

Home
News

Main Categories

- [Top News](#)
- [Nation](#)
- [States](#)
- [Washington/Politics](#)
- [World](#)
- [Editorial/Opinion](#)
- [Health & Science](#)
- [Census](#)
- [Offbeat](#)
- More News**
- [Columnists](#)
- [Lotteries](#)
- [City Guides](#)
- [Government Guide](#)
- [Talk Today](#)
- [Money](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Weather](#)

Nation

▪ [E-mail this story](#) ▪ [Subscribe to the newspaper](#) ▪ [Sign-up for e-mail news](#)

06/11/2002 - Updated 11:13 AM ET

Striving to 'live in truth'

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

FALL RIVER, Mass. — In an anything-goes society, the Rev. Roger Landry is an arrow pointed toward absolute truth. Amid a daily litany of news about sexual abuse and coverups in the Catholic church, Landry, 32, knows every priest is in the spotlight. He feels called to be one holy role model, for the sake of the church and for the sake of his particular parishioners. Fall River was home to the Rev. James Porter, a notorious pedophile priest who molested more than 200 children before he was convicted in 1992. The town is just 50 miles south of Boston, epicenter of the current scandal.



By Eileen Blass, USA TODAY
Rev. Landry is a parish priest at Espirito Santo Church in Fall River, Mass.

[Read more below](#)

ARCHIVES
SEARCH FOR
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES
[CLICK HERE](#)

NEW E-MAIL
**GET NEWS
IN YOUR INBOX**
[Click here to get the
Daily Briefing in your
inbox](#)

Photo
Gallery



- [Choosing the ordained life](#)

Yet, Landry says, all the evil history and present-day pressure make no inroads on his joy in the priesthood — a vocation he recognized early on.

"I knew when I was 4 years old, and I thought the priest was the luckiest man in the universe to hold the Lord in his hands and be able to give him to others," says Landry, who grew up 75 miles north of here, in Lowell.

In his choices, his confident conservatism and his relentless schedule, Landry is in many ways representative of today's young priests. While a day in his life as a pastor and high school chaplain is particular to this Portuguese-accented factory town of 92,000, it also exemplifies in many ways the dilemmas facing all priests, once unquestioningly respected but now relentlessly suspect.

Landry, ordained in 1999, holds in his mind a vivid image of Sean O'Malley, the current bishop of Fall River, addressing Landry and other priests who came to town years after Porter.

O'Malley wept as "he told us how Porter raped a boy and told him that if the boy told anyone, God would be angry with them. The boy told his father, and the next day his father died. I realized we can never underestimate or overlook the pain these victims suffered. We should never be thinking about the cost of settlements or dealing with these issues. The church can recover from financial bankruptcy but not moral bankruptcy."

Every move he makes is calculated to show that the trust his parishioners place in him is deserved.

If there's a desk, he's behind it.

If he's with teens or children in church or school, he makes sure the room has a

window or an open door, or some other adult nearby.

Even if he's spinning an exercise bike at a local health club or playing hoops in the parish hall, he wears a black T-shirt and shorts, as if to say: "I'll never forget I'm a priest." He is deeply aware of the damage done by Porter and others who violated their vows, forgot or perverted their priestly roles.

"A priest who lies about himself can't be trusted to bring people to God or share the truth," he says.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meets Thursday in Dallas to vote on new rules for preventing, reporting and removing abusers, an estimated 1,500 priests among 140,000 in the past 40 years.

While bishops debate zero tolerance for abusers, Landry thinks the church should go even further: "We need to have a zero-tolerance policy on people who cheat on their vocations in any form."

Chastity, he says, is not about controlling sexual desires. "It's a gift that allows us to love appropriately to our role. It's more than saying no to sex. Saying yes to Christ is what sustains us in being faithful to our vows."

Landry's mild appearance — 5-foot-6 with watery blue eyes and a fuzz of thinning hair — belies a ferocious competitive spirit. He was a top high school and college athlete, a bulldog in debate.

He advocates a "manly spirituality I saw in my dad, the hardest worker I've ever seen. I learned more about the priesthood from my father than anyone: the idea of sacrificial love for others, fidelity to God and family."

The "sweet burden" of priestly duties consumes his days from 4:45 a.m. to 11 p.m., as it has since he arrived two years ago. This is his first priestly assignment and, like most of the 120 active priests and 45 religious brothers serving 100 parishes in the diocese of 60,000, he has multiple tasks: chaplain for Bishop Connolly High School and one of two parish priests at a deeply pious working-class church, Espirito Santo. The job comes with a rainbow of demands, from baptisms to burials, counseling teens to visiting the infirm.

"Patience sounds nice, but it's a terribly difficult virtue. One of the greatest things I have learned from the people in the parish is the example of how someone can rest in God during times of great suffering," says Landry, whose life is blessed, he says, by loving, healthy parents, a twin brother, Scot, sister Colleen and brother Greg.

Yet Landry's eye is also on the wider horizon, where he says the "Catholic vision of human dignity" needs fresh lieutenants in the culture wars. He's qualified for service on several fronts, a graduate of the finest education that U.S. society and the Catholic church can offer:

- Honors at Harvard, "the first time I faced serious disagreement and realized I had a lot to learn about how to present God's ideas." He's still working on presenting them to teenagers like Janelle Moynagh, 17, who sums up his religion lectures: "You know he's a Harvard guy, so he pours it on. But he's young."
- An interlude in politics as a youth campaign organizer for 25 conservative candidates during the 1992 Republican congressional revolution. But he wanted more than earthly victories.
- Seminary in Rome with a concentration on moral theology in marriage and family life and in bioethics — "issues that often put people on the fence with their faith." He was featured in the 1997 book *The New Men: Inside the Vatican's Elite School for American Priests*, which described six seminarians' training in the alma mater of many U.S. bishops and cardinals.

Landry's training comes to life in the lectures he gives around the diocese on controversial and often misunderstood Catholic teachings. He radiates certainty that what might seem like a long list of sins and thou-shalt-nots about sexuality and relationships are in fact "treasures of truth that set people free when they

really understand them. Living in truth leads to joy."

This unwavering focus on toeing the doctrinal line differentiates most young priests from the baby boomers who preceded them, Landry says. Midcareer priests "trained in the days when seminaries emphasized pastoral care and community building, with the Mass as a celebration of our faith together. They may have been more likely to bend on sticking points or tell people to follow their conscience in the hope that they will return to faithful practice.

"We under-35 priests think we need to be really clear on the truth. It's not like we want to drive people away by being strict. We want to challenge people."

He echoes the message of Pope John Paul II, who electrified Landry at World Youth Day in Denver in 1993. A photo in Landry's church office shows his ordination class surrounding the pope, beaming like the winning coach of a 30-something varsity team in clerical black and white.

If there's less talk these days of campaigning for economic, social and military justice, Landry says it's because his generation of priests and their bishops are turning back to the fundamentals on the beginning, the end and the dignity of life.

"We know 95% of Catholics will use artificial birth control at some point. You are definitely not preaching to the choir. But I keep going because I know I'm not working alone. It's my job to bring God to the table and try to get out of the way."

The high school may be the greatest challenge in his day. "Kids are so different now. I get questions on the morality of oral sex. Would I have ever asked that of a priest? No way! No way!"

Still, his greatest joy is the Eucharistic service at Espirito Santo. One twilight, when 30 people have braved a thunderstorm to attend Mass, Landry leaps into his prayers with fresh energy, his voice low and urgent. His homily speaks of Mary, mother of Jesus, "who saw God in everything."

Then comes the moment for which he became a priest, the moment that transcends the priest and gives the faithful a window to God. He lifts up the host, in which Catholics believe Jesus is present. Landry says he is "the luckiest man alive."

AD

USATODAY.com partners: [USA Weekend](#) • [Sports Weekly](#) • [Education](#) • [Space.com](#)

[Home](#) • [Travel](#) • [News](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

Resources: [Mobile News](#) • [Site Map](#) • [FAQ](#) • [Contact Us](#)
[Email News](#) • [Jobs with Us](#) • [Terms of service](#) • [Privacy Policy](#) • [Media Kit](#) • [Press Room](#)

Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds [XML](#)
Add USATODAY.com headlines to your Web site

© Copyright 2005 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)