend the afternoon session, on the opening day of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region in the Vatican. —AFP

tions to priestly celibacy. German conservative cardinal Gerhard Mueller said in an interview with the Repubblica newspaper Thursday that "Church tradition is not a game that can be styled to one's liking".

The bishops at the synod will draw up suggestions for the Argentine pope, who is expected to then write his own document. The

hard-conservative wing of the Church frequently takes aim at Francis's papacy, saying he is not outspoken enough on abortion, too compassionate towards homosexuals and divorcees, and too accommodating towards Muslims. But Francis has brushed off fears of a rupture within the centuries-old institution, saying in September he was "not afraid" of a schism. —AFP

Ghana puts nine 'coup plotters' on trial for treason

ACCRA: Ghana has charged nine people with treason for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government, in a rare case for one of West Africa's most stable democracies. The suspects, who were arrested in a security operation last month, pleaded not guilty as they appeared in court in the capital Accra on Wednesday. They include four military officers and a medical doctor accused of using his hospital to manufacture weapons as part of a scheme to "destabilize" President Nana Akufo-Addo's government.

Prosecutors in court said the accused - part of a group called Take Action Ghana - intended to stage several protests with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the president. The judge remanded those charged in custody until October 28 for another hearing. Two other suspects who were initially arrested were discharged. Defense lawyer Victor Adawudu told the local media that his clients were being set up. "My clients are innocent. They are being framed up and must be released," he said.

Ghana is viewed as a bulwark of stability in a region characterized by insecurity and turbulence. It has been run by democratically-elected governments since 1992 and is gearing to hold fresh polls late next year. Incumbent Akufo-Addo looks set to face a challenge from former leader John Mahama for the top job. Treason is a criminal offence punishable by the death sentence in Ghana, but the country has stopped executing prisoners since its return to civilian rule in 1993. —AFP

Poland's populists set for victory but majority at risk

WARSAW: Poland's governing right-wing party is poised to win a general election on Sunday, buoyed by generous social spending and fiery nationalist rhetoric, but its majority is at risk, giving opposition parties a narrow chance to snatch power. In office since 2015 and led by ex-premier Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the Law and Justice (PiS) party has sought to mobilize mainly poorer rural voters by coupling family values with populist promises to extend benefits and hike the minimum wage. Kaczynski, widely regarded as Poland's de facto leader, has led a highly polarizing campaign, attacking sexual minorities and rejecting Western liberal values, all with the tacit blessing of Poland's influential Catholic church which holds sway over rural voters. The Civic Coalition (KO), supported by outgoing EU Council President Donald Tusk - Kaczynski's arch-rival - has rallied mainly urban voters upset by the PiS's divisive politics, judicial reforms threatening the rule of law and high-profile graft scandals. Railing against the PiS's anti-LGBT views and its close ties to the church, but sharing its welfare goals, left-wing parties are poised to return to parliament after a four-year hiatus. Surveys also suggest two smaller groups could win seats, including the far-right. "The electorate is split down the middle, with around 45 percent each for the PiS and the centrist and leftist opposition," Anna Materska-Sosnowska, a Warsaw University political scientist said. "Turnout will decide whether the PiS will govern alone, whether it will have to build a coalition, or even if it might lose its majority," she added.

'Promises kept'

The PiS has capitalised on a growing populist backlash against liberal urban elites, similar to trends in Western Europe and the US. Its generous social programs have sought to appeal to Poles who felt they reaped little gain from Poland's explosive growth after it shed communism in 1989. "Our great social program has led to the fact that the sphere of poverty, often extreme misery... has been abolished," Kaczynski, 70, told supporters at a War-

saw rally this week, calling it "our moral achievement." "PiS has done a great deal of good for families, pensioners, for children... they've kept their promises," Malgorzata Kowalska, 66, a retired orphanage employee told AFP as she left a Warsaw church. But a recent study shows that while extreme poverty dropped slightly in 2016-17 to just over four percent it rebounded to 5.4 percent in 2018 as inflation rose. Joanna, a 40-year-old stay-at-home mother raising three girls receives 1,500 zloty (350 euro, \$380) per month in child benefits. She says the cash-in-hand won't sway her. "Regardless of how much they'll give, I'll never vote for the PiS," said the formerly self-employed psychology graduate, slamming the party's "contempt for Poles who don't fit the stereotype of traditional Catholics."

'Clean up politics'

Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska, the even-tempered 62-year-old deputy speaker of parliament chosen by the KO as its candidate for prime minister, has sought to provide a clear alternative to Kaczynski's polarising campaign. "Let's clean up politics, free Poles from hatred, hypocrisy and political toxins," she told supporters in Warsaw this week. The KO opposition has vowed to reverse a string of controversial PiS judicial reforms which the EU says threaten judicial independence and the rule of law but has otherwise offered voters little. Days ahead of the vote, the European Union yesterday took the PiS government to the EU's top court over a new disciplinary regime for judges that allegedly threatens their independence. According to Laurent Pech, a professor of European law at Middlesex University in the UK, threats to the rule of law in Poland are bound to "significantly worsen" should PiS return to power. Kaczynski's plans for a "future reorganisation" of the courts are likely to mean a purge of the Polish judiciary under false pretences which will lead in turn to a renewed open conflict with the EU," he told AFP via email.

Most migrants

On the economic front, Poland has fared well with strong growth under the PiS, something critics attribute to favorable external factors. Joblessness hit a 30-year record low of 5.1 percent in September as employers struggled to find workers. Despite the PiS's strident anti-migrant rhetoric in the campaign ahead of its stunning 2015 victory, Poland became the world's top temporary labor destination in 2017, surpassing even the US, according to the OECD. —AFP