

# Church keeps quiet on waver for married priests

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Father Parker is among that number. In 1982, he became the first of the married Episcopal priests to be ordained a Catholic priest under the pastoral provision, which provides an exemption to the canon laws governing clerical celibacy. He currently works with Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law to coordinate the program for married Anglican priests entering the Roman Catholic Church throughout the United States.

Father Parker also was among the group of Episcopal priests whose efforts in the late 1970s led to the creation of the pastoral provision.

"We appealed to the Catholic Church through the apostolic delegate (Bishop Jean Jadot at that time)," Father Parker recalled. "Our request was that Anglicans believed that they were not a Protestant church that arose out of the Reformation. We saw it as a schism."

Father Parker explained that he and a number of other Episcopalians in the United States had hoped that the Anglican and Catholic rift would close and that two churches would be reunited.

But as the Episcopal Church began to enunciate positions at odds with Catholic teachings on such issues as birth control, homosexuality, divorce and, in 1977, the ordination of women, it became obvious that the reunion was not likely in the near future, Father Parker said.

Yet these Episcopal priests are not merely conservatives turning to Catholicism because they are upset by the ordination of women, Jesuit Father Joseph Fichter, noted in his 1989 book, *The Pastoral Provisions — Married Catholic Priests*.

"The defecting priests undoubtedly had deeply personal reasons for shifting to Catholicism quite aside from the ordination of women," wrote Father Fichter, a professor of sociology at New Orleans' Loyola University.

"All of these clergymen had a deeper reason, theological, spiritual and psychological, for the pledge of allegiance to the Church of Rome," Father Fichter's book explained. "Ample research evidence points to the fact that these men were already on the road to Rome."

Those who took that road doubtless found it rocky.

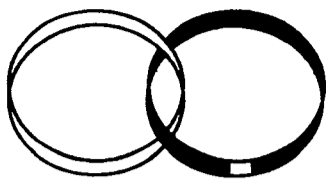
The pastoral provision stipulated that these men leave the Episcopal Church and live as Catholics for at least one year before they could be ordained Catholic priests, Father Parker said.

Leaving the Episcopal Church often meant leaving their church-related jobs as well, which frequently caused financial problems, Father Fichter noted in his book. Some of the priests have been forced to take low-paying, menial jobs, forcing some of the families to seek public assistance.

Even after becoming Roman Catholic priests, these men and their families must live with less money than they received while employed by the Episcopal Church. The pastoral provisions provided no guidelines for paying wages to support a family, Father Fichter noted, adding that the "fixed income of a newly ordained diocesan priest, even with housing and other perquisites, is not sufficient to maintain a family."

The Archdiocese of New York is in the process of contending with this issue of compensation, noted Monsignor Edward O'Donnell, director of the archdiocesan Personnel Board.

"We're running into these questions and trying to work with (the priests) to respond to their needs," Monsignor O'Donnell said. He added that the



archdiocese has only three such married priests — all ordained since 1989 — so problems are only beginning to take shape.

"They're not just getting what the other priests get, and we try to utilize whatever facilities are available," the priest said. One of the priests lives with his family in a house on the grounds of the school where he teaches. The archdiocese is seeking low-cost housing for the other priests and their families.

Long before wages become an issue, however, the married Episcopal priest must find a Catholic bishop willing to accept him as a priest. Father Fichter acknowledged that the number of such bishops is limited.

Father Fichter said some bishops do not agree with ordaining married priests; are unwilling to take a chance with the experiment; are concerned about their ability to pay wages that can support families; or simply do not have appropriate assignments in which to place the priests.

His book explains that the pastoral provision prohibits the married former Episcopal priests from becoming pastors or assistant pastors in parishes. This restricts them to other parish positions or to taking chancery or teaching posts while assisting at parishes.

After finding bishops willing to accept them, the former Episcopal priests must apply through Father Parker and Cardinal Law to the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Waiting for an answer from the Vatican can take more than a year.

The priests must also meet with a panel of U.S. theologians to determine their academic readiness and knowledge of the Catholic faith. Based on that meeting and the applicant's credentials, the panel then assigns readings or recommends study to fill any gaps. The former Episcopal priests must later submit to oral and written examinations to show that they have mastered the material.

The process can take as little as a year, Father Parker said, but it often takes much longer. For example, Father David Dye, the married father of three children, was ordained in Atlanta, Ga., on May 30, 1992 — approximately four years after initially applying to the Vatican in 1988.

Father Fichter pointed out that the length and difficulty of the process has

discouraged some Episcopal priests from attempting to become Catholic priests.

The number of priests who have endured this process is small. They are scattered among more than 34,000 diocesan priests serving across the United States. Their scarcity — coupled with the low-profile positions in which they are permitted to serve — has left most Catholics unaware of the presence of married priests in the church, Father Fichter observed.

Monsignor O'Donnell noted that virtual silence about the existence of these priests stems, in part, to a belief "that there be no triumphalism about them out of respect for other churches. The ordinations have been done without a lot of headlines."

Another reason, Father Fichter speculated in his book, is that church authorities wanted to play down "this dramatic shift in the Catholic clerical tradition of celibacy."

Some church leaders feared this shift would lead Catholics to ask why the thousands of resigned Catholic priests who are now married are not being invited to return to active ministry, the priest wrote. Others feared that the practice would "scandalize" the laity, he added.

Fears of scandal appear to have been unwarranted. Fathers Fichter and Parker as well as Monsignor O'Donnell all report that the married priests have generally been accepted both by lay people and by their fellow priests.

But questions about resigned Catholic priests have arisen, leading to small protests at the ordinations of some of the Episcopal priests, both by individuals and an organization known as CORPUS, the Corps of Reserve Priests United for Service.

About 15 protesters — led by Penn Yan native George Clements — targeted Father Dye's recent ordination in Atlanta. A graduate of St. Michael's School, Clements — who has never been a priest — now lives in Roswell in the Diocese of Atlanta.

"We did not protest his ordination," Clements explained in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "We welcome him into the church. What we're saying is we wish the priesthood could be opened to qualified priests who are no longer active."

"I call it hypocrisy to be ordaining married Episcopalians when we tell our Catholic priests they have to leave if they want to get married," he continued. "If we're suffering from a priest shortage — and we are — why don't we ordain women?"

Clements observed that the situation of the Czechoslovakian priests is just another symptom of the church's unwillingness to deal with the issue.

"That one just boggles the mind," Clements said of the Czech priests. "This was a group of priests that kept the church alive in Czechoslovakia for 40 years. It's just another one of the inconsistencies."

Indeed, the Vatican may be fueling arguments over its consistency on clerical celibacy, both by granting the exemption to the Episcopal priests, and by the method it has adopted for dealing with the secret Czech priests.

Initial news stories about the underground Czech priests reported that their priestly status had been revoked. Later reports detailed the process by which non-married priests are being assessed on an individual basis, and the ruling that some of the married priests would be restricted either to the permanent diaconate or to Eastern-Rite churches.

On June 5, the *Catholic Courier* contacted the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith by telephone to solicit an explanation of the church's current position on the married Czech priests.

"It's a matter that is being resolved by the local bishops and the Holy See, and for the good of the church is not being discussed publicly," replied a Vatican official who asked that his name not be used.

In the United States, however, public discussion may soon focus on the ordination of married former Episcopal priests and the issue of clerical celibacy.

Clements suggested that the Atlanta protest may be a prelude to an ongoing campaign, and said he has talked with other groups and individuals across the country. Future actions ranging from similar protests at ordinations to boycotts of the Peter's Pence collection could take place, he said.

Regardless of such protest efforts, the ordination of married Episcopal priests will continue throughout the near future, Father Parker said.

"They're still coming," he noted. "It's a stream."

But it is a stream that could easily be dammed, Father Fichter observed.

"We are reminded that the pastoral (provision is) indeed 'provisional,' and may be withdrawn at any time," Father Fichter wrote. "The Vatican can, at any time, cancel the American bishops' right to ordain married Episcopal priests."

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