

# LINDA & RALPH

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

CALL TO ACTION, NOVEMBER 16, 1996

By Linda and Ralph Pinto

### READING FROM ACTS

*When the Sanhedrin heard that the apostles were filling Jerusalem with teaching in the name of Jesus, they were furious and intended to kill the apostles. However, a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, an authority on the Law and respected by the people, stood up and asked the apostles be removed from the room. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin:*

*Israelites, think twice about what you are going to do with these people. My advice is that you leave these people alone and let them be. If this movement, this activity, is of human origin, it will destroy itself. If, on the other hand, it comes from God, not only will you be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God.*

### WELCOME

We welcome you to what we hope will be a time of sharing, celebration and conversation about who we are, why we find ourselves in this place at this moment in time, and what it means for the Church, the People of God.

We believe it to be vital to connect our personal journey with that of the more than 20,000 other married priest families whose lived experience has given life to this com-



munity known as CORPUS.

Finally, we wish to enter into a conversation with you about how the presence of married priests living, working and ministering to the Catholic community at large continues the work of the Spirit begun long ago.

It is indeed a journey back to the future.

### YOU ARE LOVED, ACCEPTED AND NEVER ALONE

I would like to share with you my personal experience as a married priest this past twenty-one years. There are more than 22,000 married Catholic priests in the United States. Some work anonymously in Catholic institutions, some minister to other religious traditions and some have preferred to channel their energies in

other directions. All of us, regardless of the level of activity represent a unique phenomenon in history. I believe in our own small way we are redefining the shape of ministry and the nature of priesthood.

Being a husband and father of three very special young women has changed my life forever. After resigning my clerical position in the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, I worked at several jobs which ranged from cleaning carpets at a local hotel to being a principal of a school for emotionally handicapped students. No matter what God was calling me to, the bills had to get paid.

For ten years after transitioning to a married priesthood, I worked in our local parish where the pastor, a good man, was alcoholic. I served as a youth minister and religious edu-

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cation director. I came into contact with many people who asked me to be priest to them. At first, I was reluctant. My heart said, "Of course, this is what God had called me to be" but my head said, "no, married priests should be resigned to sit in the pew."

Gradually, with Linda's support and love, I had to see that my priesthood was forever and the desire to serve had never left my soul. Priesthood and marriage are compatible.

I eventually was invited to serve as a pastoral associate in a unique Church situation. Protestants and Catholics had formed an Inclusive Community with the endorsement and support of the United Church of Christ. I also serve several small faith communities for weekly or monthly home liturgies.

I witness many marriages of couples who are unable to marry due to present Church restrictions.

In all of these experiences I found myself re-defining what ministry and priesthood are all about. I believe it's much more than just having a married clergy or women's ordination.

We have to push the ecclesiastical envelope and stretch our definition of Church to be inclusive of people and sensitive to their needs.

I could never tell someone in a disastrous marriage that divorce is not an option. I will never refuse to provide a catholic presence for couples who are remarrying. I will not tell people they are unworthy, or it is divisive to celebrate liturgies in their homes. I can't ostracize people struggling with their sexual identity and deny them a place to convene or celebrate sacraments. And I will never tell my three daughters that they are not equal in the Church!

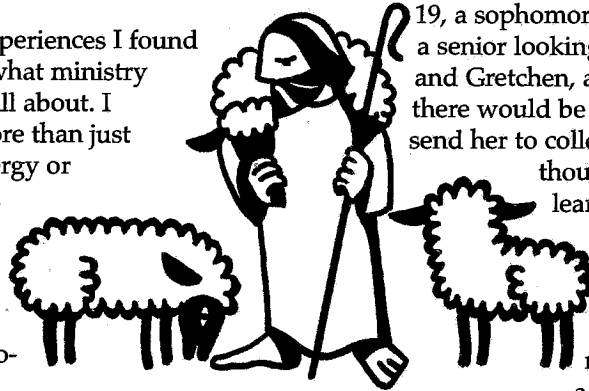
Someone must be there to include them in the Catholic family. Someone must be there to embrace their need. Someone must be there to tell them God still loves them,

and they are not alone.

## PREFACE

Before we begin, we wanted to share a little experiment we undertook in preparation for our time together. Jesus' stern and sincere instructions to his disciples to listen to the children, for there you will find true wisdom, has always proven true in our lives. As a former Franciscan, I taught medieval history in West New York, NJ, to the children of the Cuban flotilla exodus of the early '70's. I'm not sure how much I taught *them*, but I will always have what they taught *me*. There was an intense and passionate honesty, a clear vision of what was really important in life, and a sincere innocence about expressing it.

Holding on to that powerful memory and commitment, we made the mistake of asking our three daughters (Rebekah, 19, a sophomore in college, Sarah, 17, a senior looking forward to college, and Gretchen, a sophomore, hoping there would be something left to send her to college), what they thought their parents had learned since transitioning from religious life to a married priest state? Their immediate response was to recall a picture of the early



transitioning couple. I, in my outdated paisley, corduroy bell-bottoms and shiny psychedelic shirt, (my sister had graciously lent me some of her clothes, or as I more honestly suspect, was happy to throw some my way) and Ralph, decked in plaid polyester pants with a striped shirt and of course, black shoes and black socks! We've come a long way in their estimation, even though we still react to their friends who show up wearing rosary beads rather than *reciting* them or listening to heavy metal which has a long way to go before it could ever be considered miraculous!

Beyond that, they wonder why their father's former clerical habit of going to the

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Islands in February has been replaced with a National Geographic video and a bag of potato chips. Or how he and I can espouse a consensual, collegial model of church when we can't even move furniture together without drawing blood!

They note we are still faithful to the daily office but it's now a 9 to 5 prayer! and remind Ralph that he longs for the days of hearing submissively "Bless me father for I have sinned," especially when the most popular mantra in *our* home is "Yo! dad, can I have the car keys?"

On a more serious note, we *have* seen life from both sides now. We were both called to live lives of professional religious service and ordained ministry. And we were both called to live lives of intimacy and marital love. This is not a fluke, nor have we failed in any way. Both calls were God-given and Spirit generated. Both calls have melded into what we experience and witness to today—a married priesthood.

Which brings us to this time and this place.

Anniversaries are a way of savoring life's events, rather than just marking time. Anniversaries can also become an opportunity to see the hand of God at play, flashing back to events which are continuously connecting us to our future.

Stop for a moment and appreciate the full impact of those anniversaries that connect with this year and this event.

It was twenty years ago that one of the most promising events in the post-Vatican II American Church (in her wisdom) was the Bishops' Bicentennial Conference known as *Call To Action*. It was historic in that it gathered the whole Church—Bishops, priests, religious, lay persons, even women and children! —"the

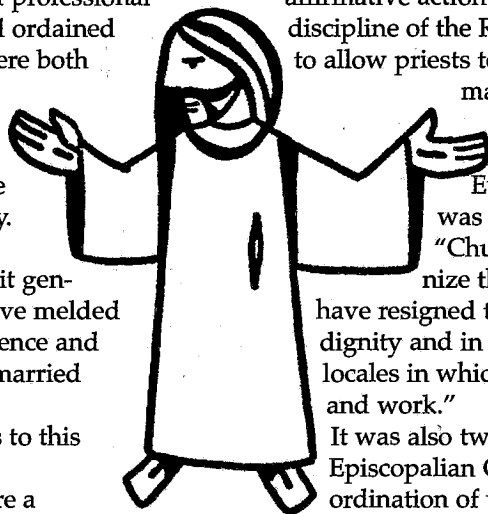
widest possible sharing of assessments of how the American Catholic community can contribute to the quest of all people for liberty and justice." "The basis for action," stated John Dreaden, Bishop coordinator of the event, "was open debate and honest sharing of ideas." The event was later described by Bill Powers in his book *Free Priests*, "A grand occasion, with the People of God coming together in a Spirit of participatory democracy."

It was at this time that CTA in their final draft directed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to take affirmative action to change the present discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, to allow priests to exercise the right to marry, and remain in or resume the active priesthood.

Even more significantly, it was agreed in 1976 that "Church authorities recognize the right of those who have resigned to be fully accepted with dignity and in good standing in all locales in which they choose to live and work."

It was also twenty years ago that the Episcopal Church approved the ordination of women to be priests and bishops and the Anglican Church of Canada ordained six women as priests. This reflects the findings of CTA 1976 in its consultation and Decree #10, calling for the change in the present discipline to allow for the ordination of women to priesthood and the diaconate.

And while at first glance seemingly insignificant and irrelevant, thirty years ago this past month, a series called *STAR TREK*, first aired on TV. It's premise was that all celestial peoples, human and otherwise, could live together in genuine community. Their diversity would be affirmed, celebrated and respected, and the strength which resulted would unify them into one. Gender, race, marital sta-



*Lord, let your face shine on us*

Our personal story  
is universal.  
We were  
two people,  
sharing similar dreams,  
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by the lives  
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of people  
we mutually admired  
(King, Ghandi,  
John Kennedy,  
Dorothy Day,  
John XXIII).  
We met and became  
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We ministered  
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We remained open to  
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Our story is one of  
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Our story is universal.  
Our story of love  
is in essence,  
yours.

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Most saw  
our falling  
in love  
as having nothing  
to do with  
God's first gift  
in the garden  
~intimate,  
loving  
companionship.  
Most saw it  
as a failure,  
a falling,  
a weakness.  
This in part  
can be credited  
to the Church's  
reluctance  
to address  
the relevant  
issues  
emerging  
from the  
ecumenical con-  
sultation called  
Vatican II.

tus, economics, or ethnic background did not qualify them for inclusion or exclusion in positions of power or service. Employment was based on charism, education and experience. Governance was collegial and consensual. Primacy of conscience was paramount (they call it their prime directive). The current series now features a *female* captain (read: Pope) who empowers, embraces and enables her crew by loving leadership.

## IN THE BEGINNING

But enough of looking at the past. Let us connect it to our present so that we can better design our future.

Our personal story is universal. We were two people, sharing similar dreams, fashioned by the lives and witness of people we mutually admired (King, Ghandi, John Kennedy, Dorothy Day, John XXIII). We met and became splendid co-workers. We ministered and became close friends. We remained open to the Spirit and fell in love. Our story is one of surrender and trust. Our story is universal. Our story of love is in essence, yours.

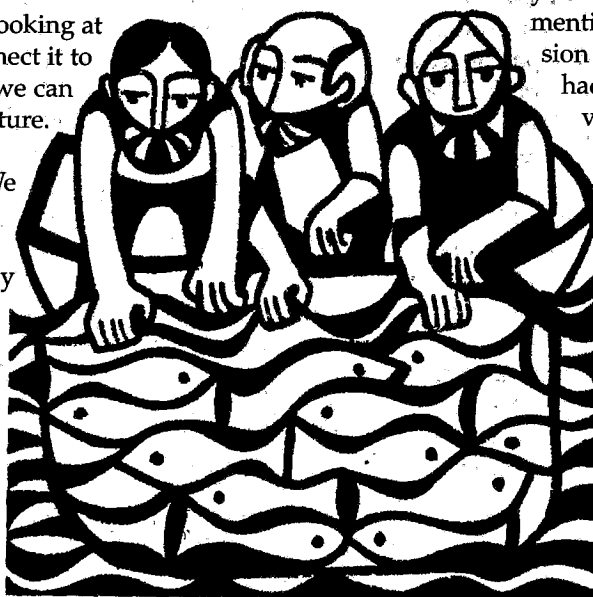
We tell it to place our lives and its purpose in context.

Ralph was ordained for the Archdiocese of Newark in 1968; I was professed a Franciscan religious the next year. Each of us was eager in our desire to be available to serve need, wherever it would be. For Ralph it was an inner city parish with immigrant neighborhoods (Portuguese, Irish, Italian), who wished to celebrate the presence of God amid the influx of drugs, inadequate housing, unemployment and the plight of the working

poor. While I felt destined to be your polite, polished, parochial school teacher, I mysteriously found myself assigned as a group mother and supervisor in an orphanage which nurtured the lives of inner city Afro-American and Hispanic children discarded from their homes in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Interesting enough, two years later, Ralph and I were both destined to be chosen for a unique situation in the early '70's. Watch the hand of God at work!

My community began experimenting with a new expression of community. They had selected three convents to be designated as "choice living" situations. The idea flowed from the Vatican II notion that the Spirit speaks to all of us, not just to the Provincial Superior who lives hundreds of miles away and may have met you only once or twice. Nuns requested residency in these convents based on their spirituality, sense of mission and spirit of community. I applied for and was accepted to



*Put out into the deep water  
and lower your nets for a catch*

St. Mary's parish in West New York, New Jersey.

One of the intriguing reasons why I chose this place was that the Archdiocese of Newark was also toying with some Vatican II notions. This same parish had been designated as pastor-less. That meant two priests would be assigned to facilitate the parish energies and call the community forth in prayer and celebration. Perfect energies resided in Joe Plunkett, a straight-thinking Irishman with tremendous administrative skills, and Ralph Pinto, an all-encompassing, flamboyant Italian from Jersey City, who believed passionately that God speaks to peo-

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ple in their everyday experience. Together, they introduced themselves to an aging, first-generation German parish, deeply in debt. By sweat, blood and love they transformed it into a vibrant, collegially governed, liturgically based home for immigrant Cubans, disenchanted youth, working class families raising children, and the life-long parishioners looking for traditional services—in other words—the People of God.

It was geographically and ideally the mountain top. Situated on a hill along the Hudson River, directly across from the Empire State Building, the parish center took up a small, perfectly square block: Church, School, Convent, and Rectory. The buildings became the body for which the life of the parish took flesh. Its heart was rooted in God and its soul was celebrated in the people. It was nirvana.

Against that backdrop you can understand why our falling in love entailed such a great price.

Our journey toward transition in 1975 was bleakly colored by the language and position of Church authorities. Few understood that celibacy was an employment policy of the Church, not a charism which automatically was instilled when one received a call to priesthood.

Most saw our falling in love as having nothing to do with God's first gift in the garden—intimate, loving companionship. Most saw it as a failure, a falling, a weakness. This in part can be credited to the Church's reluctance to address the relevant issues emerging from the ecumenical consultation called Vatican II. It was fashionable to shun religious who spoke of love; it was convenient to remove their picture from the mantel and make no mention of their life and accomplishment. This was much easier than trying to understand the experience or question if God had any place in it.

I, myself, was keenly aware of my responsibilities as a vowed religious. I had lived all my life knowing that God had called me to become a nun. At 19, I knew. At 27, I knew nothing.

But there was no denying that I enjoyed Ralph's company; I could not deny that we embraced shared values and visions. We designed elaborate seasonal liturgies together; executed long youth weekend retreats together; coordinated parish Octoberfests, Cuban pig roasts, St. Patrick Day dinners, St. Francis animal blessings. We even held the first annual Winter Solstice celebration together. (this was before New Age even got its name). We enjoyed ministry, and we embraced parish life.

There was no problem when I realized I was attracted to Ralph, that was normal. There was, however, a moment in time when I realized that I was in love with Ralph. That was when my questioning entered a different level. How could I be in love with a man and also be called to a chaste, celibate life? If I had fallen in love, and God is love, how could this possibly be in defiance of God? If I denied this experience, could I

ever be honest with myself about being a true celibate? Was celibacy then a gift I had been given or a challenge I had accepted?

It was only then that I realized what God had in store for me. It became clear that no matter how chaste or how pure I remained, my heart was no longer celibate. I could continue to live celibacy physically, but I could not honestly embrace it spiritually. But the reality was clear. The Church would see this decision as a quest for lust, thus revealing that they knew very little about falling in love. The Church would characterize this decision as an uncontrollable desire for sex, thus revealing they knew very little about intimacy

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*I  
am the  
Way  
the truth  
and  
the life*

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What good happens when a priest is forbidden to minister publicly? Is his education, experience and talent no more? Is the need any less after his, and over 22,000 other resignations of priests to marry in the past thirty years? With the dramatic decline of vocations to the priesthood and the burgeoning number of Catholics being baptized, is the need no more?

or integrity.

In the final moments I asked myself, what would be the value of denying love?

Ralph shared a similar journey. He was advised by some his peers to "just have an affair". He was encouraged by his co-pastor to just "slither" off quietly, no fanfare, no announcements. Being Italian, a native of Jersey City, New Jersey, and an avid follower of the open window policy of John XXIII, he knew this was impossible.

His last words to the community which he had lived, shared meals, held dying children with, and celebrated marriages, his last words to his parish family were of gratitude and love. The memory of his announcement from the pulpit that he had fallen in love and wanted to share and celebrate that with them all still brings tears to the eyes of the teller.

When I shared with my religious sisters that I had also fallen in love, it was recommended that I resign immediately so that "scandal" could be avoided.

Ralph and I did a great deal of praying during this period. We knew what we were doing was honest and right and holy.

It was from God. There was no shame. How could one be shamed by love and honesty? Where was the scandal? Was the real scandal the obstacle that Church policy imposes upon its own? Was the real scandal that those whom the Church sent out to proclaim God's love, are denied romantic love for themselves? Why? What is so wrong with loving and being loved? Why was that so hard for people to see?

Our wedding day made the feast at Cana look simple. We celebrated with over three hundred parishioners, friends and most of our family (these are Italians and Irish-Germans! Even the idea of shame wouldn't stop them from partying). But the day after

was just that: the day after.

With new lives, new jobs, and a new home—we were still alone. We were aliens on a strange new planet, seeking a community, any community where we would be accepted for who we really were. Our former identities had been stripped from us and the new ones didn't quite fit. Yes, we were Linda and Ralph Pinto, yes, we were teacher and principal, yes, we joined clubs and volunteered time in the community, but at our core there was something more.

We knew no other married priest couples. Church officials had deliberately designed it that way. No listing was kept, no insurances or pensions were retained, no notification was printed, no ceremony of departure was scheduled, no reunions were planned. You just disappeared as if you never existed.

If you wished to marry in the Catholic Church, you were held

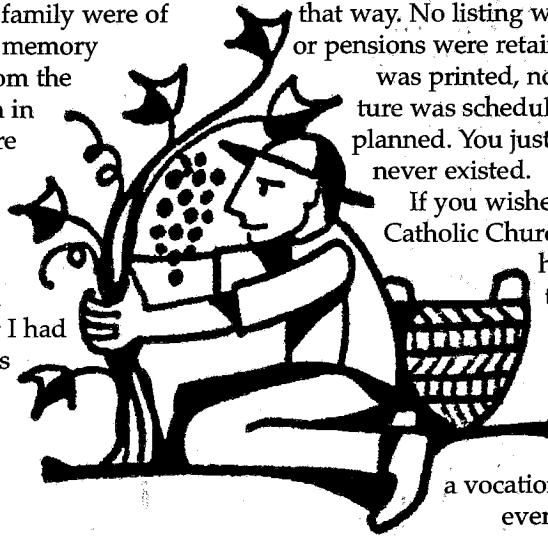
hostage to the conditions of the rescript. These were supposedly designed for the "good" of the Catholic community.

You were to deny that a vocation to the priesthood was ever present, and move at least fifty miles away from your last place of service. You were forbidden to minister publicly, and you

were not allowed to serve in any formal functions in the parish. What is it that frightens them so?

What good happens when a priest (once a priest, always a priest) is forced to declare that his vocation was faulty? If his vocation was for naught, why does he continue to seek service in the Church? If he is indeed a fraud, why is he still compelled to help bring Christ's message of healing and hope to all who are in need?

What good happens when a priest must move fifty miles away from his last parish? What scandal would the presence of his wife and children bring? What is the scandal of a Catholic marriage and a Catholic family for a



*Go into my vineyard*

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one-time convener of the Catholic community?

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What good happens when a priest cannot be a lector or Eucharist minister or religious educator? What good happens when he sits sterile in the pew during read sermons which are designed from homiletic services and disconnected from the lived experience of the local parish community?

Where is the good? If the Church is supposed to mirror Christ, then in this instance its face has become

clouded and dull. We must commit ourselves to being the polish. We must commit ourselves to giving it back its shine, its brilliance, its reflective character. Isn't this really why we are all here in this place?

## THE CORPUS CONNECTION

Enter *CORPUS*. It came quietly into our lives. A newsletter which appeared sporadically about the mere existence of married priests.

Sometimes the Spirit whispers, and sometimes she blows up a storm! In 1974, while the Spirit was quietly at work in our lives, she also concurrently created turmoil and wonderfully challenging change in the

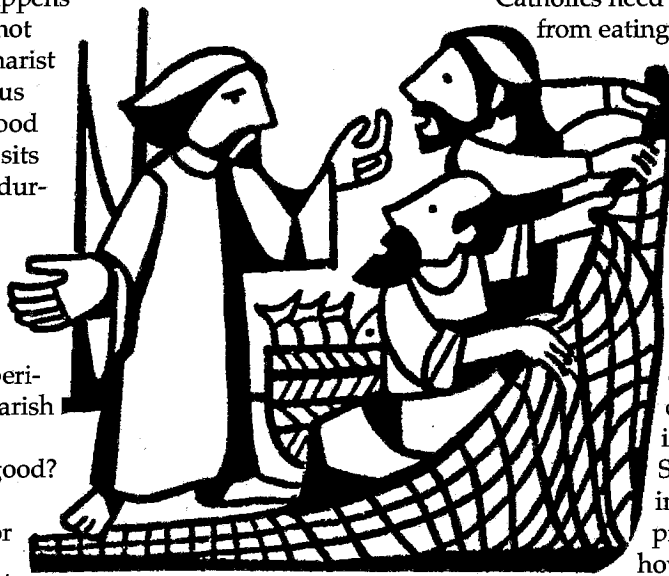
Church at large.

*CORPUS* was created out of energies which were present long before itself. In the late sixties, priests who long before had stirred and contributed to the Big Bang of Vatican II, now had to make sense of the creative and challenging chaos which followed. Changes in the liturgy, changes in church law once thought to be unchangeable (incidentally, this year is the thirtieth anniversary of the Roman Catholic bishops rule that US

Catholics need no longer abstain from eating meat on Friday),

changes in church governance, were not as challenging to your local pastor as changes in the very nature and scope of priesthood itself. How did the new directions inspired by the Spirit in Vatican II impact who a priest was and how he related to

the Catholic community?



*From now on you shall be catching men*

The old adage "a

journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" held true for this new effort to reform, renew and revitalize the priesthood. The first targeted, measurable step on this long journey was challenging the mandatory nature of celibacy. This would become the rallying flag.

The National Association for Pastoral Renewal was formed in 1966. Priests who wished to remain active in ministry but be allowed the freedom (operative word: choice) to marry sought to develop a formal process *within* the Church. It was actually the "back to the future event" which foreshadowed the current "loophole" in Church law called the Pastoral Provisions. This program, endorsed and encouraged by John Paul II, allows for Protestant ministers to be ordained in the Catholic Community and serve the People of

...the freedom  
to serve  
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of God  
in ordained  
capacity  
regardless  
of  
marital status  
as  
the affirmation  
of sexuality  
and  
intimacy,  
and  
the right of any  
marital couple  
to exercise  
with conscience—  
these two values,  
have been  
the engine  
driving  
the reform  
movement.

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*CORPUS*  
is women,  
some married  
to priests,  
some involved  
with priests,  
some called  
to be priests,  
all who refuse  
to stifle  
the stirrings of  
the Spirit,  
despite the  
efforts of an  
all-male clergy  
who legislate  
against  
and even try  
to silence this  
same Spirit.  
*CORPUS* is men  
and  
women who  
are first called  
to marriage,  
but then find  
themselves called  
to seek a life of  
committed service  
through  
ordination.

God along with their wives and children. This same program is not open to "cradle Catholics," those born, baptized, raised and ordained by the Church.

The *NAPR* grew rapidly. Surveys were conducted, commissions were established, Bishops were meeting, dialoguing and picturing themselves as collaborators in the task of reform. Enter Paul VI's *Sacerdotalis Celibatus*, reaffirming the requirement of priestly celibacy and the one document which has changed the church forever, *Humane Vitae*.

Taken as a pair, regardless of these two principles: the freedom to serve the People of God in ordained capacity, and marital status and the affirmation of sexuality and intimacy as the right of any marital couple to exercise with conscience; these two values have been the engine driving the reform movement ever since.

These two papal documents provided the flashpoint for which freedom and integrity in the priesthood now became questionable issues.

As time passed, it became clear that the pregnant possibilities of the 1950's and 1960's had birthed the Church of Vatican II, but unlike the Christ Child of Christmas cards (usually pictured to be instantaneously about eight months old), this new Church had a long, deliberate growing process before it. But the spirit of *NAPR*, always hopeful, always committed, always determined, refused to capitulate to despair. Their energies were eventually channeled into a number of creative organizations. We pay tribute here to our brothers and sisters in the Federation of Christian Ministries who emerged from the same history. *FCM* dedicated its energies to developing a free, inclusive, ecumenical ministry. It is also against this backdrop we find the reasons for *CORPUS*.

The early 1970's saw a dramatic and critical drop in the number of priests. Dire warnings were issued about pending priest shortages and the inability of the Church to provide Eucharist; an unthinkable event in 1974.

With this in mind, several married priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago who

had been gathering on a regular basis, attempted to creatively capture the moment and bring about the reform so needed. Given the impending crisis, their position was that there already existed a pool of educated, experienced, qualified and ordained individuals ready to be active in ministry. This return was conditioned, of course, as long as their wives and families were valued and welcomed as well. Names were gathered and placed on a list. They were the proverbial elephant in the Catholic Church's living room.

The first public challenge to the notion that a group of married priests were available, willing and qualified for Church service came immediately. A local Bishop commenting on the organization claimed that priests who married had "other" interests. They were *not* interested in the Church.

The gauntlet had been laid down. The challenge was clear. Priests who knew priests who knew priests who knew priests now declared their intention to serve the People of God as married men. The Emperor had no clothes and it was time to declare it. *CORPUS* was born.

The early 1980's were filled with the remarkable energies and charisma of the spokespersons, coordinators, pioneers (read: prophets), of our time: Bonnie, McGrath, Nemmers, Dosh, Padovano.

The late 1980's and provided the cataclysmic "big bang" when all the energies, heartaches, jubilation, sacrifices, surveys, celebrations, presentations and heroic deeds came together in Washington, DC, at the first National Conference. The aliens had found a homeland and a family. The organization *CORPUS*, the former *CORPS* of Reserved Priests United for Service, had become the community, *CORPUS*, the Body of Christ. It was 1988.

## EACH END IS A BEGINNING

It was the Pentecost event for us all. The scales of shame and secrecy, the burden of proving our worth and place in God's design, the role of married priesthood for the overall reform of the Church was clear. Our



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lives had become sacrament and living testimony to the honor and integrity of both marriage and ministry.

And so the *CORPUS* community continues to expand and evolve. And after twenty three years, we have come of age.

*CORPUS* is now priests, married and celibate, canonical and non-canonical, possibly your local pastor—no matter what the label—forever priests.

*CORPUS* is women, some married to priests, some involved with priests, some called to be priests, all who refuse to stifle the stirrings of the Spirit, despite the efforts of an all-male clergy who legislate against and even try to silence this same Spirit.

*CORPUS* is men and women who are first called to marriage, but then find themselves called to seek a life of committed service through ordination.

*CORPUS* is the alienated, marginalized, and disenfranchised who can find nowhere to rest in a Church which defines membership more by behavior than belief, a Church which values complicity rather than conscience, a Church which operates as institution rather than live as a community, a Church of precepts rather than people.

*CORPUS* is religious sisters who continue to witness to unselfish service. These women of strength and integrity know well the sacrifice of *CORPUS* priests who serve. They always have, and to this day continue to serve unconditionally, and unselfishly without proper recognition or power.

*CORPUS* is the laity who actively participate in the priesthood of all believers: those who take their baptismal call to service seriously, those who continually call *CORPUS* priests into service.

*CORPUS* is Church community, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It is a diverse family of believers who are committed to the Spirit of Vatican II and won't let it go.

Over and over again, these stories of courage, pain, passion, conviction and celebration are told. Over and over

again, the sentiment is the same. *CORPUS* provides these Christians with the redemption, hope and healing needed to continue to say: This is our Church, not Rome's, not the Pope's, not our local bishop's. This is our Church and we refuse to let the dream die.

*CORPUS* has become the homeland for the homeless, the voice of conscience for a silenced people, the space for the alien nation to be free, the family for those outcast by the institution simply because they wished to give life to a Church where they are valued and affirmed.

## HAUNTING RESIDUE

Recently, Ralph had spent a restless night trying to simulate sleep. In the midst of his effort, he turned on the TV to enjoy what he terms "nocturnal theology." Somehow between midnight and 6:00 a.m., the human situation shown on TV is more intense, more dramatic, and more realistic in their search and struggle for God.

The next morning while driving to work, after a long period of silence, he asked me, "Linda, what is your passion?" I found the intensity of the question odd at 7:15 a.m., so I just stared at him. He explained that he had seen an infomercial for a get-rich quick school. He was intrigued by their focus on enabling and empowering the viewer by examining the principles of drive, determination and achievement. So he asked me again, "Linda, what is your passion?" I instinctively answered, "justice."

So in that spirit, please allow me the privilege of addressing two of the most haunting images which remain a residue of our history.

*The first postures CORPUS as a group of ex-priests, men of broken promises, who selfishly seek their old clerical jobs back.*

Let us first examine the promise alleged to be broken and then journey into the lives of the men who have sup-

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So what have married priests broken? Was it their call to priesthood, service, ministry, or compassion? If so, why are they here today? Why do they remain steadfast in the commitment to ordained service? Why do they continue to listen to the needs of the Catholic community and serve when called?

posedly betrayed that trust.

Tu es sacerdos in eternum. Priesthood is forever. Canon 292: Once a priest, always a priest. Priesthood, then, by its very nature is unbreakable. So what then is this promise which had been breached?

Celibacy—a discipline of the Church, an institutional policy, an ecclesiastical law. Other institutional laws bearing the same weight: abstaining from meat on Friday, the seven holy days of obligation (there's now only five or six depending on who you ask), even St. Christopher; have all suffered the fate of changing ecclesiastical policy. Yet, Celibacy, described by Pope Paul VI as a "brilliant jewel of the priesthood," reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II as the "ideal," is a non-negotiable issue. The question according to Church officials is settled. For cradle Catholics, those born, baptized, churched, and ordained as Catholics, celibacy is a requirement, a necessary condition for public ordained ministry. If God calls you to priesthood, it is agreed, God will also give you the grace to live a celibate life. It is a package deal—two for one. But this was not always the case.

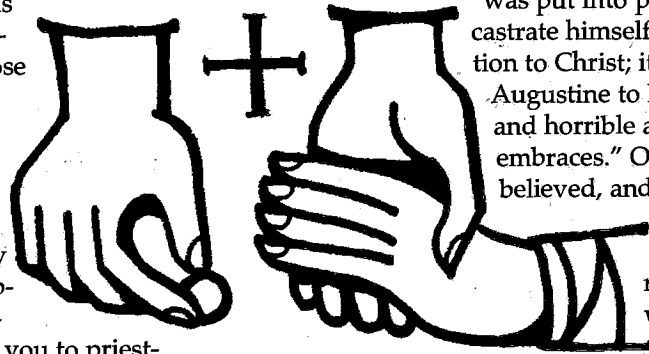
Celibacy was not a requirement for ministry in the early Church. Jewish law required men to be married. Jesus washed the feet of married men at the Last Supper and instructed them to serve and to find sacrifice in the service, not as an end in itself. Men and women, married and single, Jews and Gentiles all followed that mandate and served the early Church in ordained capacity. Leaders were chosen from the community based on charism and character, not gender or marital state.

The Age of Gnosticism and the collapse of the Roman Empire redefined the conditions for priesthood. It was the age of

absolute duality: good vs. evil, light vs. dark, soul over body. Talk about Back to the Future—it reminds me of a recent occasion when I was sitting in traffic behind a bumper sticker which read: God does not grade on a curve!

Embracing celibacy as a mandate of the heart became second place to mandating celibacy as a method of control. The control of sexuality, rather than the embrace of celibacy became the operative principle, capturing, controlling and eventually corrupting the full expression of love and ministry.

All sexual expression began to be seen as weakness. Even within marriage, sex began to be defined as shameful and a "necessary evil." Culturally, abstinence from sex was seen as virtuous. A rigid, cruel sexual ethic was put into place. It led Origin to castrate himself as an act of devotion to Christ; it prompted Augustine to label "soared, filthy and horrible a woman's embraces." Original sin, he later believed, and all evil was stored in the genitals. Intercourse the night before the weekly celebration of Eucharist is



forbidden, lest the sacrifice of the Mass be tainted. When weekly Eucharist was replaced by the practice of daily Mass, marital relations became legislatively impossible. Some priests cast their wives out, abandoning them to society's exclusion and their gradual, impoverished demise. Children were sold into slavery.

Celibacy became a mandatory condition for ordination in 1139 when Pope Innocent II declared marriage an impediment to priesthood. Despite the papal proclamation, priests continued to marry. Marriage was not formally ritualized or codified as a sacrament until the Council of Trent in 1545. Thus, after 1139 it was impossible for a priest to marry and after 1545, it was impossible if married to become a priest. Interestingly enough, nearly fourteen years later in 1559, the charism of celibacy as an accepted God-given condition for priesthood was still

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being called into question. Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg is to have reported: "I know that all my priests are living in concubinage. But what should I do to stop it? If I forbid concubinage, they either want to have wives or become Lutheran!"

Celibacy then became a means to control the priest and the people. Virtue had been replaced by loyalty; love had surrendered itself to law.

This is the legacy we of the twenty-first century have inherited. Celibacy is no longer valued as a God-given gift, freeing a person to live a life of intimacy with God and others; celibacy has been mandated as a requirement, a necessary condition for ordination and public ministry.

What a disgrace! What a scandal! What a disservice! Those priests blessed with the call of living fully a celibate life cannot be appreciated because it is expected. Those priests blessed with the call for intimacy within marriage cannot be appreciated because they are outcast. Those priests struggling to be faithful to a call for which the grace was not given them are tired, uncared for and in some sense morally exhausted. What a disgrace, scandal and disservice to our genuinely celibate clergy! It is the classic struggle of law over love.

So what have married priests broken? Was it their call to priesthood, service, ministry, or compassion? If so, why are they here today? Why do they remain steadfast in the commitment to ordained service? Why do they continue to listen to the needs of the Catholic community and serve when called?

What have married priests broken? In my view, simply their silence.

Married priests have given voice to their conscience and declared their

truth—a choice for marriage is not an impediment for ministry. Their truth, the value of a woman and living a life of intimacy and relationship—is worth the price the Church imposes. Their truth—a free priesthood of married and celibate, male and female, unconditional lovers called by God and ordained by the community—is good and right and holy. We will not be silenced. If so, even the rocks and stones will speak.

We stand to declare a priesthood free of artificial barriers, one which provides priests for its people, one which values the ancient celebration of Eucharist over the continued policy of imposed celibacy, one in which priests are valued and revered for integrity and conscience and not their complicity with institutional proclamations, one in which the priest is not in control but acts to convene the

People of God, enabling their gifts and talents to be woven into the fabric we call Church. This priesthood values people over policy,

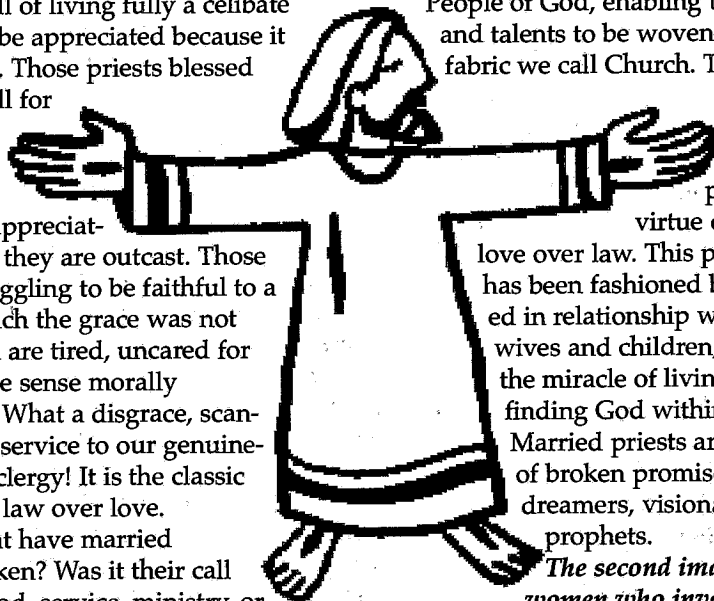
virtue over vice, love over law. This priesthood has been fashioned by fire, rooted in relationship with their wives and children, molded by the miracle of living life and finding God within.

Married priests are not men of broken promises, they are dreamers, visionaries, and prophets.

*The second image views women who involve themselves with CORPUS as selling their souls for a male-only issue.*

*It has been said the women involved in the issue of reinstating married priests to active canonical service have sold out for patriarchy.*

The charge of oppressor collaborating with oppressee is an ancient, reoccurring one. I myself wondered about the intensity of my commitment to this orga-



I will not let the Church get away with discarding the rich resource of priests, called by God, ordained by the community, experienced and enriched by the lives of the people they served.

I will not let the Church discard them because they have love, they have loved a woman.

I will also not allow the Church which fashioned and nurtured who I am today;

WE will not allow this Church of ours to define the worth of our three

daughters simply because of their biology.

We will not stand silent.

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We stand ready,  
to serve.  
The call  
to priesthood  
is from God.  
Who can turn  
their back on  
God's call?  
When parishes  
are closed,  
married priests  
will serve.  
When divorced,  
disenfranchised,  
or unchurched  
Catholics wish  
a priest to witness  
their wedding,  
married priests  
will serve.  
When the elderly,  
hospitalized,  
or imprisoned  
are unattended  
because of the  
shortage  
of priests,  
married priests  
will serve.

nization called *CORPUS*. I began wondering about myself in 1988. I keenly remember the four-hour ride to the first national gathering of *CORPUS* in Washington, DC that same year. Part of the program was given over to dialogue sessions, one of which was entitled "Married Priests and their Wives." At the time, I remember being surprised by the suggestion. Women were not members of *CORPUS*, and issues of feminine equality had not yet become part of the consciousness of *CORPUS*. I remember volunteering to be a facilitator in this workshop but to this day, I can't remember what caused me to do that.

During this four hour ride I prayed to God to deliver me or inspire me—one or the other! I was haunted by the image that the women who had married priests were either baggage or blessing and so I presented that question for consideration during the workshop. The results were catastrophic.

We began our weekend as *CORPUS*—the *CORPUS* of Resigned Priests United for Service. We left that weekend as a community of believers, rooted in Catholic tradition, committed to an expanded and renewed priesthood for all who feel called by God. We had become *CORPUS*—the Body of Christ.

I, too, had experienced a metamorphosis. I accompanied my husband to the first *CORPUS* conference because I knew issues which were vitally important to *him* would be addressed. It was clear that no matter how hard he tried to push his priesthood out of his psyche, he could not scratch it from his soul. It was part of him, part of who he was, who God had called him to be. *CORPUS* now

provided the sacred space for him to be celebrated. But what I didn't expect was that this space was no longer his alone. *CORPUS* had also evolved to be sacred space for me.

What became crystal clear that weekend was that all this hoopla was not about priests being married. What became clearly apparent that weekend was that married priests are only secondary victims of discrimination. The real problem, the real pariah, the real target is women.

For his public witness to the worth of a woman and the value of an intimate, loving relationship, Ralph is no longer considered worthy to serve the People of God. If we had chosen to have an affair (as one chancellery official recommended), or if we had married secretly as many priests have done, or if we had parented children out of wedlock, and *even* if our relationship had dissolved, none of these would bar him from public ministry as a Catholic Priest. The one element which has



Male and female he created  
them.

flash-frozen his priesthood in the hierarchy's eyes is his public declaration of his love for a women and the worth of their lives lived in love.

Think about it. The Roman Catholic Church has little problem with a married priesthood. In 1982, Cardinal Law sponsored along with the Pope's blessing, the Pastoral Provisions. This provides a legislative embrace for Protestant ministers, along with their wives and families into the Roman Catholic System. They are ordained, assigned and fully functional in local parishes, schools, hospitals and prisons as Roman Catholic Priests. So a married priesthood, with the Pope's blessing, exists side by side with the 22,000 additional married priests who had received the Pope's shunning. The problem resides in the women involved in

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such a change. The problem is *the woman*.

If this were not so, why are Protestant ministers who are ordained Catholic priests required to sign a contract never to marry again in case their wives die? What does that say about the value of the woman? What does that say about their marriage?

If this were not so, why were two priests ordained in Brazil prior to 1990 with the knowledge that they were married, forced to sign an affidavit to live with their wives as "brother and sister" only after the knowledge of their ordination went public?

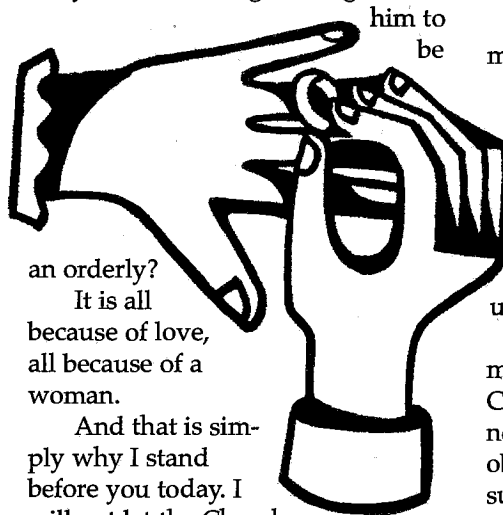
If this were not so, why are their forms in each chancellery office for priests, who resign, marry and are subsequently widowed, to apply for reincardination into active canonical service with the full embrace of the Church?

If this were not so, how could we justify the most recent events in St. Petersburg, Florida. Bishop Robert Lynch, after receiving a marriage license dated 1981, suspended the beloved pastor of a 10,000 member parish so that he could "prayerfully decide whether he should end his marriage or give up the priesthood!" Can you hear what the Bishop is asking? Is it *not the woman*, according to Bishop Lynch, who is the impediment to successful priestly ministry?

If this were not so, why did Ralph, in order to obtain a rescript allowing for a Catholic marriage and the privileges of raising a Catholic family, pledge to move fifty miles from his last place of service? What scandal would occur if he prayed with the same people he had served?

If this were not so, why is he forbidden to serve in any formal directive function in the parish? What

scandal would occur if he led a prayer service, delivered Eucharist to the sick, or proclaimed the word of God? What good purpose does it serve to chain him to the pew? If he spent eight to ten years educating and achieving competency as a neuro-surgeon and eventually fell in love, what purpose would it serve to deny him his calling and regulate



an orderly?

It is all because of love, all because of a woman.

And that is simply why I stand before you today. I will not let the Church

*God is Love; let us love one another as he has loved us.*

get away with discarding the rich resource of priests, called by God, ordained by the community, experienced and enriched by the lives of the people they served; I will not let the Church discard them because they have love, they have loved a woman.

I will also not allow the Church which fashioned and nurtured who I am today, *WE* will not allow this Church of ours to define the worth of our three daughters to be determined simply because of their biology.

We will not stand silent.

As Anthony Padovano said so eloquently before the gathering of Women's Ordination Conference, "If a woman and marriage dishonor the priesthood, then such a priesthood dishonors the Church and the message of Christ."

## SO WHAT, FROM HERE?

We are the Church. What if we meant what we said!

What does this all mean for us and what we will do with it?

What is the lasting contribution of married priests who have been the backbone of the movement for a reformed and renewed priesthood for the third millennium?

We stand as a voice in the communal chorus that the Vatican Council actually occurred and that no effort to undo, undermine or obliterate the work of the Spirit will succeed.

We stand as a statement and sacrament. Our lives witness to a Vatican II Church, one that is mirrored in our marriages as intimate and co-equal relationships, in our families as inclusive and consensual communities, in our commitment to others through service not sacrifice, and in our lives as witnesses to the power of love.

We stand as part of the collective conscience that priesthood be based upon call, charism and commitment, rather than gender, marital status and sacrifice.

We stand in affirmation of Eucharist as central to the life of the Catholic community, not celibacy.

We stand accepting and embracing those discarded by the institution because of love-married priests, the separated and divorced, the gay community, and theologians of con-

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science.

We stand as faithful Catholics in prophetic dissent. In the tradition of Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi and Joan of Arc, we proudly declare that current church policy regarding ordained priestly ministry is wrong. We are a legitimate voice reflecting a consensus. We can be suspended, but we will not be silenced. We can be removed by we will always return. We can be ostracized but we will not be obliterated. We have dreamt the dream, we have seen the mountaintop, and we will not go away.

We stand ready to serve. The call to priesthood is from God. Who can turn their back on God's call? When parishes are closed, married priests will serve. When divorced, disenfranchised, or unchurched Catholics wish a priest to witness their wedding, married priests will serve. When the elderly, hospitalized, or imprisoned are unattended because of the shortage of priests, married priests will serve. When the Church seeks more ways to exclude than to include, married priests will serve.

## WHAT THEN CAN YOU DO?

*\* Never permit the term "ex-priest" or "laicization" to be used in your presence again. This is indeed the language of insult and oppression. There is no such thing as an ex-priest. Tu es sacerdos in eternum. There is no such thing as "reducing someone to the lay state." Vatican II leveled us all and made us equals in the sight of God. Both terms insult and demean all the people involved.*

*\* Find out who in your parish is a married priest family. There are 22,000+ married priest families in the United States and 18,000+ parishes. Look around. Find out who they are. Introduce yourself to them. They have given their lives once to the service of God's People, continue to involve them in your parish life.*

*\* Speak out against injustice. Many married priests, their wives, their children, their parents and their friends have been victims of discrimination. At the mere knowledge of connection to a resigned priest, some have been denied employment, parish involvement and even the reception of Eucharist. If you become aware of such injustice, let your pastor or parish council know that this is wrong. Speak out.*

*Let your light shine.*

*\* If your parish is closing or spiritual services are drastically reduced due to the shortage of celibate priests, keep telling you bishop that the parish must be kept open and the services supplied. Sacraments take precedence over celibacy.*

*\* Pray for reform. This is not a pious platitude. It is our way of life. For just as in our opening reading, if it is of God, nothing will stop it. So pray, pray that this effort continues to be of God.*

In the classic play "Les Meserables," Jon Valjean, a criminal redeemed by the kindness of a priest, faces the end of his life. He finds himself in the company of Cozette, the grown child of Fontaine, a common woman rejected by her lover and consequently society. She is forced to sell herself in lust to provide for her child in love. Valjean reflects on the blessings of his life and is moved by the love he has received undeservedly and unconditionally. As his life slips away, he is greeted by the deceased Fontaine and they embrace with these words.

TAKE MY HAND AND LEAD ME TO SALVATION

TAKE MY LOVE, FOR LOVE IS EVERLASTING.

AND REMEMBER THE TRUTH THAT ONCE WAS SPOKEN  
TO LOVE ANOTHER PERSON IS TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD.

Their words mirror our experience in CORPUS and the reform movement. Remember them as we leave you in love and look into the many faces of a married priesthood.

