



Dozens of Italian women who have had relationships with Roman Catholic priests or lay monks have endorsed an open letter to the pope that calls for the abolition of the celibacy rule. The letter, thought by one signatory to be unprecedented, argues that a priest "needs to live with his fellow human beings, experience feelings, love and be loved".

It also pleads for understanding of those who "live out in secrecy those few moments the priest manages to grant [us] and experience on a daily basis the doubts, fears and insecurities of our men".

The issue was put back on the Vatican's agenda in March when one of Pope Benedict's senior advisers, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the archbishop of Vienna, said the abolition of the celibacy rule might curb sex abuse by priests, a suggestion he hastily withdrew after Benedict spoke up for "the principle of holy celibacy".

The authors of the letter said they decided to come into the open after hearing his retort, which they said was an affirmation of "the holiness of something that is not holy" but a man-made rule. There are many instances of married priests in the early centuries of Christianity. Today, priests who follow the eastern Catholic rites can be married, as can those who married before converting to Roman Catholicism from Anglicanism.

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