

Today is “Priesthood Sunday” and is meant as a reminder to pray for priests. Every month in my little pastor’s page, I ask for your prayers, because without them, I would certainly not make it through any day. The priesthood can seem mysterious. No two priests are alike. But where do we come from, and how does a guy decide to become a priest. So, this weekend I would like to deviate from my usual homiletic practice, and instead speak about why and how I became a priest.

It all began when I was 4. My parents were in the habit of seating all of us kids in the front row so that we could see what was going on. As a toddler, there’s nothing worse than staring at the back of somebody’s head and wondering what everybody else is looking at.

Back then, in 1966, the Mass was the old way. And in the summer of 1966, my youngest brother was born – so we all ended up in the back row with the baby. For the rest of the summer, I would attempt, mostly unsuccessfully, to get to the edge of the pew so I could look down the aisle at what was going on up front on the altar. Most of the time, I’d make too much noise, and be picked up and taken outside; or else I’d be told to sit still and be quiet. One Sunday, however, I managed to make it to the end of the pew. I was able to lower myself over the edge and onto the floor. Looking back, it seemed that nobody had noticed. At that point, I saw my chance. I made a break for the front of the church, sprinting as fast as I could, hoping to reclaim my spot back in the front row.

Of course, my dad was faster than I was and scooped me up and took me outside, where I wailed at the injustice of it all.

In my family, church was always the high point of the week. No matter how hard it was to pack up five kids and get the dog outside – we managed to get to church on time.

I remember peeking at the presents at my sister’s First Communion, and the ancient bishop who confirmed her. I remember after my brother’s First Communion, and my own a year later. And reading the Children’s Missal trying to make sense of the Mass.

Off-and-on, we would play Mass, wearing a bathrobe backwards, with the belt over our neck ... two flashlights pointed upwards on the coffee table in the place of candles ... and the process of making “hosts” by smashing marshmallows in the pages of the dictionary or phone book ... with Hawaiian Punch serving in place of wine ... a handkerchief and a towel for altar cloths.

I’m not sure that I remember if we ever made it completely through a Mass before somebody ate all the marshmallows or drank all of the Hawaiian Punch; but I remember that we at least tried to play Mass.

Fourth grade brought with it the opportunity to be an altar server. By that point, the Mass was 100% in English. I do remember being punched in the arm by one of the older boys because the younger boys didn’t have to memorize any Latin. I was disappointed not having the opportunity to master a second language. But at least I got a front-row seat.

In junior high school, I joined the “folk group” as it was called. By the time I was able to drive, I was leading the music when the adults took off up north in the summer. From there, I became the sometime music director, and continued to do that through college and then on weekends when I graduated and got a job.

I studied Engineering at Kettering – known in those days as G.M.I. ... I went to Purdue for graduate work, and worked at General Motors for close to 14 years. I spent two years at the German supplier, Robert Bosch Corporation. And then took 6 years away from engineering to enlist in the U.S. Navy. While in the service, I trained in Naval Aviation and learned Chinese Mandarin. For 4 of those years, I was based out of Japan and flew 153 reconnaissance missions, logging 1,101.1 total flight hours on the EP-3E Aries aircraft.

After the Navy, I worked at Ford Motor Company, and after work would go to night school – tapping into my G.I. Bill and Navy College Fund to pursue studies in Theology and Philosophy. I eventually resigned from Ford after a couple of years to study full time ... eventually completing my Philosophy and Theology studies courtesy of the U.S. Government.

During that time, I struggled to find sponsorship from a bishop or a religious community. I was told that I was either too old, or too educated ... that my military service was an obstacle... or that engineers made lousy preachers. It was always one excuse or another.

I was introduced to our former bishop, who has since moved on, and when I asked him what lame excuse he was going to use to reject me ... he told me he'd give me a chance.

I was ordained priest in 2009, and I guess the rest is history.

I apologize – first, because I don't like to talk about myself during the homily; and second, because I've gone over my usual time-limit for preaching.

I suppose the bottom-line to all of this is that when God calls, it's not a one-shot deal or a lightning bolt, but usually there are threads and paths that connect from early on. It was less of my choice to go into a certain "profession" and more of my choice to finally listen to God's voice and answer His call ... the call that God placed on my life when I was born.

What it takes to be a good priest, at least as far as I've been able to figure it out, is the same as what it takes to be a good Christian. That is, what Jesus says in today's Gospel:

*love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.*

[And] love your neighbor as yourself.

You do what you can, and hope for the best. Try not to hold back, and give yourself to God. In return, He will give you way more than you can imagine.

Oh – yeah – one last thing: When I quit my job at Ford to start my seminary studies full-time, my boss asked me one question. He asked me, Did I expect to become pope or what? And what I told him, over twelve years ago was that I just figure I'd made it if I got to be the priest in a small country parish.

So, I guess I've made it :-)

God bless you. Please pray for me, and pray for all priests.