

Abandon Your Wife or Be Laicized

LETTER FROM MOST REV. PAUL A. ZIPFEL, D.D. CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE 24



Written By

Robert Kippley

ROBERT KIPPLEY

ORDAINED JUNE 10, 1983

DIOCESE OF BISMARCK

TRANSITIONED JULY 1, 1998

MARRIED JOAN AUGUST 11, 1999

BEGAN MINISTRY IN THE

**EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
IN AMERICA JUNE 1, 1999.**

PRESENTLY PASTOR OF SHEPHERD

OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH IN

CANON CITY, COLORADO.

WWW.SOTHLUTHERAN.COM

ROBERT CAN BE REACHED AT

RKIPPLEY@YAHOO.COM

Dear Bishop Paul A. Zipfel,

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourself be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

I received your letter indicating you will be progressing with my laicization as a result of the new faculties recently granted to you by the Congregation for the Clergy. You indicate that I have two options, which I will paraphrase. I can abandon my beloved wife Joan (and I presume children, too, if I had any) and return to being owned by the Diocese of Bismarck. Or, I can remain as I am, happily married and in successful ministry where I am free to live my life in a way I feel called by God.

I will choose the latter.

I am not sure if this constitutes participation in the laicization process you are suggesting or not. I might have considered going through the laicization process if I hadn't chosen to continue in ordained min-

istry. Since I continue in legitimate ordained ministry, I see no need for it as I am still a member of the clergy, albeit in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

If the situation were reversed, and I had left Lutheran ministry and converted to Catholicism, I would be welcomed with open arms into the church along with my wife and would be able to function as an ordained married priest. But now, because of my marriage, I am banned from ordained ministry in the Catholic Church. I find it difficult to wrap my mind around this twisted logic and am so very thankful to no longer have to minister under such a system. Yet, I cannot help but feel sorry for priests who long for marriage and must suffer as they try to tolerate this oppression. I pray someday they too can find freedom and the courage to leave the priesthood.

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My wife has been a sacrament of God's love and has greatly enhanced my life and ministry. I thank God often for bringing us together. Your suggestion to abandon her is immoral and heartless, and I don't think you really mean it. You also indicated in your letter that I have "attempted" marriage. Do you have any idea of how arrogant this statement is? I assure you Bishop, I have not merely attempted marriage. I have been quite successful at it.

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you really mean it. You also indicated in your letter that I have “attempted” marriage. Do you have any idea of how arrogant this statement is? I assure you Bishop, I have not merely attempted marriage. I have been quite successful at it. I have been in a happy, fulfilled and often consummated marriage that has been blessed in the eyes of God for over eleven years. Because of the love and nurture I receive from my wife, I am a better pastor.

I would find it very difficult to return and minister among young Latin speaking priests who refer to Vatican Two as “Vatican Too Much.” Their God of laws and dogma stand in sharp contrast to Jesus, who often violated the religious laws of his day in order to extend healing and compassion. This neoconservative movement is further polarizing the church. Rather than work to accommodate progressive minded people such as me, the church is handing us our hats as they open the exit door. Even many moderates are feeling they no longer have a place within Catholicism as it drifts further to the right. The church needs gifted bishops to stand up to this rising tide, but few if any seem to have the courage to do so.

So, I give my consent for you to proclaim whatever incantations you feel are necessary over my priesthood and invite the Vatican to issue whatever documents they wish. It’s all a charade anyway. It may satisfy the agenda of the institution, but I expect God is rolling his eyes at such petty nonsense. You may find my words challenging, but that would be due to the world-view you have had to adopt over the years in order to conform your mind into the small world of Catholic fundamentalism. I see God as

so much more vast and omnipotent than my experience within Catholicism has allowed. The idea that God is somehow bound by the decrees of any church is ridiculous and now foreign to my thinking and experience.

I find it interesting that bishops and even cardinals, after they retire, feel free to speak of the need for optional celibacy for priests. I expect you will probably someday do the same, at least privately, if you are not already doing so. I don’t know how you can maintain your integrity in doing the work you are compelled to do. Like many retired bishops and cardinals, I am now free to speak the

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truth in my heart because the church has diminished authority over me, except for this final episode in which you find it necessary to reduce me from the clerical to the lay state. I’m not sure I will be able to withstand this trauma. You are taking me off the Catholic clerical pedestal! Sorry to say Bishop, my wife has beat you to it. She often reminds me of who I am. In addition, Martin Luther, of happy memory, loudly proclaimed the “Priesthood of All Believers” and removed the pedestal. So, whatever is to be gained from the action you are taking has already been accomplished. However, I would appreciate it if you would extend the courtesy of addressing me in our correspondence by my professional title of “Reverend” as I am an ordained minister. You may have forgotten that the oppression of the Roman church does not extend beyond itself. I

also request that whatever publications you give my laicization will in no way imply that this action was done as a result of sexual misconduct as I would interpret that as defamation of character.

You indicated that you have a need for this laicization but I am unclear why. Your letter indicated that you think it will bring me peace of mind at this time of my life. No Bishop, it’s not about me, it’s about you. Perhaps you intend it as a deterrent for other priests considering leaving, or maybe it’s a punishment for me leaving. It could be you are trying to keep the priesthood pure and holy and my marriage in Colorado is a scandal to

the Diocese. Whatever its purpose, it has everything to do with you and not me. I find myself frustrated at the moment by your initiation of this process, but deep in my soul I am very much at peace.

I have shared this communication with your Presbyteral Council because I prefer this not be done in the shadows but open to the light of day. I invite our correspondence to be shared with all the priests of the Diocese during this “Year of the Priest.” It would give them an opportunity to discuss issues such as how they feel about Anglican and Lutheran pastors who convert to Catholicism and can function as married priests, the neoconservative movement that is cultivated in the church today and how it is affecting the priesthood, and the recent power granted to bishops to laicize priests who have not requested it.

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December 8, 2009

Dear Members of the Presbyteral Council,

Grace and peace to you and your ministry during this holy season of Advent!

Enclosed you will find some communications between Bishop Zipfel and me pertaining to my laicization.

Recently the Congregation for the Clergy granted bishops special faculties to laicize priests who have not requested laicization. I share this communication with you because I desire this process to be done, not in the shadows, but in the light of day. I am not requesting that the Bishop refrain from this action but simply that it be done in a manner that is open for priests of the Diocese to see and discuss if they wish. Preparation and ordination to the priesthood is done in an open way with much fanfare. Yet, when priests leave, it is often out the back door and shrouded with shame. I hope this communication will help to shine the light of day on this process and give you a sense of what is going on in the mind of a priest who has left.

As most of you know, I transitioned out of the priesthood in 1998 and have been involved in ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for the past eleven years. I celebrated my 25th anniversary of ordination in 2008. Ministry is going well and I welcome the opportunity to continue to serve as an ordained pastor in this portion of the Lord's vineyard.

As you can see in my letter to the Bishop, I am suggesting this laicization process is a good opportunity for priests to discuss several important topics such as the neoconservative movement in the church and the impact it is having within the priesthood, how they feel about Anglican and Lutheran pastors who convert to Catholicism and can function as married priests, and the new powers granted to bishops to laicize priests against their will.

I do not expect people to agree with my thoughts about these issues, but do think they merit discussion especially during this "Year of the Priest." I have also enclosed "An Open Letter to Cardinal Hummes" by transitioned priest John Horan, which sums up well how many transitioned priests view these new powers given to bishops.

I often think of you and other priests in the Diocese as you minister sometimes under very difficult circumstances. May God abundantly bless and guide you and your ministry.

Sincerely in Christ,

Reverend Robert Kippley

cc Bishop Paul Zipfel

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An Open Letter to Cardinal Hummes

Eminence Claudio Cardinal Hummes, O.S.F.

Dear Cardinal Hummes:

Congratulations on the new responsibility you have just taken on. This past April, Pope Benedict XVI granted you the power to dismiss from the priesthood and release from the obligation of celibacy, priests who are living with women, who have abandoned their ministry for more than five years or who have engaged in seriously scandalous behavior. I am one of those you will be dismissing - not for the scandal part but for the woman part. It is a big job you have taken on. World wide, there are many thousands of us and, to add to the challenge, most bishops have no idea who or where we are. We have been on the "pay no mind" list for such a long time that tracking us down will be quite a headache.

I have seen your picture on Wikipedia. You seem like a kind man and your vitae demonstrates that you have Doctor of the Church quality brains. You clearly have some iron in your soul as demonstrated by your advocacy for homeless, indigenous people and your stance against the dictatorship in Brazil. But you have been away from parish work for a long time and prolonged exposure to the curia can cause cataracts. I am appealing to your kindness, brains and iron.

First off, understand that this project is a matter of paperwork, a re-organizing of files in cabinets, a clearing of the priesthood balance sheet. It has nothing to do with protecting the good of the church, avoiding scandal or getting things right in the eyes of God. God knows the Catholic Church has a good deal of work in those areas, but releasing thousands of us from the obligation of celibacy should be about around 10,000th on the Vatican to do list.

Secondly, some historical context needs to be established. You may not realize it, but the Vatican has zig-zagged for years about laicizations. Under Paul VI when large numbers were leaving, there was a fairly straightforward, but slow process. John Paul II pursued a much harder line, apparently in the belief that he could stem the tide by making laicizations virtually impossible. It didn't work. The unintended consequence was to diminish the credibility of the process. In his later years, he switched to a strategy wherein a petitioner had to lie, and state that he never really had a vocation at all. Most of us could say that we had a genuine vocation to priesthood, but not to celibacy. Now, Pope Benedict has done a complete about face. Forgive us if we are a little confused but the Vatican has changed its strategies like most of us change socks.

I left the Vatican priesthood during the late 1980's when the church was NOT granting formal dispensations from the obligation of celibacy. During my "exit interview" with Cardinal Bernardin he said that I could apply for a dispensation, but it would not be granted until I was much, much older. I remarked that the Vatican was playing hardball. He agreed, but his eyes told me that he had no stomach for such silly tactics. (By the way, what SHOULD be on the Vatican "To Do" list is to put Joe Bernardin on the canonization track.) So, let's be clear. In the 1980's the Vatican would not grant that which was asked for and now, 20 years later, will take that which has not been offered. In light of this context, please be careful about tossing out phrases like "abandon our ministry." This revisionist bit of history is a lie, pure and simple.

I am no ecclesiastical prognosticator, but I have to believe that you are on anyone's short list for Pope. The Congregation for Clergy is a big job and this chance to clean up the sacerdotal balance sheet is litmus test of the first degree. But you should know that it is only important in Vatican circles and in diocesan offices. Everywhere else, Catholics find it funny and upon deeper reflection, really quite infuriating.

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I will give you an example. My wife and I have been in a civil marriage for the last 19 years. We couldn't get married in the Catholic Church because I didn't have a dispensation the Vatican wouldn't give. Our marriage has been full of consensual sex. When my wife found out that our sex, in the eyes of the Vatican, was causing serious scandal, she laughed right out loud. "Our lawn is a scandal," she said. "Our consensual sex is a sacrament." I fear most women married to ex-priests will not, like my wife, find this particularly funny. They will instead fume and wonder out loud why the Holy See has such a hard time seeing real scandal and such an easy time manufacturing fake scandals.

This notion that our church will become "leaner and purer" are concepts best applied to cuts of meat and not the Church of Jesus. Cardinal Hummes, if your kindness, brains and iron could only understand how absurd this all is to all of us, if only you could muster up a real giggle about these forced dispensations, you would surely make a terrific Pope.

Best Wishes,

John Horan

Ordained; May 13, 1981

Left the Vatican Priesthood; June 10, 1988

Contact information: His Eminence Claudio Cardinal Hummes, O.S.F.

Mailing Address: Palazzo delle Congregazioni, 00193 Roma, Piazza Pio XII, 3

Official web site: <http://www.clerus.org>

Telephone: 06.69.88.41.51 Fax: 06.69.88.48.45.

Dear Mr. Kippley:

Greetings in Christ!

On June 5, 2009, after the release of the news of the new faculties granted to the Congregation for the Clergy regarding clerical laicizations, you emailed me to state that you had no interest in the process. However, after much consideration, I have decided that it is in the best interest of the Diocese of Bismarck that we proceed with laicization, especially considering that you are civilly married and are working as a Lutheran minister.

At this point, you have two options: you may return to full ministry as a Catholic priest after abandoning your attempt at civil marriage; or you may stay as you are. I request that you notify me in writing of your decision by December 31, 2009.

If I do not hear from you by that date, I will instruct the Office of Canonical Affairs to begin the process of your return to the lay state. To ensure due process, the Promoter of Justice of the Diocese of Bismarck must be involved (Rev. David Zimmer, JCL). If the Congregation for the Clergy grants my request, you will be dispensed from your clerical vows as well as the obligations of celibacy.

If you wish to participate in the process, please contact the Office of Canonical Affairs at 701-222-3035 as soon as possible. Rev. Chris Kadrmas, JCL, will be instructing your case, with assistance from Ms. Mary Tarver, JCL, and Sandra Breiner, Ecclesiastical Notary. However, please note that this case will go forward, with or without your participation.

I kindly ask you, Bob, to consider participating. I trust that this can bring you peace of mind as well at this time in your life.

Wishing you every good blessing, I remain

Most Rev. Paul A. Zipfel, D.D.
Bishop of Bismarck