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Priest finds 'disappointment' in church, 'humanity' in marriage

by Kevin Eckstrom by Religion News Service



Episcopal Fr. Albert Cutie is pictured in a 2007 file photo in Washington. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiehede)

Fr. Albert Cutie saw a lot of things in his 14 years as a Catholic priest while church officials looked the other way: priests who got caught with prostitutes, priests who lived with their gay partners, and men of the cloth who kept one bed in the rectory and another with their mistress.

"In the Roman Catholic Church, a scandal is not really a scandal until it becomes public," Cutie writes in his new book, *Dilemma: A Priest's Struggle with Faith and Love*, which hit stores Jan. 4.

Yet when he was caught by paparazzi canoodling with his girlfriend on a Miami beach in 2009, Cutie was booted from his rectory, dropped from his insurance plan and told he would no longer receive a paycheck.

The global television ministry that had earned him the nickname "Father Oprah" and legions of fans across Miami and Latin America, was over, he was told.

Within weeks, the priest whose made-for-Hollywood good looks provided endless tabloid fodder left to become an Episcopal priest. He later married his girlfriend, Ruhama Buni Canellis, and on Dec. 2, the couple announced the birth of their first daughter, Camila Victoria.

As Cutie describes it in his book, his move to the Episcopal Church was not as quick and convenient as it appeared. In fact, he says his dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church had stewed for several years.

The scandal only intensified his disillusionment with a church he now describes as "incompetent," "inhumane," "merciless" and an "ideological dictatorship."

"The church doesn't need my help to tarnish its image," Cutie said in an interview from his new office at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection near Miami. "The institution has done plenty to tarnish its own image."

The book contains few saucy details about the relationship that blossomed from friendship to romance over nearly a decade. Cutie writes that he was instantly attracted to the shy single mother and was grateful when he was transferred to another parish so he could focus on work.

But as Cutie wrestled with the loneliness and high expectations of the priesthood, he found himself stealing dates with Canellis at quiet restaurants or movie theaters where they would not be seen.

"My life was all about work, but there was something in my life that was missing, a big empty hole: intimacy," he said. "And I would ask whether (celibacy) was really God's rule and what God wants or a man-made rule and what the church wants."

The harsh treatment of priests who were ousted during the clergy abuse scandal that erupted in 2002 only fueled Cutie's disillusionment, and he knew that mandatory celibacy was part of the problem.

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"This is one of the real scandals nobody wants to see in the church: good people, mostly good men, who are so lonely on the inside that they are often driven to satisfy basic human emotional and physical needs in all the wrong ways," he writes.

He also struggled with church teaching against homosexuality, divorce, women's ordination and denying Communion to non-Catholics. The priestly fraternity he was promised, he said, was actually a club of lonely ladder-climbers.

While Cutie protects the names of many in the church, he directs his harshest criticism at retired Archbishop John Favalora, who he describes as cold, rigid, arrogant, aloof and "disconnected and uninterested in my life."

"The spiritual fatherhood of a bishop ... was something I experienced through other bishops, but not from you personally," Cutie wrote in a lengthy letter that he never sent to Favalora.

Officials at the Archdiocese of Miami declined to comment about Cutie's book, and referred to a 2009 statement in which Favalora likened Cutie to the Gospel parable of the prodigal son who eventually "came to his senses."

Cutie, 41, actually began talks with the local Episcopal bishop years before the paparazzi pictures forced him out of the church, and said his transition was neither "easy nor quick."

"Yet the more I prayed and thought about the message of Jesus, the more I realized that his is a message of inclusion, not exclusion; a message of love, not rejection; a message of salvation, not condemnation," he writes.

Cutie readily admits that he broke his vow of celibacy, and still wrestles with the disappointment some former parishioners may feel. He says he didn't write the book to settle scores, but out of "deep-rooted disappointment" in an institution that he once believed held all the answers.

"I don't think it's anger," he said. "I think it's disappointment, and sadness for the people who believe in an institution that isn't what it proclaims to be."

His new Episcopal flock in Biscayne Park has grown from 28 to about 300 and he's finding his footing in marriage, fatherhood and 3 a.m. feedings for his young daughter.

Marriage, he writes, has made him a better priest because "I feel more connected to humanity," and an infant daughter and teenage stepson have added a new understanding of the term "Father."

"I'm so blessed to be able to experience the gift of fathering a child, knowing that I had convinced myself that I wasn't going to be part of that experience," he said. "To be able to experience it, for me, is a double blessing."

NCR columnist Heidi Schlumpf blogged a short review of Fr. Cutie's book based on this and other news reports last night. Find it here: **Fr. Cutie: Too little, too late**

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