

# Leaving the Priesthood Website

Ecclesiastical institutions have no power except that which we give them.

[www.leavingthepriesthood.com](http://www.leavingthepriesthood.com)

The purpose of this website is to provide information about challenges Roman Catholic priests encounter and the need for reform. It provides a forum for priests who have left the priesthood to share why they left and what they have learned through the process. At the left of your screen you will find posts from active priests, priests who have transitioned, laity, and those in relationships of love with priests. You will also find a theology link with news articles, recommended books and other information. There are also blogs where you can find information and share your thoughts. On the right you will find a monthly or bimonthly article written by Henry. Below you will find a table of contents and at the bottom of this page contact information.

Although there are other online resources, there is little that directly addresses the challenges and opportunities a priest faces when considering leaving. If you are a priest or lay person and see little need for reform, we hope you will continue reading to understand why so many of us found it necessary to leave. We began this website because we care about Catholicism, its many priests who have left, and those who continue in ministry. The pontifical "we" is used at times because it reflects the thinking of many priests who have left.

If you are using the translation link at the top of this page and find one text box expanding upon another, reducing the size of the print will help.

The contents of this website are for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional psychotherapy or counseling advice.

## **Contents**

### **Why Priests Leave**

### **A Theology That Allows a Priest to Leave**

Romantic Love Made Evil  
Vows, Promises and Change  
Support from Outside the "Fraternity"  
Priestly Vows vs. Marriage Vows  
Celibacy and Sex  
Homosexual Scapegoats  
Priests Who Are Homosexual  
The Experience of Romantic Love in the Heart of a Priest  
To Priests in Love  
Priests and Romantic Love - A Woman's Perspective  
Patriarchy Dressed in Piety  
Various Reasons for Leaving the Priesthood

PAGE TWO:

The Lure of the Priesthood  
Not All Leave the Church  
Why It's Hard to Leave  
An Unholy Sacrifice  
The Compulsion to Please  
The Archconservative Shift  
Pope Francis - Religion vs Ideology  
Reform vs. Restoration  
A New Definition of "Center"  
Defining "Truth"  
Relativism vs. Pluralism  
The Priest in a Wayward Church  
The Cold War  
Conclusion  
To the Pope and Bishops  
Next Steps for Transitioning Priests

### Why Priests Leave

Although no longer in sanctioned priestly ministry, many priests who leave are still involved in ministerial activity, whether in Catholicism, another church or elsewhere. The depth of dedication and commitment to social

justice and other charitable work continues, but in different ways. For most, there is sadness in leaving because of the joy and fulfillment they found in priestly ministry. What compelled most of them to leave was not ministry, but the inability and lack of freedom to live their personal lives in a manner in which they felt called by God. More will be said about this later. Now for many, the priesthood continues in some way within their lives, therefore the term “transitioned priest” is preferred to “ex-priest”.

When associating with transitioned priests, one quickly sees the tremendous talent and kindness of these men. If you didn’t know they were ordained priests, you would have guessed they were, or are, in some sort of ministry for pastoral depth and gentleness seeps from their demeanor. A major attribute of these priests is compassion for the marginalized because they have experienced being marginalized. But, more than anything else, when associating with transitioned priests, you can’t help but feel the huge loss to Catholicism when they left; a loss that, in most cases, could have been avoided if the Church had engaged in more meaningful reform following the Second Vatican Council. These reforms are still deeply needed and supported by the vast majority of Catholics.

Priests who leave are often both pushed and pulled out. They are pushed out by the lack of collegiality, the inability to make important choices about their personal lives, or by rigid dogma and ecclesiastical laws that, in conscience, are no longer credible. Many are pulled out by the love of another person with whom they wish to pursue a relationship in the light and outside the shadows of mandatory celibacy.

### **A Theology That Allows a Priest Leave**

The first thing necessary for leaving the priesthood is for the priest to have theology that allows him to leave. Central to this theology is the realization that God’s presence and activity are not confined to the Roman Catholic Church and even Vatican II acknowledges this. Jesus Christ leads priests both in and out of the priesthood. Both journeys are sacred and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is not God and it has no divine power. It is an institution with the power to govern the operation of the institution. Christ may be present in the Catholic Church as he is in other churches, but as the subtitle of this website states, "Ecclesiastical institutions have no power, except that which we give them." So, central to a theology that allows a priest to leave the priesthood is the understanding that the Church has no divine power, only human power, which is bad enough when in the hands of power hungry clerics.

No one, not even the Pope when speaking "ex cathedra" is infallible. Only God is infallible. Papal Infallibility is a doctrine invented by the Church to empower itself. The doctrine of Infallibility was defined and hastily pushed through a poorly attended First Vatican Council in 1870. It was proclaimed in response to Protestants proclaiming the Bible to be infallible, which was in response to Darwin's "Origin of Species" and the scientific community's embracing of evolution.

It is no accident that "The Origin of Species", published in 1859 was followed by the doctrine of Infallibility proclaimed in 1870. This quest for Infallibility arose out of fear of the modern world and the rapid changes that were occurring. Protestants made the Bible their infallible Paper Pope, while Catholics proclaimed the doctrine of Infallibility. Both are nothing but a form of idolatry and an attempt by fearful people to bank their existential angst when realizing their world-view is mistaken and they are not in control.

Someone emailed and asked what the source is for these statements. They were looking for a footnote. The source is rational thought. One could ask the Papacy what its source was for proclaiming itself infallible. Its only source would be from people who were threatened with excommunication for saying anything otherwise.

The point is, the Church has no divine control over any priest.

Most priests who leave have done so after months and perhaps years of prayer and reflection, often shedding tears as they make this important decision. When priests leave, most find it takes far more faith and courage than entering. When entering they heard "Hosanna! Hosanna!", but when

leaving they hear “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Nevertheless, both are sacred journeys. ([Click here to see more articles about a theology that allows a priest to leave.](#))

### **Romantic Love Made Evil**

Mandated celibacy is a form of violence done to those called to ordained ministry but not to celibacy. While these priests can have a profound sense of Call, celibacy never really finds a home within their hearts, regardless of the spiritual facade their bishops or spiritual directors attempt to wrap it in. Celibacy is something they try to tolerate but deep down an intense loneliness prevails. The thought of growing old as a celibate, and someday retiring in a home for priests, brings more pain than comfort. Although their loneliness may diminish at times, it is often in the background of their lives, a kind of darkness that will not go away.

Priests who fall in love can feel imprisoned within the priesthood as they watch others freely celebrate their love and openly show affection for their significant other. They cannot deny that their love is a holy experience and find themselves perplexed as to why it has put them on a collision course with the priesthood, when, in fact, being in love has brought them new joy and enthusiasm for life. They experience a deep yearning within, not simply for sex, but for the union of two hearts and souls lived in the sacred mystery of love and companionship for the rest of their lives. Mandatory celibacy, however, forces them to face difficult choices. They can secretly embrace this love in the dark and shaming shadows of mandated celibacy, force this love out of their lives, or extract themselves from the priesthood and pursue the relationship. None of these choices seems appealing, but true freedom is found in the latter.

If a priest is in love, it’s hard for him to understand why this love is disqualifying him from the priesthood, especially in light of I John 4:8 where we read that “God is love”. So, why is love an impediment to ordained ministry? Yes, we all know the old party line “Celibacy frees you to love everyone”, but, we also know it’s not true. Married people can and do love others just as passionately as celibates.

The fact is, when celibate priests fall in love they find what has been true all along: they are owned by an ecclesiastical institution which has turned romantic love into a force of evil and has an odd obsession with controlling their sexuality, to the point of bordering on a kind of a master/slave relationship. Disguised in religious jargon and contrived theology, mandatory celibacy is really about radical patriarchy (male domination) and misogyny (whether it be in ordained priestly ministry or as wives of priests, women are perceived as inferior and an evil influence).

On the other hand, Christ has no interest in mandated celibacy and even cured the mother of Saint Peter's wife in respect for his marriage. (See Matthew 8:14, Mark 1:30-32 and Luke 4:38-39.) Understanding this, the transitioning priest is justified in separating the will of God from the practice of the ecclesiastical institution.

For a reflection about the decision to marry click [here](#). To see the positive role women would have on the priesthood, click [here](#).

### **Vows, Promises and Change**

What about the vows and promises taken on the day of ordination? Things change and change is healthy and inevitable in the maturation process. To live in a dynamic relationship with God is to live in the midst of change. We could not stay in the priesthood because it prohibited changes God was calling us to make. The papacy has made mandatory celibacy and other teachings into idols to which many of us could no longer bow.

How can one find visionary leadership in a church that's reluctant to change? Most of its bishops, especially during the past forty years, were chosen precisely because of their aversion to change and their willingness to attempt to restore the church to some former golden era. (Thankfully this is finally changing with Pope Francis, but systemic change will be extremely difficult.) Pope John XXIII, Vatican II and countless dedicated priests and bishops worked hard to pry open the windows of the church to let in some fresh air only to find them being closed by a new generation of priests who refer to Vatican II as "Vatican too much". There seems to be little room in this new

Church for reasonable, Spirit-guided change, so many priests find it necessary to leave. Their journeys, prayerfully embarked upon, are inspired by the Holy Spirit. One of the oldest teachings of the church is one's obligation to live according to the dictates of their conscience.

In a healthy maturation process, the locus of authority moves from external to internal. Author and Methodist minister, James Fowler, in his book "Stages of Faith" proposes a staged development of faith across a person's lifespan. Fowler's first stage is called "Undifferentiated Faith" where an infant's experience of reality is not distinguished from fantasy. As the child develops the capacity for concrete thinking, she then moves toward stage two called the "Literal Stage", where she starts distinguishing reality from fantasy. In this stage, God may be perceived as an old man living in the sky, while heaven and hell are viewed as actual physical places. Here, one believes that if they follow the rules, God will give them a good life. But they begin to grow out of this stage when encountering conflicts and contradictions to what they hold to be true. The perplexing question, "Why do good people suffer?" begins to challenge them during this stage.

Around puberty, a person moves into Fowler's third stage, "Conventional". As in the previous two stages, authority is still located outside of self. Here, people are not fully conscious of having chosen to believe something, because they are not engaged in any analytical thought about their faith. It's called "conventional" because most people at this stage see themselves believing what everyone else believes. They are reluctant to change their beliefs because of their need to stay connected to their peer group. Many church leaders may consciously or unconsciously attempt to keep people in this stage by discouraging analytical thinking about their faith. They imply that questioning one's faith in itself shows a lack of faith. They prefer people stay in a sort of perpetual childhood where authority is located in themselves and their religion in order to continue exerting control.

Many men who leave the priesthood find it is necessary in order to further mature and progress to the next stage. In stage four, "Individuated Reflective" faith, young adults become aware of their freedom and burden to begin to sort through their beliefs, accepting or rejecting them. Here one's sense of

authority moves from the external to the internal. A person is better able to govern themselves and is less dependent upon rules. The literalism of religious stories begins to give way to deeper meanings. The strength of this stage is the capacity for critical reflection, but the weakness is that a person may “throw out the baby with the bath water”, claim to be atheist, and fail to enter into the next stage.

Stage five is the “Integrating Faith” of middle adulthood. Here a person is able to expand their worldview beyond the “either/or” position of the previous stage, toward a “both/and” point of view. People in this stage are willing to cross religious and cultural boundaries to learn from people they may have previously avoided. Here one believes in God, but not as a literal being living in the sky, and Heaven and Hell are no longer seen as physical places. They re-examine their beliefs, while at the same time accepting that it is beyond their ability to comprehend. They realize truth can also be found in other religious traditions besides their own and no longer need to accept their faith on a literal level only. This stage of faith makes it difficult to follow one's conscious when church leaders insist their way is the only way.

Many priests find it necessary to separate themselves from the controlling tendencies of the ecclesiastical institution in order to mature in faith. The same process is necessary for anyone experiencing the desire to mature when their tradition attempts to hold them back. Conservative religion is built upon unhealthy psychology. [See this link for more discussion about the maturing process and faith.](#)

### **Support from Outside the “Fraternity”**

When leaving the priesthood, it is wonderful, but not always possible, to have the support of family and friends. I found it very difficult to talk with my brother priests about leaving, even after being in a support group with some of them for over 12 years. I heard how they referred to other priests who had left and knew confiding in them would bring more pain than support. Besides, I might have been whisked off to a counseling program if they had reported to the Bishop that one of his priests was about to jump the fence.



I'm still amazed that I didn't feel free enough to discuss something as important as leaving the priesthood with guys I had been meeting with in my "support group" for so long. For me, it became apparent that whatever fraternity we had was a mile wide and an inch deep. But, I think something else was at work. Leaving the priesthood is so taboo that even discussing it with "faithful" priests is perceived as sinful. Deeper still, even the thought of leaving is avoided by those who are repressing it, giving credence to the saying "Sow a thought, reap an action".

If a priest is serious about leaving, it will be helpful for him to associate with others with whom he can honestly discuss his fears, hopes and dreams. It is important that he confide in people who are not brainwashed with Catholic fundamentalism, which eliminates his Bishop / Superior and most of his priest friends and other conservative Catholics. The most understanding people I found were from the Corpus organization. If he can find a Corpus group meeting in his area, that would be a great help. Corpus is comprised of priests and women religious who have transitioned out of ministry as well as other Catholics who are interested in significant change within the church. He may also want to find a good counselor who is supportive of his journey.

### **Priestly Vows vs. Marriage Vows**

On the day of my marriage, as I spoke my vows to my beloved, I felt nothing but joy and happiness in the freedom to live my personal life out from under the oppression of mandatory celibacy. These vows made much more sense than the previous ones I had made in front of my bishop seventeen years earlier. The purposes of those were obedience and control, while the purposes of these were for love and companionship. Making the two mutually exclusive is an abuse of ecclesiastical power, an injustice to priests, and contrary to the will of God as found in the scriptures and first thousand years of Catholic Church tradition. The sixteenth century reformers were correct when they taught marriage is a divine right that no ecclesiastical law can negate. When you read the arguments against the practice of mandated celibacy those reformers made, you will find little has changed during the past 500 or so years. You can find their arguments by clicking [here](#).

## Celibacy and Sex

Abused children are not the only victims of the sex abuse crisis in the Church today. Every priest in active ministry is a victim. Prior to leaving, I remember walking through an airport wearing my collar, when a mother pulled her young child closer to her as I approached. That hurt and it had everything to do with the stigma of mandated celibacy.

Mandatory celibacy defines a priest primarily by sex and places an inordinate amount of attention on his sex life. When the typical lay person meets a priest, they perceive him first and foremost as a "celibate" and have an internal dialogue that goes something like this: "Is he really celibate? I wonder what he does with his sex drive. Is he gay? He must masturbate a lot. God, I hope he's not a pedophile." If he's attractive, they think, "Father what-a-waste", and, if not attractive, they think, "No wonder he went into the priesthood". Those who think this occurs because our society is preoccupied with sex are mistaken. It's always been this way. People are now just more willing to talk about it. The fact remains that, because "celibate" primarily defines a priest by his sex life, he is viewed and understood primarily by sex and for this he suffers now more than ever. Priests are not "celibates"; they are "human beings".

Priests who leave to marry are not looking only for sex. From some of the emails received, many Catholics seem to think their quest is all about sexual union. They cannot seem to see beyond sexual intercourse to the quest that a priest has for love, emotional intimacy and nurture. For them, it is all about f\*\*king, which reveals what their marital lives must be like and one can only feel sorry for their wives. The primary quest for priests who leave to marry is mutual love and intimacy with their spouses of which intercourse is only one part. I find it offensive when someone implies that a priest leaves because "he can't keep it in his pants". No, the issue is "he can't keep the rock wall around his heart".

The term "mandatory celibacy" implies that a priest is to abstain from sexual activity. It objectifies sexual intercourse and separates it from the union of heart and soul that a healthy marriage entails. "Mandated celibacy" gives the impression that f\*\*king is what marriage is all about and tends to turn women into sexual objects. Yet, that is not what most priests are after. They simply long to have another person to love and share their life with like any other normal human being. Mandated celibacy shames priests for having this desire, and because celibacy is all about sexual abstinence, their sexuality is shamed too. This is a dark cloud that hangs over the priesthood, which all priests are forced to enter upon ordination. They are forced to publicly declare that they will forever deny this important part of their lives. This isolates them and makes them into an oddity that people often pity more than respect. The problem is forcing celibacy upon priests. The dynamic would change if celibacy was optional.

People may object by saying, "But celibacy is optional. No one was forcing you to be ordained." But you are mistaken. Our Call is from God and it was profound. The Church has imposed celibacy upon God's call. Mandated celibacy was not part of the early Church (Jesus cured the mother of Saint Peter's wife. Mark 1:30-31) and never became a law until around 1000 AD. Mandated celibacy is not the will of God and it has caused tremendous problems in the Church.

It's ironic that church officials, obsessed with controlling priests' sex lives by mandating celibacy, have themselves created this sex abuse crisis. For centuries, they have constructed a mystical facade around celibacy and their efforts brought welcomed protection and privilege. But, like Toto in the Wizard of Oz, this crisis has pulled back the curtain and no amount of incense can hide the little man pulling the levers. Mandated celibacy is far more integral to this crisis than the Pope and bishops are willing, or perhaps able, to admit.

Click [here](#) for a reflection about how mandated celibacy hinders healthy sexual integration. Click [here](#) to see the statement extolling the superiority of priests by Lacordaire and how it has created an atmosphere of clericalism, which has allowed sexual misconduct to become more prevalent within the

priesthood. Click [here](#) to see how celibacy is a necessary component to a clerical culture that enables sexual abuse. [Click here](#) to find where the ultimate responsibility should be placed for this crisis. [Click here to find a history of sex, choice and Catholics.](#)

### **Homosexual Scapegoats**

The Vatican's public response to this crisis was the promise to screen out gay candidates for ordination during their seminary preparation. With this statement, they made homosexual priests the scapegoats in this crisis, even though they know pedophilia is a separate issue. They have taken the easy way out by exploiting society's homophobia and sacrificing these priests on the altar of self-preservation. This is a far cry from Jesus, who stood with the marginalized and was crucified because of his solidarity with them. It's revealing that the Vatican intentionally tied pedophilia to homosexuality in order to exonerate mandated celibacy and avoid having to make the systemic changes necessary to find real solutions. For more about scapegoating homosexual priests, [click here](#) and [here](#).

Recently, the hierarchy paved the way for the ordination to the priesthood of numerous married Protestant clergy. Most of these clergy left their denominations over the issue of homosexuality. Their primary desire was to find hierarchical support for their homophobia, and sadly, they have found it within Catholicism. History will soon prove the Catholic Church wrong on the issue of homosexuality as it has on so many other issues. Even then, the hierarchy will continue to proclaim itself "Infallible" and those in the pew will again look the other way in order to maintain their illusion of faith. Click [here](#) to see how the Bishops have lost credibility with the majority of Catholics when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. Click [here](#) to read a story about the pain the Bishop's homophobia has caused one man and how their teaching causes many gay people to commit suicide.

### **Priests Who Are Homosexual**

*I have known I was gay from the time I was four years old, even though I could not articulate it to myself, let alone anyone else. I thought everyone felt the same as I did, but gradually as I grew up and then went to school and observed others, I realized*

*slowly over time that I was different. And so did my classmates when I reached a certain age because I did not have, nor have any desire to have, a "girlfriend." Naturally, I became the butt of jokes from my male classmates from a very early age. I became an altar boy at the tender age of seven and noticed immediately the profound respect I had from the older people in the parish that I never had before. When I announced to my classmates at an early age that I thought I wanted to be a priest, it helped to stop the ribbing (at least from the Catholic ones), now; at least, they saw a reason why I stayed away from girls. When I entered minor diocesan seminary with other students, we were surrounded by men who gave us an attention, respect, and honor that I had never experienced before. Never once did they question my sexuality or make me feel uncomfortable.*

Within the Roman Catholic priesthood, a high percentage of bishops and priests are bisexual or homosexual. One should not be surprised at this. As the priest cited above attests, the acceptance and respect shown to celibate priests is a strong drawing card for boys who feel alienated and demeaned because of a homosexual orientation that they themselves probably don't understand. The seminary environment is, itself, conducive to nurturing the emotional needs of homosexual men. From the moment a man enters the seminary, he is surrounded by men and expected to associate primarily with men throughout his formation.

From the time a man enters the seminary and throughout his priesthood, special friendships with women are discouraged and often perceived as scandalous, while associations with males are, of course, acceptable. Eyebrows are raised if a priest goes out to lunch with a woman, but he can live with other men and vacation with other priests, with no questions asked. If he is gay, this is also a drawing card, as it would be for a heterosexual priest if the situation were reversed and he could freely, without raising any eyebrows or suspicion, associate with women.

In no way do we want to imply that an all male environment influences men to become homosexual, because sexual orientation is genetically predetermined. However, within a male environment, it is understandably easier for a homosexual or bisexual man to have his intimacy needs met than it is for a heterosexual man.

Because homosexual relationships are frowned upon in most areas of society, welcomed in very few and completely rejected in others, the priesthood is, and has been throughout the history of mandated celibacy, a refuge for gay men. But, there is another reason why gay men are attracted to the priesthood, they are very good at it.

During our years in the priesthood, we found homosexual priests to be some of the most pastorally gifted and successful people in ministry and learned to respect them deeply.

Although it is easier for gay priests to have their intimacy needs met, they risk public ridicule if their sexual orientation becomes public knowledge. Therefore they must keep their sexual orientation “in the closet,” and that is more easily done within a community of celibate males.

If the Church’s hierarchy were honest, it would acknowledge the high percentage of priests who are gay and affirm their ministry. Instead, they appear to be ashamed of these priests and attempt to deny their existence. In so doing, they are contributing to society’s homophobia and encouraging gay priests to view their God-given sexuality with shame.

Some cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests in ecclesiastical offices responsible for homophobic policies are themselves gay, which shows to what degree they will sacrifice their integrity in order to maintain their power.

The history of the Church indicates that even some popes have been homosexual. The hierarchy is well aware of the high number of homosexuals that minister within their ranks. Sadly, their policy has been to be dishonest and deny it. Gay priests are also expected to join in this falsehood and be dishonest about who they are.

Regardless of whether priests are homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual, the real problem lies with the hierarchy’s seeming inability to deal with human sexuality in an emotionally healthy way. Their outlook exemplifies an Augustinian view where sexual orgasm is perceived as a defiling act

rendering the priest impure. This sick, medieval view of sexuality is the heart of the problem and the foundation upon which mandatory celibacy rests.

It is very difficult for priests to integrate their sexuality in a healthy manner when it is perceived as an alien force within them. My moral theology class in the seminary taught that masturbation (or even so much as thinking about it with delight) was serious sin. My professor summed it up in these words: "If you are celibate, no orgasms!" This came from a very conservative moral theologian whom the Church had elevated as an authority on human sexuality in one of the largest seminaries in the United States. The message that came through to us seminarians was: "Your sexual drive is evil and alien to who you really are and must be repressed, or you will be punished by God." This resulted in seminarians running off to confession every few days with sex as the major "sin" with which they were preoccupied. Teaching such as this is psychologically damaging and harmful to healthy sexual integration. This is why there will always be some sort of sexual crisis within the priesthood, and the responsibility for it needs to be placed at the very highest echelon within the Catholic Church's hierarchy.

A priest who is gay and has transitioned created a blog intended to be a safe place where gay or bisexual priests (currently serving or have served) in the Church, can find support. He states, *"It is my hope that, through the process of sharing the challenges that exist for being gay and priests, support and encouragement can be found regardless of dispirited rhetoric and dictums from the Church's hierarchy, which oppresses gay and bisexual men into feeling lonely and shameful. This blog is intended to allow a healing process to exist, whereby priests can find understanding, hope and a sense of peace."* Click here to find the blog "Make It Known".

For an excellent in depth discussion about homosexuality and the Catholic Church, see this article in Commonweal.

### **The Experience of Romantic Love in the Heart of a Priest**

The experience of falling in love is overwhelming for anyone, but especially for a priest. When love erupts in a priest's heart, he realizes everything he has worked for is put at risk – his ministry, reputation, the esteem of parishioners,

other priests, his bishop and possibly family and friends. He risks losing his job, home, health insurance and, sadly in some dioceses, his retirement. On top of all this is the fear of spiritual condemnation by the Church who claims to wield the power of God Himself. So, rather than romantic love being a treasured gift from God, it becomes a threat to a priest's very survival and puts him in crisis.

Even though they know this, most priests still yearn for a significant other with whom they can have a close, intimate relationship. If gay, they long for a male, and if straight, a female companion who will see beyond the curtain of their professional lives into their hearts and embrace them with tenderness, nurture and unconditional love. Their primary desire is not for sex, but for the warmth, tenderness and nurture that a healthy relationship of love offers. Unfortunately, mandated celibacy makes all of this "sinful", or at least, the near occasion of sin, which priests are trained to avoid.

It is true that there are priests who are primarily looking for sexual gratification and are willing to use others for this purpose. But these priests are emotionally troubled and do not represent the majority. Those who have been recipients of their abuse would call them criminals and possibly even attempt to sue them or their diocese or religious order for their behavior. Mandated celibacy can and often does attract dysfunctional men who are emotionally and sexually confused. Furthermore, it can arrest what would have otherwise been healthy psychosexual development because it prohibits the very intimate interaction necessary for this development. This is particularly true for priests who are "lifers", i.e. they entered the seminary during high school when the psychosexual factors of their lives were being formed.

Women who fall in love with priests—and the same is true for gay men who fall in love with priests—often find a sort of "schoolboy" mentality, which is indicative of men whose psychosexual development has been arrested. But it is also a product of the environment in which priests live for all the reasons mentioned in the first paragraph of this section above. A priest in love must keep it hidden and often the first person he tries to hide it from is himself. What love he is able to show cannot be overt, and like a schoolboy he is



awkward trying to express it, feels shame if anyone notices it, and if asked would strongly deny it exists. What is going on in his heart is euphoric and at the same time frightening.

Rather than run from this love, priests may find it helpful to have a good trusted counselor with whom to discuss it. They may find that attempting to run from love is actually running from God's greatest gift and something they will someday regret. On the other hand, careful discernment is necessary to see if he and his companion have the emotional maturity to make a marriage work.

Because mandated celibacy prohibits this relationship, proper discernment while in ministry is difficult.

If a priest finds that he would like to pursue the relationship, he may be better off leaving the priesthood. In this way, he can be honest and express his love in the light of day, rather than in the shaming shadows of celibacy, where now his lover is also required to live. I fail to understand why a priest would expect the person he loves to also live in this oppressive environment that perceives their relationship to be sinful. She is susceptible to verbal and other emotional abuse if word gets out that they are in love.

Such is the sad situation of the Roman Catholic priesthood.

In order to leave, the priest needs to look at everything he does as a stepping stone out of the priesthood. This begins in his own heart with a clear intention to leave, i.e. "Sow a thought and reap an action." Finding emotional support is helpful, but if he is looking for priest friends or his bishop to validate his desire to leave, he will be disappointed. He must believe, not only in God, but also in himself.

To someone outside of Catholicism, they may think, "What's the big deal? If you want to leave, just leave!" But it's not that easy. Click [here](#) to see more reasons why it's hard to leave.

He can leave with or without going through the laicization process. If he and his beloved want to continue within Catholicism, get married and receive the sacraments, he will need to be laicized and this process can be lengthy, but it can occur after he leaves. Further information about being laicized is available on this website's blog, "[The Laicization Process](#)".

The first step to transitioning out of the priesthood is for the priest to have a theology that allows him to leave. He must also perceive that he has the internal resources necessary to create a new life elsewhere. Even if he finds that this particular love relationship does not end in marriage, it has served to help him mature and begin a new phase of life. Once a priest tastes the sweetness of intimate romantic love, it becomes the benchmark for other relationships. He has been to the mountain top of romantic love, where, perhaps to his surprise, he has found the presence of God and a whole new dimension of life. It changes everything and he begins to see forced celibacy for what it is – an oppressive ecclesiastical law that stands apart from the will of God. Of course, the situation would be completely different if celibacy was optional.

It takes tremendous courage for a woman to confide to a priest that she is in love with him, or for a priest to confide to a woman that he is in love with her. And of course, the same would apply to gay relationships.

When a priest is in love, his love is often expressed with innuendo and under the table, so to speak, which is indicative of the schoolboy dynamic. If the woman has reached a point in the relationship where she wants to be honest and express her love to him, she will be hurt if it is not reciprocated. The rejection may occur for several reasons:

- The priest is not in love with her and she has read more into the relationship than was there. In this case, he must ask himself if he intentionally led her on. If this was the case, he joins the ranks of other abusive priests.
- The priest lacks the courage to admit his love for her, though he may come around to it in time.

- The priest may truly love her, but not enough to face the possible ramifications of developing a deeper relationship. At least, he should admit this.
- The priest truly loves her, but is too steeped in Catholic theology to ever seriously consider leaving because he fears putting either of their souls in jeopardy. He feels that by remaining a priest he is practicing “sacrificial love” and awaits their perfect union in Heaven. In this situation, in the mind of the priest, the ecclesiastical institution has become divinized.

By discussing the nature of their relationship, the woman has been the mature one by admitting her love, no longer willing to play schoolboy games. She has been honest and called him to honesty too. Like so many women in the history of humanity, she is the hero but is often viewed as the villain. To all the women who have been hurt by priests who love them but are afraid to come out from behind their collars: your honesty, integrity and courage are an inspiration. He is a slave of the institution. Hold your head high and move on to a man worthy of your love. Healing will come in time.

A priest in love normally wants the relationship to continue under the table, because of the crisis it involves for him to be honest about it. Often when in love, his denial is primarily to himself about the blossoming love relationship, but he cannot deny the joy he feels while in her presence. It’s time for him to man-up and face the truth. It may be costly but such is the price of true spiritual growth and maturity.

He needs to wake up and see how he has been brainwashed by the Church and embrace this love as a gift from God. Regardless of what the Church says, this is the real conversion where he takes responsibility for his own life. Just as he found Christ present in ministry and now in romantic love, he will find him also present and guiding him into the future. *Faith is confidence assurance about things hoped for and conviction about things unseen.* (Hebrews 11:1)

Mandated celibacy forces a priest to live a sort of schizophrenic relationship with himself when it comes to romance and nurture. Intimacy lurks beneath

the surface of his life and he dreams of someday finding someone with whom he can share it. If he does come across someone that causes the violins to sound off, he feels both attraction and fear of where it may lead.

This can be a challenge for married couples as well, who find their hearts being touched by someone other than their spouse. It is less an issue if their need for love and nurture are being met with their spouse, and this involves much more than sex. But, for a priest, there is *no one* filling this void in his life. While it is true that some find their needs for intimacy met in their spirituality, many do not. Christ longs to bring these priests love, nurture and intimacy through another human being and they have a right for this. Ecclesiastical law can never nullify the divine law to marry and experience the union of two people coming together as one.

There are women and priests in love who have made a mutual commitment to somehow live this love within the context of the priesthood. Some of these relationships are celibate and some are not. I don't know how, over the long haul, they do it. They live in fear of their love becoming public and must sometimes have to lie to keep it hidden. I don't think living this way is emotionally, spiritually or physically healthy. Yet, some have managed to make it work. Love will have its way, even if it must be lived within the shaming shadows of celibacy. However, priests who ask their beloved to live in this way must examine themselves to see if it is truly mutual or the result of a lack of empathy. In some countries, a priest having a concubine is tolerated, perhaps even expected, but that is not the case in the United States.

Only in the Roman Catholic Church is God's gift of love perceived as evil.

Some priests find their needs for love and intimacy met within their life and ministry but many do not. An obvious solution to this would be to make celibacy optional. Unfortunately, the Church is entrenched and blind to this, and it's time for priests in love to move on with their lives.

Ecclesiastical leaders eager to pass judgment on priests who seek companionship need to understand that they have turned God's gift of love into a force of evil. This is one of the greatest perversions of religion today

and they would do well to remember that turning God's gift of love into a force of evil is the real sin. By so adamantly maintaining the current law of mandated celibacy, they are mainly responsible for the pain suffered by priests and women in love and for whatever scandal might ensue from these relationships.

A question women who fall in love with priests must ask themselves is, "Am I part of a fantasy world he is creating?" Most priests have no intention of leaving the priesthood, but welcome a romantic relationship, whatever the degree, because it provides relief from the loneliness of the priesthood. Women involved with these relationships can find their lives on hold sometimes for years only to find the relationship to be going nowhere.

If a priest is really in love, he would leave. Period. No, "Well, if only..." Or, "I would leave if ...." Many women who enter into the world of mandated celibacy and romance end up deeply hurt. Romance and the priesthood are indeed an oxymoron. If a priest is unwilling to be honest and discuss the relationship with the one he loves, it is an indication that the relationship is going nowhere.

### **To Priests in Love**

Father, if you are in a romantic relationship, whether gay or straight, you are fortunate. Giving and receiving romantic love is a huge part of what it means to be a human being. It is an experience where the presence of God cannot be denied if one is honest about it. If you are still active in the Catholic Church, no one needs to tell you how complicated the relationship is given the fact that you have to live it within the shaming shadows of mandated celibacy. It is unfortunate that now the one you love must also try to express their affection within this oppressive system. Your options are to force this love out of your life, or strive to secretly nurture it within the confines of the priesthood, or leave and live the relationship openly in the light of day. True freedom is found in the latter. Romantic love opens up a whole other world. Your superiors will demonize this relationship, but how can love be evil? Realize they and their predecessors have turned romantic love into a force of evil, which is the ultimate corruption of religion. How can their corruption of

romantic love be the will of God who identified himself with love? Because mandated celibacy is not the will of God, you are free to leave.

### **Priests and Romantic Love - A Woman's Perspective**

Since this Website was launched in the summer of 2009, many women and priests have been in contact to share their experience of falling in love. The article below is from the perspective of Marie, a woman who was in love with a priest and he with her for several years and how their romantic relationship developed and, sadly, ended. Marie shares many insights into the dynamic of romantic love in the context of the priesthood. Her experiences are not unique and will be helpful to others in similar situations.

**From Marie:**

#### **Catholic Priests' Emotional Instability Toward Women**

One area in which many an otherwise capable or even gifted priest falls short is having a basic understanding and relationship with women. In particular, if he develops feelings for a woman or a woman falls in love with him, most priests will lack the compassion, maturity, and knowledge that comes easy to them in other areas of their ministry. This article explores possible causes of this deficiency, as well as the devastating repercussions it can have for priests and women.

#### **When a Young Man Receives His Priestly Calling**

Most priests enter the seminary at a young age, often shortly after high school graduation, having begun to discern the vocation as early as middle school. Young men are attracted to the vocation by the promise of an instant community with like-minded peers, a belief that Jesus has personally "called" him to this lofty status, and the ego-boost of instant respect and recognition for making such a noble choice. Such attractions are hard for a cradle Catholic to resist, especially if he was born into a deeply religious family. The adulation of family and parishioners, coupled with confidence in his having chosen "the better way," and the promise of a rich reward in Heaven make a heady brew indeed; and this, for some, even before the sexual awakening of puberty.

Older and respected priests are sometimes encouraged to evangelize aggressively young men and draw them to the vocation. A young man is often caught off guard and believes that an invitation to the priesthood is a “sign” that God is calling him.

When a man enters the seminary, his interaction with females (other than those in his immediate family) is cut off completely, both by his physical isolation in an all-male institution and by strict prohibitions against associating with women during his vacations. This happens at the very time when feminine influences in his life are so critically important for his psychosexual development, which is consequently stunted. Although some men do leave the seminary prior to ordination, many are already on auto-pilot, having received donations and encouragement for his education by his family and others.

The average age for a man to be ordained is 25; however, if he has been exposed to no other lifestyle than the seminary, he probably has not experienced enough of life at that age to discern the entirety of his commitment. A commitment that by definition forces him to deny his basic emotional needs, desires, and intimacy that are God’s most precious gifts to us—for the rest of his life. Thus, in the black-and-white world of Roman Catholic sexual morality, many seminarians and priests instinctively come to regard women either as Virgin Marys or whores.

### **Priests are Dehumanized in their Role**

After ordination, the priest basks for a while in his newly found acceptance, adulation, and mission, convinced that he has one of the most important vocations known to man—for, who else can administer the sacraments? The busyness of priestly ministry, the belief that he is saving souls, and the contact with others that it affords, serve to keep a priest from getting lonely. For a while.

After a few years, the repressed instincts of his adolescent years start to assert themselves, and many priests yearn for the intimacy that their mandatory celibacy has denied them. They witness the happy glow of couples being married and the joy of family celebrations, then return to the loneliness of an

empty rectory. Diocesan priests are also at the whim of the bishop to take required assignments, and some of these may not be desirable to the priest—not all priests “fit” well with a certain parish or with fellow priests in their living quarters. Eventually, their black-and-white view of life starts shifting to shades of gray.

Meanwhile, pedophile scandals have caused parishioners to be more cautious in the invitations that they extend to a priest. He is no longer automatically on a pedestal, as he had heretofore been viewed. This increases his loneliness profoundly. He often must rely on extended family for friendship or holidays, and not all priests have family who live nearby.

Most of all, a priest longs to be seen for who he is beyond his priestly role—a human being with feelings who needs to connect intimately with others by sharing his joys, sorrows, and tears. He longs for authenticity with another human being so that he can express his innermost thoughts, share a warm hug, and have a shoulder to cry on. But the unwritten rules of the celibate lifestyle and his role to protect the power of the Catholic Church have forced him to keep himself aloof from women in his peer group.

At some point, he may meet a woman who sees his essence and humanness, who invites him to share his true feelings about life in general, who has that shoulder to cry on. At first, he may deny to himself that his feelings for this special woman could affect his priestly vocation—if he feels love, he will likely deny this to himself initially; he cannot name it, but when it comes along, he will certainly recognize it in time. Inevitably, there occurs a sudden breakthrough into intimacy, regardless of how expressed.

In short, the priest falls in love.

### **Three Choices for Priests in Love**

If a priest falls in love, he has three choices for his future lifestyle:

- 1) The Celibate Way: Keeping his sexual urges under control and unexpressed. He prays that his feelings will stop. He cuts off all contact with the woman. This leaves him lonelier than he was before.



2) The Marital Way: Marrying the woman. This option demands, in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, leaving priestly ministry, and is usually frightening and unacceptable to his theology. It's worth stating that this option is the only "sin" that automatically disqualifies a priest. And *that* sin only applies to cradle Catholics. A former Anglican priest who is already married can become a Catholic priest.

3) The Third Way: The Third Way means that a priest can interact with a woman in a celibate but otherwise intimate way, or even carry on a clandestine sexual relationship while maintaining his role as a priest. As long as nothing becomes *openly* scandalous (thus possibly diluting the power of the Church), the Third Way allows the priest to "have his cake and eat it too."

The Third Way can only last for so long before the woman will eventually want a concrete answer as to whether he is willing to leave the priesthood for marriage. If the priest has no intention of leaving the priesthood, he is deeply conflicted as he goes through cycles of unchastity, confession and attempts at amendment. If the priest is uncertain, he must opt for either celibacy or marriage.

**Stockholm Syndrome in the Priesthood (aka the "Patty Hearst" Syndrome)**  
"Stockholm Syndrome" is defined as: *An extraordinary phenomenon in which a hostage begins to identify with and grow sympathetic to his/her captor.* (Wikipedia.)

Nearly everyone experiences Stockholm Syndrome at some point in life. The "captor" need not be a threatening entity, though it must be perceived as one. Even fear of change can trigger a lesser level of the syndrome. For example, someone in a bad marriage may stay in it for fear of leaving, even if they are free to do so. People stay in jobs they hate for the same reason.

In normal circumstances, the relationship between a couple will rise or fall on its own merits. With a priest, it is different. He can't go through the normal channels of dating to discern whether he should marry a particular person or even marry at all. If he mentions his amorous feelings to a priest counselor, he will probably be advised to pray more and avoid the woman at all costs. If he is truly engulfed in Catholic teaching, he will also equate defying church

law as defying God (i.e. mortal sin) and, for the sake of his eternal salvation—*and the salvation of his beloved*—he will not choose marriage. He will instead return to celibacy, believing that this “sacrificial love” is for the woman, ending their time together on earth for the “perfect eternal love” he hopes to share with her in Heaven. In short, he will not have the theology that permits him to leave the priesthood, no matter how strong his love for the woman may be.

The four characteristics of Stockholm Syndrome can apply to priesthood.

1. *The hostage views the captor as giving life by not taking it. The captor is in control of the captive’s basic needs for survival.* The priest is promised eternal life if he’s a good priest and remains celibate. He relies on the church for life’s necessities, and he may feel that he would not have the skill or connections to survive in the outside world, especially if he has served as a priest for a long time. Thus, he allows the church to control both his life here on earth and his salvation in the Hereafter.

2. *The hostage endures isolation from other people and has only the captor’s perspective available. The outside world’s response is either hidden or renounced to make the captive more dependent.* Priests are brainwashed with the theory that the church is always right. One consequence of this is that they cannot even allow themselves to think about anything that would threaten their celibacy.

3. *The captor threatens to kill the victim and gives the perception of being able to do so. The captive judges it safer to align with the captor than to resist and face murder.* For the priest, eternal damnation is considered infinitely worse than being murdered. If a priest decides to leave, he faces an enormous uphill battle, with condemnation and shaming by the institution who has held him captive. It’s much safer for the priest to pray for his demon of love to end.

4. *The captive sees the captor as showing some degree of kindness. Captives will suppress their anger at the captor’s terrorizing and concentrate on his good qualities in order to protect themselves.* For the priest, all is forgiven if he repents. He is well supported in a middle-class lifestyle, and is exalted within the institution far more than he is in the outside world, especially today.

### When Love is on the Table

If a single woman (or a woman in a bad marriage) wants to receive absolution in the church, where does she go? She must go to a priest. A long term spiritual issue could involve several sessions with a priest, telling him her darkest secrets and personal problems. Both parties are vulnerable—the priest, who rarely experiences intimacy on any level, and the woman, who seeks spiritual counseling because she already has issues to resolve. The natural outcome of such a scenario between a lonely, celibate priest and a troubled woman whom he finds attractive, is that he wants to “save” her and she is wanting to be “saved.” Inevitably, a bond forms between them.

When love strikes a priest and a Catholic woman, it’s often much more powerful than when people meet through normal channels, simply because neither of them are *seeking* a relationship, but are accidentally *finding* someone to love. It is *not* due to simple infatuation or forbidden temptation. (This is a myth that I find offensive.) In fact, the *opposite* is true. The Catholic woman is afraid of her feelings and hates herself for having them just as much as the priest does! She has likely been fed the same black-and-white worldview that he has. She knows that it is wrong and impossible to love a priest. Neither party wants to admit, to the other or even to self, that they feel more than platonic love, and this repression only leads to strengthened feelings. Down the road, it is usually the woman who finally admits to herself that she has feelings for the priest. The priest may admit it to himself, but be convinced that any feelings of romantic “love” are from the devil.

Admitting to myself that I loved a priest took me almost a year. Most women in a similar position feel that it’s their duty to pull back immediately because that’s the only way to have a clear conscience if you believe that loving a priest is sinful. I started going to other parishes instead, and he was hurt. Then we became very close and he pulled back, and I was hurt. This endless cycle, being sinfully close (in our minds) and then backing off, went on for over three years. We craved each other’s company. Our wills were strong in trying to stay apart, but our hearts were unable to deny our feelings, and we became obsessed with thoughts of the other, but afraid of getting hurt and terrified of eternal damnation.

If he begins to discern his vocation, the priest has much more to lose than the woman he loves. The thought of leaving the priesthood can be terrifying because it removes the only form of financial and societal support the priest has known. Worse, he runs the very real risk of debasement in others' eyes, or even in his own, for having failed in his vocation. Women, because they can never be priests, know *conceptually* that priests are off-limits, but cannot relate to the *actual* experience of marriage to an institution versus marriage to a flesh and blood human being.

Eventually, the woman will consider forcing the priest to discuss the relationship, and call upon him to choose between severing the relationship and staying in the priesthood, or leaving the priesthood to marry her so that they can have an above-board, open and public relationship.

Really, it cannot be otherwise.

*If a priest has been showing obvious signs of love for the woman, and she loves him, eventually she must choose between three options. One, she can continue in the Third Way which becomes extremely painful and degrading the longer it continues. Two, she can sever all ties with him, which is more painful in the short term. Or, three, she can tell the priest where she stands, which results in his entering a time of discernment as to whether he should leave the priesthood or sever the relationship altogether. In today's climate, the latter usually ensues.*

Often, one person or the other will attempt to stay in touch, and the other will back off completely. In my case, I backed off completely, which hurt like hell. The outcome, if marriage is completely off the table, is always painful for both the priest and the woman.

As a result, polarization and guilt or anger usually occurs. The priest may become even more entrenched in Catholic ideology to prove to himself that he made the right decision; since the Church cannot be wrong, his feelings of love must be. The woman may leave the Catholic Church altogether, believing that the feelings of God-given love are not wrong, and so the Church must be.

### **The Aftermath (For the Priest) of Rejecting Love**

Having known other women on the receiving end of this religious abuse, I can say with some certainty that the priest will act much like a schoolboy once honesty or an ultimatum is presented to him by the woman. This may well be the first time he has had romantic feelings for a woman. As I mentioned before, his psychosexual development may have been arrested when he entered the seminary as a teenager, and as a result he treats the woman as would a teenager.

Her openness evokes not love, but fear. Fear that she, angry at his rejection, will report him to the bishop. Fear of losing his job, his friends, his reputation. Fear of the unknown, the “outside” world. He is angry at the woman for causing this Fear to arise, for ending (in his eyes) their relationship, for being nothing but a temptress after all, just as he had been taught to believe. He might even be angry at her for wrecking his image of her as an obsequious admirer who dared to look past his Role as priest and into his humanity. How dare she!

He must act before the woman does. He can't rely on her to keep her mouth shut. He'll go to his priests' support group and tell them that a woman declared her love for him. He may even tell them terrible things about her to defuse the situation in the event that he is denounced. He will be praised by his counselor for his sacrificial love. Sooner or later, he will receive a new parish assignment.

He'll go on as if nothing had happened and as if he'd never known love. But the catch is, he has. Once the dust has settled and he realizes that the woman didn't report him to anyone, that his vocation and reputation are intact, he will feel deep grief and longing.

Regardless, the priest knows that he must get over his beloved. The easiest way to do this is to convince himself that she would have been wrong for him anyway; his initial anger and subsequent aloof or even nasty behavior toward her help to ensure the death of any tender feelings that may linger between

them. If she leaves Catholicism as a result, he's further convinced that he made the correct decision to remain a priest.

From a woman's perspective, it's hard to say what the long term effects might be; these will differ for each individual and depend on many factors. I do believe that the shades of gray he experienced will always remain with him, despite a renewed show of stoicism. Time and physical distance help to heal, but no matter where life takes him, the priest will always go to bed alone.

### **The Aftermath of Rejection for the Woman**

The woman is shocked that a man who was so kind to her, her closest confidante, who loved her (and perhaps always will), has suddenly turned as cold as a block of stone. She is deeply wounded when the priest rejects her. Typically he goes even further to treat her badly, overcompensating for his earlier, too romantic behavior. Such a hurt can last the woman a lifetime.

Many of these women leave Catholicism as a result of witnessing such painful hypocrisy. Many never marry (or remarry, if they were seeking counseling for a bad marriage). Both of these courses of action are as life-altering as having loved a priest, if not more so. When she sees a priest, she no longer thinks of the Lord, she thinks of the Pharisees. She thinks of the man who hurt her beyond repair. How can she, a cradle Catholic, reconcile her love of God with the twisted dictates of the only faith she has ever known?

For weeks, months and even years, the woman will wonder what she did to deserve being treated so poorly by the priest. She may try to reach out to him with little or no response. She may regret opening the door of love for him. She often wishes they could return to the Third Way and feels in her darkest moments that she ruined the happiness she had known with the priest. Her self-esteem takes a serious hit. Time will heal her wounds, though never completely. No matter what course her life takes afterward, she will always hold that love, and that hurt, somewhere deep inside.

Marie is author of [www.formercatholic.com](http://www.formercatholic.com).

## **Patriarchy Dressed in Piety**

The hierarchy's claim that God requires celibacy and offers it as a gift to all priests is nothing but patriarchy dressed in piety for the purpose of keeping the Catholic Church in the firm control of celibate males. Not only do they believe women to be unfit for ordination, the hierarchy believes priests should remain unmarried so they will be free of any female influence in their lives. Why? Because of patriarchy and misogyny. Patriarchy defined: *"A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it."* Misogyny defined: *"The hatred of women by men as in 'struggling against thinly disguised misogyny'".* Undeniably, at the heart of mandated celibacy for priests and the foundation on which it stands, is patriarchy and misogyny all carefully wrapped in religious piety. This is a serious sin and a dark cloud that hangs over the Church.

## **The Inquisition of the LCWR**

Misogyny and patriarchy have also been seen in the bishops' recent Inquisition of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States and elsewhere. Keep in mind, these are the bishops who turned their backs on children who were being sexually abused by priests. Many of them moved abusive priests from one congregation to another, violating State and Federal law. Why did they act so irresponsibly? Because of patriarchy, that had incarnated into "celibate male clerical privilege", which they and their predecessors systematical fostered over the years. These bishops are the men who have brought great scandal and crisis to the Church, not Women Religious.

One of the few shining lights within the Church today are Women Religious who are present where there is human suffering. They are the hands and feet of Christ in nursing homes, hospitals, soup kitchens, among immigrants, the poor and other marginalized people. They are the ones who built Catholic schools and hospitals throughout the country and did so in poverty, receiving very small stipends for their hard work. These are the "Nuns On the Bus" who traveled throughout the United States shining light on the plight of poor and marginalized people. But sadly, not far behind were bishops in limos harassing them.

These pompous bishops, in an attempt to divert attention from their clergy sex abuse crisis, demand Women Religious bow in homage to their authority and submit to their demands. They have accused them of "radical feminism", when in reality, the bishops' "radical patriarchy" and the atmosphere of privilege it has created for them, is the real problem. Rather than the bishops investigating the LCWR; the LCWR should be investigating the bishops for their immoral behavior. Many should be kicked out of the episcopacy and some would be in prison were it not for celibate male privilege.

Radical patriarchy will tolerate the presence of women and even praise them, but only if they are docile, submissive and obedient, not to Christ, but to patriarchy. Radical patriarchy and misogyny cannot tolerate the presence of strong, decisive and well educated females, which is to say, the LCWR.

Recently, Pope Francis referred to the problem of ideology replacing religion. [Click here](#) to see how many in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have succumbed to this distortion and now expect the LCWR to embrace their ideology.

### **Various Reasons for Leaving the Priesthood**

I remember driving through town shortly after ordination, wanting to stop at McDonalds for a hamburger; I avoided doing so because of lack of money. That may sound strange, but it's true. My salary as a newly ordained priest was about \$400.00 per month plus mileage and I was making monthly payments on a student loan, a car and other personal items. "What had I gotten myself into? Why does the bishop allow this?" I thought. It was the beginning of my disillusionment with the priesthood.

My bishop could be best described as a miser. He squeezed the nickel so hard that the Indian was riding on the buffalo's back. During his twenty-five year administration, he socked away millions of dollars for the diocese, but when asked for anything involving a financial expenditure, he acted as if you were asking him for one of his kidneys. The chancery was decorated in the style of the 1940's with technology and theology to match. He made sure his priests were kept poor.



My life as a parochial vicar (or, as we were called, “assistants”) was a challenge, and that for more than merely financial reasons. I was living in someone else’s house with people that I would not have chosen for housemates. The pastor, however, was a nice guy and treated me well enough; nonetheless, this forced living arrangement for grown men made me feel like a child. As a parochial vicar assigned to this living arrangement, I felt the church didn’t trust me and that I needed supervision.

Having *ministerial* supervision as a young priest made sense, but the presumption that I needed supervision in my living arrangement was an intrusion into my personal life. It presumed an enmeshment with the church with which I never felt comfortable. Even as a senior pastor in a large congregation, being forced to live in a rectory was demeaning, giving me the impression that I was not trusted. It underscored the fact that I was being controlled, but I think “owned” would be a better term.

Perhaps the real issue is that the Catholic Church presumes to own its priests, like masters who own their slaves. This is part of the infrastructure that priests are expected to embrace. Priests are reluctant to complain because, at this point, they have prostrated themselves on the floor in front of their bishops in diocesan cathedrals and monasteries and professed obedience to him as they would to God himself. All of this has been carefully orchestrated by the hierarchy over centuries to make sure priests understand that they are but pawns in the hands of their bishops, who claim to wield the power of God himself. This was driven home painfully clear with their demanding a promise of celibacy, by which they proclaim that even the priest’s sexuality is under the control of the Church. When you are owned sexually, you are owned at the deepest part of your being.

While in the priesthood, I helped conduct a few retreats for priests in various parts of the United States. This was long before I had awakened. In preparation for my presentations, I found that if I really wanted to know what a priest’s focus in life and ministry should be, I need to study the ordination rite. It shows that the priest is an extension of his bishop in whatever ministry he serves in the diocese. It is very clear that priests have no identity or

ministry apart from their bishops. This is one reason why it is nearly impossible for bishops to separate themselves from priests who are involved in sexual misconduct because they are acting on the bishop's behalf. The fact is, the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is built upon many things, not least of which is the hierarchy's need to be enmeshed with their priests in every way possible.

Most priests have heard horror stories from parochial vicars who have had to deal with pastors who were veritable tyrants. It was not uncommon for them to be barred from the kitchen except during dining hours. Locks were put on refrigerators. Some vicars were locked out of the rectory after the curfew hour of, say, 11:00 PM. The Christmas collection, which should have been divided equally among the priests in the parish, went entirely to the pastor, who managed to toss a few crumbs to the vicars. Sadly this nonsense still continues in some places. One counselor states:

*In my daily dealings with clergy, especially younger clergy, celibacy is NOT usually why they consider leaving. It is often unreasonable bishops or the outmoded rectory life and all that goes with it that concerns them. Dealing with older unreasonable pastors who force them to live by their rules. They are told where to stay, how to act, what to eat, everything! Financial concerns are also a major issue.*

And so the drama continues. Comments from others would be welcomed. Of course, confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.

Pastors have it much better than the lowly parochial vicar. Pastors of large parishes have it even better, their salary nicely supplemented by more stipends, larger Christmas collections, and other perks.

My experience as a parochial vicar did end on a happier note. After that miserly bishop retired, he was replaced by one with a much appreciated understanding of the Second Vatican Council; under his leadership the diocese moved forward, though still not nearly far enough in my estimation.

Priests who awaken to realize how far the Church has intruded into their personal lives often find themselves frustrated. In time, many of them

discover the freedom to live their lives in a way they feel called by God, which means that they must leave the priesthood. Is this selfish? Is it sinful? No, it's part of their maturing in faith and taking responsibility for their lives. Their journey in, through and with Christ will continue, albeit on a different path than the one prescribed for them by the hierarchy and its medieval institution. Many active priests understand how they are being oppressed but choose to stay and work for reform from within the system. Our prayers and encouragement are with them too.

Another transition priest shares experiences that led him out of the priesthood:

Though the proximate cause of my leaving the priesthood was an ultimatum from the bishop to either abandon my lover or not return to ministry, with hindsight I now can see other reasons that influenced my departure. These reasons would have themselves been enough to leave if I would have had the courage to do so.

I've had lots of problems with Church teachings and practice, mandatory celibacy being only one example. Difficulties in these matters go back, at least, into the second decade of my priesthood. Had push come to shove then, I would probably have been forcibly defrocked as a heretic and an insubordinate, had I spoken honestly about what I believed. Some of this concerned practice, but there were also issues in matters of faith.

In its history, there are examples of the Church changing its teaching on certain issues. For example, up until the 16th century, it taught, based on Lev. 25:37, that it was immoral to charge interest on a loan. Galileo was sentenced, as a heretic, to house arrest for life for holding that the earth revolved around the sun, whereas the Bible explicitly states otherwise. Nor could I accept the teaching that sexual sin, for example, willfully enjoying the sensation of sexual arousal, even for just a moment, is always mortal sin, deserving of eternal damnation. But the clincher is that, in the face of these glaring contradictions, the church has declared itself infallible, that is, never capable of an error in matters of faith and morals. Well, folks, if I remember my study of logic correctly, all that is needed to disprove a universal statement like the

claim to infallibility is to cite a single case or incident in which it doesn't hold. That having been done, I find the doctrine of infallibility to be disproven and unable to prevent me from legitimately doubting or even denying something that the church teaches, if I have good reason to do so. My first obligation is to be a person of integrity, true to myself and my conscience, as the Church itself teaches.

And other teachings, indeed, are being called into question. I no longer believe in original sin, purgatory (and indulgences!), fallen angels who tempt us, that the Church cannot ordain women to the priesthood, nor a host of other doctrines that logically flow from the concept of original sin, such as the redemptionist necessity of a savior to reopen the gates of Heaven to “fallen” human nature. It’s all based on a fable (Genesis 1-11); it’s an analogy to teach us something about the God “whom no human has seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). When such fables are interpreted as factual history, we are in big trouble! That’s not to say that Sacred Scripture is without value—it is, indeed, a treasure trove of truth and wisdom. What is needed is a basic revision of our biblical interpretations—reading the Bible as it stands, full of metaphor and adaptation of its story lines, and not as literal and factual history. When we do, a very different picture emerges!

I can empathize with men who leave the priesthood because they have such doubts of faith. Sometimes I wish I would have left because of my conflict with Church teachings, practices and dogmas, rather than for the simple reason of having a lover. But nonetheless, I’m glad not to be in the pulpit any longer, because I’m afraid I’d be spending more time at the chancery, called on the carpet for my heretical notions, than at the altar!

## **The Lure of the Priesthood**

### *The Priest*

*To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures.*

*To be a member of each family, yet belonging to none.*

*To share all suffering. To penetrate all secrets. To heal all wounds.*

*To go from men to God and offer Him their prayers.*

*To return from God to men to bring pardon and hope.  
To have a heart of fire for Charity, and a heart of bronze for Chastity.  
To teach and to pardon, console and bless always.  
My God, what a life! And it is yours, O priest of Jesus Christ.*

This statement was written by Father Jean Baptiste Lacordaire (1802-1861). I first ran across it at the seminary while preparing for ordination to the priesthood and was quite taken by the lofty status it granted to priests, but questioned whether I could measure up to its expectations. If there was hyperbole in the statement, no one pointed it out at the seminary and we were left to believe it literally. Lacordaire's acclamations were intoxicating to us embryonic priests: "To share all suffering ... penetrate all secrets ... heal all wounds ... To go from men to God to offer him their prayers and return from God to men to bring pardon and hope."

Dioceses attracting the greatest number of vocations to the priesthood are those who most clearly emphasize this propaganda. Their Vocation Directors carefully masked it in piety and their nascent seminarians find themselves captivated that God would choose them for this divine position. But, little do they know that they are being ushered into the world of Catholic fundamentalism, where God is perceived as subservient to the ecclesiastical institution.

The object of faith within Catholicism is not God as much as it is faith in a quasi divinized hierarchy. Once a man enters the seminary, he learns that his faith in God has to be supplemented with faith in the Church, and when push comes to shove, faith in the Church as interpreted by the hierarchy trumps. For a priest, this is not unlike a mind-controlling cult. This may sound harsh but when a priest finds himself in conflict with hierarchical teaching such as the ban on artificial contraception, admitting divorced and remarried Catholics to the sacraments, ordaining women, or wishing to marry, he finds his conscience means nothing and he must bend to the will of an unyielding irrational hierarchy. This has become a more serious problem now that the hierarchy is firmly ensconced in fundamentalism.

We will see if Pope Francis can bring any systemic change. Because John Paul II derailed the reforms of Vatican II and his successor Benedict XVI continued in his tradition, I am not hopeful. If a church Council can be derailed by a pope, whatever changes Francis is able to make can be easily overturned by his successor. Conservative Catholics are quick to point out that the Catholic Church is not a democracy, but they fail to continue and admit it is a dictatorship. In any other organization, a constitution and by-laws are followed. Not so within Catholicism. If the documents of the Second Vatican Council can be ignored by a pope, they have little authority and the Church is governed by the whim of whoever happens to occupy the papacy. Although the papacy sometimes has harsh words for oppressive political dictatorships, it is unwilling to critique its own dictatorial polity.

One of the reasons why people are attracted to Catholicism is because faith has been concretized in the external ecclesiastical institution. It assures them that God's grace can be seen and experienced directly through a priest. He goes to and from God to mediate grace. It is clear cut and tangible. Such a black and white system creates a sense of security for the laity. However, after fifteen years in the priesthood, I came to believe that that security was misplaced. This highly mediated religion makes the laity subservient and dependent upon the hierarchy. Their job is clearly to "pray, pay and obey" while the hierarchs make all the important decisions. But, what more can one expect from a monarchy who understands its main job as the preservation of itself?

Following ordination, this new generation of priests is more than willing to wield their authority. They robe themselves in the garb of their medieval theology with cassock, surplice and biretta. Humble pottery chalices that were popular following the Second Vatican Council are replaced with the majesty of silver and gold. As they process down the main aisle with candles, incense and ornate vestments eager to proclaim their edicts from Rome; legions of Catholics are escaping out the back door, their hope for the reforms of the Second Vatican Council thwarted. In the United States, over one third of Catholics have left the Church making them the fastest growing religious group in America.

Many of these young priests are entering ministry with an agenda – to undo what they consider to be the harm caused by the Second Vatican Council. They wish to restore the Church to some pre-Vatican era. Bishops, who know better but are desperate for priests, look the other way and ordain them anyway.

Over the past thirty years, the hierarchy has intentionally marginalized moderate and progressive minded Catholics, and now the Church is imploding under the weight of this neoconservative movement. It has forfeited its universality in order to become a sect of like minded people. Rather than “The Church in the Modern World”, it has become “A Church in Its Own Little World”.

Shortly after ordination, I remember an elderly priest asking me, “How many masses do you say on a Sunday?” “I don’t say any”, I replied, “but I celebrate three.” His question reflected the idea that all priests need to do is show up and “say” mass. That’s the problem when faith has been concretized in the external ecclesiastical institution and is understood to be mediated only through priests. All that is necessary is to “say” the prayers and the blessings come.

In the town where I served during those early years of ministry, some members of my congregation chose to go to a neighboring church for Sunday services. I asked one of them why and he said, “Father Tom says a quick mass, I can be out in twenty minutes. We don’t have any singing, his sermon is short, and he doesn’t have the sign of peace. I don’t know why people think they need to shake hands in church.” He was there for one reason, to get what Father had to give with as little effort as necessary. His involvement was solely as a spectator.

For me, simply “saying” mass was nothing but hocus-pocus. The word “hocus-pocus” has its origin within the Latin mass. During the consecration, the priest would say, “hoc est corpus meum”, which is translated “this is my body”. To those in the pew it sounded like “hocus-pocus” and came to be associated with magic.

A theological term used to emphasize this was “Ex Opere Operato”, which is translated “from the work done”. During the sixteenth century Reformation, some theologians argued that people needed to be enlivened by an internal faith in order for the sacraments to confer grace. But the hierarchy argued, “No, the sacraments work ex opere operato”, i.e., regardless of the faith of the priest or people, the sacraments confer grace by the very act of being performed.

In other words, the hierarchy was saying “we have all the power!” What more can one expect from a monarchy who understands its main job as the empowerment and preservation of itself?

“Ex opere operato” can degenerate into “hocus-pocus”. It also led to the multiplication of private masses often said for souls believed to be in purgatory. This was a practice many objected to because they vehemently denied the church had any power over the dead. They also objected to having a mass with no congregation present. Some priests were saying multiple private masses a day, which was made even more odious when they collected a stipend for each one, a practice that was later forbidden.

It is interesting to watch young priests promote the Latin Mass. Here is “Ex opere operato” taken to an extreme where those attending are spectators more than anything else. Priests pushing for this are basically saying, “Come to the Latin Mass and watch me perform”. At its core it is very narcissistic.

Most Catholics understand something is amiss within Catholicism. The more educated they become, the less toleration they have toward violating their consciences and embracing irrational Catholic fundamentalism, which is proclaimed to be true only because the hierarchy says so. In any other setting it would be dismissed. On the other hand, others prefer this belief structure. The faith they cultivate is not so much in God as it is in the Church, which they have equated with God. They rest more peacefully at night knowing they have fulfilled the Church’s requirements and are therefore acceptable to God. This is why Catholicism is attractive for those who prefer a black and white religion.



There are multitudes of Catholics who long to take their rightful place at the altar of God as equals, rather than subservient and obedient laity. As mature Christians, these Catholics will take seriously the hierarchy's opinion, but the claim to Infallibility is an insult to their intelligence. Infallibility is seen for what it is: The usurping of the power of God herself who alone is infallible.

### **Not All Leave Catholicism**

Many priests who leave the priesthood stay deeply connected with Catholicism, become laicized and marry within the Church. Although this website has been critical of Catholicism, it may not represent the majority of those who leave. Hopefully someday our efforts and the work of others will contribute toward reform within the Catholic Church. In some ways, we miss Catholicism and probably always will. Most people who leave the church of their childhood miss some part of it. And, you cannot leave the priesthood without leaving some very fond memories and experiences behind. There are priests, bishops and other friends that will always be an important part of our lives and, for them, we are grateful. But, there is a sickness within Catholicism that many can no longer tolerate and it seems to be getting worse.

Transitioned priests often choose to stay involved in the Church and work for reform from within. There too, they are a blessing just as they were in active priestly ministry. If you are a priest and your heart is leading you elsewhere and you are torn, remember, the Spirit will walk with you wherever you choose to go. There are many opportunities awaiting priests who wish to use their gifts elsewhere.

### **Why It's Hard to Leave**

A great challenge for us who have left was our dependency upon the institution in which we lived. The basic impression given in formation and ordained ministry is "The Church will take care of you". This dependency upon the institution is structured into the system with the monastic communal lifestyle of formation, the "fraternity" of ordained priests, and provided housing. Furthermore, the minimal salary received necessitates the hope for Christmas gifts, "clergy handshakes", etc. which also promotes dependency. And, finally, dependency on the system culminates in retirement

within a priests' retirement home. All of this is wrapped in the spiritual facade of living in "Mother Church", which threatens excommunication and claims to hold the keys to eternal salvation. And, if you come from a deeply Catholic ancestry, this thinking becomes carved into your genes.

From our communication with priests and others through this website, we have found that it is difficult for all priests and in particular, Religious Order priests to perceive themselves having the interior resources necessary to survive outside of the priesthood. Priests may desire to leave because they are miserable living within the lifestyle prescribed for them, or are deeply in love with someone, or may even have secretively fathered a child with the woman they love, yet, even under these circumstances are unable to extract themselves from the priesthood. Many have become addicted to the elevated status the priesthood provides for them and the esteem they enjoy from the faithful. It is as if they have been brainwashed into believing they cannot create another life elsewhere for themselves.

The Church has been the recipient of huge lawsuits because bishops refused to remove abusive priests from ministry. However, the Church is also responsible for creating an ecclesiology that has formed within the priesthood such strong dependency upon the institution that priests find it nearly impossible to leave. The Church has systematically fostered the belief within priests that they are wedded to the Church and dependent upon it for their survival both physically and spiritually. This is why some leave only when they are forced to leave by ecclesiastical authority after sexual misconduct has occurred. The responsibility for creating this milieu within the priesthood reaches to the very top of the Church's hierarchy.

Yes, by design it's damn hard to leave this system, but if a priest discerns that this is the journey he should make and finds the courage to do so, the freedom on the outside will be euphoric. The question "Can I make it on the outside?" understandably crosses the mind of all transitioning priests. As mentioned earlier, having a theology that allows a priest to leave is essential and enables him to see through the confusing landscape of celibate Catholic culture. In time, priests in the midst of transition find the answer to this question to be "Yes, not only can I make it, I can thrive!" Their salary will probably double, if

not triple, in most any other professional area of employment they find. And, more importantly, they will be free to live out the God-given dreams of their personal lives. Their educational, pastoral, administrative, and teaching experience will be welcomed in any number of organizations. The key is networking and for them to have the courage to walk through open doors. Those considering leaving will find helpful information at [www.corpus.org](http://www.corpus.org). Also, the Internet opens up all kinds of avenues of information. Priests interested in pursuing ordained ministry in another Christian denomination can easily find them on the Internet. You can also find more information below in the section "Next Steps for Transitioning Priests". During this process, priests need to remember that they walk with Christ, regardless of what the institution, or those who have divinized it, may say.

The most crucial times in making this transition are the months before and after leaving. Priests need to have a plan, some money saved, a place to live, the love and support of understanding people, and, perhaps, a good counselor. Making this transition can "rattle your cage" and competent, understanding counselors are a tremendous gift. As with any major transition in life, experiencing situational depression or anxiety is normal.

### **An Unholy Sacrifice**

The months prior to and immediately after leaving are the most stressful, but part of this stress was caused by our desire to please others and concern about being judged negatively for leaving. This affliction is called "codependency". Normally, codependent people find themselves compelled to sacrifice themselves in order to protect a loved one whose life is in chaos, because of addiction to a mind-alternating substance, such as alcohol or drugs. Within the priesthood, codependent priests feel compelled to sacrifice themselves, not to protect a loved one addicted to alcohol or drugs, but to maintain the hierarchy's irrational addiction to male celibate control of the priesthood. This addiction is nothing less than a serious disease that is causing enormous harm to the family of Catholicism. Priests are not obliged to enable this disease and may more effectively contribute to its cure by leaving.

## The Compulsion to Please

Codependent behavior is especially seen between priests and bishops when priests find themselves compelled to gain their bishop's approval. I remember one occasion several years ago as Director of Missions for the Diocese, when I had presented a proposal to the Bishop, Mission Committee and potential missionary candidates and it was abruptly dismissed by the Bishop. I felt hurt that my proposal was rejected by my bishop, especially in such a public setting. It took most of the two hour drive home to regain my inner confidence and work through this experience. The following day, my dog was doing what he always did, wagging his tail, hoping I would pet him and give him some attention. As I looked at him, I felt the Spirit say in my heart, "You're like your dog in the presence of the Bishop! You long for his approval and relish his affirmation. You look for him to pat you on the head and say 'Good boy!' You need to find your acceptance from within." That was an eye-opener. Perhaps my thirst for the Bishop's approval had to do with a father wound, where, subconsciously, I had heaped upon him the expectation of approval never given me by my father, or was given and not recognized. Whatever it was, the fact remained that I had given way too much power to my bishop to define my happiness and sense of success.

The archconservative movement in the Church today is being manned by priests sitting at their bishops' feet looking for a pat on the head, and willing to do anything to get it. As the emotional health and self-worth of these priests increases, it will become a detriment to this movement. Given the increase of families with absent fathers during the past fifty years, this theory may have validity.

To complicate this issue, priests have to sort out their promise of obedience to their bishop from their own codependent behavior. Making this separation is difficult and explains why leaving is sometimes necessary as one seeks to develop healthier personal boundaries. The whole infrastructure of the priesthood demands that upon ordination, a priest is required to enter into an enmeshment with the church that makes the maintenance of healthy personal boundaries nearly impossible.

## **The Archconservative Shift**

The archconservative shift during the past four decades is certainly more complex than the emotional health of priests. It also involves “post modernity”, a term that has been coined fairly recently. While the modern era hailed many positive developments for humanity, it also produced the horrors of the holocaust and nuclear warfare. The promises of the modern era have fallen short of expectations and society is struggling in this post-modern era to find a place in which to place hope.

Rapid social and technological change is also a characteristic of this era and is causing the ground on which we stand to shake. In their anxiety, people often fall prey to the easy black and white answers of fundamentalism to quench their existential angst. In Catholicism, it is found in papal/doctrinal fundamentalism, and in Protestantism, biblical/doctrinal fundamentalism. All are fear-based and promise security. Finding refuge in something more concrete, such as the Pope, doctrines or Biblical fundamentalism is easier than trusting the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into the future. Creating idols are a perennial problem, especially during times of anxiety.

## **Pope Francis - Religion vs Ideology**

Pope Francis is certainly a breath of fresh air in a Church long stagnated by stuffy hierarchs who systematically closed windows Pope John XXIII and a generation of clergy tried to open during and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The progressive road on which the Council set the Church was found to be a threat to Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) and his theological watch dog Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to be known as Pope Benedict XVI.

The Council’s documents that empowered laity and opened the Church to the modern world would have, if implemented, accomplished much of what Francis is now talking about. However exciting it may be to hear his words, we know they are tempered by clerics who enjoy their dictatorial control and who are embedded in the Church’s archaic structures. These hierarchs are more than willing to wait until this holy Pope dies and they can more carefully elect one of their own kind.

Pope Francis understands that during the pontificate of his two predecessors, Catholicism drifted from religion into ideology and is now slowly imploding under its own weight. This ideology forfeited the Church's universality in order to become a sect of like-minded conservatives. He said the Catholic Church is obsessed with abortion, gay people and contraception and its moral authority risks "falling like a house of cards" if it continues. Francis knows that hierarchs obsessed with pelvic area morality have used it to both divert attention from social sin and absolve themselves of social responsibility.

Keeping the spotlight on the pelvic region distracts attention from the fact that these bishops have wedded themselves to the American Empire of militarism and corporate greed. They stood idly by during one of the largest shifts of wealth in American history from the poor and middle class to the wealthiest ten percent. Their voice was largely silent as American soldiers were sent off to fight a war in Iraq that was clearly unjust. Why were they silent? Because of their Republican ideology.

With 40 to 50 million Americans uninsured and many more underinsured and struggling with bankruptcy as a result of rising healthcare costs, these bishops, acting as the right arm of the Republican Tea Party, went on an ideological binge with their "Fortnight of Freedom" campaign in an attempt to derail the Affordable Healthcare Act under the pretext contraception. Catholics not part of their ideology felt ashamed as their bishops totally missed the boat of Christ's compassion for the poor and those in need of healing. Only their mishandling of the clergy sex abuse crisis is more egregious. Blinded by their ideology, the rich history of Catholic healthcare ministry in America was discarded, and rather than being part of the hard work of implementing needed healthcare reform, they were part of the opposition. Thankfully, "Nuns on a Bus" heard the cry of Christ and stepped in the gap. But now they find themselves being investigated by these ideologues for not following Church teaching, which is to say, their ideology. If anything, these nuns should be investigating the bishops.

It is going to take far more than words to pull these bishops out of their ideological stupor. It's no accident that the Republican Party and the United

States Conference of Catholic Bishops both lost their moderate voice. Similar voices that formed the Tea Party now dominate the USCCB. These voices will not be silent because they consider their ideology to be infallible. For them, the drift from faith to ideology is complete, regardless of what Pope Francis or the Gospels say. (See "Twenty Quotes from Pope Francis".)

These are the kind of bishops Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI systematically cultivated. Candidates had to pass a litmus test of pelvic centered morality and conservatism prior to being appointed. What these Popes wanted were ideologues, not pastors, and now Pope Francis is left with the mess.

The implementation of Vatican II will take leaders who are adhering to Christ, not ideology, which is difficult to find in the USCCB. Francis recently announced that pastors, not ideologues are to be appointed bishops. But after 35 years of the opposite, he has his work cut out for him.

Some have said that abandoning the reforms of the Council put the Church in schism and the conservatives are those on the outside. Perhaps this is why it seems that even Jesus has abandoned it and Pope Francis is so refreshing to see and hear. Only time will tell. Our prayers for Francis will continue.

### **Reformation vs. Restoration**

“Reformation” entails reforming the faith, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as we walk into an unknown future. “Restoration” entails returning to a former golden era and restoring the past. Vatican II was about “reformation”, but what went on in Catholicism prior to Pope Francis was about “restoration”. Priests who understood this found themselves frustrated, disappointed and even ashamed of papal and episcopal leadership as they sought to restore a bygone era. Those who stayed often did so reluctantly and find contentment in their local ministry. Others, understandably, chose to leave. We will see if systemic reform is possible, but are not optimistic.

Our post-modern society requires a reformation movement within churches equal to, if not greater than, the reformation of the sixteenth century. It calls us to “walk on the water” of fear and anxiety with eyes of faith. Looking back

and finding refuge in the past may bring a feeling of security, but will not withstand the tectonics of change or stop societal evolution. Catholicism and other ecclesiastical institutions unwilling to accompany this change are being left behind in a fundamentalist ghetto where their influence is reduced to occasionally proclaiming anathemas.

### **A New Definition of "Center"**

I remember a sermon given by a bishop during his installation in a diocese many years ago. He said that a bishop must not walk too far in front of or behind the people of God. Rather, he needs to walk in the middle of them. Unfortunately, papal decisions to choose far right archconservative bishops have them walking far behind the people of God and soon they will need binoculars to see them. Papal leadership these past thirty or so years has attempted to create a new center in the church. Archconservative is now conservative, conservative is now moderate and moderate is now liberal and liberal is, in effect, shut out of Catholicism. This is a strange development for a church that defines itself as "universal". But, it has made it easier for progressive or liberal minded priests to leave, because they have a shorter distance to go and this, too, is by design.

Although the majority of priests ordained during the past twenty five or so years appear more conservative, I expect many from this group will also leave the priesthood as they become more inwardly referented and see the fallacy of Catholic fundamentalism. When ordained, I, too, was very conservative and never thought I would leave. But, as time progressed, I found myself more and more at odds with Church teachings, such as the ban on artificial birth control, which the laity had dismissed as irrelevant years earlier. But, I had to find this out for myself.

A few months after ordination, I remember organizing Natural Family Planning classes to be held Sunday evenings in the church basement with a certified NFP couple to teach. I preached about NFP at all three morning masses and included statements indicating that the Church considered the use of artificial methods of birth control to be sinful. That evening, two couples,



out of about two hundred, attended. As the classes progressed, one of the couples quit and the other continued, not because of church law, but because of the health benefits of NFP. It became evident to me that the vast majority of couples had dealt with Church law and the birth control issue in their own consciences long before I arrived. I now look back with sadness that I had imposed such guilt upon people.

I lived in the conservative camp for the first few years of my priesthood, but slowly evolved out, because it seemed to be more about control than the message of Jesus. Jesus was very progressive in his day and violated all kinds of religious laws in order to show love and compassion. For Jesus, compassion always trumped legalism. Perhaps my spiritual director in the seminary saw my rigidity when he told me so many years ago: "Henry, when you die and appear before God, I hope he accuses you of being too compassionate. I would rather be accused of being too compassionate than too harsh and judgmental." Amen. My only regret is not moving out of the conservative camp sooner and I now regret much of my earlier preaching.

### **Defining Truth**

Theology is not about "truth". Rather, theology is developed by the Pope, bishops and pastors in order to support their emotional states, agendas and positions in ministry. I see this in myself. I have developed a theology that supports my leaving the priesthood, and believe it is "true", just as I believed my conservative positions during my early years of ministry were also "true". A classmate of mine did something similar, but went the other direction. He was very progressive in his thinking during our years together in the seminary and advocated the ordination of women and other such causes. I remember him overhearing a conversation I was having with a few other guys after class about the necessity of taking a tough stand in ministry and teaching what the Pope and Church taught. He walked up to us sarcastically singing this little ditty over and over: "The Pope, the Pope, our only hope. Without the Pope we have no hope." It was very funny at the time. At any rate, now he's involved in seminary formation and is on the other side of the theological spectrum. Why the change? He found it necessary to tow the Church's line in order to support his present position in ministry. And there

are bishops and pastors out there in all denominations doing the same. We just need to be more honest about it.

### **Relativism vs. Pluralism**

More conservative sisters and brothers among us will say that we are “relativists” and don’t believe there is absolute truth. We disagree. There is absolute truth, but it cannot be defined by any one person or institution. Rather than “relativism”, a better term is “pluralism”, which states that absolute truth is best discerned, understood and defined by a plurality of sectors. If a truth is indeed “absolute” or “universal”, it should be recognizable within a plurality of perspectives.

My moral theology instructor in the seminary use to hammer away about how the Catholic Church alone possesses “objective truth”. But, if this truth is not perceived from a plurality of perspectives, it certainly is not objective; and because it is chosen primarily to support the Church’s agenda, its truthfulness is questionable. “Pluralism” insures an unbiased view that does not allow truth to be manipulated by any one institution to empower itself.

This is anathema within Catholicism and other religions or ideologies that claim to uniquely possess God’s truth, but “pluralism” is the future in our global society. Anything else, over the long haul, is tribalism and destined for division and conflict. This is clearly seen in Christianity’s bloody history and continues in our post 9/11 world. The long, dark and dangerous shadow of religion is cast most clearly by those with absolutist claims. Absolutism provides the illusion of control with its feeling of security for that particular “tribe”, but that’s all, and for many, that’s enough. However, no one tribe can lead our global society into the future and we are in desperate need of new and creative leadership.

### **The Priest in a Wayward Church**

Where the definition of truth really gets interesting for a priest is when you honestly ask yourself what church teachings you personally believe to be true and which ones you feel obliged or coerced into believing are true. When there are aspects of Catholicism you no longer find credible, you’re

confronted with choices, which can either lead to freedom or the beginning of the loss of your integrity. This became evident for many of us with the ban on artificial birth control. It didn't take long after ordination when we began to be more honest with ourselves and realized we no longer believed in it. As a presiding judge on the Matrimonial Tribunal, after reading case after case and rendering judgments, I began to see how unnecessary the whole process was and found it more and more difficult to explain to people why they had to endure it. As with the ban on artificial birth control, I found the necessity of an annulment to also be about the Church's need to control and little else. After declaring their marriage null and void from the beginning, try explaining to a couple why their children born of that union are not illegitimate. After splitting theological hairs, you realize the absurdity of the whole process and the pain, rather than the healing, you're causing.

After awhile, you begin to find other teachings, which no longer seem credible, such as mandated celibacy and Papal Infallibility. Also, the Church's argument against women's ordination becomes irrational when viewed objectively outside celibate male prejudice. Women have all the gifts necessary for priestly ministry, just not the right genitalia, which again shows an odd preoccupation with sexual function. Sadly, the Church teaches that it's not enough for women to be like Jesus, what they need to do for ordination is pee like Jesus.

If you are a priest, perhaps you can add other teachings to this list that you feel are losing their credibility. In this process, some would say you're losing your faith, but, on the contrary, you're not losing your faith, you're finding it! Your faith is maturing and becoming your own, rather than being imposed by the Church and its agenda of control. This conflict of faith becomes inevitable when an institution expects assent to teachings that are irrational and unable to withstand the scrutiny of enlightened faith and logic. As your faith grows and matures, you join the majority of U.S. Catholics who are finding themselves increasingly outside what the Vatican has attempted to redefine as mainstream Catholicism.

Whenever a priest is expected to preach and teach what he no longer believes, or is beginning to seriously question, he's on a collision course, not only with

his conscience, but with his bishop, if his bishop is seeking papal affirmation. To make matters worse, he will find his faith becoming even less represented in the archconservative church in which he finds himself. Eventually, he will have to choose between freedom or further loss of his integrity.

We will see if Pope Francis is able to change this. But even if he does it is likely to be reinstated by his successor. If the constitution and by-laws of the Second Vatican Council can be ignored, his pontificate has little meaning.

When the Pope and bishops choose the irrationality of archconservative Catholic fundamentalism, in which most priests were not formed during their seminary preparation, moderate and progressive priests are faced with serious and difficult choices. They are expected to embrace a world view that is flawed and an affront to their conscience. It is primarily for this reason they are justified and guided by the Holy Spirit to leave the priesthood and do so as a prophetic act. If they stay, it's an act of charity and sacrifice for an institution that takes more than it gives and has lost its way. For them, too, we pray and offer our support.

Our conservative friends would argue that Catholicism is "the true Church" precisely for its willingness to take unpopular stands, even if it means the loss of priests and other members. However, their primary allegiance is to what can only be described as Catholic fundamentalism. When priests begin to recognize this, they find they are expected to sacrifice their integrity for Church teaching that is considered "true" only because Church authority says it is. In any other setting it would be dismissed. While still in Catholic ministry, I remember thinking that I don't mind sacrificing myself for the cause of Christ, but I'm no longer willing to do so for a church institution.

Perhaps Catholicism is reaching a time in history when schism is again necessary. It worked for Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1988, as people are now advocating for the Latin Tridentine mass to become normative. There are worse things than schism.

## **The Cold War**

Within Catholicism, there is a growing rift between its leaders and membership. There is also a growing polarization, largely because of rising fundamentalism and the refusal of more progressive minded people to embrace it's world view. This has resulted in a "cold war". Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI decided that a smaller "universal" church is preferable to dialogue and reform. Therefore, the blame for this "war" rests primarily upon them. They have demonized and written off the "left", which has emboldened and empowered the "far right", causing a lot of damage in the Church.

Hopefully Pope Francis will see things differently and initiate substantial and systemic reform. But then his successor will probably retreat in fear at the prospect of really engaging the modern world with something other than anathemas.

Within Protestantism, its mainstream is also struggling in this "post-modern" era, but is finding its way. The hot topic issues of today are being openly discussed. Dialogue has not been silenced, as it has in the Catholic Church, resulting in a more honest church. Despite efforts for dialogue and understanding, sometimes divisions occur, which in the long run will probably prove to be healthy. The life of Christ indicates that not everything should be sacrificed for unity. Boundaries are being expanded within some denominations to receive gay and lesbian "Gentiles", along with other outcasts of society, and, in this, I see Christ.

## **Conclusion**

We do not enjoy pointing out errors within Catholicism and certainly do not consider our positions infallible. We are far from perfect. We are sharing these concerns because we care about Catholicism and its many good and faithful priests. Leaving the priesthood is not easy and we hope this website will be a resource for priests who feel trapped to find a way out with their heads held high, continuing to use their many gifts and experiences in whatever new life and ministry they find.

We are under no illusions that our writing reflects the views of all priests, but believe the majority of what has been written here represents the feelings of many who have left or remain in active ministry.

Transcending all this is God, in whom we have our hope and who is doing something different these days. Catholicism and Protestantism will look different fifty years from now. Much of what we are presently doing is not helpful to harmony and human progression. Furthermore, harmony will not be restored by absolutist religions that expect people to submit to their agendas. Those days have come to an end regardless of how loud they shout. People and the evolution of world societies are demanding something different, and the Holy Spirit is breaking forth in new ways.

Today, there is an emerging Christianity/Spirituality that cannot be stopped. It is more universal in scope and pluralistic in its quest for truth. Never before in the history of Christianity has there been such an interest in spirituality from outside organized religion, and this gives us hope.

### **To the Pope and Bishops**

*"If God held all truth in his right hand and in his left the everlasting striving after truth, so that I could always and everlastingly be mistaken, and said to me, 'choose,' with humility I would pick the left hand and say, 'Father, grant me that, Absolute truth is for thee alone.'"*

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

*"Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth."*

Albert Einstein

If by chance this website should somehow penetrate the walls of Cathedrals or even the Vatican, we hope it is read prayerfully and with an open mind.

Within the Church during the last several centuries, there has been a kind of divine status given to the Pope with an accompanying Infallibility creep into most everything the Pope says. Prior to the 8th century, the papacy used the title "Vicar of Saint Peter" or "Vicar of the Chief of the Apostles" to describe itself. Following the 8th century, the title "Vicarius Christi", meaning, the

"Vicar of Jesus Christ" was taken. A "vicar" is a representative, deputy or substitute; anyone acting "in the person of" or agent for a superior. (Wikipedia)

It is time for the papacy to acknowledge that ascribing "Vicar of Jesus Christ" unto itself was a grasp for power that has led to a kind of papal idolatry. This blurring of the distinction between Peter and Jesus Christ needs to be corrected. Try as you may to explain Papal Infallibility, in the end it is nothing but a form of idolatry. How does one call Jesus Christ to accountability? The Church would gain more respect by dropping this foolish claim, especially since it has been proven to be in error on so many occasions.

The claim to Infallibility is not necessary unless the agenda is power and control.

In the scriptures, Jesus not only affirmed Peter, he also rebuked and corrected him. Where is Christ's voice of correction to "Peter" in the Church today?

Has the ecclesiastical dogma of Infallibility silenced Christ?

Cardinals, archbishops and bishops, where are your voices? Your silence has forced thousands of good priests out of ministry, because of laws that many of you know desperately need changing. Your silence is also putting many other priests, sisters and laity on a collision course with their consciences as the Church drifts further into archconservative Catholic fundamentalism. Many priests have found it necessary to leave and many who stay find it necessary to distance themselves from this authoritarian and wayward Church in order to find emotional health and peace.

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*

*as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Colossians 3:12-18

Much of what has been written on this Website may seem harsh to some people. We all want to live in love and unity as the scripture passage above encourages. But, it also calls us to teach and admonish one another. When faced with unyielding oppressive ecclesiastical leadership, which has elements of idolatry, words of challenge are necessary. The famous words of Pope Paul VI ring true today for those who pull the levers of power in the Church:

*"If you want peace, work for justice."*

Pope Francis is a refreshing fragrance in a stale Church, a warm breeze on a cold winter's day. But then, so was the Second Vatican Council, which supposedly had more authority than a pope, and most of its reforms were abandoned. The shift in the locus of power for systemic change necessary for its implementation to occur was too great a threat for subsequent popes and their advisors.

Abandoning the reforms of the Second Vatican Council put the Church in schism and the conservatives are those on the outside. Perhaps this is why it seems that even Jesus has abandoned it and Pope Francis is so refreshing to see and hear. Only time will tell. Our prayers for Francis will continue.

To the Bishops and Cardinals in opposition to reform, you have abandoned the Crucified who engaged the world and brought about redemption. He was crucified because of his universal love, not your fundamentalist little world. You have nothing to say to the modern world other than anathemas, which is to say, you are irrelevant. You are afraid of the modern world and long for your own fundamentalist ghetto. You will certainly find it, but will lose your claim to Universality, as well as One and Holy. Christ has moved on.



## Next Steps for Transitioning Priests

The Vatican recently created extraordinary procedures for Anglican priests to convert to Catholicism and serve as married priests. These procedures to proselytize Anglicans amplify the hierarchy's oppression of other Catholic priests who would welcome the freedom to marry. Perhaps no other policy in the Church is as irrational and insulting to priests than this one. This, along with the Church's regression into Catholic fundamentalism, are creating a "Crisis of Conscience" among priests. In this environment, some find themselves having to separate the will of God from the ecclesiastical institution, an easy job for laity, but not so easy for priests in a Church that demands their enmeshment.

The governance of the Church since the Second Vatican Council has contributed to this crisis. Under the leadership of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, "The Church in the Modern World" has been reduced to a ghetto of like-minded conservatives. This is particularly true within the hierarchy where "conservative group-think" has replaced the richness of "Universality".

Why has the Church turned in on itself? In one word, "Fear". The fear of change, fear of modernity, fear of progressives, fear of liberals, fear of women, fear of losing control, and the fear of the future are destroying the Church.

On the other hand, this has created an opportunity for priests. It is easier for a priest to leave the priesthood when he realizes the Church has gone astray.

The hierarchy has so institutionalized fear that they consider it virtue. They consider themselves God's faithful remnant and are doing everything possible to ensconce the institution within this mentality. Any priest who is aware of the problem and thinks he can stay and fix it is mistaken. At best, he can work at making his local congregation one of openness and inclusivity, but he knows a younger priest will one day replace him and probably undo his work.

Faith is a remedy to fear but it is difficult to express fully within the Church. Why? Because what the hierarchy considers to be authentic faith is so limited. Many priests are living under a kind of house arrest. Like Galileo, they are looking through their metaphorical telescope and seeing much farther than they know is acceptable. The voice of Christ rings in their hearts that it is true and they are not mistaken. Silence is difficult, and so for many, it's time to leave.

For priests looking for someone to communicate about transitioning, here are some helpful links:

[To find transitioned priests willing to talk about the journey and for career counseling.](#)

[To find transitioned priests in your locale, see the Corpus membership directory.](#)

[In the Chicago area, WEORC is comprised of many transitioned priests and others.](#)

[Celibacy Is The Issue \(CITI\) also has a listing of transitioned priests and their locale.](#)

[Many of the members of the Federation of Christian Ministries are transitioned priests.](#)

**To communicate with authors of this Website, email Henry at [henry@leavingthepriesthood.com](mailto:henry@leavingthepriesthood.com).**

If you know of others who may be interested, please forward this website to them. Check out the "Posts" link located on the top left side of the [home page](#) for the interesting and inspiring transitions of other priests. More of their journeys will be added as they are submitted.

If you would like to submit a post, please email it to the address above.

If you would like to respond to a post or contribute to other discussions, you can do so on one of the Blogs located on the top left side of the [home page](#). Click "comments" at the bottom of each blog topic to share your views. Come be part of the dialog.

Permission is granted to quote contents of this website provided Leaving the Priesthood Website is cited as the source and notification of the citation is emailed to [henry@leavingthepriesthood.com](mailto:henry@leavingthepriesthood.com).