

PRESS RELEASE

**Priestly Ordination of Robert Assaly,
a former Anglican priest this Friday**

MONTREAL, September 18, 2019 – Robert Assaly, a former Anglican priest -- and one married with children, will be ordained to Roman Catholic priesthood on Friday, September 20, at 7:30 p.m., at Saint Thomas à Becket Parish located at 4320 rue Sainte-Anne, Pierrefonds, at the hands of Archbishop Christian Lépine.

How is it that a former Anglican priest -- and one married with children -- can be ordained a Roman Catholic priest? Does this mean that the discipline of consecrated celibacy for priests of the Latin rite is going to be changed or modified?

Although this is, indeed, a first for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Montreal, it has been occurring in different parts of the Latin-rite Catholic Church for many years, especially in English-speaking countries like England, the U.S.A., and Australia.

As far back as June 1980, Pope John Paul II issued pastoral provisions in which, in certain well-defined circumstances, a married Anglican priest could ask to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church, and, after a suitable time of preparation and participation in Catholic Church life, he could request ordination to the priesthood and a dispensation from the promise of celibacy. (This provision has since been applied to ministers from some Protestant denominations, as well.) This was reiterated by Pope Benedict when he established Personal Ordinariates for Anglicans in 2009. In this case, not just individuals, but entire congregations were requesting formal union with the Roman Catholic Church.

Robert is quick to point out that his state – as a married Roman Catholic priest – is an exception, and he cherishes the Church’s desire to maintain normative celibacy for the priesthood. In his particular case, however, he has an existing “vocation to marriage,” but he insists, “celibate priests can give their all, a greater sacrifice in a way that I can’t.”

Fr. Robert Assaly will serve as a priest in the Archdiocese of Montreal alongside his fellow priests, under the authority of Archbishop Christian Lépine, at the service of the People of God, in whatever parishes or other ministries are entrusted to him.

Much as our deacons engage in ordained ministry while continuing in their role as husbands and fathers, Fr. Robert will do so as an ordained priest, as part of our presbyterium, available to be missioned where the diocese needs him most.

As with our deacons, Robert would not be able to remarry should his wife predecease him, and the exceptional nature of his ordination is in no way meant to undermine the traditional discipline of clerical celibacy. We are grateful for Robert's fidelity to his conscience, to the call of the Lord in his life, and for offering himself for service in our Archdiocese.

May the prayers of soon-to-be St. John Henry Newman, co-founder of Anglo-Catholicism, who made the journey from the Anglican Church to the Catholic priesthood in 1845, and who will be canonized October 13, accompany Robert and his wife, Nancy, as well as their six children, on this new step in their journey. Welcome, Fr. Robert!

Meet Robert Assaly

Robert Assaly was a confused but avowed atheist at 24-years-old when, in the midst of a personal crisis, he encountered the Living God. That was 1984, and since then, everything changed for Robert, including transitioning from an Anglican Ottawa-area pastor to a married Roman Catholic priest for Montreal. Robert received a dispensation from clerical celibacy from Pope Francis, under a provision that was instituted by St. John Paul II in 1980 (see article that follows).

Baptized Anglican, the 59-year-old says that his faith upbringing was nominal, at best. Yet, he always maintained a certain appreciation for the Anglican Anglo-Catholic liturgy. That all went by the wayside once his teenage years dawned. "I was brought up with the idea that if money didn't buy you happiness, you were shopping in the wrong places" Robert recalls.

As far as Robert was concerned, he was following good family values by getting ahead in the business world. As a young stock broker, he did extremely well, becoming a millionaire at age 24. "I came to a crisis point in my life where I thought I had everything," he says, "but I realized I had nothing."

The stock broker's existential crisis led him to seek out God and the answers He would provide. God certainly answered in the form of a persistent voice that kept telling him: "Be a priest". Although unexpected, he pursued this journey of faith, which came to fruition in 1991 when, now married with three young children, he was ordained an Anglican priest.

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For the next 24 years and with six children in tow, he served in Anglican parishes in the Ottawa area principally and latterly in Montreal, after having spent four years in Jerusalem as director of the Middle East Council of Churches office. Between 2005 and 2014, he also earned a Th.M. (Toronto) and pursued a PhD (McGill, incomplete; no thesis), studying the history and theology of the Early Church Fathers.

His journey to the Roman Catholic Church took a decisive turn when he moved to Montreal in 2007 to pursue doctoral studies at McGill University. While the divisions afflicting the Anglican Communion were never far from his thoughts, on a practical level, the Assalys needed to provide proper faith development for their three youngest children. Discovering the lack of youth programs at the most youth-friendly Anglican parish in the city, they turned to St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish in Notre-Dame-de-Grace. “My wife went to St. Ignatius because as far as she’s concerned a parish is a parish is a parish,” Robert recalls, “It was all about our kids, and what was best for them.”

The degree of comfort that the Assaly family experienced in a Catholic parish is evident. At the same time, unsettling aspects of the Anglican Church were coming to a head for Robert. “Many Protestant branches...are ethnically based. Presbyterians rooted in Scotland, Anglicans in England, Lutheranism in Germanic traditions,” he says. In addition, the Anglican Church sees itself as a global communion, he observes, but “the Anglican Church has become very divided, the Global North vs Africa/Asia.” For Robert, this is symptomatic of a church that is drifting away from its foundation. “In the Catholic Church, [this divide] has not impaired communion.”

Robert approached the Archdiocese of Montreal in 2009 about becoming a Catholic, without any assurance that his request for ordination would be accepted. It was a leap of faith, he confides, requiring a ton of patience and total reliance on the Holy Spirit. But “[the journey] had a positive effect as I became more confident in this call of the Spirit. I knew I would be relieved of the turmoil that I had felt being an Anglican priest,” Assaly says.

Robert and his wife, Nancy, were formally received into the Catholic Church in 2015. At that time, he ceased functioning as an Anglican minister. As part of his seminary formation, he served at St. Monica Parish in N.D.G., at St. Thomas à Becket Parish in Pierrefonds, and has now moved to St. Thomas More Parish in Verdun. He was ordained to the transitional diaconate in February.

As an Anglican, both when he was a child and a priest, Assaly has been fascinated by the liturgy. He reveres both the sacraments and the apostolic nature of the Church. “I have not [had] as much as one Protestant bone in my body. I never

have,” he underlines. “The Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic have always been essentially important to me,” he says. Not surprisingly, Robert is the grandson of Lebanese grandparents. His maternal grandparents were Antiochian Orthodox Christians, and his paternal grandparents were Greek Catholic, who, when they settled in rural Saskatchewan a century ago, attended the only parish nearby, which was Anglican.

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