



Roman Catholics: The Married Priest

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ROMAN CATHOLICS

With his son serving as acolyte, a Detroit man named Ernest Adam Beck was ordained a fortnight ago in Germany as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. A former Lutheran minister, Father Beck, 42, is married and has two children. He is the first American among a handful of Latin Rite Catholic priests who have received dispensations from the Pope to take holy orders without a vow of celibacy.

Canon law has insisted on priestly celibacy since the Middle Ages, although Eastern-Rite Catholic priests may marry before their ordination. But within the past 13 years, Popes have from time to time approved the ordination of a few convert Protestant ministers for whom leaving their families would be a heartless cruelty.

Such dispensations are not easy to get—as Father Beck's experience shows. Born and raised a Lutheran, he studied at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, served a parish in Teaneck, N.J., for seven years. In 1954, Beck and his wife became Catholics. Convinced that he had a vocation to the priesthood, Beck went to Germany and in 1956 received permission to enter the seminary at Mainz. But before he could be ordained, Pope Pius XII told Beck in a 1957 interview, he would have to find a bishop who would promise to support him. Bishop Mark Carroll of Wichita, Kans., stepped in with an offer shortly before Pius died, but Pope John subsequently decided that there would be too much danger of scandal if Beck served in the U.S., suggested that he find a bishop somewhere else.

Beck gave up his studies for three years, worked in advertising, teaching and sales to support his family while trying to find another prelate who would accept him. At one point, Boston's Richard Cardinal Cushing put in a bid—but, like Carroll, was turned down by the Vatican. Last year Bishop Hermann Volk of Mainz agreed to provide Beck, who speaks German, with an assignment, and Rome finally agreed.

Several other Protestant converts are currently studying for ordination in German seminaries, but no one foresees that there will be any drastic revision of the church's general prohibition against priests with wives. Most American bishops oppose the idea of married priests, and the Vatican has made it clear that none are likely to serve in the U.S. soon. But last week Cardinal Cushing indicated that "we should accept at least topflight men," predicted that a change in the church's attitude "will come in the future."

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