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Leading Irish cleric urges end to Catholic celibacy

(Reuters) - One of the most prominent members of the Irish Catholic Church has called for an end to celibacy for priests, saying it is pushing new recruits away.

Retired bishop of Derry Edward Daly, who rose to prominence during Northern Ireland's decades of sectarian conflict, said the church should act urgently to address the lack of young clerics. "I feel now that celibacy is damaging to the church and I do feel now that we have to look at that issue very profoundly at this point in time and quite urgently," Daly said in comments broadcast on Irish state broadcaster RTE on Tuesday.

Daly said he was saddened by good men who reject the priesthood because of mandatory celibacy and had been disheartened by the rising average age of priests.

The number of people joining the priesthood in Ireland has fallen sharply in recent decades as a series of clerical sex abuse scandals undermined the church's reputation and ended its dominance in the once devout country.

"I just thought to myself, what is going to happen, where are the younger priests going to come from," he said. "I am sure many people in the church feel this way."

Daly became a symbol of peace in Ireland on "Bloody Sunday" in 1972 when television cameras captured him holding up a white handkerchief while ministering to the injured after British troops opened fire during a civil rights parade. A critic of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that fought against British rule in Northern Ireland, and other paramilitary groups, Daly was a leading figure in the campaign to free six people wrongly imprisoned for an IRA bomb attack in the English city of Birmingham. They were acquitted in March 1991.

Supporters of a married priesthood caused a stir earlier this year when they unearthed a 1970 appeal to ordain older married men signed by nine German theologians including the then Father Joseph Ratzinger, the present pope. Ratzinger turned away from his youthful views in the 1970s, becoming a leading conservative theologian and is firmly opposed to changing the rule which dates back to the 12th century.

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