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## The Catholic priest with nine children

Father Ian Hellyer is a Roman Catholic priest – yet he has a wife and nine children. How can that be when priests have to make a vow of celibacy? Joanna Moorhead finds out that he's one of the few who can offer parishioners a family perspective



**Joanna Moorhead**

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Father Ian Hellyer with his wife, Margaret, and seven of their children. Photograph: Jim Wileman for the Guardian

Father Ian Hellyer is a Roman Catholic priest – but far from being celibate, he's a father. Not just to a couple of children, either: in true Roman Catholic fashion, Father Ian has lots of them – nine, in fact, ranging from 18-year-old Clare to seven-month-old Rose – taking in Teresa (17), Angela (15), Martha (11), John (nine), Luke (seven), Simeon (four) and Gregory (two) in between.

Ian (45) hasn't done all this on his own, naturally: his wife Margaret (43) has been heavily involved too. And yes, he agrees genially over a cup of tea at his cluttered family home, his lifestyle does surprise a lot of people. Just the other day he was wheeling Rose's buggy into a church before a service, clerical collar visible, when a whole row of elderly Catholic ladies turned to stare at him. "They had this mixture of delight and horror on their faces – delight at the baby, and horror that she belonged to me," he says.

This time last year, Ian was an Anglican priest, and he and Margaret and their children lived in a large Victorian vicarage in Devon. The house, and the life, seemed to have been made for them: they had six bedrooms and two staircases. There was a huge garden and plenty of friends for the children in the surrounding villages.

It all seemed rosy, but it wasn't: because deep inside, Ian – who was ordained into the

Anglican priesthood in 1995 – was having doubts about whether he was in the right church. "I felt like a fish out of water," he explains. "The Church of England was making decisions that seemed more to do with the world than with the fundamentals of Christianity. The Church of England was changing its mind about everything all the time. Decision-making seemed to be all about politics, rather than what I felt it should be about, which was God's will."

He had always been close to the Catholic church, because Margaret – they married 19 years ago after meeting as students at Lancaster University – is a Catholic, and the couple have raised their children across both denominations. "We'd go to church twice on a Sunday – once to Ian's church, and once to the Catholic church," says Margaret. When the pope came to Britain last year, the Hellyers went to hear him celebrate mass in Birmingham – and that, says Ian, was pivotal. "Everything fell into place that day," he says. "I knew the Catholic church was where I belonged."

In the past, Anglican priests who made the switch to Catholicism could only become priests if they weren't married, but two years ago, the Vatican changed the rules and established a new organisation – the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham – into which married Anglican priests could be ordained as Catholics after converting.

With that mechanism in place, leaving Anglicanism suddenly seemed a lot more attractive – Ian could leave his church but continue his ministry, despite having a wife and children. Surely, though, that meant the Catholic church was doing exactly what Ian had criticised the Anglican church for doing – changing the rules to suit itself? "For me, the celibacy issue is a discipline – it's not a fundamental tenet, and it was fundamental tenets that I felt were up for grabs in the Church of England."

"Not many people realise this, but the Eastern rite Catholic church, which is in full communion with Rome, has a married clergy. Celibacy isn't a core issue in the way, for example, that the bodily resurrection or the virgin birth are core issues – and these were the sorts of things I felt Anglicans were sometimes unclear about."

But the switch was far from simple: Catholic priests are paid a tiny stipend, and there's no budget to support a priest with a family – let alone one with nine children.

"Lots of our friends were worried about us because it was difficult to see how we'd survive financially if Ian became a priest," says Margaret. "But we both believed this was the right way, the way God wanted us to go, so we thought: the Lord will provide."

That's easy enough to say, not so easy to live out in practice. Many of Ian's former colleagues in the Church of England preferred to stay put until their children were older and he says he can understand why that is. "We knew it was a leap of faith – but we decided to leap."

Telling his Anglican parishioners wasn't easy but, he says, most understood. "I didn't feel guilty about going, but there was a great deal of sadness," he says. They were given a few months' grace to stay on at the vicarage but by the end of the summer, they knew had to leave.

Ian and Margaret worried about the effect on their children. "They loved the vicarage, they had friends nearby, and suddenly there was all this uncertainty," says Margaret. "Where would we live? What would we live on? It was very unsettling for them."

The Hellyers had always been frugal but now the lack of money was a much scarier reality. "I remember going to the cash and carry to buy large quantities of pasta, flour, rice and lentils, and wondering how long our savings would last," says Ian.

"Meanwhile, Margaret was getting larger and larger, as the time was getting closer for the new baby to be born."

By last spring Ian had converted and was studying for the Catholic priesthood, travelling to London one day a week to study at Allen Hall seminary in Chelsea. But one day in May, he couldn't make it. "I had to phone and explain that my wife had gone into labour," he says. "I don't think there can have been many calls like that to a Catholic seminary through the years!"

A few weeks later, with newborn Rose joining all the other Hellyers for the occasion, Ian was ordained – and told that a job had been found for him as chaplain at the University of Plymouth. What is more, the bishop gave him the happy news that a five-bedroom house beside a church in central Plymouth was being made available – and that they could move in right away.

Today that house is a bustling home overflowing with children and toys and schoolbooks (Margaret homeschools four of the children). Ian agrees that, yes, in a church whose leaders have little direct experience of family life, he perhaps does have another perspective to offer – but he is modest about whether an example like his could prompt the Vatican to rethink its rules on celibacy. "I'm happy to be a good witness of how the married priesthood could work, but I don't have a sense that raising it as an issue is my calling in the church," he says. "I'm happy to trust the pope to take the decision."

He says he has always been grateful to his new bishop and the seminary rector for being clear about where his first loyalties lie. "They both said to me that being a father and a husband came ahead of being a priest," he says. But he says he would never want to confuse the roles of spiritual and actual fatherhood. "I wouldn't want to baptise my own children, for example," he says. "My role that day was to be my family's father, not their priest."

Their new house, although not as grand as the old vicarage, does have one advantage: a door that leads from the sitting room on to the altar of the adjoining church. Sometimes, the whole family troops through and Ian says Mass for all 11 of them. As he does – and especially over the next few days, he says – his thoughts will go to the Christmas story. "I think of St Joseph, who guided his family through a difficult time, and always tried to follow God's will," he says.

"This has been an eventful year for us – but in the end, God did indeed provide."

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