News



Phil Marcin is shown baptizing his grandson Declan, held by his mom, Maggie and alongside his dad, Phillip, in 2021. (Courtesy of Phil and Linda Marcin)



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Phil and Linda Marcin met five decades ago, but he still gets a twinkle in his eye when he describes the first time he saw the "beautiful blonde" who would eventually become his wife. The only problem: He was a Catholic priest at the time.

After years of friendship and discernment on both of their parts, Phil eventually left ordained ministry, as did tens of thousands of priests worldwide in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, many to get married. The Marcins found support, community and an opportunity for a new ministry through CORPUS, originally founded as the "Corps of Reserved Priests United for Service."

Now, after 50 years, one of the oldest reform groups in the U.S. church is disbanding, citing the advanced age of its membership and lack of new members. CORPUS, which bills itself as the "national association for an inclusive priesthood," officially closed at the end of December 2024.

"It's heartbreaking," Phil Marcin, now 87, told the National Catholic Reporter, recalling "the friendships we made, the hope we had and the seeds we planted, even though they're not blossoming the way we hoped they would. I believe CORPUS was a great success, but in the Lord's way, not in the way we envisioned it."

After about a millennium of mandatory celibacy in the Latin rite, the church now allows some married clergy who have converted to Catholicism. The issue again received worldwide scrutiny in 2019, when a synod of bishops recommended that Pope Francis allow the ordination of married men as priests in the Amazon. He declined to answer their request.

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CORPUS began in Chicago, where three couples gathered in 1974 in response to an auxiliary bishop's negative comments about priests who had left the priesthood to marry. Soon, other local groups began meeting and a national conference was organized. The late Anthony Padovano helped bring attention to the issue of an inclusive priesthood during his leadership of the organization which at its height, had more than 11,000 on its mailing list. By last year, it was down to 300.

Last year, the group's leadership made the decision to disband. Its website is still online and its e-newsletter will continue for now. CORPUS members have been

asked to support other groups through the Catholic Organizations for Renewal. CORPUS's remaining funds, about $150,000, were dispersed to several of those ministries, including FutureChurch, Dignity USA and the Women's Ordination Conference.



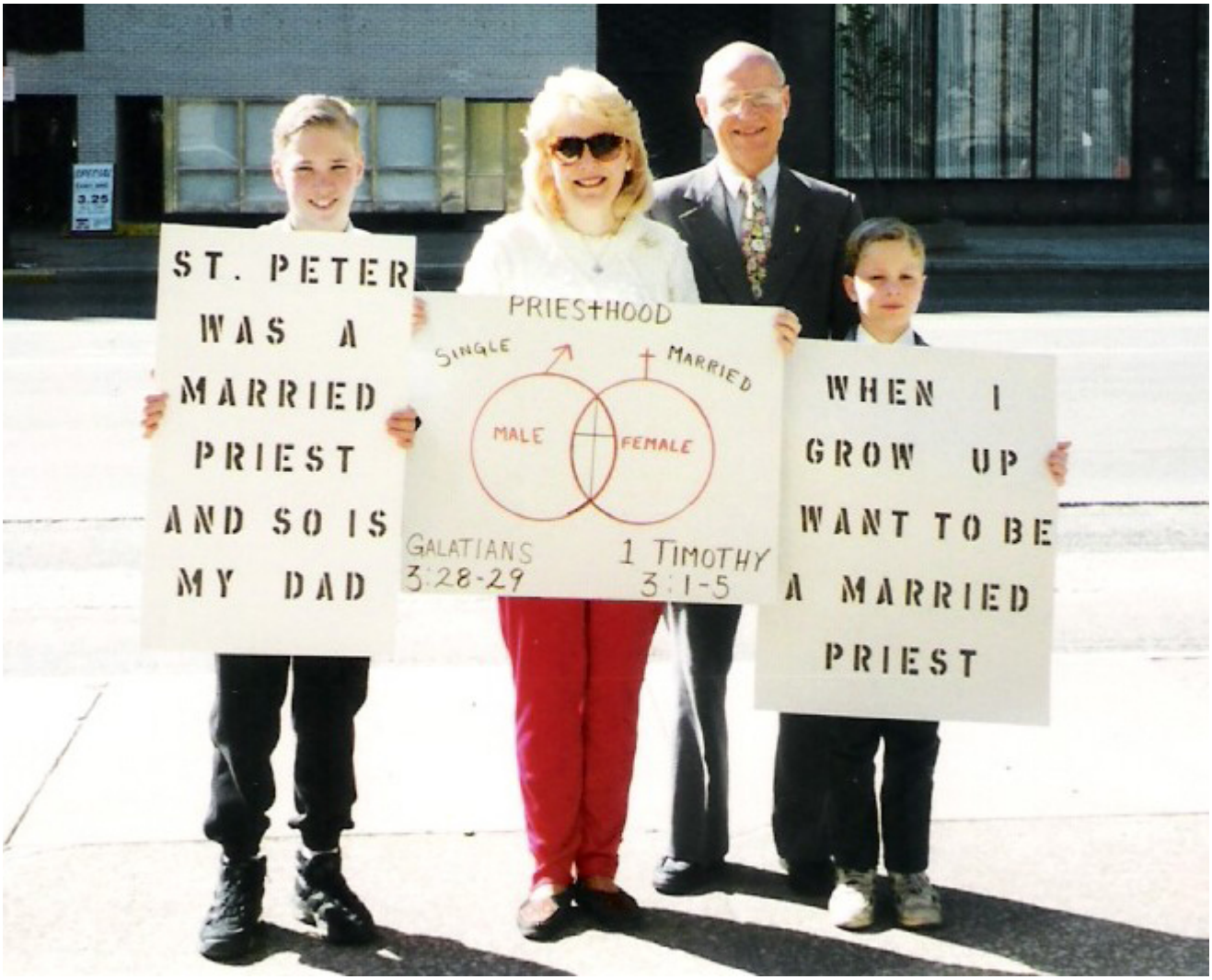
Phil and Linda Marcin in 2016 after they officiated the wedding of their son Phillip and his wife, Maggie (Courtesy of Phil and Linda Marcin)

CORPUS estimates that some 35,000 men left the priesthood to marry in the second half of the 20th century, most of them in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. At that time, laicized priests were expected to "just disappear," said Linda Marcin, who is now 77. Some men had never told their own children they were former priests. Others struggled with isolation and career transitions.

Phil opted against secrecy and announced his decision at all the Masses at St. Bernard Parish in Akron, Ohio,* where he had been serving when he met Linda, then a single mom who had converted to Catholicism after enrolling her son in the parish school. Although both say they had immediate feelings for one another, they had kept them hidden, even from each other, for five years. Phil was torn: "I loved the priesthood, and I loved Linda," he said.

Like many CORPUS members, Phil and Linda found a second chance at ministry conducting baptisms, weddings and funerals outside the auspices of official church structures. At one point, they were doing nearly 40 weddings a year, many involving divorced Catholics who had decided not to go through the annulment process.

The Marcin family, including their two sons, also would "witness" at the diocese's annual ordination Mass, with signs saying: "St. Peter was a married priest and so is my dad" and "When I grow up I want to be a married priest." Some of the newly ordained priests expressed support and encouragement, Linda said. "CORPUS was really a great witness to the church as a whole."



Phil and Linda Marcin are joined by their sons Phillip, far left, and Joshua, at right, for an annual family witness for married priests, outside St. John the Evangelist Cathedral in Cleveland in 1996, on the day of the priestly ordination Mass. (Courtesy of Phil and Linda Marcin)

Another organization, Celibacy Is The Issue, or CITI, was founded in 1992 (lightheartedly referred to, initially, as "Rent A Priest") to help connect resigned priests with individuals or groups, especially those who didn't feel welcomed in the church or were uncomfortable approaching their local parish.

Other resigned priests organized another group to secure alternative accreditation for their jobs as hospital or other chaplains. Originally called "The Society of Priests for a Free Ministry," the organization exists today as the Federation of Christian Ministries, and provides ministers to celebrate weddings, baptisms and funerals, as well as other spiritual care.

From the beginning, CORPUS was not only for men who left priesthood, but their wives, too. Linda Pinto, a former Franciscan nun who married a former priest, led a workshop at one of CORPUS's first conventions on married priests and their wives. "My message was that we were not baggage," she said. Pinto served on CORPUS's board and eventually became co-president.

The group was also an early supporter of expanding priesthood to women, seeing both mandatory celibacy and the ban on women as forms of discrimination.

It's difficult to get an accurate count of how many priests resign and for what reasons, as the Vatican's official statistics only report the current number of priests and seminarians. Sociologists who have studied priesthood previously had estimated that approximately one in six priests resign for religious reasons, while studies of current priests note stressful workload and other issues affecting morale, separate from celibacy, according to Michele Dillon, a sociologist and co-author of *Catholicism at a Crossroads*.

"My sense is that priests who leave the priesthood today (especially in North America and Europe) have many options and access to professional and support networks other than feeling a need to join an organization like CORPUS," Dillon said. "Some too may want to distance themselves for socio-emotional reasons from fellow priests/ex-priests while they forge a new life and new secular roles."

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In the 1970s, when leaving ministry was considered shameful, many former priests and their families were looking for community and support. CORPUS let them know they were not alone.

Nick De Los Reyes of Long Beach, California, had been a priest in the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who left the priesthood to marry a nurse, Mary, whom he had met while working in a hospital. For him, CORPUS was part family and part church reform group.

"It was always encouraging and heartening to run into so many people who not only shared the background of having been ordained priests, and now married and raising families, but were also very much interested in promoting the teachings of Vatican II and living a church of Vatican II," he said.

De Los Reyes worked as a marriage and family counselor, and performed weddings, which he calls "ministry on the margins." He notes that CORPUS members were not angry or bitter. "Our motive really was to be of service to the church and be in ministry to God's people."

Now married 46 years, with six children and nine grandchildren, De Los Reyes, co-president with Pinto, hopes that the church remembers what CORPUS stood for.

"History won't erase us," he said. "The question of married clergy in the Latin rite is going to come back again and again. The prophetic voice that we were for 50 years was heard and will continue to be heard throughout history."

**This story has been updated to correct the location of St. Bernard Parish.*