

Former Anglican clergyman celebrates first Christmas as Catholic priest

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This Christmas was particularly joyous for Father Albert Scharbach, who celebrated its liturgies just a few weeks after his ordination as a Catholic priest for the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter.

"I feel like myself again, but much more," Father Scharbach said of his Nov. 15 ordination. "I am humbled and grateful to be part of the gracious exception (the ordinariate) in the life of the church."

Initially ordained an Anglican priest in 2005, Father Scharbach was ordained a Catholic priest through the ordinariate, established in 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI to make it easier to welcome former Anglicans into the Catholic Church.

Equivalent to a diocese but national in scope, the ordinariate allows former Anglicans to join the Catholic Church while maintaining aspects of their liturgical traditions. It accommodates Anglican priests who are already married, such as Father Scharbach.

Abby, his wife since 1996, and their seven children were among the worshipers Christmas Eve at St. Mark in Catonsville when Father Scharbach celebrated an 8 p.m. Mass in the chapel for the congregation of St. Timothy's, a former Episcopal Church in Catonsville that was received into the Catholic Church in 2013 as part of the ordinariate.

Father Scharbach had presided at his final Christmas liturgies as an Anglican priest in 2008.

"I decided that unless I am clearly moving toward full communion with Rome, then I would no longer be living in the obedience of faith," were the words he used to tell his congregation at a parish in Rosemont, Pa., outside Philadelphia, that he would leave the Anglican Church and join the Catholic Church. "In other words, without a change, I would have no claim to the fiat lifestyle exhibited by Mary."

Taken from the Blessed Virgin Mary's response to the angel Gabriel when she was

asked to become the mother of Jesus, “fiat” is Latin for “let it be done.”

“I felt like a fish out of water,” Father Scharbach said of leaving the Anglican priesthood and faith tradition he practiced for years. “It was always a hope to serve at the altar again.”

Accepting the Catholic faith became a matter of conscience for Father Scharbach.

“I could live without being Roman Catholic,” he said, “but could I die without being Roman Catholic?”

In 2009, Father Scharbach became pastoral associate for Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden and relocated his family to the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The Scharbach brood ranges from Sophie, who turns 2 in January, to Keelan, 16, a junior at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville. Isaac is a freshman at Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington. Abby homeschools the other children in their Federal Hill home, the former rectory at Holy Cross Parish.

The family entered the Catholic Church during the 2009 Easter Vigil at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore.

Shortly after entering the church, Father Scharbach began his journey to become a Catholic priest, which was realized when Bishop Madden ordained him at the Baltimore Basilica.

“He had that kind of priestly charism about him,” said Bishop Madden, “the way he dealt with people, the way he related to priests in the archdiocese. I always thought he would make a wonderful Catholic priest. For me, it was a great joy to see that realized.”

Michael Cannon, who met Father Scharbach when he was an Anglican priest in Pennsylvania, attended Father Scharbach’s ordination at the basilica. He described the liturgy as “one of the most moving and beautiful ceremonies I have ever attended.”

The newly ordained priest’s faith, Cannon said, is “inspiring and uplifting, and gives encouragement to those who come in touch with his wonderful charism.”

Coming into full communion with the Catholic church

Father Scharbach was the homilist at the 10:30 p.m. Mass Christmas Eve at Mount Calvary Church in Baltimore, where 42 parishioners were brought into full communion with the Catholic Church in January 2012 through the Texas-based Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, the first group of American Anglicans to do so.

In June 2012, 112 people at Christ the King Church in Towson, another former Anglican parish, were brought into full communion with the Catholic Church.

In 2013, parishioners of St. Timothy’s, the former Episcopal parish, were brought

into full communion with the Catholic Church.

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