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BREAKAWAY CATHOLICS

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Brian Delvaux defies Catholic convention. He's a single parent who shares custody of his two children with his ex-wife. He wears jeans, drives a Toyota, schleps his kids to McDonald's, runs a household, has a girlfriend. Nothing unusual. It is his job title that causes the startled looks, the puzzled - and disbelieving - expressions. Father Delvaux is a full-fledged, full-time, practicing Catholic priest.

He is a leader in a quiet revolution, a soft-spoken but passionate renegade who had the audacity to part with the formidable Roman Catholic Church and form his own. Last year he opened the Good Shepherd American Catholic Church in Lakewood. It is a part of the steadily growing independent Catholic community, a group of autonomous congregations which have marked differences with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church but are rooted in the same beliefs and worship.

While the Roman Catholic Church attempts to deal with the hundreds of priests currently under investigation for child molestation, The Most Rev. E. Paul Raible, a bishop of the American Catholic Church, says people of all faiths are re-evaluating the position of the clergy.

"What is new is the enormous change of thinking of the laity," he says. "People are no longer afraid to step forward and point a finger at the clergy. Priests are no longer put on pedestals. They are men born of women, with feet of clay like everyone else."

It was against a backdrop of convulsive social change that the Church of the Good Shepherd was born. "The very fact that it exists is revolutionary," Delvaux declares. "It isn't wacky. Independent Catholic churches tend to be very fringe. This one is controversial, but it is mainstream. It is contemporary, and it is middle-of-the-road.

"It is a dream."

Dream on, some of his Catholic brethren say, quickly noting that there is a great big difference between his American Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church. And that's OK with him. "No one's got a monopoly on the word Catholic," the unlikely radical says.

The story of Delvaux's journey from one side of the altar to the other and back again begins with his strong Roman Catholic roots. Above all, it is a love story, the story of a man who gave up his profession to marry the woman he loved.

Delvaux, a quietly charismatic man described as overwhelmingly forthright and loving by those who know him best, was born in 1948 in Laguna Beach. He was reared in Hollywood, the only son of devout, middle-class Catholics.

He attended Catholic schools for 20 years, and was a top student until he blossomed socially in high school and settled for the gentleman's B. Though he grew to be 6-foot-1, he was small growing up and not much good at sports. He was funny kid with a lot of friends. As an altar boy in elementary school, he says he was highly influenced by a young, dynamic priest in his parish. But he didn't seriously consider the priesthood until he was a senior.

"In high school, I fit into the crowd," he recalls. "I dated some. I'd either fall deeply in love with a girl and she didn't with me, or vice versa. Had something clicked I probably wouldn't have gone to seminary."

At the time Delvaux entered St. John's seminary in Camarillo in 1966, there were 280 students in his class. Worldwide the Roman Catholic Church was experiencing

tumultuous change as it grappled with a swiftly changing world. Priests and nuns were leaving the church for secular life in droves. By the time he graduated in 1970, there were 86 students left in Delvaux's class. Of those, only 19 were ordained.

His first appointment following ordination in 1974 was as associate pastor of St. John Fisher Roman Catholic Church in Palos Verdes. He was a well-educated, outgoing young priest who was comfortable with his role and committed to his calling. After the first year, however, his commitment was seriously tested. He began to doubt for the first time his ability to stay celibate. He'd met a young woman. He was falling in love, a feeling he kept from himself and from her for a very long time.

It took four years for the couple to begin acknowledging their affection for one another. Delvaux transferred to another parish to decide alone if he could continue in the priesthood.

A year later he left to be with the woman he loved, and was married in 1980.

"I didn't know what difficulty meant," he recalls of his adjustment to secular life. "I didn't realize how competent a layperson has to be to work and have a family and have things run smoothly. It was a shock."

His first job in the real world was as an order desk clerk for a pipe supply business. But hard as he tried to fit in, he had little in common with many of his more worldly co-workers. "He was the goofiest guy I ever met," recalls Christine Lowe, who worked with Delvaux and is now a member of Good Shepherd.

"It was a very difficult adjustment for him. When the guy found out he was a priest, they would tell him the dirtiest jokes. They would razz him.

"He was good natured about it. He'd go with the flow. He was so earnest. Everything was new to him and he gave it everything he had."

Adds Denyse Dallape, a coworker at Delvaux's next job as a manager of a private telephone company, "He was an efficient manager, but never seemed quite comfortable. He's a very caring, empathetic, loving man. Now he's really beginning to shine."

During the years he was at the phone company, his marriage died. That's the way he puts it. "Divorce is a tragic death of love. It's a horrible, rotten thing.

"At first, we were very happy. But both of us found it very, very difficult to cooperate. We sought counseling. We lacked the right combination of tools to create a family."

Delvaux says his experience dramatically changed his thinking about divorce. "I gained tremendous respect for others who have experienced the nightmare of divorce. My prejudice toward them - which lingered from my former Catholic perspective - vanished.

"Divorce is horrible. But divorced people are wounded but still wonderful and precious to God. They have not committed the unforgivable sin."

Since the divorce, Delvaux and his ex-wife have shared custody of their two children, Phillip, 11, and Theresa, 8.

It was in the late 1980s that he first heard about St. Matthew, a tiny American Catholic church in Orange where married people were allowed to serve as priests. He quickly developed a close relationship with the pastor and with Bishop Raible, who heads the local American Catholic Church Diocese.

Until his assignment by Raible to pioneer a church in Lakewood in 1993, he served as priest at St. Matthew, a parish largely composed of disenfranchised Roman Catholics, who, because of divorce and remarriage or the practice of artificial birth control, aren't allowed to receive the sacraments.

Raible maintains a very small flock which includes the Church of the Good Shepherd and an alcohol recovery program in Running Springs. His spiritual roots are

related to Carlos Duarte Costa, a Brazilian bishop who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in 1945 to establish an independent denomination.

He has named Delvaux to succeed him. "Father Delvaux is an extremely bright, warm, well-educated, open man. He loves the people, and they love him."

Raible says independent Catholic churches are just beginning to organize. In January, he plans to meet with a bishop in Denver to discuss forming some kind of confederation of independent Catholic clergy.

"It's very exciting. I predict there will be a council of independent bishops soon, and that we will be taken seriously by the mainstream. The time has come."

Though there are variations within their ranks, most independent Catholic priests reject the Roman Catholic version of papal infallibility, allow priests and bishops to marry and raise families, encourage all baptized Christians to take communion, don't believe contraception is a sin and accept remarriage after divorce.

Delvaux estimates there are about 20 small independent Catholic churches in Southern California. In some, women are ordained and serve as priests.

In the Long Beach area, the Most Rev. Joseph Sartoris is the regional bishop of the Roman Catholic Church. He is headquartered at St. Pancratius in Lakewood, just blocks from Good Shepherd.

Earlier this year, he met with Delvaux. He says he has no animosity toward his new neighbor. "We disagree, but the dialogue is always good," Sartoris says.

He is quick to point out that he wants to be sure Delvaux's church isn't confused with the Roman Catholic Church. Good Shepherd isn't a threat to Roman Catholicism, he notes.

"I hope someday Father Delvaux will come back to the Roman Catholic Church," he adds. "He's a fine person."

Father Delvaux returns the compliment, but says he's never left the Roman Catholic Church. He is a Roman Catholic who has chosen to worship independently as dictated by his conscience. "We are careful to respect the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas which states that we must follow our own certain conscience," he says. "Even if in so doing we might be considered mistaken by Church authority.

"God could care less whether a Roman Catholic gets married here or in the Roman Catholic Church. Our target is the great number of disenfranchised Catholics, the divorced Catholics the church does nothing for. We do not want to be a wedding mill. We are an alternative.

"We have all of the treasures of the Roman Catholic Church without the obstacles," he adds. "And, no, we don't stop five times during the Mass and say, 'I'm not a Roman Catholic. I'm not a Roman Catholic.'"

Delvaux makes no apologies for his liberal interpretation of Catholicism. Jesus Christ was accepting and nonjudgmental, he says, and the church should be too. "Jesus Christ did not demand perfection before he embraced people. There were no prerequisites for acceptance. A person should be able to receive communion if they are divorced. They should not have to prove themselves acceptable. Pastorally it's not my job to hassle anyone."

On Feb. 7, 1993, when he opened the doors to Good Shepherd for the first time, he said he was terrified no one would show up. He'd placed an ad in the Press-Telegram which read: "Local Church Seeks to Take the X out of X Catholic." He invited aunts and cousins and plenty of musicians. He organized a chicken dinner.

Despite pouring rain, about 45 people showed up. By September, the number had doubled and has continued to grow. The congregation is mostly composed of mainstream Catholics who feel alienated from the church of their youth. Many haven't been inside a Catholic church in years.

They say they are looking for a church that is both compassionate - and realistic. They bring their kids. Delvaux brings his. It's the first time any of them have known a Catholic priest who's both Father and Dad.

In his role as pastor, Father Delvaux visits the sick, comforts the needy, counsels the troubled, shepherds the flock. He also loves to party, and to country swing dance with his girl friend. He's as likely to be found in a Mickey Mouse costume serving hot dogs at a fund-raiser as he is serving Mass at an altar. He's a family man who plays computer games with his kids and helps them with homework. He holds a master's degree in divinity, and he knows how to mow a lawn.

"The trouble with a lot of priests is that they can't have healthy adult relationships," he says. "If they were abused and molested - and often they were, celibacy doesn't make them any healthier. I think married priests who are capable of adult relationships are better able to serve and to love.

"A celibate priest in the Roman Catholic Church can be very objective about people's problems. A married Catholic priest may lose some objectivity because of his experience, but his empathy is greatly increased. I strive for objectivity, but I believe it is empathy that heals.

"Everyone is strengthened by hearing someone say, 'I love you,'" and to the experience of human love."

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