

His hearing might be impaired, but Chan listens to God

written by Maryanne Meyerriecks |

“God came to me,” he said. “I prayed to be enlightened by God’s will. ”

Responding to God’s call, Chan continued his seminary studies online while undergoing extensive physical and occupational therapy, returning to St. Meinrad in January 2014, 10 months after the wreck. On May 28, one year later than he had originally planned, Chan will be ordained a priest.

“I still do physical and occupational therapy on my own,” Chan, a former physician in Fort Smith, said. “When I returned to St. Meinrad, what helped me most was participating in our prayer life — the liturgy of the hours, Eucharistic celebrations and our daily holy hour. The Benedictine seminary has a beautiful campus, very isolated, with lots of opportunities to meditate and contemplate while walking around the grounds. St. Benedict’s Rule tells us to ‘listen, your Master is speaking.’ I kept this foremost in my mind as I discerned where the Holy Spirit was leading me. ”

In the summer of 2015 Chan worked as a deacon at St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista and also assisted at two parishes near St. Meinrad during his final year in the seminary. His experience as a sacramental minister, assisting at liturgies, funerals and proclaiming the Word has heightened his desire for the priesthood.

“It inspires me that when we are ordained to the priesthood we are really acting in the person of Christ and I look forward to being a vehicle, to be as Christ,” Chan said.

He said he prays for the grace to be a joyful priest, trusting that whatever he has started will be perfected according to God’s will. He is looking forward to whatever aspects of ministry he is assigned to by his pastor and hopes that God has prepared him to minister to whatever populations he encounters in his new parishes and will provide him with whatever skills he needs to reach his parishioners.

“It will take a year or so to really get to know the people in my new parishes,” he said.

Before his ordination to the diaconate, Chan wrote that he was grateful for his hearing and vision impairments, which taught him to listen and see with his heart, and for his memory impairment so that he would seek God’s wisdom. Taking up his cross with a grateful heart, he sees his own suffering as Christ’s invitation to sanctity.

“Joseph is a center of serenity,” Sister Bernardone Rock, OFM, his music professor, said.

Wynne resident enjoying the journey he is on

written by Sarah Morris |

“Good times and bad. For better or for worse. Whether I am interacting with a beggar in the streets of Rome or reading a book in my room. Whether I am washing dishes in the kitchen or talking with Pope Francis.

“Whether I am on cloud nine or in a tough and spiritually dry time of life, I have to recognize that Christ is with me. I cannot escape reality,” he added. “We encounter Christ only in reality. It is very easy to dwell on the past or be preoccupied with the future. ”

The past and future cannot be controlled nor should be worried about, which Gadberry said he has since learned to recognize along with the fact that “everything begins with God and it ends with God. ”

“What matters is that I spend that time in the middle with God,” he said. “It is hard to perfectly live in the present moment, but it’s possible. The perfectly live in the present moment is called sanctity ... and sure ain’t no saint. Ask my family. That’s the whole journey aspect. That’s what makes life fun and worth living. ”

Before seminary, Gadberry attended East Arkansas Community College in Forrest City for one year and then served three years in the U. S. Air Force in Texas, Germany and Iraq. He also “rode my bicycle and played a lot outside. ”

It was not a single item that led to his journey to priesthood, but he said a combination of “a personal encounter with and invitation from Christ, being brought up in the Church, the examples of simple, holy priest(s) who loved their flock, the encouragement of family and friends, and the faithful parishioners of my home parish and those I met in the military.

“I have taken many classes in philosophy, theology, spirituality, history and psychology, through which I have learned a lot about Christ, myself and humanity,” Gadberry said. “I have learned and experienced how involved Christ is with all aspects of our lives, the effects of the incarnation.

“Through these years of study, I have spent an equally large amount of time in personal prayer, daily Mass, confession every two weeks and a daily holy hour have been essential in my preparation for priesthood,” he added. “Of course, playing the harmonica every day helps too. ”

Gadberry is now looking forward to his assignment at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers. He said he is ready for daily interactions with the faithful, celebrating the sacraments, finding and welcoming back people who have left the Church, sharing what he has learned through his years of seminary formation as well as exploring northwest Arkansas — it will be his first extended period of time in that part of the state.

He is also looking forward to telling people about “my best friend, Jesus Christ. ”

“Christ is real. If you don’t believe me, ask him yourself. ... but wait patiently and listen for an answer,” he added. “As Pope Benedict XVI put it, Christ is not an idea, but a person and ‘(one) can confide in him and speak to him: he hears and sees and loves. Although he is not within time, he has time: even for me. ’ He has time for you, too. ”

Ordination will allow Jacobo to further ministry work

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |

, and then as a manager at a carpet store.

But through it all, God was running beside him until Jacobo stopped and truly listened while praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

“Lord, why don’t we just stop playing, let’s stop the chase and show me what you want from me,” Jacobo said he prayed. “‘I’m searching for love, but every time I think I’ve found love it breaks my heart and I don’t feel fulfilled. Why don’t you show me the love you want me to have; show me the way to love like you love. ’ Then I said, ‘I want to be your priest, I want to be able to love like you love and help like you help. ’”

Then, as in the Gospel of John when Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Jacobo heard the same question three times from God.

“That was the moment when everything started aiming toward ordination,” he said.

On May 28, Jacobo will once again hear that passage from the Gospel of John at his ordination to the priesthood along with four others at Christ the King Church in Little Rock.

“It’s a beautiful feeling,” Jacobo said of his impending ordination. “ ... I’m thinking of the passage of Jeremiah, ‘I chose you from the womb of your mother’ and like in Matthew, the tax collector, ‘come and follow me. ’ I’m following him, trying to be his servant. ”

Jacobo was born in Mexico, the second oldest of five children raised by a single mother.

“She’s my model. She’s the model of a woman with strong faith in the midst of chaos,” Jacobo said. “... I’m very close to her, so she was the one who encouraged me to continue. There were some occasions when the doubts would come in, fears; her words were, ‘just pray and rely on God. ’”

The family moved to Texas in 1985 and later to Georgia. Even as a child, he told his mother he wanted to be a priest. Jacobo assisted his pastor at St. Clement in translating the Mass into Spanish.

“It helped me a lot to desire my vocation,” Jacobo said. “Working close to the priest I was able

to see how he related to people; he wanted his flock to be heard and understood. ”

After entering the seminary in 2007 at St. Joseph Seminary in Covington, La. , he transferred to the Diocese of Little Rock in 2011 after meeting vocations director Msgr. Scott Friend. Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock adopted him and welcomed him in as a parishioner.

As a priest, Jacobo said he’s excited to “show the people the one who is love. ”

“The biggest lesson or the biggest thing I’ve learned is we must have our feet on the ground and our eyes fixed on the cross. Never forget we’re still human, still fragile, we rely on the mercy and love of God every day, every day; every day we have to rely on that,” Jacobo said. “It doesn’t change who I am as a person, I’m still Mario. But God gave me a vocation to help others. ”

McFall thankful for seminary bringing out his true self

written by Dwain Hebda |

“One of the things that I’ve really enjoyed about St. Meinrad is it’s not a cookie-cutter seminary,” he said. “They work really hard to help form you as a human — intellectually, spiritually, pastorally. One of the key issues here has been you learn to be who you are as a person.

“Knowing who you really are and then coming to the altar to give yourself to Christ to serve his Church, you’re really giving yourself. You’re not giving a facsimile of somebody or something else. ”

Part of who McFall is is a husband and the first married seminarian in St. Meinrad’s history. McFall said the lengths to which the faculty and staff went to accommodate his situation was gratifying.

“This has been a wonderful chapter in our lives, to be here at the formation process of St. Meinrad, he said. “They’ve been extraordinarily hospitable here; they’ve worked hard at making something happen that’s never happened here before, which is having a married seminarian. They’ve just been wonderful to my wife and to me.

“It will be sad to leave them behind, but I’m looking forward to getting back to Arkansas and doing the very thing that I’ve been preparing to do. So right now I have some mixed emotions of excitement and a tinge of sadness, too, to be leaving here. ”

Another part of who McFall is — that of an ordained Baptist minister — afforded him the unique viewpoint comparing two theological schools of thought during his formation and education. He said for as much as was different between the two faiths, there were a number

of elements that were very similar.

“One of the key similarities is the focus on knowing God,” he said. “Developing a relationship with Christ through words, through prayer, through devotion, the emphasis on Scripture, that’s all very similar.

“What’s been different, of course, has been the sacramental theology reality of the Catholic Church, that is, the graces that we receive from Christ through the sacraments. It’s the starting point to understanding more and more of what it means to be Roman Catholic. ”

Many of these lessons and the road of faith they have led him down coalesced in the final days of his seminary education, he said. Not least of which was his practicum class where he got a small taste of what lay before him.

“I did my final presentation to the practicum class where I did the whole Mass myself as if I was a priest,” he said. “I’ll tell you that really rang my bell when I finished. I just had this deep sense of joy and I look forward to being the main celebrant at my first Mass on May 29. I got the sense that this is what I want to do the rest of my life. ”

New priest will lead seminarians in House of Formation

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |

But after four years, God turned the proverbial desk. He called Whittington to be a student again, this time at the seminary.

“It was hard in some ways to give up what I had, like a car for example, and go back to school,” Whittington said. “ ... But I never had any second thoughts after I made the decision to being open to the process of formation. ”

On May 28, Whittington, 38, will be ordained to the priesthood at Christ the King Church in Little Rock.

“I am so excited about what’s coming and it’s hard to believe I’m already at the end of the process,” he said. “... I am really grateful for all that God’s given me. ”

It isn’t the first time that God put Whittington on a different path. Whittington was raised in Scott, attending a Pentecostal church where his father was a minister.

“They’re very lively. The emphasis is on the sermon. So you’d have music and the sermon, only now and then would you have something like communion,” Whittington said. “I learned personal piety, personal prayer, reading the Scriptures. ”

After high school, Whittington “wasn’t going to church anywhere” while attending Hendrix

College in Conway, until he went with a friend to the Episcopal church, getting a taste of a more liturgical-driven worship.

“I was reading just for my own education, my own attempt to understand better the Christian tradition, the theology of St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross ... It all kind of came together,” Whittington said. “I just felt drawn to (St. Joseph Church). I found myself driving out of my way to drive past it. ”

He joined the Catholic Church in 2000 and felt called to be a priest. Though he always thought about following in his father’s ministerial footsteps, it was important to make sure his “new convert zeal” was not a mistaken call for the priesthood, he said.

“I think it’s good to integrate yourself into the life of the Church at the parish level first, before thoughts of ordination or religious life,” Whittington said, adding school “gave me the chance to push the pause button and continue discerning. ”

While at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana, Whittington said he learned greater patience and trust in God.

“One (Scripture verse) that comes to mind a lot is ‘you did not choose me, I chose you,’” he said. “I’ll often find myself thinking that throughout the day — you’re chosen by God to be here. ”

Looking back, Whittington said his time in college and as a teacher prepared him for his first priestly assignment.

“I think it turned out to be providential — what I studied in graduate school, philosophy, is what I’ll be teaching the seminarians” at the House of Formation, he said.

Whittington said he’s grateful for his parents support and for the unique gifts God has given him for a priestly life.

“I think I’m pretty empathetic or sympathetic to people; according to the feedback I’ve received, I’m very approachable. I think people want that from their priest, not that you can solve all their problems, that’s not something they expect of a priest, but not only does he truly care, but is able to show it,” Whittington said, learning that lesson most vividly from his time in hospital ministry. “When you go into a person’s room in a hospital, your impulse may be to assure them everything is going to be OK. Often that’s not the case . . . Be the presence of God to them and let them see that. ”

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