

Leaving the Priesthood

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

www.leavingthepriesthood.com

There are 41,500 Diocesan and Religious priests in the United States today. During the past 60 years 25,000 priests have left the priesthood.

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. It also provides a place of networking and support for priests at crossroads as they consider whether or not to leave, stay or return to active ministry. At the right of your screen you will find posts from active priests, priests at crossroads, priests who have transitioned, laity, and women who love priests. You will also find a theology link and other information. On the left are blogs where you can find information and share your thoughts. Below you will find a table of contents and at the bottom of this page contact information.

When I left, I would have welcomed information such as this. 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, I hope you will continue reading to understand why so many of us found it necessary to leave.

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

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Why Priests Leave

I can only speak for myself and relate what I have heard from other transitioned priests as to 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. (I will say more about this later.) Now, for many of them, 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 themselves 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 outside the shadows of mandatory celibacy.

A Theology That Allows You to 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. 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 you to leave.](#))

Love Disqualifies the Priest

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 a celibate falls in love they find what has been true all along: they are owned by an ecclesiastical institution which 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 control of the celibate's sexual life and prohibiting the intimacy and companionship that marriage provides.

On the other hand, Christ has no interest in mandated celibacy and even cured Saint Peter's mother-in-law in respect for Peter's marriage. 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 inevitable. 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 into an idol 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 thirty years, were chosen precisely because of their aversion to change and their willingness to attempt to restore the church to some former golden era. 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.

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 mandated by the bishop, if they had reported me. No, my support came from outside the Diocese, with the exception of one trusted lay couple from my congregation.

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 here. 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 discuss his fears, hopes and dreams. The most understanding people I found were from the Corpus organization. (You can find their web site by clicking [here](#).) 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 these reformers made in 1530, 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 a mall 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 the 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”.

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 aura around celibacy and welcomed its 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 find where the ultimate responsibility should be placed for this crisis.

Homosexual Scapegoats

The Vatican’s public response to this crisis was to screen out gay candidates for ordination during their seminary preparation. With this statement, they have 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](#).

Priests Who Are Homosexual

A priest who is gay states:

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 I want to imply that an all male environment influences men to become homosexual, because I believe that that 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 my fifteen years in the priesthood, I found homosexual priests to be some of the most pastorally gifted and successful people in ministry, and I learned to respect them deeply. Many of these priests are committed to a celibate lifestyle; some are not.

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.

Not All Leave Catholicism

Many priests who leave the priesthood stay deeply connected with Catholicism, become laicized and marry within the Church. Although I have been critical of Catholicism in my writing, I probably do not represent the majority of those who leave. I'm hopeful that someday my

writing and the efforts of others will contribute toward reform within the Catholic Church. In some ways, I miss Catholicism and probably always will. I suspect that anyone who leaves the church of their childhood misses 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 my life and, for them, I am 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, Jesus will walk with you wherever you choose to go and do his work. 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 façade 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 my communication with priests and others through this website, I have found that it is difficult for all priests and in particular, Religious Order priests to perceive themselves as 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 secretly 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. Again, I suggest those considering transitioning to visit www.corpus.org to find people who are willing to help. 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. 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

I found the months prior to and immediately after leaving to be the most stressful, but part of this stress was caused by my desire to please others and my concern about what they would think of my leaving. I have met other pastors with this affliction 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. In our situation, 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.

I sometimes wonder if the archconservative movement in the Church during the past thirty, or so, years is manned by priests sitting at their bishops’ feet looking for a pat on the head, and willing to do anything to get it. If that’s correct, 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 Archconservative Shift

The archconservative shift during the past three 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 the Bible is easier than trusting the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into the future. Creating idols is a perennial problem, especially during times of anxiety.

Reformation vs. Restoration

“Reformation” entails reforming the faith, under the inspiration of the 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’s going on in Catholicism now is about “restoration”. Priests who understand this often find themselves frustrated, disappointed and even ashamed of papal and episcopal leadership as they seek to restore a bygone era. Those who stay often do so reluctantly and find contentment in their local ministry. Others, understandably, choose to leave.

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 fifteen to twenty 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

I am convinced that 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 only 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 I’m a “relativist” and don’t believe there is absolute truth. I disagree. There is absolute truth, but it cannot be defined by any one person or institution. Rather than “relativism”, I prefer “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.

I remember my seminary moral theology instructor hammering 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 point that does not allow truth to be manipulated by any one institution to empower itself.

I know 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 spiritual 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. As mentioned earlier, for me this first became evident with the ban on artificial birth control. It didn't take long after ordination when I began to be more honest with myself and realized that I 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, which I referred to earlier, 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.

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.

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.

My 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”. The last two popes have 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.

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.

My “Seamless” Transition

A few years ago, I spoke with a doctoral student who was writing his dissertation about priests who have transitioned out of ordained ministry in the Catholic Church to ordained ministry in other Christian denominations.

If I remember correctly, he has interviewed about 200 priests who have made this transition. The purpose of his dissertation was to find out whether or not marriage has been a positive or negative influence in their new ministries. From my discussions with him, he has received an earful from these priests about the positive influence marriage has been to their ministry. He also said that my transition was the most “seamless” he has heard.

I’ve been ordained for twenty five years. For fifteen of these years I ministered in the Catholic Church and have been ministering for about ten years in another Christian denomination. My Catholic ministry included being an associate priest for a couple of years, pastoring three small rural congregations for six years and a larger city congregation with an associate pastor and staff for seven years. I also served on the bishop’s staff as Director of Missions, on the Presbyteral Council, Personnel Board, Catholic Schools Board of Directors, and was a presiding judge on the Matrimonial Tribunal. As mentioned earlier, I was also a member of a priests' support group. Ministry in my present denomination includes one year of education, an internship, pastoring two rural congregations and now, for the past seven years, pastoring a mid-sized city congregation. I’m also a member of a pastors' support group.

Because I enjoyed ordained ministry, I wanted to continue in another Christian denomination. In my study of what other churches believe, the document that most captured my interest was The Augsburg Confession. It is a summary of the concerns of the sixteenth century church reformers that was presented to Emperor Charles V in 1530. It's amazing how little has changed in the Church's control of priests during the past 500 years.

No church or denomination is without its problems and this one has its share, however it’s an inclusive forward looking denomination. The big controversy now is allowing gay and lesbian people to be pastors. Lots of people have their shorts in a bunch over this, but it is a civil right issue so has passed and become policy. Notice, I said “passed”. This, along with other regulations, are voted on by both lay and ordained leaders. This process is messy and contentious, but it trusts the Holy Spirit to work through God’s people and not just a chosen few. It also keeps important

contemporary issues before the church, where they can't be denied and silenced. Also, bishops are voted into office and return to a congregation or retire, depending upon their age, when their terms are completed. This helps to keep them grounded and to stay connected with both pastors and laity.

When I was seriously considering leaving the priesthood, I requested and received permission to go on a four month sabbatical. Thanks to a consortium of seminaries where I studied, I was able to register at the Catholic seminary and take all my classes in the seminary of another denomination. During this time, I contacted the other denomination to inquire what the process would be to transition into ordained ministry there.

The requirements are fairly standard for anyone transitioning from the priesthood into ordained ministry in another Christian denomination They are: an academic year of education at a seminary of your choice, membership in a church for a year (which can begin with your education), an internship (salaried), and approval to be placed on the clergy roster. Because they recognized my Roman Catholic ordination, I didn't have to be re-ordained. There is a fair amount of paperwork, a required psychological evaluation, and a few interviews with the Candidacy Committee. I also needed a letter from my previous employer, in this case, my Catholic bishop, which I postponed requesting until after leaving the priesthood.

After receiving a favorable evaluation from my internship, I completed my final interview with the Candidacy Committee and was approved for ordained ministry. I interviewed in a congregation, negotiated the Call package and began work. After a few years, I completed mobility papers and requested to move to another area of the country. We interviewed in another congregation, negotiated the Call package and began ministry there.

In the Call process, the Bishop's office shuffles paperwork to congregations seeking pastors, but the congregation is the hiring agent. The Bishop's office has salary guidelines and all full time pastors

participate in health insurance and retirement programs, which the congregation pays. However, all this needs to be negotiated. In this process, I welcomed the freedom to make my own decisions regarding the geographical area of the country to live and work. Of course, now my wife and I make these decisions together.

During this transition, I was without a pay check for only the nine months of education. Although this transition was fairly “seamless”, it didn’t seem so at the time. I wasn’t sure of acceptance in this denomination until it occurred about two years after leaving the priesthood. I felt fear of what the future would hold, but also sensed God’s guidance. I was angry at the Catholic Church for making this whole transition necessary. Because of my incessant need to please, I regretted disappointing Catholic friends and parishioners when I left. I loved them and was sorry to leave. Most whom I have run across since leaving see little redeeming value in Catholicism, especially since the latest eruption of the clergy sex abuse crisis.

The Extraction

By the time I left the sabbatical, I had been accepted as a candidate for ordained ministry in this denomination, but had several more steps to go before final acceptance. During my sabbatical, I also connected with Corpus, which was a great blessing. They had monthly meetings that enabled me to network with other transitioned priests. It was a joy to participate in their meetings and I will always be grateful for them. Through Corpus, I found two counselors and met with them regularly during the sabbatical. They were a transitioned priest and sister who were married and had a practice in the area. It was during this time that I finalized my decision to leave the priesthood. The peace and joy I found in my decision was euphoric. What a sense of freedom!

After returning to my parish, I found it sad to look out over the congregation realizing I would be leaving in a few weeks. Rather than discuss my leaving the priesthood, I told them I was going to go back on sabbatical, which was partially true, because I was returning for education. Although many of them would have supported my decision to leave, I was

in no condition to receive the shaming scorn of the conservatives. Besides, I still wasn't sure what my future would hold.

Discussions with my bishop went as well as could be expected. He agreed to pay my salary for three months and my medical insurance for one year, which I think is pretty much standard policy in other dioceses when priests resign. Later, I settled with my diocese regarding my retirement. After fifteen years of service in the priesthood, I received a lump sum payment equal to about a year and a half of retirement contributions made by my congregation in this denomination. However, unlike many other dioceses, I was vested after ten years of ministry.

It is a huge injustice for resigning priests to receive no retirement benefits in retaliation for leaving. Some of these priests have served thirty, or more, years in the priesthood. Thanks to the work of Corpus, many more dioceses are including resigned priests in their retirement programs.

In this denomination, we receive a quarterly retirement statement and personally choose from several investment alternatives. Retirement funds are ours from the get-go and are never used for punishment. However, I do understand the Catholic Church's policy that one must be in ministry for five to ten years prior to being vested for retirement, as most dioceses have paid for the priest's theological education and that is a significant expense.

I greatly enjoyed my academic year of studies. This was a wonderful and graced time. At first, it felt odd studying with both men and women candidates for ordination, but I appreciated the gender equality and the freedom I felt was palpable.

My internship began when my studies at the seminary concluded. I found it humbling to go from pastoring a large city congregation with an associate pastor and staff to becoming an intern in a small congregation under the supervision of another pastor. It was during this internship that I married my wonderful wife.

Conclusion

I do not enjoy pointing out errors within Catholicism and certainly do not consider my positions infallible. I'm far from perfect and the denomination in which I now call home also has its problems. I am sharing these concerns because I care about Catholicism and its many good and faithful priests. Leaving the priesthood is not easy and I 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.

I am under no illusions that my writing reflects the views of all priests, but I think the majority of what I have written here represents the feelings of many who have left or remain in active ministry. If any other transitioned priests would like to share their thoughts about any issues mentioned above or why they found it necessary to leave, please email them to me at henry@leavingthepriesthood.com and I will post them on the "Posts" link. If you are in active priestly ministry, women religious or a lay person and would also like to offer your thoughts about needed Church reform, I would be happy to post them, too. Please indicate if you are a lay person, sister, in active priestly ministry or have transitioned out. You can also share your thoughts on the blog by clicking [here](#).

From my observations, after priests leave and years begin to elapse, many begin to lose interest in Catholicism and their hope for change. I, too, am approaching this point and wanted to write this before its time had passed. I've been out ten years and I'm probably losing touch with the priesthood, even in its more progressive expressions. Within Corpus and other organizations working for Catholic reform, many people continue to have great interest in Catholicism and work hard for change. Their faith and commitment is an inspiration.

Transcending all this is God, in whom we have our hope, and who, I think, is doing something different these days. I doubt Catholicism or Protestantism will look the same 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 me hope.

To the Pope and Bishops

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

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.

The Papacy's intoxication with authority and power is causing great harm and division within the family of Catholicism. The healthy ones find 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. Who will be Christ's voice to the Papacy today?

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Henry, one of thousands of transitioned priests.

Email:
henry@leavingthepriesthood.com

If you know of others who may be interested, please forward this website to them. Check out the "Posts" link 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 me at the address above.

If you would like to respond to a post or contribute to other discussions, you can do so on the Blog by clicking [here](#). Click "comments" at the bottom of each blog topic to share your views. Come be part of the dialog.

The views expressed here are mine and not of any church in which I am affiliated.

www.leavingthepriesthood.com