

I am no longer a priest.

I started feeling uncomfortable in the Russian Orthodox Church the day after ordination. As the joke goes, don't confuse tourism and immigration. For a long time I tried to fit in, to become "one of the guys"—ineptly, clumsily, unsuccessfully.

I think of priesthood as a function (thanks to the theology of Nicholas Afanasiev). The mystical in the priesthood is not a result of performing sacred rites, but of a personal visitation by God. A priest simply performs a role bestowed upon him by a community—no more, no less. A bunch of good people got together, looked around, and said, "Mikhalych, do us an honor. You are a kind man, we have known you for a long time, we trust you—be our primate in prayer. We will help you as much as we can, but you stand before the Lord's table, break the bread, read us the Word, explain it to us as God moves your spirit, and we will ask the bishop, and he will bless and confirm your candidacy."

So all this "Father," "bless me," "what should I do," used to really trouble me. I wanted to see beautiful people around me rather than the herd that would lose the last vestiges of human dignity in the presence of a priest. By the way, by the end of my time serving a parish, I had somewhat succeeded in reconstructing a *homo erectus* out of the bowed-down mass mumbling "forgive me, bless me."

And, just as long and ineptly, I tried to leave, at first externally. My flirtation with journalism, speaking out publicly about controversial issues, was all just an attempt to leave. No, I didn't realize it. I

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Dmitry Sverdlov

had thought that I was firmly entrenched in the Church, perhaps in the left wing of the opposition, but inside the Church. "This kind is also needed." In reality, I was doing everything I could for the church system to push me out, to eject me. I couldn't do it by myself—I lacked the strength. It makes me very sad now to remember how powerless I have been.

By January 2012, I'd been a priest for fourteen years. My phone rang in the middle of the night. I was smoking in a frozen vestibule of a train car speeding through the woods. My phone suddenly caught a signal. I was told that a notice of my suspension had been posted on the diocesan website. This was the external leave-taking I had provoked.

Ten years have passed. It took me exactly ten years to leave completely, internally.

Even up until a year ago this situation bothered me. It always got worse around the new year. One or another of my former church supervisors would call me and ask the obligatory stupid questions: What are you doing these days? How do you make a living? Do you attend church? Do you take communion?

A church person might ask what was stupid about this. The stupid thing was that these questions didn't get at what really mattered: What is in my soul? What is my relationship with God? Am I a Christian? And if I consider myself a Christian, what kind of Christian am I?

They have rules. They perform bureaucratic procedures. They keep tabs on a suspended priest and report their observations up the ladder. They report that he is not openly confessing satanism, but is not expressing repentance either, so we should leave everything as is until circumstances change.

I was upset that they could defrock me. I was not ready to give them this right. They hadn't brought me into the Church, they hadn't led me to ordination, they hadn't ordained me. They were simply exercising a function—playing a part which either had been bestowed upon them by worthier people, or that they had usurped. Yes, I was brought up in an environment of anti-system church dissidence. This was the structure I had constructed in my head.

Who were "they"? An award-bearing suburban latifundist; a fiery redhead, a honey-tongued failing careerist; a "people's bishop" in felt boots and fleece jacket who would kneel before the sponsors; a white-bearded elder, a KGB agent; an iPhone-addicted boy, a committed nativist; another patriot, a European car connoisseur; a human computer in steel-rimmed glasses, unwaveringly controlling the fortunes of dozens of people every month; a corrupt, Cadillac-driving cleric who had been collecting money to build a church for fifteen years, with no church to show for it; a highly-placed gay

promising an apartment in Moscow as a reward for the phone number of an altar boy who had run away from him; an elderly ascetic with mad eyes convinced of his own chosenness; et cetera. . . .

Last Christmas, another one called—a lost and miserable soul who bleated something incoherent. I think sweated. I couldn't really talk, and interrupted him: "Father, you haven't done me any harm personally, so I do not object to you writing anything in your report that you find necessary. But let me give you brotherly advice: please stop calling me. These calls will not end well for you."

And now I don't care anymore. I am no longer a priest. Ten years is a long time—but thank God for it.

Of course, everything is a bit more complicated, as usual. I am not a priest, and I am a priest. I am more than a priest, and yet the priesthood for me is an unattainable height. I am a completely secular person, but I wallow in deep religious reflection. I hate my church experience, and value it as a unique gift. I lament the time lost, and I embrace my fortune as a brother and thank it, smiling, for all the zigzags. I went through all the phases: denial, anger, and the rest. But I broke free. I am sorry that the way to freedom took so much time and energy, and I am glad it all happened.

There must be other, greater degrees of freedom. But, as a personal signpost, I know I am now indifferent to being defrocked. I feel so free that I could now even happily read on a *kliros*.

So, I raise my glass to freedom—to our freedom, and yours. ✱