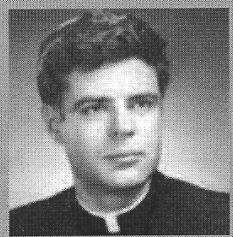


# A Path to Rome with A Detour

## My Story



Written By  
**Rucgaed E. Cross**

Ordination photo  
June 19, 1958

He can be reached at  
[recross@cloud9.net](mailto:recross@cloud9.net)

**A**s I celebrated the 50th anniversary of my ordination last June, I think I can say that, in many ways, I am a perfect example of how the church wished its priests to be formed in pre-conciliar years. I was raised a Protestant—Methodist on Dad’s side and Presbyterian on Mom’s side. I went to church every Sunday and played piano in Sunday school. My math teacher in public school was my Sunday school teacher as well as my Boy Scout leader. How then did I come to the church?

My Presbyterian mother had attended a Catholic boarding school when she was a girl, and for years the nuns kept sending little Catholic books that I devoured as a boy. As I ended my junior high school years I began to double dip, going to an early mass and later in the morning to services at the Methodist church. One Sunday when I stood up to sing a hymn a little book fell out of my pocket onto the bench where my Sunday school teacher was sitting behind me. The title of the book was “I Go to Mass.” I decided then and there that it was about time to make up my mind. This was 1945. I went to see the priest who was surprised that I knew everything in the catechism. He said, “Come around on Sunday and I’ll baptize

you.” Well, what did I know? I had already been baptized a Presbyterian. So I guess it was a “conditional” baptism. Later a new priest came to our town, and right away I decided I wanted to be a priest like him. So, against my parents’ better judgment, off I went to the minor seminary. It was only after I was there for a while that the rector realized I had never been confirmed. That was promptly arranged with a private ceremony in the Baltimore Cathedral with Bishop Lawrence Sheehan.

I loved seminary life—the challenging classes, Latin and later Greek, religion, Gregorian chant. Being an only child I loved my classmate brothers all the more. I was only fourteen years old. But, after all, didn’t papal documents stress that candidates for the priesthood should be cultivated at a tender age? (“*annis teneris*,” were the Holy Father’s exact words). You know of course that in those days in some places in Europe, such as Italy, young men were enlisted in seminary training and wore a cassock at an even earlier age. After all, did not the very word “seminary” imply a sheltered hot house-like environment where the tender seedling of a vocation could be nourished?

The very word “seminary” imply a sheltered hot house-like environment where the tender seedling of a vocation could be nourished?

## A Path to Rome with a Detour

Sheltered in a preparatory seminary at age 14, with black suit and all for Sundays and visiting days, I was subjected to rigorous discipline and academic training for six years in a diocesan seminary. I cannot sing loudly enough the praises for the kind of intellectual and academic preparation I received in the minor seminary—something I find terribly wanting in many of the recent products of whatever seminary training remains.

There were major drawbacks, however, and it is these that are *ad rem* in this present discussion. We were formed according to the rules of the seminary and the guidelines as laid out in “The Young Seminarian” by a renowned French Sulpician. Many seminaries in those days used this book rigorously. We were warned repeatedly over the six years to avoid the company of “the opposite sex” (the term most preferred for girls). “You should not seek the company of persons of the opposite sex, however virtuous they may be; you should avoid familiarity with them in conversation and behavior; you should resolutely decline invitations to such meetings and parties as could endanger your vocation,” etc. (page 436). No doubt, foolishly, I followed this rule to the letter. Furthermore there was absolutely no sex education along the way. It was simply not discussed except in the vaguest terms. In the section on “Holy Purity” the most we were taught was to “resist and check the solicitations of the body.” (427)

We were warned about having anything to do with sisters of fellow seminarians, warned about having anything to do with an ex-seminarian

(the worst of all possible contacts). We were told by the rector as vacation time approached that, when we were home, should we see a “person of the opposite sex” that we knew from grammar school coming down the street, the correct thing to do was to cross the street and go down the other side. I followed this rule as well.

In the minor seminary we had a society called the “Angelic Warfare,” a devotion of Dominican origin to promote purity (I was the head of this in-house organization for one year). One wore either a cord or a medal (medal in our case) to recall how Thomas Aquinas had dealt with the wicked woman who was introduced into his cell and how an angel had come and gird his loins and thus protected him from further temptation. And so it was, as summer vacation approached, that we then celebrated the “Six Sundays of Aloysius” (Gonzaga) at which time we were given a talk on each of the last Sundays before vacation on how to avoid the occasions of sin as we prepared to face the world. We sang a hymn each week with the refrain:

“*O Aloysi, Flos Paradisi*” O Aloysius,  
Flower of Paradise.

Now some of my fellow seminarians no doubt did not always follow the rules: they dated, they even had girl friends. But they usually left. I stayed because I wanted to be a priest no matter what and the best way to become a priest was to follow the directions of the rector and spiritual director in such matters. So I had no girl friends; I didn’t date. I did exactly what I was told to do. I crossed the

street if I saw a girl in town with whom I had gone to grammar school. I wouldn’t even go to our local community center, as my mother suggested, because Monsignor said I shouldn’t because there would be “persons of the opposite sex” there.

On Sundays I wore a black suit and tie for the six years I was in the minor seminary. I think I was a perfect candidate because I did as I was told, what the church, as I knew it then, wanted. Since I was the only seminarian in my county, it was not easy on vacations and I couldn’t wait to get back to the seminary to be with my friends.

Because I was a good student, after six years (we never thought of the last two years of the minor seminary as “college.” It was just more Latin and Greek, theology, rhetoric, etc.) I was sent to Europe—not to Rome, thank God—but to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium for two years of philosophy and four years of theology, for which I am eternally grateful. It was there that I really began to understand what it meant to be truly human. Again I had an incomparable education in philosophy and theology, above all, in what I must call Christian humanism. I think this is what saved me as a person. Some of my professors were movers at the Second Vatican Council.

The priests I knew and lived with in France during the summer months only confirmed my love of and desire for the priesthood. It was another world. *Le prêtre est un homme mangé*. The priest is a man devoured by his people. He must be good bread to sus-

## A Path to Rome with a Detour

tain them. I knew and loved these French priests who were totally dedicated to the people, who lived no better than they; they were poor, warm, open, and understanding of the *condition humaine*. I would eventually offer my first mass in the little French parish where I had lived in the summer and gave my first sermon in French in the parish church draped with French and American flags.

The downside of my European experience, however, was that once again I continued to live in the all-male world as the church required. I wore the *soutane* and clerical chapeau for all six years except on summer vacation. When on vacation, however, we always had a “prudent companion” with us, a fellow seminarian. We traveled, as the rule said, “*bini et bini*” (two-by-two). If any of my fellow seminarians did any cheating along the way, I was unaware of it. It certainly didn’t happen with my traveling companions.

To this day I am eternally grateful to the church for the intellectual and spiritual formation of my 12 years in the seminary. I never wanted to be anything but a priest—not even to this day. And by God’s grace I was ordained in 1958.

Given my formation, you must realize, therefore, that on the day of my subdiaconate it was not difficult for me to take whatever step was necessary to be a priest—that formidable “step” that accepted the celibate state. The

“choice” for the unmarried state was an easy one, a non-problem. How informed was this choice is another question. I was prepared to give a course *de matrimonio*, having studied with one of the world’s authorities on the subject. But when I took that step, save for one seminarian’s sister I had once met and admired, I did not know a woman that I could call “friend,” or could even call by name for that matter. I certainly had never had a girl friend.

The fly in the ointment, however, is that after ordination to the priesthood I soon discovered in my first assignment that half of the people I was supposed to minister to were “persons of the opposite sex”—women—unknown quantities to say the least. I had plenty of knowledge *per scientiam*, as they say, but none *per connaturalitatem*.

I will not bore you with the long saga of my ten happy years in the ministry, as a

example of the Canadian, French, and other bishops with a moderate position. A number of us wrote a letter to the local paper quoting the statement of some 200 theologians at the time, who had voiced reservations about *Humanae Vitae*. (I still have the text.) We were chastised for this by the bishop and told not to preach or counsel on the issue. Classmates of mine in Washington, D.C., under Archbishop O’Boyle were sacked, even one who was an official in the marriage tribunal. In hindsight I think some of my problems stemmed from the fact that our moral theology professor for four years in Louvain was Canon Louis Janssens. He was a *peritus* at the Council and served on the special papal commission of Paul VI whose recommendations were eventually turned down. He had been very influential in our own formation in this area of moral theology.

“French priests were totally dedicated to the people, who lived no better than they; they were poor, warm, open, and understanding of the *condition humaine*.”

seminary professor, as a curate and eventually pastor. During this time, however, I came to a crisis in my life.

First of all there was the arrival of *Humanae Vitae* on the scene. By this time I was a pastor. I lived alone in one of the biggest houses in town where there was only one Catholic church. My bishop at the time took a rigid position on the interpretation of the encyclical. Yet a number of my brother priests had hoped he would follow the

While all this was going on, I had over the years come to understand and appreciate the women with whom I had worked in my ministry, especially the many sisters in the various

parishes where I had served, as well as those whom I had befriended during my six years of summer studies while I was a seminary professor. This discovery of what the innocent friendship of a woman could mean came as a revelation to a “late bloomer” like myself. Indeed the first friends I made with “persons of the opposite sex” were women religious. They were safe, but also absolutely wonderful women. To this day I cringe at the snide remarks that are made about so many

## A Path to Rome with a Detour

noble women who have served God's people with such dedication. Over a number of years I became fond of one sister (not from my state) who became a good friend during my summer studies out East. In time I realized how much I really loved her. It was during these turbulent times that I eventually—and sadly—resolved to take a leave of absence to reflect on my situation. I still wanted to be a priest but was lonely and unhappy living with *Humanae Vitae* as my Ordinary interpreted it. Today in my twilight years (I am 76), I have a fuller understanding of priesthood and how it must be opened up to those by virtue of their baptism and who desire to exercise it.

At this time I was a pastor and found it hard to live with the hard line my bishop had imposed on us. I asked my auxiliary bishop, who was a personal friend and rector of the seminary where I had taught, to help me because my Ordinary did not believe in the rescript policy for release from the clerical state as it existed in canon law. My friend, however, told me that because he was only the auxiliary bishop he did not have the canonical jurisdiction to submit such a request to the Vatican.

He also told me I would have a better chance to get a rescript if I left the diocese where I was well known, basically to go into "exile." It was a bit ironic since I had not run off with the housekeeper or something similarly scandalous. He suggested that I find a bishop who would be open to this canonical endeavor; and he recommended two people, one in the far West who was a Louvain man and

respected bishop, and another highly regarded bishop in New England. Since I had classmates in the New England diocese, I headed for the area with little more than my car and the shirt on my back. I had never thought of anything in life but the priesthood and had made no provisions for such an exodus. I was received graciously by the bishop's auxiliary who helped me fill out the proper papers and the Ordinary subsequently took them to Rome on his next visit. Meanwhile my friend in my home diocese was named an archbishop elsewhere.

Since I had no money; nor any source of employment, I stayed out East where there was an organization in New York whose mission was to help clergy persons in transition (priests, rabbis, ministers, nuns). They helped me make a resume and sent me out in the city for a series of depressing job interviews. I could not bring myself to accept the kind of offers made. Meanwhile I lived as a charity case with a rabbi and his family on Long Island. The rabbi was one of the patrons of this organization, and had room for me after a former sister in transition left his home once she found a job.

The organization in question eventually tired of me, because I turned down some of the jobs offered, implying I was too hung up on the priesthood. They told me to go into suburbia where there was a Probation Department whose director had been a seminarian and was sympathetic to losers like me. I discovered that this department indeed had given employment to a number of former clergy-

men from various backgrounds. They found a job for me in the adoption unit, where I worked in a kind of ministry until I could find a teaching job.

I lived in a run-down rooming house with a La Salette father who was in a situation similar to mine. It was a dump, and it wasn't long before we were burglarized. The lowest point in my life was living in the local YMCA while waiting for a place to live. Twelve years of my life as a seminarian, and ten more years in the clergy had not prepared me for this. Once more I was getting a crash course in *la condition humaine*. Eventually my buddy and I took an apartment nearby that had belonged to a former religious friar and his wife. No sooner married, the poor fellow was drafted and sent to Vietnam and his wife retired to her parent's home. So it was that we got his apartment. Our mutual agreement was that whoever got married first would move out. My friend had not gone the same route as I to petition Rome and eventually got married. He left the apartment to me.

I took a bit of teasing from my former clergy colleagues in the Probation Department, who told me I would never hear from Rome and that I should get married civilly and then I would get my papers faster. I don't know if this would have been true. But since I had done everything "by the book" thus far I chose to continue to do so.

I joined the local parish where my wife and I have been active members ever since. Things were not moving in Rome, and I called my friend the arch-

## A Path to Rome with a Detour

bishop who said he would call someone in Rome and get things moving. Months later I received a call out of the blue from someone named Monsignor X in the local chancery office. At first I thought it was one of the guys pulling my leg. They called me "*ante factum*" because I had said I would not marry unless or until I heard from Rome. Furthermore I knew the sister I loved would never leave or marry me without the Church's blessing.

Over the phone the Monsignor said: "Do you want your papers or not?" and told me to come down to the Chancery office. I would learn later that when my "papers" had come from Rome they were sent to the New England diocese where the petition was originally made and those folks thought they were doing me a favor by forwarding things to the local chancery office, saving me a trip. Big mistake. My troubles had just begun.

Well, I went down to see the Monsignor and, I have to tell you honestly, he was ice cold and not nice to me at all. Ironically I have a friend in my parish, also a married priest, who sings with us in the choir. He had the identical experience in dealing with this same Monsignor.

When I sat down he held some papers in his hand and asked me to sign a document on the bottom line to the effect that I was released from my clerical obligations. He made me promise

that I would be a good Catholic layman. I asked him if I could see the document he held and that I had signed and he said, "It's in Latin." I said, "I taught Latin, Monsignor, and took my oral exams in Latin for four years at Louvain." He simply said, "Just sign here." I then asked him if I could at least have the document, since I assumed it was mine, or even a copy. He said, "No, it will be kept in our special archive." I said, "Well, it's important for me to have something in writing attesting to the fact that I am a Catholic in good standing and have been relieved of my clerical obligations." He said, "No." Only weeks later, after I had hounded him a bit, I eventually received a one-sentence statement on chancery stationery that reads as follows:

**"My wife and I are blessed with a fruitful marriage, a wonderful son and daughter-in-law and two beautiful grandchildren."**

*"To whom it may concern: This is to attest to the fact that Richard Cross, ordained a priest for the Roman Catholic Church has been dispensed from all obligations of the priestly state, and remains a Catholic in good standing."*

The Monsignor also told me that if the time ever came for me to be married, it would have to take place in private chapel inside the chancery, and that he would be the celebrant. That was not a pleasant thought.

Furthermore, he said that the rescript called for two witnesses who should be priests, but that "our priests have better things to do on Saturday mornings," and that I would be allowed only two witnesses present. I had two parents. By this time I had thought that I might some day marry my friend who also had a parent. He replied, "Well, you will have to decide which one doesn't come."

This is the truth.

Furthermore the Monsignor informed me that no flowers would be allowed. "We don't want people coming out of the chancery wearing flowers," he told me. I did not please him when I mentioned that only recently the local paper ran a front page story about a priest, a Monsignor in Rome, who had worked in the Vatican and who, having received his dispensation, was married in a church ceremony in Rome. There he was, big as life in the paper, pictured standing in front of Saint Peter's smiling with a big flower in his lapel. The Monsignor said with disdain, "We don't care what they do in Rome. This is the way we do things in our archdiocese."

Well, I left with mixed emotions: happy that my papers had come through, but saddened by the rest. This was not the reception I had hoped for, and I was hurt.

Eventually when my Sister friend was free to get married I called my



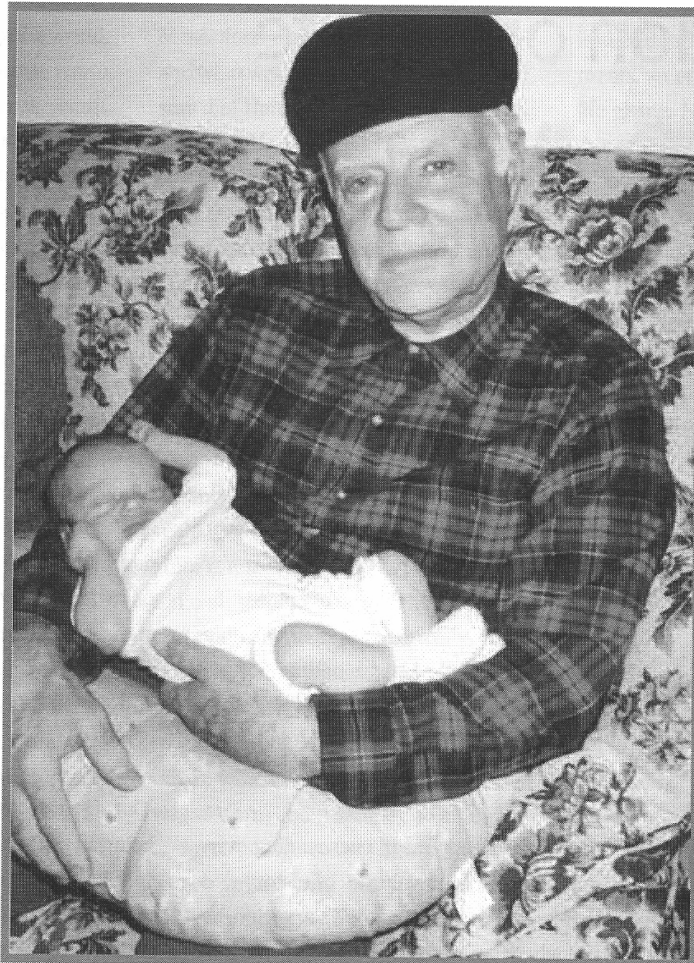
## A Path to Rome with a Detour

Archbishop friend and told him what had happened. "I did everything you told me to do by the book," including leaving my home state where I was well known—something that you had said would help my case with Rome, and look at my predicament today."

"Well," he said, "Don't worry, Dick, let me call the chancery and straighten things out."

He called me back later, somewhat disappointed and exasperated. He told me that although the chancery would allow him to come in and perform the ceremony in the chancery chapel, they would not yield on the matter of two witnesses only at the wedding. He was as incredulous as I.

He then called a friend who was an official in a neighboring diocese and made arrangements so that we could eventually be married in that diocese. He flew in personally from his Midwestern archdiocese and performed the liturgy, wearing his full regalia including the pectoral cross I had designed for his Episcopal ordination as well as a set of vestments I had bought for him in France. (I had previously prepared the music for his own consecration as bishop when I was head of my diocesan music commis-



Richard and David Earl, his grandson

sion.) Several years later my wife and I were invited to participate in his installation as Cardinal Archbishop. This was a pastoral man who loved the Church and God's people. He was a just man, did me right, and I miss him.

That is the story in sum. It's not fictional. My wife and I are blessed with a fruitful marriage, a wonderful son and daughter-in-law and two beautiful grandchildren. After a brief stint as a probation officer I went back to school and earned a master's degree in

Special Education and taught handicapped children for 25 years. My wife, also a musician and liturgist, taught the same number of years in our parish school. We both have served as music ministers in our parish for over 30 years. Now that we are retired we still sing in our parish choir and remain active in liturgy, music, and ecumenism.

Since retirement my personal activities have included music ministry (something that has been part of my life ever since I first played piano as a boy in Sunday school), working as a Hospice volunteer, being an activist for peace and

justice, as well as an advocate for the Palestinian people. My interfaith outreach to the local Muslim community has led to my being honored by the American Muslim Women's Association "for building bridges of understanding between our communities."

I have learned much about ministry and priesthood over the years. It is not "my priesthood" but "His priesthood" in which I have a small share along with all baptized and committed believers.