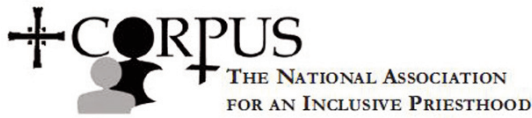


A CORPUS Story



My name is Paul Bumbar. Let me share some of my story in - and beyond - clerical ministry; how I entered and left the ranks of the clergy.

Today I am looking forward to celebrating tomorrow's Feast of Ss. Peter and Paul. I celebrate the feast because it is my name day, and more so because of its import.

In the Eastern Church, the commemoration of Peter and Paul is one of the six holy days "of obligation" (the other five being: the Circumcision of Jesus, the Baptism of Jesus, the Annunciation, the Dormition of Mary, and Christmas). It has always seemed to me remarkable that Peter, head of the apostles, shares the holy day with Paul; Peter the "rock" of the Church is paired with Paul the founder of numerous church communities.

This combined celebration has colored my understanding of "church" as the community of believers which is not "ruled" by the bishop of Rome (Peter) but is united in a communion of autonomous churches (Paul). It is the model of church that has meaning for me and which informs my ministry.

I began formal, canonical ministry in 1965. I was ordained in Rome at the Ukrainian College of St. Josaphat - just up the Janiculum hill from the North American College whose gates I walked by on my way to the Pontifical Urban University (*Propaganda Fidei*) from which I earned a Licentiate in Sacred Theology in 1965. My last three years of theology coincided with almost all of Vatican II. The spirit of the Council has remained with me to greatly inform my thinking and decision making, after ordination and to this day.

When I returned to the states, I was Assistant in the Ukrainian parish of Yonkers, NY, for two years. Then I was assigned to Stamford, CT, to the minor seminary which I had attended for high school and college. My new "boss," the principal of the school, said, "Paul, you studied theology in Latin, and during Vatican II, so I want you to teach freshmen and sophomores Latin, and juniors and seniors about Vatican II. Also, I know you're American born but you learned Ukrainian well enough in the college over in Rome. You will be a good person to teach English-speaking people a foreign language." So, I taught Latin, religion, and Ukrainian, and also was put in charge of the boarding students at the seminary. I became—my friends laugh at this—the Prefect of Discipline.



That worked out well for about four years until, some of the clergy faculty took exception as to how I was teaching religion. I was not picking books of the Bible, giving chapter and verse and then saying, this is what you're supposed to be doing based on the words. Rather, I used curriculum that examined students' lived experience, and how this might relate and be informed by Scripture and Church teaching. This, apparently, was too "radical" for the senior clergy, who, I later learned, had been criticizing my teaching methods.

A Ukranian Catholic Priest

Consequently, upon my return home late one evening, I found, slipped under my door, a letter from the bishop. He was assigning me to be pastor of the Ukrainian parish in Ludlow, MA – and I was to be there in two weeks. I was stunned. Faculty used to regularly—at least weekly—sit down, drink Scotch and have supper with the bishop, so I really was hurt that he did not sit down, talk to me and say, “Thank you for what you have done here at the seminary. Now I want you to go up to Ludlow and be the pastor there.”

More than anything, the way I was removed / reassigned led me to question whether I wanted any longer to be part of, and support by my presence, a system where people could be moved around like chess pieces. I had always known it to be possible, but when it happened to me, it really hit home.

So, after breakfast next morning, I went up to the bishop’s residence. He was making his bed. (He was an unpretentious, humble man.) He asked me to talk as he made his bed. I told him, “Normally I would be incensed at what happened last night when I got a letter slipped under my door, but I have been thinking whether I want to remain in this system and serve the people of God as a cleric. I will go up to Ludlow and be the pastor there. I guarantee you one year of devoted service, and will let you know before the end of a year whether I’ll be asking for a leave of absence.” He quietly accepted what I said, and added that I would be administrator of a second parish, one in South Deerfield, MA, about 35 miles from Ludlow.

I relocated to Massachusetts, June 1971. I was happy in serving both parishes, and the parishioners seemed very happy with me; however, it became increasingly apparent to me that I would not continue being a cleric. I had come to realize that the church I was member of was not on the path of Vatican II that had so captured me when I was studying theology. Added to the slowness and intransigence of the Church was my unwillingness to be part of the clerical caste. I just thought, I can serve God and people differently. So, before the year was up, I called the bishop and said, “I have considered what I’m going to do: I am asking

you for a leave of absence, with the probability of petitioning for “laicization.” He granted the leave.

In September 1972, I took the leave of absence and, because as a student I had worked one summer in a congregate care home on Staten island, I found employment working in child welfare at St. Agatha Home of the New York Foundling Hospital. About one year into my leave, I got a call from the bishop and he said, “Are you going to pursue asking to be dispensed?” and I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, I will consider that, but you first must go for an interview.” I had to go fly to Pittsburgh to be interviewed by a priest psychiatrist, perhaps for him to affirm the fact that my psychological and spiritual well-being depended on the dispensation.

So, for two years I continued working and pursued the “laicization.” While this was going on, I became close friends with and fell in love with Gloria Durka, whom I first met five years before when we both were studying at Fordham U. We chose to delay marriage, however, and wait for the outcome of the laicization petition. In June of 1974, at 8:15 AM, and dressed in my bathrobe, I received the special delivery letter from my bishop informing me that Paul VI had granted my petition: I could get married in the Church, but could no longer function as a priest. (To this day, it is inexplicable to me that one “channel of God’s grace” becomes an impediment to a second channel.) Gloria and I happily celebrated our sacrament of marriage on August 3, 1974, in the chapel of Boston College.

To add to this story: fifteen years later, when Gloria and I were back at the seminary in Stamford for a get-together, my old Latin teacher approached me and said, “I must tell you that when the bishop received the letter from Rome for your laicization, he was not sure of his translation of the Latin, and asked me ‘What exactly does this word mean?’ The word was *annuit*, meaning to give a nod or assent to. (It’s on the back of all our dollar bills: *annuit coeptis*.) When I told the bishop this meant the Holy Father was giving you your papers, he smiled.” I always remember this and say a prayer for the bishop when I go

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past his grave in the cemetery where my mother and grandmother are buried.

Since our wedding day, Gloria and I have lived “happily ever after” – for a short while in Massachusetts and Florida, and now over 42 years in Tuxedo, NY. All this while, Gloria taught graduate-level religious education, the last 38 years of which were at Fordham University.



What I’ve been doing since leaving clerical ministry is work in human services: congregate care for children with behavioral, emotional and severe developmental needs (Down syndrome, and autism); residential and outpatient drug rehabilitation in Roxbury, MA and in Broward Women’s Prison in Florida. When Gloria and I moved back to New York from Florida, I returned to the New York Foundling Hospital to work the next 22 years as staff trainer, Independent Living program director, assistant to the Executive Director and coordinator of agency-wide Continuous Quality Improvement.

In 2001, I was presented with early retirement because the Foundling was downsizing and restructuring, and I retired from full-time work. After leaving the Foundling, to “stay busy” and make further use of my doctorate from Northeastern U. in administration and management, I started teaching management, part-time to undergraduates, and did so for ten years, until 2011. And then I finally stopped “going to work.” I have realized, now that I’m an octogenarian, it’s true—things do wear

out—and I respond now not to a clock or schedule but to ad hoc needs as presented.

I have not regretted the path I have followed. My younger brother celebrated his fiftieth ordination anniversary two years ago. He still ministers in a parish outside of Pittsburgh. Some people look at my brother and ask me, “Why did you leave the priesthood?” I say, “I didn’t leave. I have followed my namesake, Paul, who remembered baptizing only three times, and who said that he was called instead to preach the Gospel” (I Cor. 1:13-17). This is how I view my life and my priesthood. Instead of sacramental ministry, like St. Paul I have “preached” the Gospel - in my case by ministering to communities of “widows and orphans, and “the halt and the lame.” (cf: Jas. 1:27 and Luke 14:21)

Although I no longer preside at parish Eucharist, I have an enduring need to be part of a eucharistic community. Right now in this time of pandemic, Gloria and I are the “two or three gathered together” every Sunday morning in our living room. But absent the pandemic, we are regular members of the local parish where we conduct adult book-discussion groups, and I also serve as Lector, Eucharistic Minister, and in visiting the homebound.

That’s about what we’re doing. I’m very happy and content and I’m very honored to be part of this group, and it’s nice to see old faces. Because as we have all learned in the COVID era, we might be separated, but we still are together and we are connected. And knowing that there are people like you keeps Gloria and me going and happy. Thank you very much for this.

