

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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A PRIEST FOREVER?

I was ordained a Catholic priest on May 7, 1966. I was laicized at the end of 1973. I always have to clarify that laicization is not a surgical procedure, but it does relieve me of priestly responsibilities and privileges.

Why I was ordained and why I left the priesthood are topics for other columns. Right now I want to focus on whether I am still a priest or not. The answer has ramifications far beyond my personal story.

Unfortunately, Canon Law is what passes for theology for the past 30 years, so Canon Law currently rules. Canon 290 states that “sacred ordination once validly received never becomes invalid.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church adds this clarification in paragraph 1582: “The sacrament of Holy Orders confers an *indelible spiritual character* and cannot be repeated or conferred temporarily.” (Italics in the Catechism)

So, by that reading, I am still a priest but cannot function as a priest. I remain validly ordained with an *indelible spiritual character* even though I consciously and continually choose not to be a priest. Being laicized does not remove the *character*. To complicate matters more, laicization is a procedure that, for all practical purposes, was available only during the 1970s.

That *indelible spiritual character* keeps a person a priest even when he leaves the priesthood, even when he is officially laicized, even when he wants out and doesn't want back in. The Church is consistent however. Even when a Bishop like Edward K. Braxton unjustly fires a priest like Fr. Bill Rowe for adding clarifying and inspiring words to the Eucharist, not even Edward K. Braxton or the Vatican can take away Fr. Bill's priesthood as he involuntarily loses all rights to function as a priest.

Once a priest, always a priest.

Suppose you are an oncologist but, at age 45, you can't deal with cancer anymore and you become an accountant. Are you still a doctor? Do you have an *indelible medical character*? Of course, your personal history includes your years as a cancer doctor but, once you lose your credentials, you are no longer a doctor. You are now an accountant.

Why is priesthood any different? Canon Law doesn't answer that question but it does add that the obligation of celibacy still persists unless the Pope dispenses the priest from

celibacy. (Canon 291) Wow! A priest can lose all his rights but retains the obligation of celibacy. What kind of thinking leads to this bizarre conclusion?

It all goes back to that teaching about the *indelible spiritual character*. A similar character accompanies baptism and confirmation. To me, there is a stronger case for the spiritual character (whatever that really is, besides a metaphor) for baptism/confirmation as initiation into the Catholic community. But priesthood is a functional service to the community and it doesn't require a permanent "mark" to offer that service. A priest is as a priest does. Why does it have to be an irremovable state of being?

There are far-reaching consequences to this teaching. Here are a few:

- The local Bishop feels an obligation to protect and defend the reputation of the church in his diocese. If a priest violates this reputation, even if it is criminal activity such as pedophilia, the bishop feels his first responsibility is to protect the church from scandal. This line of thinking led to the cover-up policies that continue to plague us. Since the priest has an *indelible spiritual character* that ties him to the bishop, the bishop feels less inclined to turn the case over to civil authorities immediately. "We take care of our own" is the motto.
- The *indelible spiritual character* implies obligations not only to the bishop (or religious superior) but to God. Making this priestly designation permanent implies that God considers this ordination to be permanent also. It is hard to believe that God is so limited. If God accepts a priest who leaves the priesthood (for whatever reason), then the Church's insistence on "permanency" is rooted in power, control, fear, and pride.
- The *indelible character* teaching eliminates a potential temporary priesthood; someone (male or female, married or celibate) becomes a priest for a number of years and then changes professions or retires.
- On the human level, this doctrine punishes priests who want to leave and does not punish those who deserve punishment.

Once a priest, always a priest is bad policy, rigid thinking with a shaky foundation, and complicates the real issue: priesthood open to all people, including married men and women.