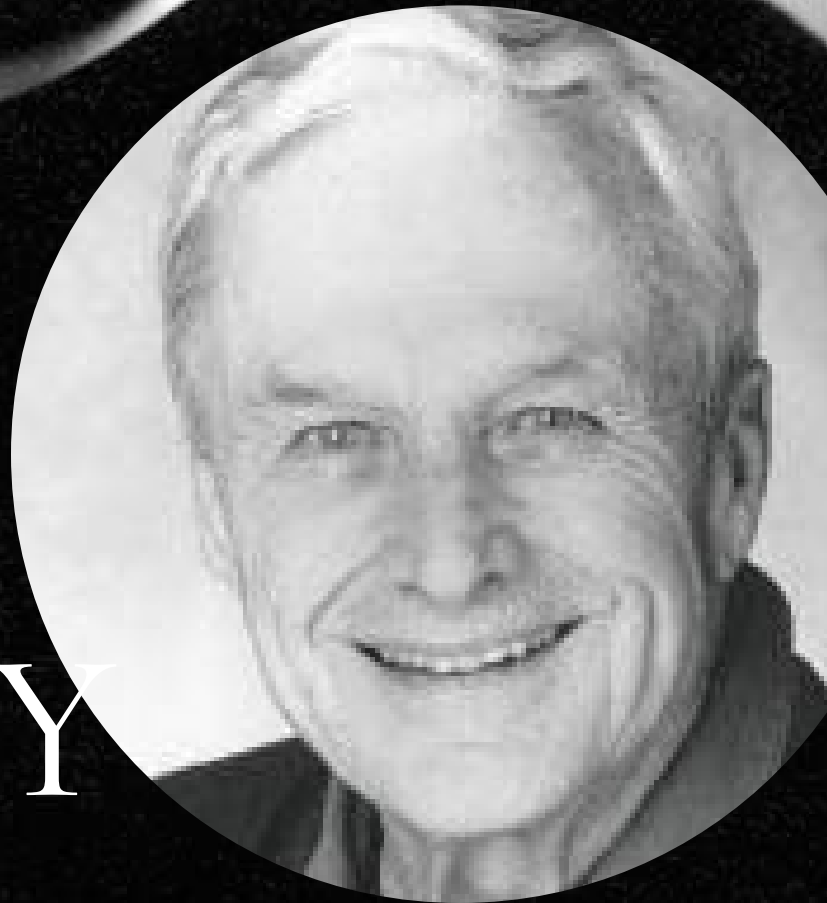


Memoir of a  
Roman Catholic Priest

Louis J. Hohman

FAKE  
CELIBACY



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## **Linda (2004)**

He knows...

He knows I'm here...

He knows why I'm here...

I *know* he knows because his secretary called me last week with a last-minute change to our appointment.

"The Bishop has to reschedule his meeting with you. Would next Tuesday work?"

"Sure." (What else can I say?)

In my mind, I see the Bishop of the Rochester Diocese looking over his calendar in the morning, seeing my name and thinking, "Oh, sh\*t. I bet I know what she wants."

Six months before Lou had responded to the Bishop's letter to all "married priests" in the area suggesting if they apply for a dispensation from their priesthood status they could get back in the good grace of the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, they would no longer be "excommunicated" and would then be allowed to once again participate in the sacraments.

Lou applied immediately, submitting his letter and fully answering the required questions. The process was to send the petition to the Diocese of Rochester where it would be reviewed and sent to the Holy Father in Rome.

The problem was Lou's petition was never submitted. It sat in Rochester on the priest's desk ... for months! No communication. No words of acknowledgment.

After six months of waiting, I decided to take action. I told Lou what I was planning to do and he didn't say no. That was quite a surprise! I think he was tired of the run-around but was too polite to push.

I figured that if I, the wife of a married priest, put herself on the bishop's calendar (a rather unusual first, I imagine), I could ask him to intercede on Lou's behalf to get the petition submitted. Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Lou had been very close. They had great respect for each other. Matthew was predictably disappointed in Lou's decision to leave the priesthood, but was gracious about it, saying he would be missed, and suggesting that he and Lou meet for a picnic or something. We'd even had him in our home for dinner, so he knew us well.

So here I am, at the Diocesan Offices.

I dutifully sit in his office waiting for Bishop Clark to appear. As he comes across the room to his desk, he looks at me and says in an off-handed manner, "You know the paperwork for Lou's dispensation has been sent to Rome, right?" I guess bishops are people too and it was clear his pride wanted it to appear that he had been on top of the situation all along. I didn't care. That

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was the whole point of getting on his calendar. I wanted him to intercede and take action. Little did I realize that he would make sure it got done before I came in. Smart man!

So now what are we going to talk about? That *was* the purpose of the meeting after all. We make small talk a bit and I suggest it would be great if the dispensation came in before August 25<sup>th</sup> as it would make a nice birthday present for Lou.

Matt looked unhappy and says, "I don't know. I'm worried."

"About what?"

"I think there is a strong possibility that the dispensation will not be granted."

"Why? That doesn't make any sense," I blurt out. "He was an *excellent* priest." "He was President of the Priests Council twice. He was the Catholic Church's media darling with his radio talk show for 13 years. He wrote the editorial column in the Catholic Courier weekly newspaper for over a decade. He was loved by parishioners young and old; respected by all as the best homilist in the Diocese."

"Yes, and that's *why* Rome may say no." "It's *because* he was an excellent priest that they may not grant the request."

That's when I began to realize that the Church's approach to ending a priesthood was hauntingly similar to their stance on annulling a marriage: if you could show that the union was not meant to be in the first place, it could be ended.

I should know because I've had two marriages annulled by the Catholic Church. I know the process. I know the shroud of secrecy around getting witness statements. I know the questions that have to be answered by me, my ex-husband, and the witnesses (my friends).

And so we wait to see if the Holy Father will let Lou out of his commitment.

In my mind I think, "What's the deal here?" If you want to do something different with your life, you have the right to do it. So instead of saying "Thank you for giving over 60 years of your life to becoming and serving as a parish priest," the Vatican might say, "You were really good at what you did; you were clearly meant to be a priest." So, even though you've been legally married for over eight years, you attend mass and give back to your community, you desperately long to be in good graces with the Church, they might still have the audacity to say, "No."

### Lou (2004)

Since I told Bishop Clark that I was resigning and getting married, I have wanted to get a dispensation from Rome to be readmitted to full membership in the Church. I'm excommunicated now; in the priests' eyes, I'm no longer Catholic.

Does it hurt to feel exiled? No, because I know it's pro forma. I am expected to dissociate myself from the church, but they've never questioned the fact that I get my pension and a very fine health plan.

Where does the Roman Catholic Church figure in my life as of now? At first, I was adrift. Those priests who had left ministry to get married in the 1960s and '70s were awarded a dispensation from the law of celibacy and full communion with the Church rather quickly.

But John Paul II practically ended dispensations by making the conditions for obtaining one extremely stringent. Now, I can only apply ten years after leaving the ministry, which would take me at least into my mid-eighties, and I would have to prove I had never really had a vocation to the priesthood.

Because of my ignorance about sex, I do believe I never had a commitment to celibacy. On the other hand, it would be very difficult for me to deny my calling to the priesthood, which I have always loved for its dignity and its power to make a difference in this world of ours.

I still love the Church dearly. One of my happiest hours of the week is in celebration of the Eucharist in my new parish, St. John of Rochester. I believe that I have the message of Jesus Christ to share and need to take part in works of mercy. At one time or another I have volunteered in the National Kidney Foundation, the YWCA, and at present in Advent House, the local hospice for the dying in Perinton.

Over the last ten years, I have given several seminars on preaching, but some conservative Catholics thought it unbecoming that a defrocked priest should give instruction in preaching. So all of a sudden I was not getting invitations of this sort anymore.

In one church, I gave a couple of Sunday homilies, but that didn't last long for the same reason.

Do I have any guilt about not being laicized, in official good standing with the Roman Catholic Church? At first, I did. It took a certain amount of courage to go to Mass on Sunday and sit in the pews. What were those people around me thinking? I was well known in the area and most of them knew my situation. Their opinion of me and my decision mattered. It was particularly difficult to attend funerals at my former parish of St. Louis, where I would be in the midst of dozens – if not hundreds – of my old parishioners.

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As it turned out, I was received most graciously wherever I went and very soon felt at home, first in the Church of the Resurrection and later at St. John of Rochester. The feelings of being excluded, of being an outsider, have melted away.

To me, belonging to the Catholic Church is like running with your grandmother. You love her dearly, but she's always miles behind. Regardless of my official role, she is my Mother, and I find in her house my spiritual home. I have never loved the Church more deeply than I do now.

How can I avoid the fact of no dispensation? I figure that thirty to forty years ago, priests were offered them and laicized, but now Rome sees fit to withhold those dispensations. But where does Jesus stand on this? Can he embrace some and reject others when the circumstances of the case are parallel? I don't think so.

To me, the situation is somewhat like eating meat on Friday: Will those who ate meat on Friday *before* the law was revoked really go to hell? Or was the final realization on the part of the Church that "the punishment did not fit the crime" enough to absolve those who felt that way before Vatican II? I think it's the latter.

I believe the time is coming when priests will be able to marry ... and married persons can be ordained priests. I believe that the connection between the priesthood and celibacy is so tenuous that it cannot survive many more decades. I believe, too, that sooner or later, "Grandmother Church" will look to St. Paul to see that, in *that* Church, no one is Jewish or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but that we are all one in Christ Jesus.

I have observed that married men in church leadership roles are by no means less effective in their ministry because they are married. Eastern Rite priests and Protestant ministers can be just as zealous, just as spiritual, and just as ministerially effective as those who are celibate. Some day that realization will hit home. I will not be here to see it, but I honestly believe it will happen.

These kinds of issues have a way of playing themselves out in the Catholic Church in a cautious foot-dragging way, yet, just as the Church finally came to admit that the Galileo was right, so it will admit to *the equality of all persons in Christ Jesus*.

In the last decade or so, the Roman Catholic Church has moved toward dangerous division, rather than inclusiveness. While many still support Vatican II and grow more progressive, a growing number of Catholics have embraced a conservatism that is borderline reactionary. The split has not become a schism yet, but the danger is there.

## Linda

First, let me say that while Lou and I met at church, I am not a born and bred Catholic. I was raised in the Federated Church, a combo of Presbyterian and Methodist. When I came of age

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to join the church, the youth minister told us to choose which denomination we would be. I asked what they believed in – how they were the same and how they were different. He said they both held to the Holy Trinity and that Methodists believed it was a sin to dance, play cards and drink; Presbyterians didn't. I declared I was a Presbyterian.

A few years later a fateful pajama party had three girlfriends and I talking about religion *all night long* ... getting absolutely no sleep. But we did have a plan to visit churches of every denomination; a new one each Sunday. We went to Southern Baptist with a visiting evangelist. All four of us, without knowing about the others, accepted Christ as our Savior and found ourselves at the Altar. We visited the Mormon church and was surprised at the informality. We went to a Catholic mass where I fell in love with the pageantry, the solitude of prayer and the focus on living a faithful life every day. So as a high school junior I initiated Catechism classes on my own with the assistant priest. I was baptized and later confirmed.

I embraced Catholicism as a way to be spiritual. But I never gave up my ability to think for myself. I don't blindly follow. I'm an odd choice for a match with a priest, right?

And then the Bishop sent a letter to Lou and the other former priests who had married in the Diocese. It gave Lou a flicker of hope.

### **Lou (1946)**

#### **Being Ordained**

I am a priest at last. I walk to my car, a 1945 black Chevrolet, trying out the sound of my new title aloud: "'Father Hohman.' 'Father Lou.' 'How do you do? I'm Father Hohman.' 'Call me Father Lou.'"

I smiled at the sound of it and threw a single suitcase - all my personal possessions - into the Chevy. In my black suit, black hat, and black coat, I was heading to my first parish, St. Helen's, leaving behind the sparse surroundings I had called home for six of the last twelve years in the seminary.

My car, a seminary graduation gift from my father, felt like a symbol of my new life, and the engine purred, as contentedly as I felt.

While I was a seminarian, driving a car had been a rare treat, but now I felt very much in control, free as could be, even though I was a bit apprehensive about what the future might hold. Every time I put on the Roman collar now, I knew it was for real. It carried with it powers and opportunities I had only dreamed of.

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I thought back to the recent past and how the nuns had started treating me differently in the two weeks since ordination, calling me “Father” instead of acting as if I were just another kid in the parish. All of this sudden adulation made me somewhat uneasy. Most people receive honor because of success in their chosen careers; I was just beginning mine, but I had already experienced the kind of reverence usually given to the very successful or the very elderly.

When a priest was newly ordained, it was customary for the nuns in his parish to approach him as soon as possible, requesting that he say Mass at their convent. I remembered when Mother Superior, Sister Dosithea, asked, “Father, would it be possible for you to come and celebrate Mass at St. Ambrose convent? We would be honored.”

I hadn’t scheduled any Masses yet, so I said, “I could do it tomorrow if you like, Sister. As a matter of fact, that’s my mother’s birthday! She’ll be delighted.”

It turned out to be a very quiet, deeply spiritual experience for all of us. My mother was thrilled, as if I had been ordained again, and more so when the sisters asked if my family and I could stay for breakfast.

I was lost in these memories as the road in front of me meandered through the city of Rochester. Just on the other side lay the small town of Gates, where I’d find St. Helen’s. Though the trees lining the town streets were barren, they seemed beautiful - strong and stark against the bright blue sky – as I marveled at God’s wonderful cycle of seasons.

Driving through my hometown, I felt new confidence and inner peace. I recalled my ordination ceremony where, lying prostrate on the floor, I had experienced a feeling of not belonging to myself anymore, of thinking, “I am in the process of becoming a priest in the Church of Jesus Christ.” When the bishop and all the priests in attendance laid their hands on me, I believed wholeheartedly that those hands were the sure sign of God’s spirit coming upon me with a very special designation and mission. It seemed as if God were telling me, “Now you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech.” I could sense the flow of the Holy Spirit into my heart and soul.

By custom, at the reception after the First Mass, the newly ordained priest would stand before a kneeler and impart blessings individually. Anyone can confer a blessing on anyone else, but the priest’s ritual of individual blessing was considered special because of the popular belief that the priest – and perhaps especially a *new* priest – had a special direct pipeline to God.

I knew then that I was no longer the awkward kid who lived down the block, but rather an elevated personage, possessing special gifts and powers not of my own making. A line of people waiting for my blessing stretched up the street for several blocks! Fortunately for them, the weather



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was beautiful! Everyone – Catholics and non-Catholics, family friends and people I had never met before – approached me at the kneeler and offered congratulations and other pleasantries.

Years before, one classmate of mine from grade school, Bob Heffernan, had bet me \$5 I would never become a priest, and he paid me off then and there!

As they knelt, I placed my hands on each person's head and intoned, "Benedictio Dei omnipotentis Patris Filius et Spiritus Sanctis descendat super vos et maneat semper." ("May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit descend upon you and remain forever.")

In those days, priests were universally regarded as mystical, specially-endowed men of God. We were considered "alter Christus," other Christs, who should expect reverence and elevated dignity. Constant vigilance was required for some of us to remember that we were to strive to be Christ-like, not to imagine ourselves as equals to Christ.

As I pulled up to my new home at 310 Hinchey Road, in the little town of Gates, I felt surprised and pleased to see the St. Helen's Church, a simple wood frame structure painted white, with a plain wood cross at the peak of the roof. Having grown up near the city, I was accustomed to large, ornate churches, complete with steeples and bell towers, but St. Helen's had none. While most rectories were massive brick or stone structures, rather dark and foreboding, with spacious suites for each of the residing priests, I was delighted to see that, instead of a modified, heavily oak-paneled funeral home, I would live and work in what looked like a middle-class suburban home.

I had prayed for anything less forbidding than the dark, cramped quarters I'd had just spent the last six years in at major seminary training. St. Bernard's in Rochester was known as "The Rock," aptly nicknamed for its similarity in warmth and ambience to the famous prison at Alcatraz. My prayers were answered: I could see that my new home was charming and inviting.

I sat in my parked car in front of the rectory for a moment, eager to enter, but a little timid about beginning this new life away from the strict discipline of seminary, now having to grapple with life in the real world.

When I rang the bell, a petite, gray-haired woman answered. "You must be our new assistant priest," she said, smiling.

"Yes," I replied. "I'm Father Lou Hohman. And you are?"

"I'm Mary, the housekeeper. Please, please, come in. It's cold out there," she said, extending her hand. "We're so happy to have you here. We've never had an assistant priest before, you know. Can I take your suitcase and show you to your room?"

"Thank you, Mary. I'm very happy to be here. But please, don't bother with my suitcase. I've got it. Just point me in the right direction."

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“Your room’s up there,” she said, pointing toward the stairs. “First door on the right. Holler if you need anything. Dinner is at 6.”

“Thanks,” I said, noticing the light pouring through the white lace curtains on all the windows and the delicious smell of freshly baked pie. I felt like I’d come home.

Upstairs in the parlor, I saw a portly, kind-looking man reading in an easy chair by the window. He was dressed comfortably in the white T-shirt that was the seminarian’s “recreation uniform.”

He looked up from his work and rose from the chair, smiling. “Hello, there. You must be Lou. I’m John Beecher Sullivan. We’ve been expecting you.”

I felt totally welcome as I shook his hand. “Thank you,” I replied. “I sure am happy to be here.”

“Well, I’ll let you get settled in. Your room is over there,” he said as he pointed to a closed door across the hall. “Sorry you can’t have your own john, but we’ll work that out alright.”

“Yes, Father. I’m sure we will.” I chuckled to myself silently. At the seminary, we had had to take our showers down in the cold, dank basement with its mildewed tile floors. Now this man was apologizing that I would have to share a sparkling clean and warm bathroom with him!

Father Sullivan seemed so laid back, another sharp contrast to what I was used to in seminary, where the priests who taught us were stern and strict. His easy-going nature quickly put me at ease.

I discovered that my room was tiny, with space for little more than the single bed and a straight back chair. I didn’t mind; I was perpetually restless, having felt so confined in seminary. I intended to spend as little time as possible in closed quarters anyway.

After unpacking my meager belongings in the undersized room, I donned my house cassock – a black, floor length, button-up robe that had been my uniform for the past six years — and ventured into the common room across the hall. Father Sullivan was reading again, and when he heard me, he pointed to the sofa and said, “Ah, you’re back. Sit down.” I did, and immediately he asked, “So, Lou, what the hell are you doing wearing that thing?”

Immediately on my guard, I responded, “What thing, Father? What do you mean?”

“I mean, where are you going in that cassock?”

“Nowhere. Um, I thought this was what we were supposed to wear.”

“Do you see me wearing *mine*? Take it off,” he chuckled. “We don’t wear that kind of thing here.”

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I had my ubiquitous white T-shirt and black trousers on underneath it, so I happily took off the cassock and folded it beside me on the sofa. Here was a down-to-earth guy. I liked his style, and I couldn't have asked for a happier introduction to the brotherhood of priests.

I sat again and asked, "What are the rules around here?"

"That's simple. First, be unfailingly kind to the parishioners. If you have a gripe, vent it to *me*, not to them. Second, if you're out after midnight, drive carefully."

I smiled. "I think I can follow those alright."

I couldn't believe my luck. I'd just emerged from a smothering, deeply traditional, authoritarian system that hadn't changed for over four centuries to now find myself encouraged to be an independent adult. Those of my seminary classmates who had already received assignments to their parishes hadn't fared nearly as well. Leo Ward had told me he was treated like a naughty child and not even given a key to the rectory. Since the doors were locked at 10 p.m., if Leo wasn't back to the rectory by then, he had to spend the night elsewhere. Unflappable, he purchased an extension ladder that he had placed underneath his bedroom window, so he could get in if he ever decided to stay out after the bewitching hour.

I was lying in my room after dinner that first night, reveling in my good fortune at this appointment, when Mary knocked softly and told me I had a phone call in the common room.

"Hello?" I said when I picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Lou."

It was unmistakably the voice of Helen, my favorite uncle's wife. I suddenly felt silly and tongue-tied, as I usually did when talking to her. I'd never forgotten that spring evening when I was eighteen and Clarence had brought his fiancée to our house to meet the family.

Helen Sanders was the loveliest girl I had ever seen, with a smooth-as-silk complexion, heart-shaped face, and eyes that reflected caring and a deep sense of peace. Blond and blue-eyed, she looked a little like Myrna Loy, and I had been instantly smitten, not just with her physical beauty, but with her sweetness and an inner radiance that belied her young age. She was totally unlike any of the other girls I had developed crushes on as a teenager.

Where does one draw the line between pale infatuation and genuine "falling in love"? I believe even to this day that I had fallen instantly, deeply, madly in love with Helen Sanders.

"Oh, Helen! How wonderful to hear from you on my first night here at . . . St. Helen's! Funny, huh?"

"What a coincidence. I wanted to call and congratulate you on your first assignment, 'Father' Lou."

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I had known from that first moment I saw her, all the hundreds of reasons I could never be with her. I was then studying for the priesthood, which of course precluded marriage and intimate relationships with women. Apart from *that* insurmountable hurdle, she was Clarence's fiancée, soon to be married to a man with whom I was closer than I was to my own father. Clarence was an experienced adult, twenty years my senior. I was a kid in more ways than one. Yet my head was always full of fantasies about this beautiful girl, who happened to be *my* age.

"It's wonderful here, Helen. Father Sullivan seems terrific, and the housekeeper is nice, and they've made me feel right at home. It even *smells* great." I could almost see through the phone line Helen's smile at my exuberance. "I think it's going to be great, you know, as long as the parish has enough work for two priests. I haven't really met that many people yet – I should have come up here sooner to do that, I see now – but it's a small parish, and if the community welcomes me like I hope they will, I should be able to make a difference and. . ."

I resolved to stop babbling about myself, paused and took a breath. "I'm sorry to go on and on like this. I'm just so excited to be here and to get started and to be out of seminary." I quickly realized I was about to start prattling on again, so I gulped and asked, "How have *you* been, Helen?"

"Very well, thank you. We had a little family party tonight for my birthday."

"Your birthday! Oh, Helen I forgot! Happy birthday! I've been so wrapped up in my own little world. I'm really sorry."

With typical sweetness, she said, "Thank you, Lou. Just a little older than the last time we spoke. No big deal."

"Well, it *is* a big deal. You go out of your way to welcome me to my first assignment, and I can't even remember your birthday."

I had never told anyone, including Helen, about the magical spell she'd cast on me. All I could do was admire her from afar and rejoice at the times when I could be in her company. Because she called me, did I dare to hope she might have feelings for me? I forced myself to do the trick that had worked in the past: to recall immediately that she truly loved Clarence. (Little did I know what she would come to mean to me in the future.)

To be continued...