

On the occasion of my 35th anniversary of priesthood . . .

On May 17, 2021 I will have been ordained a priest of the Catholic Church for 35 years. Here is a bit of my vocation story.

My reawakening to my Catholic faith happened when I was in my first year at the University of Illinois (Chicago campus). I never abandoned my faith. I believed, but did not seem to have time to practice it during my early teenaged years. During a time of self-doubt and personal struggle I became aware of God's loving presence. Again, I always believed in God, but in a certain moment I experienced God's love for me.

Since that moment my life settled down, and I became more confident in my abilities and university studies. It dawned on me that I should begin to "officially" pray, that is, pray prayers that good Catholics ought to know by heart. Problem was: I had forgotten all those prayers. So, back to grade 1 in learning prayers.

I was always fascinated by the rosary. At St. Turibius grade school, the parochial school of the parish, from third grade onward the school day began with Mass. During the month of May, right after the Mass, the priest would lead the whole school in the rosary. Even though we had to kneel for the whole rosary, it was something I did not mind.

So, I looked for my First Communion prayer book and rosary. I found them in my sock drawer. I relearned my prayers and started to pray the rosary on my own.

I was studying Business Management. Believe it or not, my hero in the business world was the young Donald Trump. I learned how he made millions in and through business deals. I thought that would be a good thing for me. I was preparing myself to enter the business world.

My prayer life increased as time went on. Then, I asked the Lord "the dangerous question." What's the "dangerous question?" I asked: "Lord, is there anything you want me to do for you."

I say that's the dangerous question because if you ask it, the Lord is likely to tell you! Our God is a gentleman. He does not push His will upon us, but He does have a will for us. The Lord has a plan, a purpose, a calling for each of us. If you ask, He will tell you.

I asked the dangerous question, and it's not that I heard an audible voice, but a notion came from within me: "Be my priest."

This shocked me. I was not expecting this. I told the Lord I had already decided what I wanted to be—a businessman, a family man, a millionaire! I told the Lord I would be a very good Christian businessman and even give a good part of my money to the Church.

I avoided asking the dangerous question again, but the awareness of the Lord's answer to me remained. Finally, I made a deal with the Lord. I told the Lord if I still had the awareness of His answer as I entered my fourth year of university, I would inquire about the possibility of entering a seminary.

At this time of my life, I knew nothing about St. John Bosco and his Salesians. Then, I saw a vocation ad in the Chicago Illini newspaper. I ripped the page out and saved it. I liked how the ad described the Salesian mission as working for youth, and how the Salesian family was spread all over the world.

The fourth year came, and I had to be true to my agreement with the Lord. His answer about being a priest still occupied my mind. I decided to write a letter to the Salesians right after I finished my first quarter exams, which I did.

I received a response from the Salesian vocation director very quickly. He said he would be in the Chicago area soon, and would like to meet me and my parents. There was a problem: I did not tell anyone, including my parents, about the possibility of going to a seminary. Now, this priest is coming to my house!

I came home from school one afternoon, and asked my Mom to sit down. She thought I was in some kind of trouble. As I revealed to her what was going on and what I may be pursuing, she began to cry. I tried to calm her. She said I did not understand. Then, she told me she almost lost me before I was born. Mom said she prayed to the Blessed Virgin that if the child she was carrying was born, the child would be hers. Through her tears Mom said: "Now, she is taking me for my word!"

Things worked themselves out, arrangements were made, and I was to begin seminary studies the following September in New Jersey, at Don Bosco College. I still did not know much about this saint that spent his life educating young people. I knew little of his spirituality. I would find out a lot in my first year at the seminary.

For one, St. John Bosco gave credit to the Blessed Mother for all he was able to do for young people. He had a very strong Marian devotion, even to the point of saying one of the main purposes of the Salesian congregation is to spread devotion to Mary, the Help of Christians. Don Bosco also said that every Salesian vocation is brought to the congregation through the direct influence of the Blessed Mother. And, it is believed that Don Bosco began his work for young people on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, when he encountered a street kid wanting to get out of the cold.

It seemed to me that “signs” or “coincidences” were lining up. My mother dedicating me to the Blessed Mother even before I was born. The rosary bringing me back to the practice of my faith. And, then, I came upon a carbon copy (remember those?) of my first letter to the Salesians—the letter I promised myself I’d write after my exams. The letter was dated December 8. Don Bosco began his work for youth on December 8. I began my Salesian journey on December 8.

My Marian devotion has supported me throughout my seminary years, and has sustained me in the priesthood. The rosary is my favorite devotion. I don’t miss a day without praying the rosary. The rosary is called the "compendium of the entire gospel." With each decade of the rosary we are to reflect on a different aspect of Christ's life and work of salvation. The rosary is "the school of Mary." It teaches us about her Son. It leads us deeper into the mystery of who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

I have no doubt that the Blessed Mother has led me to the Salesians of Don Bosco, and guided me throughout my vocational journey. In my priesthood she has been my help, and has brought me closer to the heart of her Son, whose priest I am—now for 35 years.