

Swimming the Thames

Thank you for your writings about leaving the priesthood. It is an issue seldom spoken of in the open...and never in church.

I was ordained in 1979 for rural Montana. I soon realized I desired more challenge than living in a rectory...it felt like a glass house. After four years and starting in my third parish as an assistant pastor, I approached the bishop and requested to be allowed to serve as a military chaplain. Concerned about my lack of stability, he asked me to stay in place for three years. What he was missing was my desire to do more, to take more ownership of my life, to embrace leadership and responsibility. After a year long wait I reapproached the question with him again and he agreed to release me...if I was willing to wait one more year. I've wondered if this was a matter of concern or control on his part.

So after six years of priestly ministry I headed off to serve as a military chaplain. It was the right decision. I served across the US, tours in England and Korea, was sent for 5 tours into combat zones. Twice I was sent to study and received two additional masters beyond my MDiv. I loved the ministry to the people of God. I was successful enough to complete 24 years of service and rise to the rank of Colonel.

Upon retirement as a chaplain, I moved to Alaska and got an apartment for a time of transition. I began drafting a letter for my bishop explaining my desire to step down from active ministry. I explained my concerns with how the church dealt blindly with the issue of pedophile priests, the neo-conservative trends I saw in young priests, and my long struggle/unwillingness to grow old alone! As I prepared this letter, I received a letter from a past classmate and friend stating regrets about not being able to attend my retirement ceremony and wishing me the best (including salmon fishing). It included her phone number. I called and asked her if I emailed my letter would she give me feed back...she knew I was a priest but not my struggles. She replied, "Great letter, don't change anything....and give me a call after you mail it." After I mailed and called, I went on the first date (at age 56) since I was in high school. She was also in the military, a nurse, and a Colonel - still on active duty.

We dated for about six months, I purposed, she said yes, we were married in a small chapel by a Methodist minister. When I told my bishop prior to the marriage of our plans, he told me I would have to wait 5 years for him to write Rome for a dispensation...I told him I was not waiting.

After our marriage we tried to attend mass in Roman parishes. My wife and I were both

'cradle Catholics.' While we never had any priest push us away after marriage, we always sat in the last pew, didn't receive communion, and knew we could not speak of our journey. It was an unwelcomed feeling. We knew the rules and lived by them.

Several friends outside of church became aware of our struggles. They told us of the Episcopal cathedral downtown. We went with some trepidation as we saw ourselves as loyal Catholics. We found a very welcoming catholic community, interested in us and our story. We also found a community centered on Word and Eucharist, with a liturgical style very familiar. It felt like a community trying to live the spirit of Vatican II in which I was educated. A few months later, I met with the Episcopal bishop at his request. He listened to my story and replied, "I don't think God is done with you yet!" After a journey of approximately two years, I was 'received' into active priesthood as an Episcopal priest. In contrast to Roman traditions, The Episcopal Church accepts Roman orders as valid.

Today I am happy to be married and still able to celebrate the sacraments. I am a 'retired' priest and choose not to be the pastor of a congregation. I do supply a small mountain parish one a month; which cannot afford a resident priest. I've also served the diocese in the selection and training of new clergy, sat on a policy advisory council, and recently been asked to be the regional representative for the bishop to 14 parishes

At the request of the diocese (Episcopal), I've helped to welcome two other former Roman priests into the Episcopal catholic community. Additionally I've been in dialogue with at least 3 others..

I remember in many old sacristies, "Father, say this mass as your first mass, last mass, only mass." When I retire from the military and stepped down as an active Roman priest, I thought I celebrated my last mass. Due to a myopic view I didn't realize "God was not done" with me.

Yes, some Episcopal priests swim the Tiber and are re-ordained. Since the Episcopal Church accepted my orders as valid, I swam the Thames and was received by a loving vital community.

I have much to be thankful for.

Blessings

Rich+