

From the desk of Fr. Tim

A Married Catholic Priest at St. Jude?

Most visitors who come unprepared are surprised to discover that St. Jude has a married priest. In fact he fills the role of what most people would call a “pastor”. The ordinary experience of Catholics is that priests are not married. They have taken a vow of celibacy and do not live their life with the routines and obligations of marriage and parenting. How is it, therefore, that there can legitimately be a married Catholic priest at St. Jude? The short answer is that Pope John Paul II, Servant of God, dispensed him from the rule of celibacy and permitted his ordination as a Catholic priest.

A little investigation into this matter will show that only the Pope can grant this dispensation, and that the occurrences before 1981 in which this was granted are so rare that it is usually not noticed by most Catholics living in the United States. It should carefully be noted that there have been married Catholic priests for some time. These, however, are not in the Latin Rite (Roman Catholic) but are Byzantine (and other) Rite Catholics who were either once separated from the Catholic Church and returned, but were allowed to retain their Church (Canon) Law which allowed for married priests. This is an important point, since these number perhaps thousands of married priests. Nonetheless, the ordinary experience of Catholics in most parts of the world is that priests do not marry.

The exception to this became a reality in 1981. Before this, a group of Episcopalian priests were aided by Cardinal Bernard Law in petitioning Pope Paul VI to allow them to be ordained priests even though they were married. Before a consideration of the case could be given, Pope Paul VI died. The same petition was presented to Pope John Paul I but his untimely death did not permit consideration of the issue. Pope John Paul II granted the request and permitted the ordination of married priests, typically former Episcopalian priests. This became known as the “Pastoral Provision.” (In principal, other Protestant ministers may also be permitted to use this permission to seek ordination in the Catholic Church, but only a very few have done so.) It should be noted that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops answered affirmatively the question presented to them by the Vatican, if they would support these ordinations.

The motive in most cases for pursuing ordination in the Catholic Church is threefold. First, it is based on the firm belief on the part of the Episcopalian priest that he does have a vocation to the priesthood. Once this has been clearly envisioned in the heart and soul of an individual, it is impossible to imagine not being a priest. Even if it is sometimes misguided or misunderstood, this motive forms the spirit of the pursuit of Holy Orders.

Second, the Episcopal Church has departed from its Catholic roots. Some might claim that this occurred long ago, but there have been vestiges of that Catholicism for many hundreds of years. Until the capture of the leadership of the Episcopal by a theologically and morally liberal party, there was still hope of reunification with Rome. That hope is now dissipated. Contributing to this is the fact that the moral

foundation of the Episcopal Church is now deeply fragmented with a widespread acceptance of unnatural sexual unions and abortion, as well as a departure from the moral authority of Sacred Scripture and the Sacred Tradition of the Church. Priests who have lived their life spiritual guided by a desire for unity with the Catholic Church have come to see that individually being a member of the Catholic Church is the only solution to their dilemma. They live in a troubled sea of spiritual isolation, longing for a fair horizon that can only come in union with the Church of Peter the Apostle.

The third motive is linked to these, but must be understood to be an emphatic and driving force. It is the desire to be clearly obedient to the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. While it is possible that we can live for a time in a kind of journey toward something (or even running away from something), eventually we must come to stable ground. The design of the Church that was clearly in the mind of God is that there would be one Church, one flock and that it would be guided, ruled and nurtured by Peter and his successors in office as Bishop of Rome and Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church. People can debate this issue until exhausted but, if they are honest with the facts, they will have to admit that all the evidence (both Biblical and other) all point to this truth. Usually, the realization of this comes gradually, with signs along the way pointing ahead. It usually involves overcoming prejudices that have been long formed, sometimes since childhood. There may be a degree of pain and confusion that is a prelude to what comes as a conversion of sorts. Even lifelong Catholics share similar experiences of coming to a deeper belief in Catholic teachings.

In most cases, once the decision has been made to pursue ordination using the "Pastoral Provision," the next step is to find a sponsoring Bishop. He shares in seeking permission from the Holy Father for the ordination to proceed. A dispensation from the rule of celibacy is not given to a group. It must be requested by an individual and is considered on a "case by case" basis. The application is lengthy and includes psychological, social, and academic criteria. The stability of the priest's marriage is examined and he is guided along a preparation path that usually takes no less than three years. An academic assessment is conducted, and a course of study is designed and undertaken. Most former Episcopalian priests have already served parishes for many years and are well equipped for most aspects of Catholic parish ministry. This period of transition into the Catholic Church is usually troubled by practical concerns, especially when a priest's family is involved. Priests usually have no special secular skills or wealth to fall back on, and the fear of being unable to support one's family oftentimes prevents them from taking what might be seen as a financially reckless path. It is almost universal that the wait from the time of making a petition to the Holy Father and the receipt of his answer takes three years.

Concerning my experience as a married Catholic priest, it has been in every way much more rewarding than I ever imagined. The opportunity that I have had to minister to Catholics and Catholic parishes is extraordinary. I am sorry that people are sometimes a little quizzical to find a married Catholic priest in our parish, even though they have always been very gracious with their questions.

Even though I may occasionally speak about being a husband and a father of three and grandfather of five; I tend not to want to be thought of as unusual or odd. I don't think I have anything unique to offer, beyond the fact that each of us is unique, and each has something unique to offer. But I certainly do not think of

myself as being a better priest because I am married or a father. I might be a better person because I am married, but that is true for each of us in our vocation as priests or as married persons.

I also do not style myself as being liberal or conservative or anything like that. Such labels are usually shallow and lack value. I see myself as an obedient priest who desires only to serve God's people. I suspect that the experience of married Catholic priests will one day be forgotten, taking up only a few lines in the annals of Catholic history and I do not mind that at all. I will, however, forever thank God and his Church for giving me this tiny little space of time to serve. What a joy it is to me!

Since this is the only time I have ever written about this, please afford me a small footnote. I owe a great debt to the people of St. Gregory's Church. This transitional community included about 130 souls who chose to journey with me to the Catholic Church. They met in a small storefront church for three years and helped to support my family. I think of them often and of the wonderfully loving little community that we shared. Pope St. Gregory the Great called us home and sustained us with his prayers. I will forever join him in speaking to the Father about you.