



**Jeff Doucette is now a youth advocate working in a homeless shelter for youth aged 16-24 in Ajax, Ontario.**

## **A leper on the edge of the Catholic Church**

Author: **Jeff Doucette**

Posted by: [Editor](#) on September 08, 2008 1:00:00 AM

**Fr. Jeff Doucette looked after three parishes in New Brunswick. Today he is married, a leper who lives in hope.**

I am a leper. Maybe that is not fair. I should say "I feel like a leper". A leper would have visible sores that you could see. I do not, my leprosy is internal. Confused? Let me explain.

I am a Catholic priest who has left active ministry, applied for a dispensation from Rome to be returned to the lay state and was turned down. There was no child abuse involved, no relationship at the time, no money scandal.

It was a question in June of 2006 that my heart was discerning my future, my dreams, my desires. I was 12 years ordained, looking after four parishes in south eastern New Brunswick in Canada and I had come to a crossroad.

Deep inside there was an awakening, a realization that I didn't think I could continue priesthood. There was a struggle going on and it had to be faced.

I was embarking on a cruise of Scandinavian countries and Russia as a chaplain. This had been booked many months before. Little did I know that cruise would be life changing.



As our ship left dock, it was not just any dock. Our ship left the famous white cliffs of Dover, England. It was spectacular to see the white cliffs surrounding Dover castle. But what I really remember about that moment was as we pulled away from shore, there was a major shift of horizon inside of me. It was like the cliffs had become my entire life that needed to be addressed. Pulling away from shore reminded me that you can't run from your life journey, the events that shape you. It always catches up. I knew at that moment I needed to speak to my bishop and ask for a sabbatical year.

Now on top of that, my best friend and priest buddy was along for the cruise. Now he knew nothing of what was going on inside of me. Oh he knew that I was struggling as most priests do if they are honest. But along the way during this trip, I would need to tell him what was happening to me.

It happened in London, England in Picadilly Square on the balcony of a little restaurant over a meal and a bottle of wine. I poured my heart out to him as he listened intently. What was interesting about that cruise and the visiting of the magical cities of Europe, I could only think "it would be easy to slip off the ship, never to come back...I could begin fresh"



When I returned I made an appointment to see my bishop. I poured out my heart and I thought my bishop understood but maybe he was shocked that I was discerning whether to continue or not as a priest. It took some convincing for him to agree.

## Listening to my heart: L'Arche



I also knew that this year could not be a sabbatical year like any other. It was not about studying scripture or liturgy. It was about listening to my heart. Deep down I felt that this would happen only if I was able to do this sabbatical at L'Arche Daybreak with the developmentally disabled. It would be a year that would not be defined by me dispensing sacraments, but living sacramentally. It was not about giving out the body of Christ in a different setting, but more about living with the body of Christ within a vulnerable community. With a lot of convincing my bishop reluctantly agreed. It was a gesture of love on his part in risking that I might not come back.



From the first moment that I arrived in Richmond Hill, Ontario at the Daybreak community made famous by Father Henri Nouwen, I knew this was where God wanted me to be. This was where the mutual listening could happen. I moved into Centre Street house as a live in assistant. My days would be filled with creating home and walking with this community and also walking with my heart. From day one the transformation began to happen. I was so open to this sabbatical. I prayed God to help me be open and to trust and follow where I would be lead. I lived with John, Mike, Tom, Kara and Mary Anne as core members (what Jean Vanier, L'arche founder called those with developmental disabilities), along with Carmen our house leader as well as Camilla, a young assistant from Brazil.

My daily routine, involved personal care, driving, cleaning, cooking. It also involved developing friendships and sharing of gifts. Each day I learned something more about myself and my heart. Each day I was blown away by these life teachers who taught me about how to embrace myself and my heart. It

was moving and through keeping a blog which you can read at [www.geocities.com/jeffdouc](http://www.geocities.com/jeffdouc) that I was able to capture my inner transformation.

In November of 2006 I participated in an 8 day silent retreat with the Jesuits in Guelph. It was incredible. It is often said, "if you are speaking, you cannot listen". So I listened...to the words of scripture, to the sights and sounds of nature around the retreat centre, and to my heart. I prayed, walked, journalled, did drawings and at the end of the week knew in my heart that I would not continue as a priest. I think I already knew, but this week made me face the fears of what people would say.

Over the next couple of months I spoke with my bishop and eventually informed him that I would be officially asking him to petition Rome on my behalf. I met with a priest in the Toronto area who would accompany me on this journey.

What I began to find out about the process would sadden me greatly. I believe I have a great understanding for married couples who apply for an annulment. They often have spoken of how deeply intrusive the process is and of how awful and painful it is. They had friends and family who were asked to evaluate their marriage. So often these couples would say to me "I know that my marriage is over...why does the church not take my word?".

As I began the process I had to find people who would speak on my behalf. So I asked three people...a close friend, a former co-worker in one of the parishes and my best friend and fellow priest. They generously agreed to do this for me and I am sure it was a painful process for them. They were coming to the realization that I was serious about this request. It also was a time of grieving for them. It was also difficult for some in my family, especially my parents who are strong Catholics and involved in their parish community. It was also very trying for my Archbishop who was so amazing and compassionate and loving

throughout the whole process. It was also I am sure for some who were close to me sad news. Some who were able to see beyond, rejoiced with me.

I also began to realize that if Rome said yes, there would be canonical restrictions put in place. I would no longer be able to celebrate the sacraments (except reconciliation and the sacrament of the sick in extreme situations). I



would no longer be able to preach, be a lector, or serve in certain pastoral capacities. What was the most bizarre was that I would not be able to distribute communion. Now at one point my hands were good enough to ask God's blessing over the bread and wine. But now how could it be considered a scandal to have me be a minister of communion? Apparently so. I would only be granted the dispensation (if Rome said yes) if I signed the document with these restrictions in place.

**"No. I'm sorry."**

Within five months, Rome had responded with a "no" to my request to be returned to the lay state. My Archbishop sent me the two line response and ended with a powerful "I'm sorry". Rome must have been puzzled with my request. Apparently you petitioned Rome only if there was sexual abuse, a complete mental breakdown, a major scandal like..God forbid...the priest got married. None of this pertained to me. I simply no longer wanted to continue as a priest and wanted the opportunity to one day to get married.



But something wonderful happened. As my petition was in Rome, some three months later I met a wonderful lady who stole my heart. It was not something that was planned, it just came out of the blue. Sandy is a wonderful lady and it just seemed that we were destined to meet. What was amazing is that when she said to me

"Why should it matter what Rome says...I love you and that should be all that matters". She was able to see beyond the fact that I was a priest. She was able to see me as "Jeff". She had read my blog and could see the struggle and the new found freedom within. She saw something Rome could never see because they had never met me. I was a case file and nothing more than that I felt. I do know that Rome was aware of some of my writings...did that affect their decision the first time? I do not know, nor can I control that. . I do not miss parish ministry in the least and I am honest when I say that. I do not miss the politics, the frustration, the attempts by others to compromise my heart and my conscience.

I know that I am at peace with my decision, happy with my life. A week ago, in the presence of a United Church minister Sandy and I exchanged vows and were married. My wedding had me surrounded by many people who have been marginalized by society and the church and it was such a true celebration. It was truly a joyous feast of love and a truly authentic celebration. I will send my marriage certificate to Rome to ask them to review my case.

What is difficult right now is that I feel like a leper in my own Church. I had to look at different parishes here in the city and was disappointed at the verbal assaults called homilies, the poor liturgies, the lack of connection with people. I also lamented that I felt I had to remain silent. I felt I could not offer my gifts to the parish in the form of music ministry, liturgy, RCIA, lector. If anyone were to ask me, I was not comfortable to go into my whole story. I am not about verbal assaults on Rome. I am grieving that my church that entrusted me with four parishes and by times six parishes did not trust me to know that priesthood was over for me. Rome's "no" hangs around my neck like the bell of the leper. I feel as though Rome views me as unclean and therefore I sit on the spiritual and physical edge of town. And that is not just, it is not loving. I want Rome to say yes to my request to return to the lay state as a means of my moving on and closing this chapter of my life. It is like unfinished business.

I have not abandoned my faith...on the contrary. I look forward to Sunday morning, to hearing the word broken open with conviction, to hear language that is inclusive and all embracing, to sing music that speaks to my soul. And for now that is happening at a United church. That is where this leper is welcome. I hope someday to be able to go home again to the Catholic Church and feel clean.

Jeff Doucette is now a youth advocate working in a homeless shelter for youth aged 16-24 in Ajax, Ontario.

**Visit my new blog at <http://jeffdouc.blogspot.com/>**

Visit my old L'Arche Daybreak blog at [www.geocities.com/jeffdouc](http://www.geocities.com/jeffdouc)

**"Living in community I discovered who I was. I discovered also that the truth will set me free, and so there's the gradual realization about what it means to be human. To be human is that capacity to love which is the phenomenal reality that we can give life to people; we can transform people by our attentiveness, by our love, and they can transform us. It is a whole question of giving life and receiving life, but also to discover how broken we are." -Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche**