

# Father Walczak says he's 'demythologizing' priesthood

By Karen M. Franz

The notion of a married priest is a foreign concept to most Catholics, but to Father Melvin Walczak and the parishioners and staff of St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, it's a part of everyday life.

Prior to his acceptance last June as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, Father Walczak, the first married priest within the Diocese of Rochester, served for 16 years as a priest in the Polish National Church, which permits its priests to marry.

By extraordinary privilege, the Holy See

married priests," Father Walczak says.

Although he refuses to speculate on the future of the celibacy rule in the Roman rite, he recalls an anecdote of a recent meeting with Bishop Clark. The bishop asked Father Walczak if the diocese could do anything to take some of the pressure off him. "I said, 'Get another married guy in the diocese.'"

Father Walczak is unique within the Diocese of Rochester, but he is not the first married Roman Catholic priest in the United States. Since 1981, 26 Episcopalian priests, most of whom are married, have been

The children did, however, undergo some confusion about their father's vocation when they were younger and "dad" was ministering in the Polish National Church. When the children were small, the family lived in the parish rectory, and Father Walczak was often at home when the children left for school and when they returned. "When my oldest was in first grade, he wondered when dad would get a real job like his friends' fathers.

"Other people seem to want to make it much more difficult," he says. "I consider myself to be married to an extraordinary woman, but I'm sure Joanne wouldn't consider herself to be extraordinary.

"I block off time. It's a question of discipline, making sure that I am available to the family. I'm very protective of that time."

Similarly, Father Walczak says the parish has adapted easily to his unusual marital status. "It's been a real cake walk in terms of adjustment into parish life," he says and notes that he hasn't had one negative experience with a parishioner.

"We don't even give it a thought any more," he says. Now, as part of his homilies, he frequently refers to his wife and sons, Darryl, 15 and Gregory, 12.

"I think that at this point in time it's a real learning experience for everyone," he explains. The transition has been easy, partly because of the nature of the parish and the parishioners' understanding. "I'm dealing with family-oriented people," he says. "I think there are more problems with priests understanding than with the laity."

Father Walczak came to the Roman Catholic Church through 10 years of study at St. Bernard's Seminary and later St. Bernard's Institute. "I had searched a number of opportunities, and God seemed to be pointing me constantly toward the Roman Catholic Church," Father Walczak recounts.

Back in 1979, when he was doing degree work at St. Bernard's, he "sincerely felt that the Roman Catholic Church would afford me the best opportunity to serve God." He then spoke to Father Joseph Hart, associate professor of theology at St. Bernard's, and the process of conversion and acceptance into priestly service began in 1980. Five years later, the petition was granted by Rome.

"I saw the Catholic Church doing more to feed the hungry, clothe the naked... I just felt an overwhelming desire to become a part of that," he says of his decision to convert. "I was not getting that kind of ministerial satisfaction where I was before."

He terms the five-year delay his "desert experience," a difficult period during which he struggled to determine whether he had misinterpreted what God wanted. He likened the delay to a telephone transaction. "He called and then He put me on hold," he says, laughing.

He notes, however, that receiving the Vatican approval was well worth the wait. "I have a sense of fulfillment about my presence here. If I died (tomorrow) I would feel God had given me a special privilege. I'm very satisfied with what's happening in my life."

"The diocese made an excellent decision in sending me here," he says of his assignment to the large parish of St. Joseph's. "It teaches you very quickly about the larger Church."

To some extent, his own ties to two different worlds may make him more sensitive to the demands placed upon parishioners who are active in parish life. He is careful to point out that parish meetings should not be scheduled at dinner time and that they should not run so long that participants will have problems arranging babysitters.

"Celibate priests just don't have anything to relate to in that sense. It may take more effort than it does for me."

Further, his broader experience may draw people who might be reluctant to discuss

problems they would feel awkward discussing with a celibate priest. "People might bring certain problems to me because they assume I might have a greater understanding of them," he says, referring to difficulties with children or spouses.

"Some extraordinary priests are easily able to relate to the problems encountered by married parishioners. It doesn't require as much effort for me," he asserts. "If, in fact, the church moved into allowing priests to marry, it would automatically become easier for priests."

No one, however, has specifically told Father Walczak that he or she was bringing a problem to him because he is married. "In general, I think, if people feel you are interested in them... it doesn't matter whether you're married or not.

"In a parish this size, there's always something that requires your time or your input, but I don't know that I spend any more time on counseling than Father Moynihan (St. Joseph's pastor, Father James Moynihan) does."

But in comparison to his years in the Polish National Church, he now spends more time doing the type of work he enjoys. "Now I spend more of my hours doing ministerial work," he says, explaining that in the small-parish setting at St. Casimir's, he was often required to spend considerable blocks of time on such janitorial chores as plumbing and snow shoveling. "A small parish required the pastor to do many things that would not be considered ministerial... Now I spend time on tasks I'm more qualified to handle. I wasn't the greatest plumber."

Father Walczak's schedule has changed significantly, but the conversion process hasn't had a great effect on his family's life. His sons continue to attend Irondequoit High School and Lake Junior High in West Irondequoit. A grin appeared on Father Walczak's face as he second-guessed the next question, one he's obviously been asked before: "Why aren't your kids in Catholic schools?" The answer was as straightforward as the disarming grin. "They've been in the same school system for a number of years and I wanted to let them finish. I see no reason to take them away from their friends."

In order to keep his children in the West Irondequoit schools, Father Walczak has become a "commuter priest," but that hasn't caused any real problems. "I think being the first in the diocese places some pressure not just on me but on the parish here to work through some of the problems. We've grown much closer and learned to appreciate what one another needs.

"We've kind of grown out of the idea of a priest on call 24 hours a day," he says, noting that hospital chaplains have largely replaced the parish priest in on-call situations. Besides, he says, "I'm only 10 miles away. It will just take me 15 minutes longer."

Living outside the parish rectory is somewhat of a change, and "dad" isn't around the house as much anymore. Yet Father Walczak says that the time the family does spend together is more important. "You have a tendency to take for granted when you're around each other constantly," he says, adding that the family now spends "quality time" together — when his wife and children can fit him into their schedules, that is, Father Walczak adds wryly.

"The change might have been a little more difficult when they (his sons) were young, but they're rapidly reaching an age when they don't want the old man around all the time," he explains. "We don't always eat together; we try but it doesn't always work out."

Father Walczak also notes that the household isn't perfect and that the common parent-child and sibling squabbles do occur.

"It seems that my household should be different from others, but it isn't. I still

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'People want to put a priest on a different level — they want to see him act differently. It's a real dichotomy. They want a priest to be human, but not too human.'

— Father Melvin Walczak

allowed Father Walczak, formerly pastor of St. Casimir's Polish National Church in Irondequoit, to continue active priestly ministry in the Roman Catholic Church.

Father Walczak recently completed a six-month period of transition and study at St. Joseph's and has been appointed by Bishop Matthew H. Clark to serve as the parish's parochial vicar, the new term for associate pastor.

The media attention given last summer to his acceptance came as a complete surprise, Father Walczak explains. "I just never imagined it being that newsworthy," he says.

"A lot of people wondered if it (his acceptance by Rome) was a sign of things to come," he recalls. "I said it was not for me to determine."

Though some possibility of change exists, an official statement from Rome at the time of Father Walczak's acceptance emphasized that celibacy "remains as a disciplinary measure which the Holy See does not intend to relax by this extraordinary pastoral exception."

Extraordinary or not, Father Walczak finds that people have accepted the idea. "Most people seem to verbalize that they are very pleased with the situation. Many have expressed that they would like to see more

accepted as Roman Catholics in this country. These priests have had to go through the process of being reordained, a step from which Father Walczak was exempted because the Vatican accepted the "absolute validity" of his previous holy orders.

Although his wife and children converted to Roman Catholicism with him, the transition within the family has been minor. "I've always been a priest," he says. "The kids aren't hung up on different churches."

Since that time, the boys have joked about following in their father's footsteps toward the priesthood, but Father Walczak says at their ages, they have too many other things to think about. Yet he says he wouldn't object to their following vocations even though the present rules on celibacy would make their lives as priests quite different from that of their father.

"I am a priest who is married, as opposed to a married priest. I accepted holy orders before the sacrament of matrimony," he says, explaining that his wife knew from the outset what his commitments were and what their lifestyle would be.

"This is nothing new to Joanne (his wife)," Father Walczak says, adding that his wife and children have had a priest in the house for many years.

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