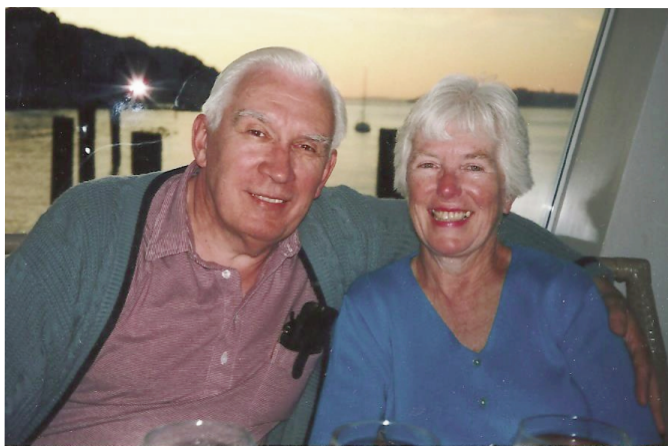


Reflections on a Married Priesthood

Editor's Note: Anthony Kowalski is a long-time member of CORPUS. He sent this reflection and his witness is priceless.

Five decades have gone by since resigned married priests in the Chicago area began planning to bring together the growing number of married priests and their spouses nationally. Strong leadership by Frank Bonnike and others prodded them. I was honored to join in that effort. Let me share my experience.



I was ordained in 1961, served as minor seminary rector for six years (1968-74) and married Joan Sullivan at the Jesuit Holy Trinity Church in Washington DC after our dispensation arrived from Rome. Joan had previously been Mistress of Novices in her community (Presentation Srs.) and had several times been selected Teacher of the Year.

Not long after our marriage, I began organizing the married priests and their spouses in the DC/MD/VA region in monthly gatherings. Our goal was always to sustain and foster our personal dedication to Christ and His Teachings.

To bring that about we fostered annual Days of Recollection for all of us. Theologians like Walter Burkhardt SJ., Gerald Sloyan, and Anthony Padovano, among others, were happy to lead us in these efforts. More and more married priests and their wives joined us.

Similar groups were gathering regularly across the land. Terry Dosh of St. Paul MN, an indefatigable organizer, was entrusted by the Chicago group with the task of meeting with these various groups and attempting to unite them in some way. Terry, a former Benedictine Monk who married Millie, a former Poor Clare nun, travelled the country and met with dozens of people. And when the Chicago group decided to organize into a national organization, they depended on Terry to put together the initial Board of Directors. Terry invited me to represent the DC/MD/VA group.

Our initial gatherings reflected a shared enthusiasm, a common deep commitment to Christ and His Teachings, and a yearning for ministry. From the start there was a strong desire to broaden the role of women in active ministry. And when discussion began of organizing a national conference, we in the DC area volunteered to organize it. And so the first National Corpus Conference took place at American University. Jim Martin, a member of our group and former head chaplain of the Veterans Administration, led the effort.

Those of us who attended that first CORPUS National Conference in Washington in 1988 thrilled over the words of Tony Padovano. He captured our yearnings so well. He recalled the story of Jethro who pledged to sacrifice to God the first being to cross his threshold if only God would grant them victory. Then, horrors!, the first being to cross the threshold was his beloved daughter. True to his pledge, he had her killed.

Listening to that narrative, we all recalled the pledge of celibacy which we had made. What a brilliant analogy!



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The married priest and his wife face many setbacks. Some of the faithful speak derogatorily of “ex-priests.” Others hold to the superiority of the celibate state over the married state. Much confusion remains. And yet, Christ is central to all of us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God! It must be so.

When we started, we were all convinced that reforms would soon be underway. We even set timetables for ourselves in accomplishing our tasks. But Rome under John Paul II was unmoved. The struggle would be much more difficult and take much longer than we anticipated. And here we are fifty years later.

Pope Francis has now introduced a synodal process which involves all Catholics in an unprecedented reflection and dialogue on the issues of the day. From the local level, these discussions have expanded to national and international gatherings. To date the process has highlighted the evil of an unbridled clericalism and the need for a more active involvement of women in the leadership of the Church. Much more work needs to be done.

The reforms which Pope Francis has initiated are consistent with those of the Second Vatican Council. A new day is dawning. It will prepare the Church to face the future in the Spirit of love and peace of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

