

## **How Can You be a Married Catholic Priest?**

Fr. Dean N. Henderson - July 2019

In 1999, after a lengthy process of thought, prayer, study and discussion, my family and I were received into full communion with the Catholic Church at Christ the King parish in Courtenay. What makes my story of adult Catholic 'conversion' somewhat different is that I was an ordained Anglican, in active ministry on Vancouver Island. Eight years after our reception, with the experience of varied lay ministries in Courtenay and Victoria; I was ordained a Catholic priest by Bishop Richard Gagnon for the Diocese of Victoria at St. Andrew's Cathedral, on April 15, 2007. While some might wonder why I would make the 'switch' and that's been asked frequently, I wish to offer a very brief answer to another question that has been asked: "How can you be a married man and a Catholic priest?"

The short answer is "It's exceptional, it's complicated, and it's impossible apart from the grace of God and the approval of both Bishop and the Pope". At the outset it needs to be said, and probably said frequently, that the Catholic Church, while granting an exception from the Latin rite requirement of perpetual celibacy (where celibate priests are in short supply), maintains the disciplinary rule that defines the exception. My sincere hope is that my priestly ministry will NOT diminish the faithful's affirmation and value of the gift of the celibate clergy but rather increase it. So why the exception in the Latin Rite? In 1967, Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical called "Sacerdotalis Caelibatus" in which he stated: "While on the one hand, the law requiring freely chosen and perpetual celibacy of those admitted to Holy Orders remains unchanged, on the other hand, a study may be allowed of the particular circumstances of married sacred ministers of Churches and other Christian communities separated from the Catholic communion, and of the possibility of admitting to priestly functions those who desire to adhere to the fullness of this communion and to exercise the sacred ministry. The circumstances must be such, however, as not to prejudice the existing discipline regarding celibacy."

Then in 1980 Pope John Paul II granted approval to the Bishops of the U.S. a provision to ordain to the priesthood married former ministers of the Anglican tradition who entered into full communion with the Catholic Church. In 1986 the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops petitioned the Holy See for approval of a similar process "For Married Anglican Priests Seeking Priesthood in the Catholic Church". It was granted by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith in the same year. Anglicans are the most 'Catholic' of Protestant denominations and therefore it is mostly Anglican clergy who present themselves as priestly candidates within the Catholic Church. The long "process" of discernment I entered in the Jubilee year of 2000 required fulfilling numerous criteria, amongst them; my own belief that I ought to offer myself for priesthood, the written expression of support by my wife Linda, the recommendation of the Vocation's Committee and ultimately the Bishop of the Diocese (first Bishop Roussin and then Bishop Gagnon), the compilation of a 13 subject dossier of information for submission to Rome, satisfactory studies in Catholic theology and liturgy, and a comprehensive psychological assessment. The approval for married priesthood was granted to the Bishop of Victoria by Saint Pope John Paul II in January 2005, just months prior to his death.

More time would be required for Bishop Gagnon, the new Bishop of Victoria, to both get to know me and my family, and properly discern my calling to holy orders. You may detect what I mean when I say this has been a complex process! In the 2005 indult, the Holy See had included parameters for a married priest including the exclusion from 'ordinary care of souls', meaning that I was not meant to be a parish pastor; potentially an assistant priest, or University/Hospital/Prison chaplain. I was assigned to the UVic/Camosun in 2007 and offered part time assistance at St. Andrew's Cathedral. Recently Bishops of varied countries petitioned the Holy See to remove the restriction after some years of experiencing the positive contribution of convert married priests. Pope Francis approved in December of 2016, leading Bishop Gary to assign me as the pastor of St. Rose of Lima in 2018 and now Our Lady of the Rosary in 2019.

With gratitude and deep vocational joy I serve the Diocese of Victoria, while enjoying my ever expanding family with Linda my wife of 33 years, Neil (31) and his wife Maira (expecting our first grandchild), Andrew (28), Leah (24) and her husband Andrew, Matthew (21) and Dominic (18) . Benedicamus Domino!