

dare to say

YES



Stories of young men  
who said yes to God's call

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Title page and illustrations by Gabrielle Castillo

# Table of contents

Foreword by Cardinal John Dew, Archbishop of Wellington

Be willing to take a risk - <i>Fr Joy Thottankara</i>	1
Could God be calling me? - <i>Mmgr Gerard Burns</i>	2
A journey with unexpected turns - <i>Seminarian Kinh Nguyen</i>	4
A vocational story - <i>Fr Patrick Bridgman</i>	6
The unexpectedness of God's invitation - <i>Fr James Lyons</i>	8
Which way? - <i>Fr Andrew Kim</i>	10
Come follow me - <i>Seminarian Matthew White</i>	12
Do what makes you happy! - <i>Fr David Dowling</i>	14
From rugby field to seminary - <i>Fr Seph Pijfers</i>	16
What do you really want? - <i>Seminarian Emilio Capin</i>	19
Why would God choose me? - <i>Cardinal John Dew</i>	20
A divine change of career - <i>Fr Dennis Nacorda</i>	22
The road not taken - <i>Seminarian Alfred Tong</i>	24
Bringing Jesus to others - <i>Fr Maleko Tufuga</i>	26
Come and see - <i>Fr Bill Warwick</i>	28
Just trust and follow - <i>Fr Michael Bellizzi</i>	30
Follow God's North - <i>Seminarian Gerson Badayos</i>	32





## Archbishop of Wellington

PO Box 1937, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

Dear Readers of this booklet ***"Dare to say YES,"***

I am delighted to greet you as you begin to read these wonderful stories of priests and seminarians who have been called by God. Each of them has taken time to listen to God's voice in the depths of their hearts. It is not always easy to listen for God speaking to us, but we all need to do that so that we can live happy and contented lives.

I encourage you to read these stories, to think about them and to talk with God about them too. It may be that God is also asking you to think about becoming a priest and serving the people. It is also a very good idea to ask God's help as you think about your own future and life. God's Spirit will help you decide what is the best thing for you to do with your life, what will bring you peace. Know that you can do something wonderful with your life.

Please pray for me in my ministry as your bishop.

With every blessing and good wish

Yours sincerely in the Lord

John Cardinal Dew  
Archbishop of Wellington



# *Be willing to take a risk*

Fr Joy Thottankara

God calls everyone in a different way, sometimes in a mysterious way but most of the time, in the ordinary moments of life. For me it was when I received my First Holy Communion and Confirmation. It was at an Ordination ceremony in Kerala where I come from. A young man was being ordained as a priest at the same Mass. After that, I couldn't stop thinking about becoming a priest!

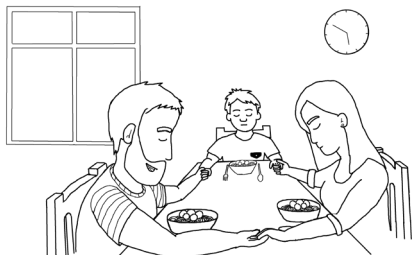
For me, the call to priesthood is an invitation to have a personal friendship with Jesus and to bring Jesus to the people I am called to serve. It is not because I am fit or worthy, but because of the love of Christ for me.

When I began my seminary training there were many of us, but a lot of my fellow students eventually left and pursued other ways of life. Sometimes I wondered if I too should leave and study something different, get a job, get married and have an ordinary life. But when I reflected on my life, deep down in my heart the desire to be a priest was still there. I just knew I had to keep going.

Whichever path you follow, you have to be willing to take a risk in life. I always keep in mind the promise that God made in the book of Jeremiah in the Bible – that God knows what plans He has for us, and that His plans for us are good. Making the choice to stay on the journey to priesthood took some courage, but I have never regretted the decision to continue even when my friends left.

Being a priest gives me the opportunity to bring the love of Christ to the people I am called to serve. It gives me joy to know that I have been able to help someone who is sick, comfort someone who is dying, or offer guidance to a young person who is searching. When I pray for someone in the name of Christ, I know that it brings peace to people's lives. This gives me the joy and energy to continue my ministry of the priesthood.

# Could God be calling me?



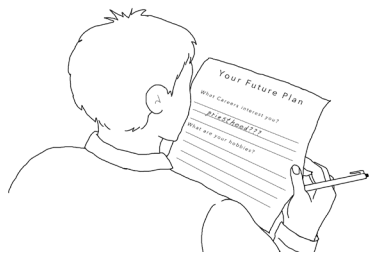
Msgr Gerard Burns

I grew up in a very ordinary Catholic family - we went to Mass every Sunday and we prayed grace before meals. We were part of the local parish community, and I was fortunate to go to a Catholic school

because it meant that I saw priests in the ordinary day-to-day life, not just on Sundays. I think that made an impression on me.

Towards the end of my college years, a priest asked me: "Have you ever thought about being a priest?" I said a quick "No"! But in fact, that was not true... I had thought about it, but I didn't really want to admit it!

You see, I couldn't imagine myself being a priest. It didn't fit into the image I had of myself. I didn't think I was worthy, holy enough or even capable – there'd be lots of study involved and I was not sure I could manage that.



So when the priest said this to me I was surprised! I thought oh, he thinks that perhaps I might be worthy, I might be capable. I went away and thought about it. I was not sure if it was for me but eventually, I decided to give it a go.

During the seminary years I found it was a fulfilling thing. I wanted to do something good with my life. I could see that a priest helped people at the very deepest part of their being. I could make a difference in a much deeper way than what I would be able to do through other jobs. I had thought of



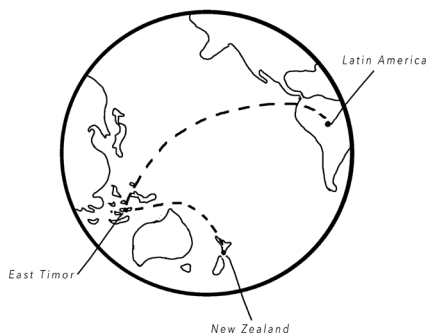


becoming a social worker, or a journalist. But then I thought that if I really wanted to do something good in the world, perhaps helping people with their spiritual wellbeing was a very important and good thing to do.

And that was the way God called me... God called me through the invitation of that priest, through the sense of fulfilment that I found in doing the studies for priesthood, through the pastoral practice work that we did, meeting and interacting with people... in all sorts of ways, God's love called me and drew me.

I didn't always realize what was happening. It was more that I slowly started to think I could do this, this seemed good. There were moments of doubt - when I thought it was too much, that I could not manage it. Could I really do it for my whole life? Could I live without a wife and family? All those kinds of questions came up. But with the support of many others, I finally became a priest 35 years ago.

It gives me joy to see the grace of God in the people that I'm sent to, especially those who are in any kind of need. When I was in seminary, I came to see that one of the important parts of being a priest for me is not only to help individuals but to help people as a group, to change society. Social Justice became important for me. I worked in Latin America for eight years and later spent some time in East Timor.



Back in Aotearoa I have worked in multi-cultural parishes and now with Maori. Sometimes, especially in Latin America, I found myself in difficult and even dangerous situations. My life was under threat. It was an intense time of fear, but also of a deep encounter of God's love as the people around us cared for us deeply.

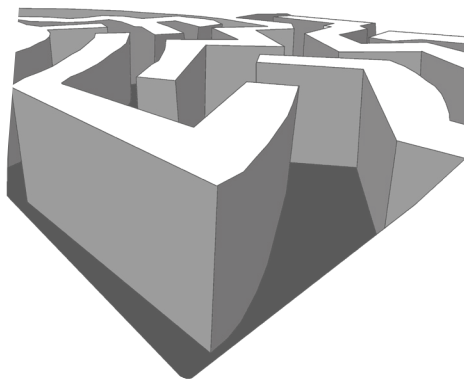
My experience of priesthood – whether preaching the Word, celebrating the Sacraments, being with people in different moments of life – has been an encounter with the Lord Jesus, and a very great privilege.

# *A journey with unexpected turns*

Seminarian Kinh Nguyen

I come from Vietnam and was born in a Catholic family. I was baptised when I was only two days old! My name, Kinh, was chosen for me because it means a person who is a good example for others. This is what I hope to be.

From an early age, I have always seen Jesus as my friend and Saviour. Many times, He is my teacher, but He is more than that. He is also my friend, and He asks me to follow him. This is how my journey to priesthood began.



When I was a teenager, I wanted to be a builder and spent two years working as a brick layer. Then one day, at the Lunar New Year festivities, I met my cousin who is a religious priest. I remember watching him at the altar during Mass and thinking that he looked very holy. In our village we have always had great respect for the priest. He is seen as a good model to follow.

We started talking about his life as a priest, and how he experienced his vocation. Finally, he asked me, "Would you like to become a priest?" My immediate answer was "no!" I said no because in my mind, to be a priest you needed to be a very intelligent and holy man. I thought, "I'm not intelligent, and I am not holy". I went back home but found that my cousin's question still bothered me.

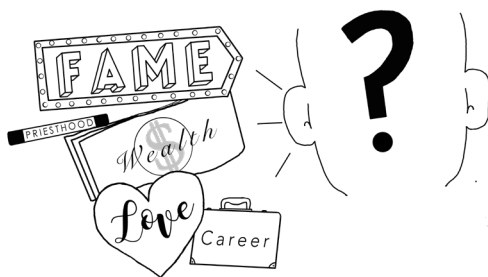
So, one day I jokingly said to my parents that I might consider priesthood. To my surprise, they were happy and encouraged me to give it a try! At that moment I decided to check it out and see if I could join a religious order in Vietnam. But it was a longer journey than I had expected.

After my quick decision, I discovered that there were many obstacles and difficulties. Many times, I felt that I was not good enough. Through the encouragement of friends and other people who reminded me that Jesus loves me, I was able to continue.

Discovering my vocation is more about discovering Jesus' love for me, rather than about me being good enough for Him. God can speak to us through other people, but most of all He speaks to us when we pray. I needed to learn how to spend time with Jesus in prayer and listen to His voice.

My journey took unexpected turns. I first entered the seminary to join a religious order, the SVDs. It turned out that it was not the right place for me. I decided to leave, and for a while I really didn't know what to do with my life. It was a very hard time for me. I sought the advice of some priests I know, and they suggested that I keep asking God for direction and in the meantime, do something that is good for my future.

I thought about giving it all up and being a normal person – to get married and have a family, to have a job and enjoy life with my friends. But somehow, I still believed that I was meant to become a priest and I kept coming back to that thought. I had to find courage to persevere, to follow Jesus and keep believing that God would lead me in the right way.



I decided to learn English, although I had no idea that I would end up in New Zealand studying for the priesthood! It was a big decision for me to come to this country, I didn't know how life would be here, but God gave me courage. I am now in my third year at Holy Cross Seminary in Auckland, and one day I hope to be a priest in Wellington Archdiocese.

# A vocational story

Fr Patrick Bridgman

Each night, after the evening meal and a bath, my brothers and I would jump into bed and Mum would say prayers with us. "God bless Mummy and Daddy, God bless..." and there followed the names of family members and extended whanau. As we grew older, we continued to pray each night in the simplest of ways. Prayer became a normal part of our day.

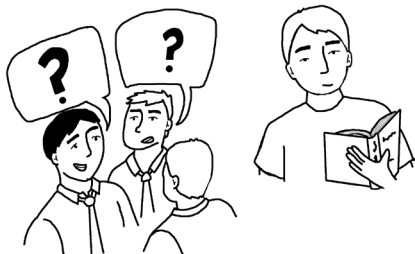
At Mass on Sundays, we would walk through the Church foyer past a photo of Pope Paul VI, his eyes kind, his smile gentle, a grandfatherly gaze. On any given Sunday, there at the altar would be Fr Paddy Carmody, Fr David Orange, Fr Alan Roberts or Fr Eddie Condra. Each of them was engaging, friendly, and kind. On our way home Mum and Dad would chat about the homily that had been preached and would ask us about something the priest had said.

No wonder this boy, who loved to pretend he was a policeman, cowboy, or a marine, would also sometimes put on a dressing gown and white cloak and 'play Mass'!



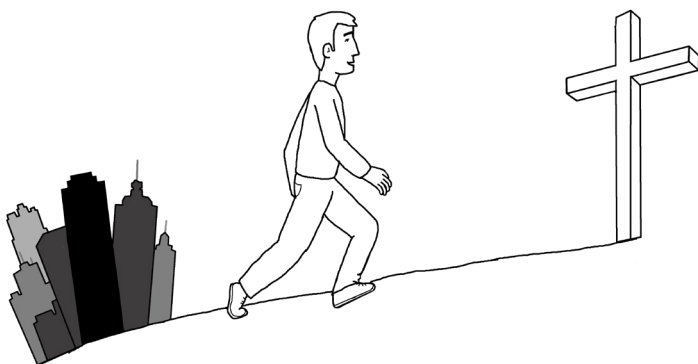
Through my College years, not many of my friends went to Church. Yet their questions about what we did on Sunday, and why we believed what Catholics believe, nudged me to find

out more about the faith. When friends came to stay over, their fascination with the Mass always amazed me. The daily sense that God was with me despite the ups and downs of family and school life was something clearly missing in the lives of most friends.



On my way home from University, I would often pop into St Mary of the Angels Church. I would light a candle or two before the Altar of Our Lady and kneel, just for a little while, remembering people I had just met, family members who needed a prayer, or essays that needed to be written. The mind and the day seemed to clear as the evening light came through the stained-glass windows above the altar.

And then, one day, I found myself sitting in a Business Management Lecture. The Professor was speaking of the signs of a 'crisis of control' in a new company. Fellow students wrote furiously with their pens. It was then that I suddenly realised that the corporate business life was not for me. Neither were my childhood fantasies of being a policeman, a cowboy, or a marine. I understood that it was time to consider the possibility of following in the footsteps of those men I had known as a boy at Church on Sundays, and to seek to follow the one who had been with me these past 21 years - Jesus.



And so I entered the seminary, which is the place where you live and study to be a priest. The years I spent there were packed with new discoveries and knowledge about myself, my faith, and the world. The academic studies, spiritual development and pastoral practice were challenging and inspiring. Fellow students became lifelong friends, the staff were always there to help, and altogether those years were amazing.

I was ordained to serve God's people as a priest and was sent to my first parish. It was incredible! Everyone was so welcoming and accepting, even when I was still figuring things out as a new priest. They embraced me and encouraged me to grow. I discovered that the life of a priest is full and

varied. I could visit parishioners in their homes, get involved in the schools, minister to the sick in hospital and the elderly in retirement homes, celebrate the Sacraments with the people of God... All this helps me to grow in my own relationship with Jesus.

I have been a priest now for 26 years. Never is a day the same, and there is always so much to give thanks for, and so much to learn. It is incredibly fulfilling to be able to encourage people to recognise the presence of God in their lives, and to understand that they are the presence of Jesus for others... And to recognise that this is equally true for me, Patrick.

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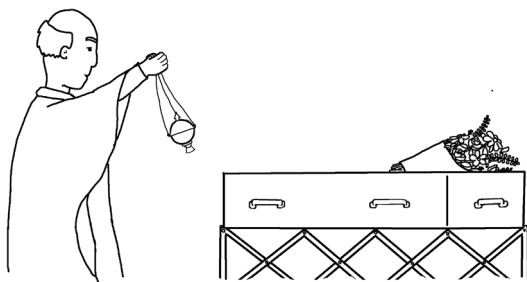
# *The unexpectedness of God's invitation*

Fr James Lyons

The beginning of becoming a priest has no recipe. Every priest will have a different answer to the question: What led you to the priesthood? For myself, it was a combination of many encounters and observations.

One that made a lasting impression was as unexpected as it was simple, and, in hindsight, quite comical.

I was an altar server from a young age and very confident in the role. So confident that, well before the end of a Requiem Mass, when the celebrant asked for the thurible used to incense the coffin, I signalled that it was too early for this.

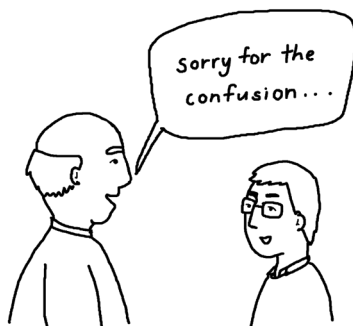


This was prior to the reforms in the liturgy that came from the Second Vatican Council (1960s) and the priest still led the Mass with his back to and some distance from the people.

He beckoned me over and told me he needed the thurible. So I got it and he went down to the casket and circled it with incense – even though it wasn't the proper time and the incense wasn't yet burning.

He knew I was puzzled and confused, so after Mass he explained: You're right, Jimmy, it wasn't the proper time. But I had forgotten the name of the person I was burying so the only thing I could do was go and look at the name on the lid of the coffin. The thurible was my cover!

I was very impressed by the honesty, and humility of this priest and the fact that he would explain his action to a little boy. As I grew, I learnt a lot more about his pastoral sensitivity and admired him greatly. He was one of the sparks that lit my vocation.



As a priest I'm grateful for the liturgical reforms that have allowed me to celebrate Mass much closer to the people – and very near the casket - because there have been times when the name of the deceased has left my mind and I've been able to take a quick look, without the aid of incense!

# Which way?

Fr Andrew Kim

I think I have an unofficial world record. I was a seminarian for twenty whole years. I was the last seminarian among my sixty classmates. My friends made a joke about me, calling me a permanent seminarian, like a permanent deacon.

I joined the seminary in Korea when I finished secondary school. I was eighteen when I joined the Redemptorists. It was nearly time to make my final vows. But I wasn't sure that it was God's call for me. I wanted to experience more about the world, to meet different people in society. I decided to leave. Maybe that time I didn't listen to God's voice clearly. I was not sure what God wants from me and where I could go to follow his voice.

When I left the seminary, people started to talk about me rather than encourage me. They tried to figure out why I had left, what was my problem... There was a lot of gossip about me. Some of my friends treated me as a failure. I felt very hurt and became very stressed and depressed. My parents and family were worried about me.

My spiritual advisor knew that I was confused about my vocation. He didn't push me to go back to the seminary, instead advising me to listen to God's voice. But I didn't really know how to listen and figure out what was God's voice from among all the others voices we hear. I thought that God was always keeping quiet and never saying anything. I was more confused than ever.





I decided to travel. I worked at different jobs and tried to open my mind and to listen to what God wants from me. During this time, I think I met Jesus on the street and in workplaces. I saw the face of Jesus on people and experienced His life in their lives.



My time in third world countries especially helped me to understand people's lives as they shared their stories and problems with me. They treated me as their brother and friend. I was very happy, and I realised that Jesus wants me to serve Him through serving the people of God. I realised that He had been calling me all the time.

I decided to join the seminary again. But there was a problem. I was thirty-eight years old, too old to re-join the seminary in Korea. Then, one of my priest friends suggested that I go to New Zealand and join a seminary there. I didn't hesitate to say yes. I knew clearly that it is God's calling to come to New Zealand. I am very happy to be here and happy to follow God's calling. I finally became a priest in 2012. It gives me great joy to be able to help people. Being a priest means I can be with the people in a special way. I am very happy to be a priest, and I know that this is what God wants for us, to be happy in what we do.



All of us are on the journey towards God. Sometimes we lose the way and we do not know where we are supposed to go. But if we just stop what we are doing and listen carefully with our heart, we can hear Jesus whisper to us deep in our heart. And this whisper will lead us in the right direction. We just need to trust him and remember his words, *"Come follow me."*

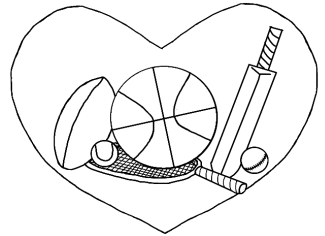
# *Come follow me...*

Seminarian Matthew White

A Catholic priest represents God on earth. He is God's ambassador. In this article, a man training to become a priest for the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington shares his journey to priesthood.

Tena koutou katoa. Ko Matiu toku ingoa. Greetings. My name is Matt White. I am in my third year at Holy Cross seminary, in Auckland, studying to be a Catholic priest.

Let me tell you a bit about myself. I am a Kiwi boy. I grew up in the river city of Whanganui. I attended St Joseph's primary school, Marist Intermediate and St Augustine's College for my secondary schooling. When I was growing up, my favourite sports were rugby and cricket. I was the wicket keeper for my college cricket team. I played rugby in the forwards and represented Whanganui playing against other teams from around New Zealand. Jonah Lomu was one of my rugby heroes. I loved to watch him run fast down the side-line and score tries for the All Blacks.



I was brought up with a belief in God and His love for me. My Dad was a strong Catholic so the family would always attend Sunday Mass. As I got older, I wanted to know more about my faith, so I started to attend Church study groups and retreats. I learnt how Jesus loved me so much He took my place on the cross for my sins and wants me to be happy with Him in heaven when I die. Later, I became a youth group leader so that I could help young people learn about the good news of God's love for us.

I enjoyed my years at primary school and college, so I decided at the end of Year 13 that I wanted to try teaching as a career. I went to Massey University in Palmerston North and after four years completed a degree in Te Reo

Maori. Then I spent a further year learning how to be a teacher at Teachers' College. I was appointed to my first job as a high school teacher at Tawa College in Wellington.

I spent many years teaching and even though it was hard work and stressful sometimes, I enjoyed teaching very much. I liked to help young people achieve to their potential. I was even able to carry on my love of rugby by helping coach a college rugby team.

After some years teaching, I felt God calling me deep in my heart to be a priest and serve His people. This happened slowly and gradually over time. I dismissed the idea several times making lots of excuses to myself not to do it. I thought I would just keep teaching, but God persisted asking me.

The turning point came four years ago when my Mum died very suddenly in front of me. My life was turned upside down. It was a Monday morning just before I was about to go to school. Her passing was very unexpected and led to a long time of grieving for me and my family. Eventually I made the decision that I needed to do what God had been nagging me to do for quite a while, and answer His call, to start training to be a priest.

I am now in my third year at Holy Cross Seminary in Auckland. I am learning lots of new things in my classes about my Catholic faith. There is a good group of guys who are studying with me and I



have made some good friends. My own family and parish have supported me in many ways on my journey to becoming a priest.

What is the name of the priest in your local parish? Please say a prayer for him, asking God to guide and bless him.

Have you ever thought about being an altar boy or girl in your church or parish? Perhaps you might like to join your local youth group to find out more about Jesus and His great love for you.

# Do what makes you happy!

Fr David Dowling

When I was a teenager I felt called to priesthood. But I never took it any further than my initial thoughts and dreams because I felt that I wasn't worthy, and I suppose it was fear that held me back.

So I became a Customs officer. For nearly 20 years I loved being a Customs official, protecting the border and serving the community in that way. But even though I'd let go the thought of priesthood, it still kept coming back to me and I couldn't get it out of my head...

After Mass one day in 1999, I was talking with a few parishioners outside our church. When our elderly parish priest joined the conversation, someone said, "Father, what will we do when you're gone?" Father John replied, "I'm sure God is still calling young men to the priesthood – maybe David here?" I just laughed and said, "You must be joking!"



We went home, but I couldn't stop thinking about what Father John had said. Later I told him I had been thinking about priesthood for a while. I said, "I want to be a priest, but I'm not worthy." I got a shock when he said to me, "Who is?" That got me thinking that it's God's grace at work when we are called to priesthood. God only asks that we are open to the possibility.

Father John died before my ordination day. He always listened patiently to my experiences in my early years at the seminary and gave helpful advice. I felt quite lost after his death and said to the rector of Holy Cross Seminary, "Who will I talk to, who will understand me?" He just said, "The Lord

provides.” How true this is! Sure enough, the Lord did provide another priest who took a special interest in me and guided and encouraged me towards priesthood.

When I was in the seminary, I visited a primary school in Northcote, in Auckland. I was a bit nervous because it had been a long time since I had been involved with young children. I was telling one class about how I was a seminarian discerning whether I was called to be a priest or not. An 8-year old girl immediately put up her hand and asked me, “How do you know God wants you to be a priest?” That question floored me, and I said a very quick prayer, God help me! I asked her, “What do you enjoy doing?” She spoke about some sport she enjoyed. I asked her, “How do you know that you enjoy that, and it’s good for you?” “Because it makes me happy”, she said. And I replied, “Yes, and it’s the same for me! I don’t get a phone call from God, saying “David, I want you to be a priest”, but I get signs on the way. And I know that when I come here to talk to you about being a priest, to talk to you about Jesus and how He calls all of us to life to the full, that makes me really happy.”

Since then, I have often reflected on what Jesus meant when He said, *“I have come that they may have life and have it to the full”* (John 10:10). While there may be pain and uncertainty at times, being a priest is so incredibly fulfilling and rewarding.



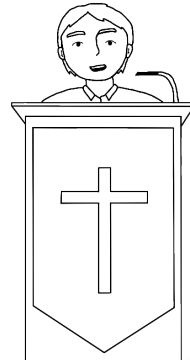
Sometimes I am approached by someone wanting to say thank you for something I’ve said or done which has helped them. Maybe a few words in a homily have encouraged someone, or a visit to anoint a sick person has brought peace and healing. When I stand at the altar and see the faith of the people of God, gathered to be nourished by the word of God and the Eucharist, I am humbled to be called to priesthood. To be an instrument of God’s love in this way - to be with people at special times... times of birth and death, joy and sadness ... to be able to encourage, to guide, sometimes to challenge... this is a gift and a privilege beyond words.

# *From rugby field to seminary..*

Fr Seph Pijfers

I'm a Nelson boy. I grew up in a Catholic family and went to the local Parish primary school. Dad was very committed to his faith; he took us to Church on Sundays and instilled in us the values of community and service. Being Catholic was a normal part of life.

I remember one day being at a School Mass. It was my turn to read, and afterwards someone came up to me and said, "Gosh, you read very well Seph, I think you'll make a great priest". That thought stayed there, it was a very clear moment for me.

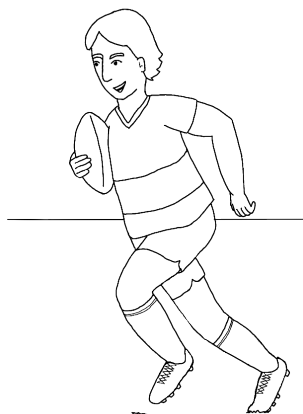


After some years at Nelson Boys, my family moved to Christchurch and I boarded at St Bede's College. The Marist priests were teaching there and modelled a life of faith. Mass was part of the daily routine, and that really helped me at a time when I was feeling quite lost.

After leaving school, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, and the thought of priesthood was still at the back of my mind. However, it just didn't fit in with my mindset at the time. I was enjoying playing rugby and I decided to just keep doing that, earn some money and maybe do some travel.

I started working at the Social Welfare Department. This really helped me to understand a different side of life as I saw people who were in seriously difficult situations.

I was doing quite well with my rugby. The 1987 World Cup was happening in New Zealand and there was a lot of international interest. A group of Italian rugby recruiters somehow heard about me and, without me knowing, had watched me play a couple of games. I was very surprised when they approached me and asked if I would like to play rugby for their team in Italy. Wow.... my heart said YES straight away!

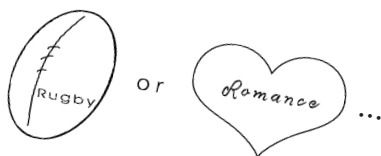


A few weeks later off I went to the south of Italy for two years. It was a great experience. I learnt that the world is a different place as I was immersed in a different culture. I got to play with some of my rugby heroes at the time too – the All Blacks were in Italy and France playing rugby. In many ways it was every boy's dream!

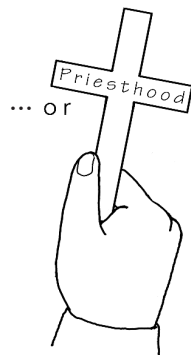
Yet somehow, I still wasn't settled. My club in Italy wanted me to stay on, but it didn't feel right, and I decided to return to New Zealand. I went back to my work in the Social Welfare Department and picked up my rugby again. Life was full, but I was still not happy with my direction in life. I started thinking more seriously about the idea of being a priest and spoke to a priest about it. Even then, I still found it hard to decide. It seemed like such a radical thing to be doing.

I decided I needed a change, so I gave up my job, threw my things in the car and moved up to Motueka. I started playing for Nelson Bays and doing some community work in the area. I got into a relationship too. By now I was 28 and thought it was probably time to sort my life out!

But when I thought about it and prayed to God about where my life was heading, I realised I needed to talk to someone about priesthood again. It was a question on my mind that needed to be answered. I realised that there was no point in having that inner thought and going through my life always wondering about it.



My Parish Priest sent me to see Bishop John Dew in Wellington. I was nervous, but he was very welcoming and put me at ease. I spent the weekend with him, talking about everything and exploring where God might be leading me. It was a very good and helpful experience to have someone accompany me and help me reflect on my life. I realised that I had to make a conscious decision regarding my vocation.



After that weekend I decided to give it a go. Going from rugby field to seminary was a radical shift in lifestyle. I knew that choosing to follow God as a priest would come at a cost. I had to give up my relationship, my rugby, my normal life. I found it difficult to tell everyone about my decision, especially my partner and my rugby mates. I expected my mates to be confused or angry, but to my surprise they respected my decision and realised that I had not taken it lightly.

I gave up the rugby altogether and at the age of 30, I entered Holy Cross Seminary. That was quite an incredible time which helped me to understand my journey. I came to know God more and to understand myself more deeply. It was not always easy; I had never done any academic study and I needed to get used to that routine of study and learning. But it was a wonderful gift that helped me to respond to God's call for me.

Sometimes I am asked why I gave up rugby. Looking back, the rugby was just part of who I was growing up - a typical Kiwi kid. I had some amazing experiences with some of New Zealand's top rugby players at the time. It was great and I did it for the passion of it, but in the end, I found something that I was more passionate about and I was happy to give all that up to follow Jesus.

Children at school often ask me how I knew that God was calling me to be a priest. I guess I paid attention to that little voice in myself, the thought that never went away. In a way, we will never know for sure, but we know that God will show us along the way.



# What do you really want?

Seminarian Emilio Capin

I was still in primary school when I started thinking about becoming a priest! My parents received a monthly Catholic magazine, and I loved to browse through it and read the section about vocation to the priesthood. As a boy I admired the priests in my parish and wished to be like them when I grew up. I also was a great fan of the Pope, who later became Saint John Paul II. As a child I used to like pretending that I was a priest celebrating Mass, using blankets as my vestment and a biscuit for communion. My brothers and sisters laughed at me, but that didn't take away my joy and I really wished that one day, I too would become a priest.

In college and university I had many friends and got involved in many programs, but although my life was full, I did not feel satisfied. I was longing for something I did not quite understand. What did I really want?

I started reading at Mass and became a parish youth leader. I tried different jobs and took opportunities as they came along, as I needed to look after myself and to help my family. Eventually I went back to study and trained as a nurse. I wanted to serve people, and worked in a poor government hospital, caring for the under-privileged. I found happiness in serving and thought that perhaps this was what I had been searching for... but deep down there was still something missing. I was still longing for peace.



Finally, I started to seriously explore the possibility of becoming a priest. I left my job and my family in the Philippines, and moved to New Zealand in 2018. I am now studying to become a priest at Holy Cross Seminary in Auckland. I know I am in the right place and have found the peace and happiness that I had been longing for. Please pray for me that I will one day be a priest and serve God's people.

# Why would God choose me?

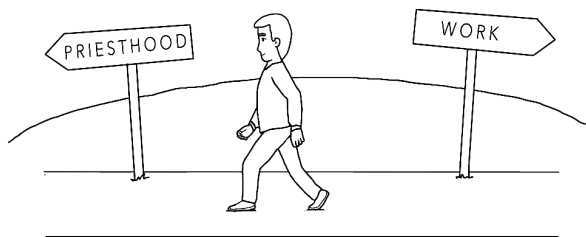
Cardinal John Dew

During my teenage years I thought about the possibility of being a Marist priest, but then figured out that it wasn't the right thing for me. Instead, I went to work in a Bank for three years, but I didn't like it and knew that I would never stay there. I had always been interested in horticulture, gardening, and nursery work, so eventually I left home and went to work in a nursery and really loved the work.

I kept thinking, "There's something more for me". I did not know what it was, but gradually it came to me that it was probably the priesthood. It was the last thing I wanted because I was playing lots of sport and I was loving my work, but at the age of 21 I knew that I had to check this out. I felt that it was the only thing, and the right thing, for me.

I wasn't much of a student and study didn't come easy. But the main reason for not wanting to go to the Seminary was that I didn't think I was worthy. I didn't think I was good enough to be a priest, for the first couple of years, I kept asking, "Why me?" Yet, even as I asked that question, I knew I was in the right place.

I talked to a couple of priests to start with, then I applied to enter the seminary. Right through the training I kept thinking that I would soon be told I wasn't good enough. I kept asking myself,



"Why would God want me?" But I knew at the same time that I had been called. Once I finally accepted that God was calling me, I made a definite choice to say yes to priesthood and I have never looked back.



In John's Gospel the Jews were upset at Jesus' words, so they stopped going with Him and walked away. When Jesus asked Peter if he was going to walk away too, Peter's response was *"Lord, there is no one else to go to; you have the words of everlasting life."*

Those words kept me going - I still didn't think I was good enough to be a priest, but there was no one else for me to go to. There is still no one else. Jesus has the words of everlasting life.

I still can't understand why God chose me. If I had chosen God, instead of God choosing me, I would have reason for thinking that I made a mistake because it would have been my human choice.

God knew me when He called me – with all the cowardice, compromise, failures and sin, yet He still chose me. All I can do is say "Thank you". It is not a matter of 'being worthy', it is about an ordinary person accepting an extraordinary gift.

My life as a priest has been so varied. Priesthood is about service – firstly about serving God, which is only possible through a life of prayer. Then it is about serving others, about learning to relate to and to be at home with people in their daily lives. I have been privileged to serve in large and small parishes, in youth ministry, in seminary formation, overseas in the Cook Islands for a while, and now as a bishop. Every experience has enriched my life. I have been incredibly blessed in my life as a priest through the opportunities that I've had.

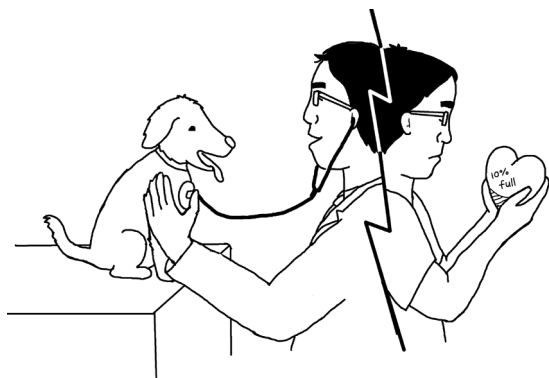
# A divine change of career



Fr Dennis Nacorda

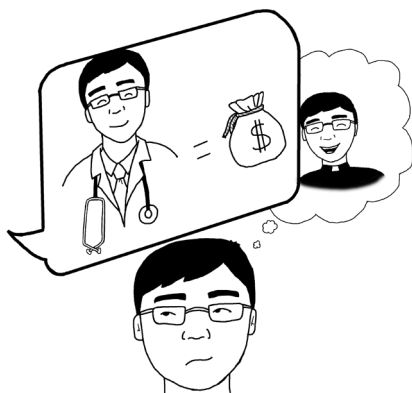
I was in awe when as a five-year-old, I watched the priest lift up the host which seemed to glow like a luminous light bulb in his seemingly magical hands. From that time on, I had a growing desire to become a priest.

As a child I read, again and again, all the Bible stories at home and in school. However, uncertainty crept into my soul when I was about to finish high school. Instead, I gave in to my mother's idea of pursuing a doctoral degree in Veterinary Medicine. The desire for priesthood resurfaced when I was about to graduate. This time, I was so certain of my vocation that I decided to leave my girlfriend. It was hard to let her go. I was preparing to share my decision with my mother, when she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. Again I had to set aside my own wishes and focus on helping my family instead.

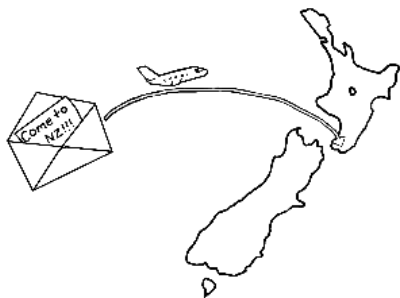


In the years I spent working as a vet, I was conscious of a gaping hole in my heart. Though it was a noble thing to help the poor farmers through my skills, I felt a deep emptiness within me. I knew what I really wanted but could not do anything about it.

When my youngest brother finally finished university, I decided it was time to leave everything behind and follow my desire for the priesthood. My father could not understand why I wanted to give up my job after a six-year degree and three years of work. But even though my father could not accept my decision at first, I found peace in my heart.



My time in the seminary at first was quite difficult, and I went back home confused, and trying to make sense of what was happening. But eventually the love of God drew me again and I realised it was not over for me unless I chose otherwise. I chose to trust my future in God's hands.



Some months later, I received the invitation from the Archdiocese of Wellington to come to New Zealand. As I set my foot in Aotearoa, I thanked God for a new chapter in my journey to the priesthood. Even when things didn't go according to plan, I did not panic - I just let God be God.

I finally became a priest in 2013, when I was 34 years old. It was a childhood dream being fulfilled that day. I am amazed by the mysterious, yet masterful way in which God has fulfilled my innermost desire since my very early years. Indeed, "God writes straight with crooked lines."

In the last seven years I have found that there is truly a great joy in serving God. You get to be with people of all ages – the young, the old, families, school students, people from every walk of life. Sometimes it is not easy, but as I reflect on it, I realise that this is really the life that I want to live.



# The road not taken

Seminarian Alfred Tong

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood". I never knew that these words from the poem "The Road Not Taken" would become so important to me when I had to learn them by heart in Year 11. Nor did I understand their implications for my life ahead. How did Robert Frost's final decision to take "*the road less travelled*" make "*all the difference*" for him? I wasn't one to enjoy literature, so at that time I thought nothing much of it. I was only interested in Science, and after leaving school I went to the University of Otago, graduating with a pharmacy degree.

By then I was less certain about myself than I had ever been in my life. I kept on asking God why my life was not as fulfilling as other people had said it would be? I struggled to cope with low self-esteem and felt like a failure in many ways.

I was walking across the university campus one day when I met a priest, Fr Mark. I started telling him everything that was wrong with my world. It didn't faze him; he said a prayer and gave me a blessing. I was a bit taken aback, but then I suddenly realised that I felt loved again.



One of the comforts I looked forward to every week was playing music in the Sunday evening student Mass at the Catholic Church near the campus. One day I met an American exchange student there who talked to me about prayer and the spiritual life. Through this conversation I started to experience that God accepted me as I was and didn't expect me to be perfect. If He did, why would He still love me?

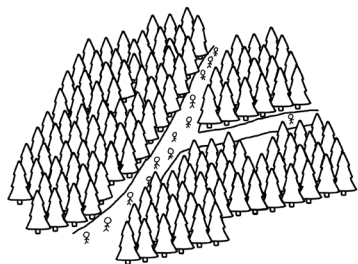


Later, another student approached me, and, in the middle of an ordinary conversation, something made her say to me "I don't know, you probably will make something great out of your pharmacy career, but have you ever considered 'The Vocation'?"

That thought wouldn't leave me, but it wasn't until I attended a Chrism Mass in Wellington a few years later, when the priests of the Archdiocese renewed their priestly promises, that the idea of priesthood felt possible. Remembering my many encounters with Fr Mark and the parishioners in my church, I felt a niggles to respond. I entered Holy Cross Seminary and am now well on my way to becoming a priest.

To see my limitations, but find that I am more than my limitations, is a huge blessing. To give love, and to receive love, is the greatest vocation anyone can have. I'm privileged to share God's love with the dying man I wheel-chaired around at the clinic the other day, with the young person I spoke to who is struggling to come to terms with an illness in the family.

I ask Jesus at times: "Isn't this impossible to do all the time?" Jesus replies "Yes – it is challenging. It is the Road Not Taken. But hasn't that made all the difference for you?"



*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

*Robert Frost*

# Bringing Jesus to others

Fr Maleko Tufuga

I grew up in a large Catholic family in a village in Samoa, I was the seventh of eight children. We were very poor, and from an early age I had to help to support the family. After school I would go to the market to sell coconut and sugar cane. This helped my family to pay for food and for our school fees. Although we struggled to get by from day to day, we trusted in God and prayed for his help. We had a strong sense of vocation and were always ready to help others.

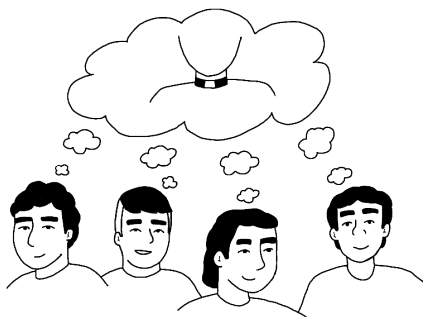


We had a Catholic church in our village, but there were not many priests in Samoa at that time, and we only had Mass about once a month. But every evening, the whole village would stop for prayer. It was here that my vocation started.

When I started college, I saw that we had so few priests in my country and started wondering if perhaps I could become a priest when I grew up. I wanted to serve my people in this way. During my college years I became quite active with the Legion of Mary and other Catholic youth groups. There were many young people thinking about the vocation to the priesthood at the time, and this encouraged me to take the step.



After Sixth Form, I went to the Theological College in Samoa for two years. After that, I was sent to the seminary in Fiji. Altogether I spent six years there. Halfway through, I started to feel unsure about becoming a priest, and took a break for two years to think about it. My parents kept supporting and praying for me, but they left me free to make my own decision. Eventually I realized it was what I really wanted, and I went back to finish my training.



Towards the end, I started thinking about New Zealand where many Samoans were living. I contacted Cardinal Tom Williams, and he accepted my request to come to Wellington to be a priest here. I was ready to be ordained, but he sent me to Holy Cross Seminary in Mosgiel first! After so many years, I was not expecting to spend even more time in seminary. But I could see that it was important for me to familiarize myself with life in New Zealand, which is very different from Samoa!

Finally, after such a long journey, I was ordained as a priest. My whole family travelled from Samoa to New Zealand for my ordination; it was a very special occasion.

In the last 32 years I have served in many parishes as well as the Samoan chaplaincy. It has been a wonderful life. I enjoy being with the people, visiting them at home and becoming a part of their lives – being with them in important moments and in every-day moments. I like to work with the youth, and the children at school bring me great joy. Sometimes, when I meet school children on the street, they tell their mums and dads that I am Jesus! That is what I do as a priest, I bring Jesus to the people I am called to serve.

# Come and see...

Fr Bill Warwick

I am a local boy! I grew up in Lyall Bay, one of six children and an identical twin with my brother who now lives in Australia. I loved growing up by the sea; it was a huge part of my life. I also enjoyed riding my bike, and of course I loved sports. I played rugby at school, in college and even in the seminary. When I became a priest, I continued to play touch rugby, and the sports field is still one of my favourite places to socialize - catching up with families and supporting young people.



Another thing I really enjoy is picking up a shovel and mucking in... taking part in working bees, fundraising events, school fairs, and just being part of the life of the community. You might even find me at the BBQ sizzling some sausages!

Being a priest means being with the people of God. A priest goes where the people are, he becomes part of their life and goes where he is needed. This is what the mission of a priest is all about. But let me tell you first how it all started for me...

Although my father was not a Catholic, he fully supported my mother in bringing us up in the Catholic faith. We went to Mass at St Patrick's in Kilbirnie and attended Catholic schools. I went to St Patrick's Primary in Kilbirnie, then to Marist Miramar which later became Holy Cross School.

It was in my teens, at St Patrick's College, that I started thinking about becoming a priest. My father was supportive but advised me to get some work experience first, so I spent a couple of years working with the Commercial Bank of Australia in Kilbirnie. Later when I was in the seminary,

I worked at the Post Office and had a few other holiday jobs. It kept me independent and in touch with people. It was good preparation for my life as a priest.

I started meeting with the Vocations Director Fr Leo Curry who guided me through that important time. I also got involved in parish life, especially with youth.

A local priest, Fr Frank Whitaker, tapped me on the shoulder one day and asked if I had considered becoming a priest. He was about to go driving down South with another priest on holiday and asked if I'd like to join them. I had just finished college and thought it was a great idea! We travelled all over the South Island. It was a magnificent time, and I really enjoyed my time with him. He was a huge influence in my life. He helped me to learn how to pray, asked me all the hard questions and got me thinking. I am very grateful that he saw potential in me and encouraged me in my vocation.

Learning to pray and to listen to the voice of Jesus has been very important to me. I love to celebrate the Mass, and always spend time in prayer beforehand, but I also like to pray at the beach and in other places. We all need to find a place to be quiet, to centre ourselves on Jesus and sit in God's presence.

In the Gospel of John, two disciples asked Jesus "*Where do you live?*", and he said to them "*Come and see.*" Jesus speaks the same words to us today. But we need to learn to be quiet so that we can hear him speaking to us, just as the boy Samuel heard the voice of God calling him in the night.



And when God calls, I pray that you will have the courage to say: "Here I am".

# Just trust and follow...

Fr Michael Bellizzi

We all have memories we will never, ever forget. For me one big memory is when my father passed away suddenly while we were on holiday in London, my first ever trip abroad. I was seven then, and I remember feeling broken hearted. As you may guess, this was really devastating for my mum and myself. We had always been a very loving, caring family.

One month after my dad died, Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II. As I watched it on TV and heard his voice for the first time, something moved in my heart. It was as if God was telling me: "You are not alone. I am your Father. I will never abandon you!" I have never forgotten that.

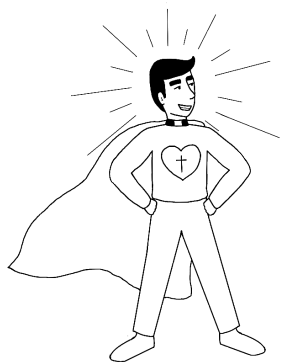


From a young age I was shown how to be a friend of God. My favourite aunt lived with us. She had dedicated her life to God, and there was something special about her. Every night, she and I would light a candle and pray the Rosary together. I had another aunt who was a nun, and an uncle who was a priest. They had chosen a different life. But I did not want to be different. I wanted to be 'normal' like other kids. I hated being singled out and the looks of pity. I was angry with God for letting my father die. Later I realised I was angry at myself, that I could do nothing to save my dad that day. My aunts and uncle understood what was going on in my heart, and they spoke words of hope and encouragement to me.

I remember going to Mass with my mum as a boy. There was a priest in our parish who always looked out for me. He would ask me to help at Communion time, even though I was not an altar boy. That simple invitation to be part of Mass in a special way was for me a sign that God wanted me to be close to Him and serve Him in a different way.

I became a rebellious teenager and would often get into trouble at school. My teachers were very patient with me. I remember going to a parent-teacher conference, expecting to be told off in front of my mum. Instead, my Form Teacher asked what plans I had for my life. At that time, I was

fascinated with science and all I could think about was becoming a doctor. But he said to my mum: "There are many doctors around, but so few doctors of souls..." I knew he was speaking those words to me...

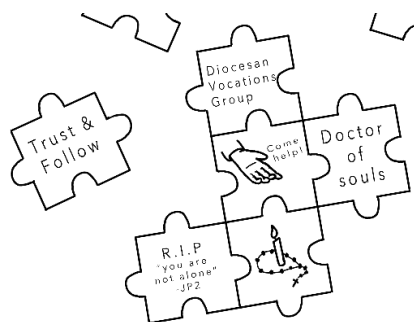


I used to imagine the priests in our parish to be heroes like the ones in the cartoons on TV. I imagined what exciting and adventurous lives they had, doing courageous and selfless things for others. And that gave me a sense of expectation that something would happen in my life...

After the Sacrament of Confirmation, all boys in Malta are invited to attend the Diocesan Vocations group. Seminarians would go all over the country (Malta is a very small island) visiting parishes and having fun activities for us. I used to really enjoy that. All these things helped me to make the decision to enter the seminary and study for the priesthood.

The seminary was a time to grow and mature. I also had to let go of a lot... my closest friends all decided to leave and move on to other things in life. This was very challenging for me as I was asking myself: "Do I really have what it takes?" But deep down I knew that this was not something I was following blindly, but a call that was not coming from me. God was simply asking me to trust and to follow.

As you can see, my story is in bits and pieces, but this is life after all. Life happens. Slowly the bits and pieces come together. I am grateful for the people who journeyed with me in different stages of my life; people who were able to see beneath the moody and sometimes rebellious and angry teen, to see something that was hidden deep inside of me.



The call to be a priest is not something you come up with, but something that is offered to you again and again. If it is really coming from God, the call to the priesthood will not go away even if you try to block it out of your life. God is very gentle but also persistent. He will not choose things for us but leaves us free to choose ourselves. The more we love God, the more willing we will be to risk everything for Him.

# Follow God's north...



Seminarian Gerson Badayos

I came to New Zealand in 2020 to prepare to enter the Seminary for the Archdiocese of Wellington. In the Philippines I was a mental health practitioner and teacher.

Prior to my professional jobs, I worked as a pastoral assistant to a hospital chaplain while I was studying for my Bachelor's degree. I helped the priest in almost all of his pastoral works, in the Mass, anointing of the sick, etc. Those were the years that priesthood seemed interesting to me.

One day I watched a video of Pope Francis about vocation. I cannot exactly recall what he said, but what I remembered was, *"If you have that sense of the vocation, cultivate that, it's actually God himself who puts that in your heart"*. It struck me and I was emotional. After watching it, I searched for information about vocations online. I also emailed some religious communities to seek help... some kind of spiritual direction. I got a reply from the Jesuits, and for years I discerned with them.

At the same time, since I had an idea about priesthood in New Zealand (because a few years back, I met a Filipino priest who is based there), I also sent an email to some priests in NZ. And to my surprise I received a reply from Fr David Dowling from Wellington! After several years of communicating on email, I got an invitation to come and see what it was like. I arrived just before the world started going into lockdown.

Coming here has made me realize that responding to God's invitation is not about being worthy or having the resources, but rather it is about taking a leap of faith and having the courage to go on an adventure with Him, even to places out of your comfort zone. Likewise, as that line in a 2016 movie entitled "God's Compass" reminds, "God doesn't choose us because we are confident in our preparation to go and do what He's called us to do. He chooses us because He knows what we are capable of. Follow God's north for your life's calling..." Being here in NZ is my God's north.

*Dear Jesus*

*My life is before me, and  
I have so many paths to  
choose from.*

*Please help me to be open  
to your guiding Spirit, so  
that I may choose well.*

*In all things, I hope to serve  
you and your friends.*

*Amen*

### *Acknowledgements*

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May God bless and strengthen them in their ministry.



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