

## "An Unlikely Priest"



Originally published in the [Milwaukee Catholic Herald](#)  
By Karen Mahoney

Reposted here from Karen Mahoney's blog "[Write 2 the Point](#)"

As a young boy, Tadeusz Pacholczyk was accustomed to the life of science and scientists. The son of Andrzej, an astrophysics professor at the University of Arizona, the young boy sat wide eyed in his family's living room with his father's colleagues discussing the history and philosophy of science. Of particular interest to him were the Jesuit Priest astronomers from the Vatican Observatory affiliated with the university.

After observing numerous discussions in his Arizona home on the apparent conflicts of faith and science, Pacholczyk knew he wanted to be a part of that life and planned to

attend college for science.

At 15, the aspiring scientist received a fellowship sponsored by the American Heart Association and assigned to a summer rotation with Dr. Jack Copeland, a cardiac surgeon with the U of A Medical Center. Shadowing the busy surgeon cultivated his interest towards the field of the biosciences.

A book and a vacation when he was 17 changed the course of his life and led him in a direction few scientists dare venture. During that vacation, Pacholczyk read an autobiography about The Little Flower, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Influenced by her dogged determination to pursue her vocation by appealing to the mother superior, the bishop and finally the pope, Pacholczyk realized that he was called to pursue his vocation with a similar passion.

"When I was 19, I spent time in the seminary and tested the waters to confirm my calling," he said. "I paid my own way and studied philosophy at the same time. I knew again for sure that God wanted me to become a priest, but I came to understand during that time that I should study science, but I didn't know why or where it would lead."

Pacholczyk returned to the University of Arizona where he earned undergraduate degrees in philosophy, biochemistry, molecular cell biology and chemistry. During that period, he performed research on hormonal regulation of the immune response.

"From there I went to graduate school in Connecticut (Yale) and studied Neurosciences and received me PhD there," he said. "I went to Harvard at that point and studied for three years there doing my post-doc work."

Upon achieving the scientific background that he knew he was supposed to do, it was time to follow God's additional path for his life.

"I went to Rome and studied at the Pontifical North American College, with dual programs in Pontifical Gregorian and Lateran studies," he said. "It seemed like I was forever in school."

In Rome for five years, he focused his work on dogmatic theology and bioethics, examining the question of delayed ensoulment of the human embryo.

Ordained a Transitional Deacon in 1999 in Rome, Pacholczyk returned to his home diocese in Fall River, Massachusetts and was ordained a priest at the Cathedral.

"I was very blessed that the Bishop of my diocese released me to serve full time as Director of Education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia," he said.

His work has led him to testify before members of the Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Virginia and North Carolina State Legislature during deliberations over stem cell research and cloning. He has given presentations and participated in roundtables on contemporary bioethics throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. He has had frequent appearances on CNN, ABC World News Tonight and National Public Radio.

On July 25, he was a guest at the Milwaukee Pfister Hotel for a Mass and a talk the following day in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of Humane Vitae. His discussion 'Stem Cell research in light of Humanae Vitae' attracted more than 200 guests. Sponsored by the Nazareth Project, Bishop William Callahan presided at the anniversary Mass and concelebrated with a dozen area priests.

For the calm, even-tempered Fr. Pacholczyk, the opportunity to combine science and faith are pieces of the same puzzle.

"Many think that science and faith are intrinsically opposed to each other," he said, softly, "That is false and one great big myth. God is the author of both science and true religion. It is an impossible conflict. If there is a conflict it is because science is overstepping its bounds or the reverse—some religious is trying to speak about an area in science that they have no expertise."

With the education to back his theological understanding, Fr. Pacholczyk is comfortable speaking with university professors, scientists, the media and fellow clergy members.

"Bioethics formation augments the ability to exercise a fruitful ministry," he said. "I can reach people because of my training that other priests cannot. I can go do universities and debate professors and interact with scientists that is a group many priests don't have a chance to interact with. Some have scientists in their parishes but generally don't deal with the specific questions that I do."

While Fr. Pacholczyk is comfortable debating topics such as human cloning, stem cell research, in vitro fertilization and end of life issues, much of his day-to-day life is admittedly stressful for the 44-year-old, red haired, bearded priest.

"I have had to debate my former Biology professor at MIT," he said. "When I was a student, I used his book and found myself debating and exposing the errors in an ethical debate. When we first began, the small classroom had a few seats filled, but after our PowerPoint demonstrations and debating, the room was over-filled. It was cool, but it was quite stressful too. It is through God's grace that he has given me a gift to remain calm. I always try to keep my cool and not ever to get into a shouting situation and I have never have."

In his position as Director at the NCBC, Fr. Pacholczyk is amazed at the changes not only in society, but among Catholics as well.

"Our society is moving very rapidly into a future that is filled with new forms of biotechnology and it is already affecting how new life comes into the world," he said. "Recently, in Britain, a mother had a family history of breast cancer. What she did was to make 11 embryos and had each one of them tested for the gene for breast cancer. The ones that had the genes were either frozen or thrown away. The only ones to be implanted are the ones that didn't have the genes. We are seeing stem cells, cloning, genetic testing—our Church exercises a pivotal and well developed criteria that helps to answer questions and Church is an essential voice as the future of society lies in these questions."

For many skeptics who disbelieve the correlation between science and faith, Fr. Pacholczyk reminds that much of the questions he examines are rooted in Natural Law.

"What that means is that you don't actually need faith to understand," he said. "Everyone knows that we shouldn't kill someone else. Although it is revealed in the Ten Commandments, we all knew that even if He hadn't told us, we still know it is wrong—it is an obvious thing. A lot of my work deals with natural law questions. But it is all still in the bigger framework of faith."

Researching all of Church documents pertaining to life, ethics and medical situations, Fr. Pacholczyk believes that these documents demonstrate that faith permeates the whole view.

"Many sense these truths can be known on their own," he said, adding, "At our center, we deal with issues such as invitro fertilization-which many Catholics are probably not aware that it is a huge ethical problem, to end of life nutrition and hydration issues. We have a consulting service with six full time ethicists and a 10-12 member hard hitting support staff to provide more than 600 consultations per year. We also provide consultation for hospitals and the Vatican when they are reviewing documents."

As this is an election year, Fr. Pacholczyk encourages Catholics to educate themselves about ways to vote appropriately. It is important for Catholics to understand that there is a hierarchy of goods and that some issues far outweigh other issues.

"If Catholics get the order wrong, they are going to end up harming the good of society and their own lives," he said. "Life is at the top of the priority and if we structure society where human life is destroyed and violated and no one does anything—we are sowing seeds of our own destruction. It is important to establish power, do your homework and bring your vote and don't vote in favor of someone who inverts the goods and turns things upside down....like saying it is OK to do abortions as long as the budget is balanced."

While balancing the budget is good, it is short term, admitted Pacholczyk, who affirmed that taking human life affects the entire society and subsequent generations. It is important to take your values to the ballot box.

"Many Catholics have adopted a Kennedy mindset by saying that they will be Catholic on Sunday between 11-12 and the rest of the week is mine," he said. "Nothing will bleed over and they will build compartments in their minds and live a highly segregated existence."

Living this type of existence is the most dangerous type of existence, which will eventually lead to personal collapse.

"The Lord Jesus wants to affect the entire week—24-7, to live with us every hour," Fr. Pacholczyk said, adding, "He wants to us to be completely His and live a fruitful reality. That is a gift."

For More Information:  
National Catholic Bioethics Center  
6399 Drexel RD  
Philadelphia, PA 19151  
[www.ncbcenter.org](http://www.ncbcenter.org)  
215-877-2660

POSTED BY [ROMAN CATHOLIC VOCATIONS](#) AT 8:39 AM [M](#) [B](#) [t](#) [f](#) [p](#)

LABELS: [DISCERNMENT](#), [PRIESTHOOD](#), [VOCATION STORY](#), [VOCATIONS](#)