

A journey toward priesthood in a changing world

By Deacon Victor Bartolotta
Guest contributor

As I entered Sacred Heart Cathedral June 2 to be ordained a transitional deacon, a group of friends kissed me, offered me congratulations, and handed me a leaflet.

The leaflet supported the ordination of women.

The incident illustrates that while the world turns slowly, the ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church whirls amid controversy and change.

In recent years, the number of priestly ordinations in North America has plummeted. Groups of people who were silent prior to the Second Vatican Council now cry out to be heard and to be allowed access to ordination.

priest. How apropos for today's world, where separation, divorce and death have left so many in my situation.

Yet the explanation of my circumstance produces at times an incredulous reaction. I am asked how I can possibly do what I am doing.

May I suggest that the model of single parent as cleric or religious is an old one?

It would be impossible to detail all of the situations of men and women who entered religious life after the death of their spouses, but I'll mention a few of the best-known. Jane Frances de Chantal, a widow, mother and contemporary of St. Francis de Sales, founded the Order of the Visitation in the 17th century.

In the late 16th century, Francis Borgia, a widower with eight children, became a priest

and eventually the superior general of the Jesuits. At the time of Pope Alexander VI's appointment to the Chair of Peter, he was the father of four.

What I attempt to do is nothing new; it is only new to the American church of recent years.

An intentional life

It's Friday night. My daughter has been invited to a sleepover with eight other second-graders. I sit alone in a darkened room of my home. It is the experience of loneliness, of sitting by the window as chilling rain beats methodically upon the drain pipe that speaks to me about priesthood.

I recently visited a priest of 30-some years in

grace given to me, I seek to share in that life.

I hear often of others who aspire to priesthood, but are prevented because of marital status or gender. A friend of mine recently told me her son's reflection after leaving his wife and marrying. The son told his mother that if priests could marry, he would certainly first to take up such a vocation.

Only time unlocks the future. But his sentiments similar to this young man's.

I press two things. First, I offer my sympathy and affirm those feelings. Second, I invite him and others like him to try to understand today's priest and what is required of him. Both the priest and one who is unable to fulfill an aspiration to priesthood need to understand one another if reconciliation and change are to take place in the church.

Instant credibility

Perhaps the church's definitive prescription of who can receive priestly ordination lends itself to the creation of critics. These critics often complain that ordination grants instant status and credibility. Juxtaposed with this priestly experience is the experience of other professionals, including Catholic lay ministers, who often work with little public recognition.

Admittedly, the above criticism rings true at times. But the priest may have another story to tell. His story may speak about the study, the personal and public scrutiny, the years he endured while remaining faithful to his vocation.

All told, I have given eight years of my life in my journey toward priesthood. Before marrying, I studied in major and minor seminary, and except for six months working at a state job, I have stayed with church ministry.

In the most recent part of my preparation — these last five years — much has changed in my life and the lives of those around me. My daughter has grown into a young girl from a baby. Both of my parents died. The world has changed drastically. Given these changes, I can



Following several years of intermittent preparation for priesthood — including stops, starts and detours that took him from North Carolina to Geneva to inner-city Rochester — Deacon Victor Bartolotta Jr. faces his June 30 ordination and his continuing commitment to his eight-year-old daughter, Lynn, with a determination to become the best possible father and priest.

In the Diocese of Rochester, which comprises nearly 400,000 people, I stand as the single seminarian to be ordained in 1990. An obvious question arises: Why do I want to become a priest?

I find myself gravitating toward a polemic answer. So many personal reasons for my wanting to become a priest lie within a quagmire of wider social and theological discussion.

Because of experiences like the one I described above, and because my situation is unusual, I explain my reasons for wanting to become a priest in apologetic terms. To do otherwise would be to ignore perceived injustice or legitimate debate within the church today surrounding the ministerial priesthood.

Single-parent priest

I was married for almost seven years before my wife died in 1985. From that marriage, I have an eight-year-old daughter. To a great degree, my priesthood will involve caring for my daughter, with whom I live and with whom I intend to live until she sees fit to strike out on her own.

Though unintentionally, I suppose I am creating a new priestly model: the single-parent



Courtesy of Victor Bartolotta
"Maxie" Bartolotta, Victor's wife of seven years, died in April, 1985, when their daughter was three years old.

his rectory. He lay in bed in pain, the victim of back problems. In the loneliness of that rectory, he said something to me that I keep repeating in my mind.

"I am a priest today for one reason," he explained. "Because I believe it is the Lord's will."

One could say, then, that the priest attempts to grasp an invitation from the Lord Jesus. In so doing, the priest tries to live an intentional life to spend and to be spent.

Intentionality is all the more important when one considers the requirement of celibacy upon those ordained to priesthood. In that requirement, the call remains different from some vocations.

Though not theologically contingent to priesthood, celibacy must be confronted by any potential priest. I deal with celibacy by declaring my weakness and my powerlessness before God. Then, acknowledging the inevitable pain and struggle, I try to take advantage of what God has given me. Daily prayer, the Eucharist, and the prayers of others exist as an essential part of my life. By taking advantage of the

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