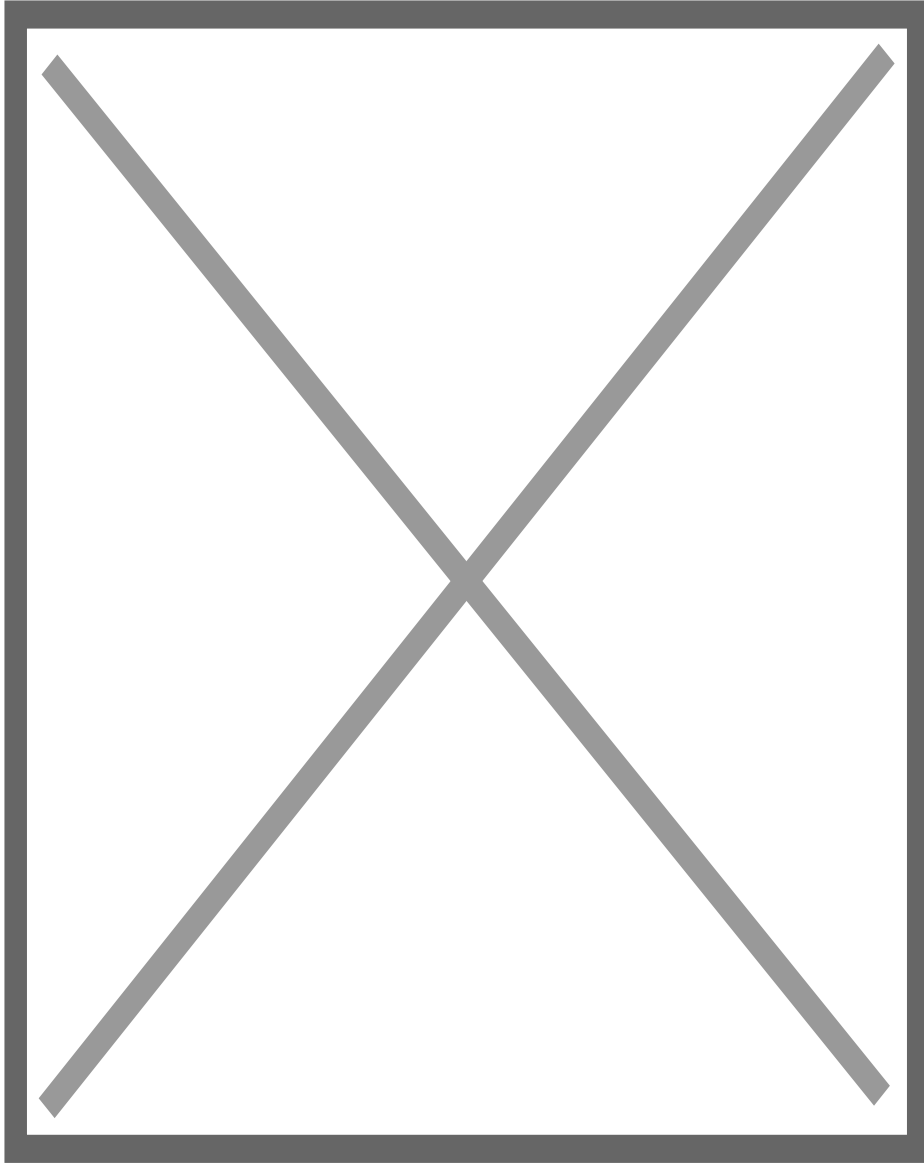


Asking “Who am I?” with Bonhoeffer

As I face unexpected early retirement, I tell myself that the answer is not yet known.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration

“Who am I?” asks Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his famous poem of that name, written from Tegel Prison, where he was detained by the Nazi regime. The poem reflects on how he could appear to be one person in public—confident, assured in front of the guards and the other prisoners—and in private to himself “a contemptibly woebegone weakling.” He asks himself, am I “one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both

at once?”

Bonhoeffer's words haunt me. I was given the poem by my first spiritual director in the 1990s. It is a classic in spiritual discernment. Now, as I prepare for a fresh, pretty frightening step into the unknown—retirement from full-time ministry on health grounds at the end of July—Bonhoeffer's poem has come alive again. I know: Retirement is hardly as stressful or desperate as the existential situation faced by Bonhoeffer. But it is still a genuine “who am I?” moment. I have been ordained for 21 years, and my whole adult life has—for good or ill—been oriented around my call to full-time ordained ministry. Pretty much from the moment I came to faith in my mid-20s, 30 years ago, this call has been my focus.

In my head, I know that in retirement I shall remain a priest. The question is, Who am I at a heart level? Well, here are some of my current answers. Early retirement represents the death of long-cherished ministry plans and futures. Given that I live in church-owned housing, it also represents the prospect of losing my home at the same time as I lose roles which have given my life real shape and purpose. Retirement is the prospect of an unchosen financial precariousness. I have long known in my head that being a full-time Church of England priest is relatively cosseted precisely because I serve an institution that offers meaning, purpose, a place to live, and money enough. Now I know it in my heart. The prospect of early retirement is an encounter with being stripped, a chastening exposure to my own absurdity, vanity, and self-importance. My heart hurts.

Who am I? I tell myself that the answer is not yet known. I am in transition, again. I shall be translated into a new reality with its own measure of grace and grit. I tell myself that in retirement I shall become something new and discover “play” again. I will stand stock still and ponder. I shall still write and broadcast. Maybe I shall become more compassionate. I like that line of Henri Nouwen's: Compassion is nothing more or less than the “full immersion in the condition of being human.” If he's right, and I think he is, then compassion surely implies that to be human is all about relationship and connection. For without relationship I can't see how it is possible to suffer with and alongside other humans. There's a thought. What if, in an unexpected retirement, I might become more open and loving?

Bonhoeffer also said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” I find this a shocking statement, and no less shocking when we make it gender inclusive. If Bonhoeffer is correct, every person who is called by Christ is called to die. It is the baptismal vocation of all, first, and the vocation of a priest, second. It is the outworking of Jesus' words, “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them; those who lose them for my sake, will gain them.” Before I came to faith, Jesus' words made me think Christianity was a death cult. Faith has helped me understand that his call to come and die is an invitation into the fullness of life; Jesus invites his followers to let go of power and control. More than that: to die so that we can be raised in him.

So is that the real answer to the question of who I am: I am, like everyone, called to come and die? It sounds both right, theologically, and a bit daunting to live by, especially when you are facing a retirement because your body has broken down at a youngish age. I fear that this answer could turn an already potentially challenging retirement into a pity party.

I hope not. Whether a person is retired or active, the call to die is an invitation to actually find life in the risen Christ. To put it another way, the vocation is to be a person of the third day. As John's Gospel has it, on the third day God acts: Water is turned into wine, Lazarus is raised, and, definitively, the risen Christ reveals the peaceable kingdom in resurrection's garden. I guess my experience, like that of many with broken bodies, is that the third day can feel a very long time coming. I know what it is to get stuck at Good Friday or, just as likely, at Holy Saturday. That happens when who you were just won't do for what you have become or are becoming.

Nonetheless, Christ is raised from the dead. Death cannot keep a good God down. The Christian faith is no mere morality play, and the way of Christ is not, first and foremost, about correct behavior. It is about the death of self. In the midst of that death, that depth charge in one's complacency, one might just be changed. I know that

along the line of my wounds, my grief, and my bewilderment at retirement, God waits. Christ invites me to place my hurting, doubting hands in his wounded side. He comes alongside me on the lonely road as I head away from the catastrophe of loss; he breaks bread and shows me a new world. Like Bonhoeffer, somehow I too say, "Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. / Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!"