

As I write this I am at home in Springfield with my Mum and Dad and like so many of us, we are not in our normal routines or usual places of work or study. I would normally be in seminary at St Mary's College Oscott but for now I am taking part in lectures virtually and meeting the formation staff via video call. As for many of us we are now live streaming Masses and taking part in devotions online. This is something new and does take a bit of getting too used but thank God we have technology to be able to do so.

This time has caused me to think more about my own personal prayer life and my vocation. The lockdown that we are currently in has provided a lot of time for all of us to think about many aspects of our lives. Something that I would like to share is my journey to hearing God's call and what was it that drew me to apply to be a priest. There were particular moments or people that helped me to discern to arrive at this point in my life.

One important part of my journey was my upbringing within the catholic faith. In my family going to church, saying my prayers and helping others was something that was part of everyday life. Each night I would say my prayers before I went to sleep and then each weekend we would attend Mass. As a child I would help Mum with the SVP lunches, I would serve Mass and this made me feel part of the community. The sense of belonging is so important to all of us and the church gave me that.

Another community that I felt part of was my school community. I went to St John Payne RC School in Chelmsford and I had seven very happy years there. School work was sometimes a chore but one part of my experience in school was how Jesus was present in all that we did. The school environment was a religious one and for me this helped me in my experience of school. I was able to put my faith in action by helping others and sharing the Good News with others. When I was in sixth form the most wonderful opportunity arose to go to Lourdes with HCPT.

This was a life changing moment for me. After years of hearing about God's love for me and others, it became reality. My acts of service, the joy of Easter and hearing the Word of God in a new way made me realise that I was called to do more and I wanted to do more. I was able to share God's love with those who I met and it was wonderful to see!

The theme during the HCPT Easter pilgrimage was "I have called you by name". Up to this point I didn't know what to do with my life but after this experience I felt called to serve.

On returning home I applied for Walsingham House, the youth retreat centre for the diocese. The ministry at Walsingham House was one of the main reasons why I was able to discern and eventually apply for the priesthood. I worked at the youth centre for 7 years and during this time I met roughly 35,000 young people. The retreats that I lead and I those that I attended allowed me space to discern what God was calling me to do. I first thought about working in the police, then to teaching and then I realised it was the priesthood that God was calling me to. I am often asked how I knew this. Well, I can only describe it as a gut feeling and a longing in my heart. I had a love for God that I wanted to share but I also could see how living my life serving others was something that was attractive to me. Young people often said to me, "you should be a priest" and it was these comments that made me think more and more about my vocation. Time in prayer at the Grotto in Lourdes and before Jesus

in the Blessed Sacrament gave time to reflect and discern. My friends would often say to me “are you a priest yet?” I think looking back, everyone could see something in me but it took me time to realise it.

The priests that I have known during my life have been an example and an inspiration. These were men who were kind, supportive and approachable. Their encouragement I think made me realise that maybe one day I could do what they do. The deacon in my parish has also been a constant in my life because he baptised me and since then has always been there to encourage and guide. When I was 16 years old he was the one who offered me a leaflet about a vocations day. At the time I pushed it aside, but I do think that when he directly said to me; “have you thought about the priesthood?” the seed that had been planted really began to grow.

This is something we all must be able to do, we should encourage men of all ages to pray and consider the priesthood as their vocation. When we speak about a vocation to the priesthood, it becomes “normal” and something that people won’t push away or not think about.

These are some of the moments in my life that guided me to apply for the priesthood and I am pleased to say that I have never looked back. I am truly blessed by my wonderful friends and family who give me so much support and love and without this I don’t think I would be where I am today. Writing this has given me a chance to reflect and I am pleased to say that I am now a Deacon-elect and will be ordained, pleased God, in June 2020. Please do keep me and all our seminarians, deacons and priests in your prayers and know that we pray for you.

God bless,

Michael Barwick

5th Year Seminarian