

From Greg McAllister:

I left the diaconate in 1966 after nine years in the diocesan seminary of San Francisco. This is my memory of the days leading up to the oath of celibacy:

That night I walk down to the library. The reading room is empty. I pick a volume of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* from the reference shelf and bring it over to the heavy wooden table. The article entitled *Celibacy of the Clergy* is several pages long so I sit down on one of the straight-backed chairs. The authors present celibacy as a wonderful development, intended by God himself. Their tone bothers me and I realize I can no longer read their words as a loyal son of the Church. I have to read between the lines to find the information I want: Celibacy was not mandatory in the early Church, not until about 1000 A.D. when Rome started forcing celibacy on married priests, first by disenfranchising their wives and children, then by declaring them slaves, the property of whatever ruler would enforce the new edict.

I make the mistake of sharing this information with a few of my classmates. "Where do you get that stuff, Greg?" guffaws Ken Kelzer. "You sound like Martin Luther." Leonard Duggan shakes his head. "You're getting awfully bitter, Mac."

A young priest from Sacramento shows up for dinner the next Monday night and Jim Kidder pulls me aside. "That's Arnie Miller, the new assistant pastor at my parish. He loves history and he's so radical he's been driving the bishop crazy." He laughs. "You'd probably like him." After dinner Jim and Arnie are standing with a couple of other Sacramento guys. I wait for a lull in the conversation and introduce myself. "I've been reading about celibacy," I say. "Is it true it didn't become a law until the twelfth century?" Arnie looks at Kidder and the others, then looks back at me and grins. "Yeah, up until then each priest owned his own church and could deed it to his kids. By imposing celibacy, Rome got control of all the property just like that." He snaps his fingers. "The laity never wanted their priests to be celibate. They used to beg the bishops to make their priests get married so they'd stay home and stop screwing all the women in the parish." Everyone laughs. "Seriously," Arnie says.

The weeks pass and the more I think about celibacy the angrier I get. What a stupid law, just another way to ensure subservience. Stupid or not, though, it's still a requirement for the diaconate, and I need to work as a deacon to see if I want to be a priest. It's a catch-22 situation.

I wake up the next morning, relieved, with a plan. My hand shakes with excitement as I draw up a disclaimer stating that I do not believe in, nor intend to take, the vow of celibacy, that I consider it an unreasonable prerequisite for the priesthood. During Easter vacation, I take it down to the bank in Kentfield and have it notarized by an unsuspecting teller. The date is May 12th, 1966, a week before we're scheduled to take the oath.

On a bright Thursday morning, my class gathers outside the theology classroom, each of us clutching a Bible. I look around to see which translations my classmates have

chosen. Al Larkin has a copy of the newly-translated Jerusalem Bible, favored by the liberals. Jim MacDonald is cradling the more moderate Knox translation. Leonard Duggan and Jim Kidder proudly flout their dog-eared copies of the Douay-Rheims, the official weapon of the Counter-Reformation.

“Our last hour of freedom,” quips Mike Murray, and everyone laughs. I smile, but groan inwardly. Part of me is disgusted by their naive bravado, another part wishes I could share their excitement and joy. I used to be one of them, an idealistic Christian warrior ready to sacrifice everything, even my sexuality, for the cause. But now I’m an outsider, a quisling.

Father Fenn appears at the end of the hall and walks toward us with an armful of papers. He wears his usual brittle smile and I’m relieved that it doesn’t change noticeably when his eyes meet mine. It’s fitting that he should be the one to administer the oath. He is, after all, the champion of law versus love, discipline versus freedom. I can tell he cherishes the role as he sets the papers down on the desk and straightens the sash on his cassock. His hair is precisely parted and combed into a stiff wave. When we are all seated, he holds up the stack of papers and widens his smile. “These are copies of the oath you will repeat after me.” He hands them to Leonard Duggan and he passes them around.

Still smiling, Fenn clasps his hands together and holds them in front of his chest. “Your oath today will place you in the company of an elite corps of men who have dedicated themselves to the service of God. Four years ago you received tonsure and had your hair cut as a symbol of renouncing the world. Now you will renounce the pleasures of marriage in order to be free to serve God with all your heart. It is a huge step. But you needn’t be afraid. Your oath will trigger an outpouring of God’s grace which will give you the courage and strength to live out your commitment.”

His words bounce off me like sharp hailstones. I feel like Herbert Philbrick sitting in a Communist cell meeting. I’m an imposter, a spy. The god he speaks of is not my god. My god is calling me away from these trappings of organized religion, toward the streets, toward humanity.

He lowers his voice. “Please place your hand on the Bible and repeat the oath after me.” I lower my right hand, but let it hover just above my bible so it’s not actually touching it. Mike Murray is sitting directly in front of me, so Fenn doesn’t have a clear view of my desk. I hold the paper in my left hand, my fingers crossed underneath to ward off any magic this ritual might possess. As my classmates repeat the oath, I silently mimic their words, watching Father Fenn to make sure he isn’t looking too closely at my lips. I feel strangely at peace.

It’s over very quickly and we’re back outside. Jim Pulskamp rolls his eyes down at his crotch. “That wasn’t so bad. I didn’t feel anything.” Everyone laughs, nervously trying to dismiss the gravity of what just happened. I look over at Jim and remember us

running through the neighborhood together. Today, I realize, I have severed that sweet bond of childhood.

I went on to be ordained a deacon and worked that summer in a parish. But there was something about the lifestyle that was too comfortable, too choreographed. I felt claustrophobic. Lying in bed very early one morning, just before I was to return to the seminary, I heard a little voice say, "Go ahead and leave. It's okay."

It wasn't as though I left the priesthood; just the Church. By then I couldn't imagine Jesus wearing a Roman collar.

Find Greg's book "Salvation of a Serial Celibate: A True Story" at this link:
<http://www.amazon.com/Salvation-Serial-Celibate-True-Story-ebook/dp/B00KJ04GY2>

