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Contact: Frank Cordaro
Des Moines Catholic Worker
P O Box 4551, Des Moines IA 50306
Ph (515) 243-0765

Rev. Frank Cordaro to leave priesthood; Ends personal struggle with celibacy

Father Frank Cordaro, a long time Catholic peace activist and church reformer, has begun a process which will likely end with his exit from the Roman Catholic priesthood. Bishop Charron of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Des Moines has accepted Fr. Frank Cordaro's request for a leave of absence effective August 1, 2003.

In a statement to his friends and family, Fr. Cordaro wrote, "There were many issues that contributed to this decision, the most influential and pressing being my promise of celibacy. After 18 years of priestly life, I've come to the painful realization that I just can't do it."

Cordaro was ordained by the late Bishop Thomas Dingman in 1984. He spent 18 years as a parish priest in the Diocese of Des Moines.

Cordaro intends to continue living and working at the Des Moines Catholic Worker, which he helped found in 1977. The Worker provides food and shelter to Iowans in need and is also a center for peace and social justice activism.

Cordaro, who has repeatedly acted non-violently against nuclear weapons and for peace, has served more than four years in prison over the last 25 years of protest. On August 13, he and 12 other Iowans will be sentenced for trespassing at the Iowa Guard Headquarters last March.

Cordaro's statement follows.

August 1, 2003

Dear friends,

It is with great sadness that I write to let you know that I am leaving active priestly ministry. There were many issues that contributed to this decision, the most influential and pressing being my promise of celibacy. After 18 years of priestly life, I've come to the painful realization that I just can't do it.

In September, 2001, I had a heart attack. It was a serious heart attack. I almost died. It impressed on me the shortness of life and my need to live it honestly and truthfully, especially in my personal relationships. Soon after, I began to seriously question my continued promise to be celibate.

Now, after months of soul searching, prayer, discernment and discussions with Bishop Charron, brother priests, family and friends, I've come to a place in my life that I need to be free of my promise of celibacy. My need for intimacy, companionship, a soul mate and partner is too strong for me to remain celibate. It is best for my health, heart and my soul for me to be free from this promise.

It is important to state that the priestly life and work is not my problem. I love being a priest, administering the Sacraments, celebrating Mass and preaching the Scriptures. In fact, it has been my success as a sacramental priest that has kept me in active priestly ministry.

The recent Church scandals have forced Catholics to demand honesty and full disclosure from its leaders. This demand for honesty and full disclosure is much needed in our Church today. In part, I make this decision because I can not ask our bishops to be honest and truthful if I can't be honest and truthful myself.

This decision saddens me for the grief it will bring, not only to me, but to my family, brother priests, friends, former parishioners and the many, many others I have related to as a priest these last 18 years.

Whenever a priest leaves active ministry because of celibacy, it is truly a local, communally shared sadness. A great web of human relationships is affected. It is also an all too familiar, universally shared grief experience by Catholics everywhere. Celibacy is the biggest reason why men leave the priesthood today. This exodus strikes all priests - order priests, diocesan priest, traditionalists, progressives, liberals and conservatives. For those who share with me this pain and grief, I ask for your prayers and understanding.

Sad as I am, I am also grateful beyond words for the countless opportunities I've had over the last 18 years to administer the sacraments, preach the scriptures and pray with those in need. My life was greatly enriched and my faith deeply strengthened by the good and faithful people I served as a priest.

I write filled with hope. Though not the best time for me to be a Catholic priest, it is a great time to be a Roman Catholic. One billion strong, the majority of Roman Catholics in the world today live in poverty. For all the challenges that come with this poverty, it brings its own blessings (Matt 5: 1-12). Catholics can be found on every continent in the world. We are truly a universal Church.

Poor and universal, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination and one of the oldest and richest Faith traditions in the world. Its sacramental life administered through its parish, diocesan based structure is unequaled and unmatched by any other Christian denomination. Its teachings, especially its social justice, war and peace teachings are great treasures, wisdom a disparate world needs to hear. I am especially grateful to be part of the Catholic Worker movement and to call myself a follower of the Berrigan brothers, Dan and Phil.

The Catholic Church is the Faith community of my birth and family. My first and most significant encounter with the ways of Jesus came through a Roman Catholic community. The Catholic Church has given me so much. I will never, ever be able to repay the Church in kind.

The life forces on this planet and all of human life are in great peril. Our violent and war-making ways threaten all life. The human race desperately needs nonviolent options to its violent pathologies. The greatest gift we Christians can give to our violent world is our rediscovery of our founder's nonviolent Spirit. The Roman Catholic Church bears both a greater responsibility and offers the best possibilities for making this rediscovery of the nonviolence of Jesus a reality.

As is the custom, I asked Bishop Charron for a leave of absence from priestly life. With a shared sadness and grief, Bishop accepted my request for a leave of absence, effective August 1, 2003. Bishop Charron wisely advised me that whenever a priest leaves for this reason the decision must be made twice, once in the priesthood and once out of the priesthood to confirm the first decision. The leave of absence is the time within which I will make the decision final.

I intend to remain at the Des Moines Catholic Worker and devote more of my time to resistance and peacemaking efforts. Given our post 9/11 world, the two wars that followed and the current USA occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the need for full time, active nonviolent resisters and peacemakers has never been greater.

I ask for your continued prayers and support.

Your brother in Christ,

Frank Cordaro
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