

DIOCESE OF LIMERICK

VOCATIONS



DECEMBER 2020

"The principal contributors to [fostering vocations] are the families, which animated by the spirit of faith and love and by the sense of duty, become a kind of initial seminary..."

POPE PAUL VI OPTATAM TOTIUS, 1

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‘GOD CHOSE TO CALL US’: THE STORY OF TWO BROTHERS ORDAINED CATHOLIC PRIESTS ON THE SAME DAY



Denver Newsroom, Jun 12, 2020 / 12:02 am (CNA).-

Peyton and Connor Plessala are brothers from Mobile, Alabama. They’re 18 months— one school grade— apart. Despite the occasional competitiveness and squabbles that many brothers experience growing up, they’ve always been best buds.

“We're closer than best friends,” Connor, 25, told CNA. As young men— in grade school, high school, college— much of their lives centered around the things you might expect: academics, extracurriculars, friends, girlfriends, and sports. There are many paths the two young men could have chosen for their lives, but ultimately, last month, they arrived at the same place— lying face down in front of the altar, giving their lives over in service to God and the Catholic Church.

The brothers were both ordained to the priesthood May 30 at Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile— in a private Mass, because of the pandemic.

“For whatever reason, God chose to call us and he did. And we were just fortunate enough to have had the foundations from both our parents and our education to hear it and then to say yes,” Peyton told CNA. Peyton, 27, says he is most excited to begin helping out with Catholic schools and education, and also to begin hearing confessions.

“You spend so much time in seminary preparing to be effective one day. You spend so much time in seminary talking about plans and dreams and hopes and stuff that you'll do one day in this hypothetical future...now it's here. And so I can't wait to begin.”

‘Natural virtues’

In Southern Louisiana, where the Plessala brothers’ parents grew up, you're Catholic unless you declare otherwise, Peyton said.

Both Plessala parents are medical doctors. The family moved to Alabama when Connor and Peyton were very young. Though the family was always Catholic – and raised Peyton, Connor, and their younger sister and brother in the faith – the brothers said they weren’t ever a “pray the rosary around the kitchen table” kind of family. Apart from taking the family to Mass every Sunday, the Plessalas taught their children what Peyton calls “natural virtues”— how to be good, decent people; the importance of choosing their friends wisely; and the value of education.

The brothers’ consistent involvement in team sports, encouraged by their parents, also helped to school them in those natural virtues. Playing soccer, basketball, football, and baseball over the years taught them the values of hard work, camaraderie, and setting an example for others. “They taught us to remember that when you go and play sports, and you have the Plessala name on the back of your jersey, that represents a whole family,” Peyton said.

'I could do this'

Peyton told CNA that despite going to Catholic schools and getting the “vocation talk” every year, neither of them had ever really considered the priesthood as an option for their lives. That is, until early in 2011, when the brothers took a trip with their classmates to Washington, D.C. for the March for Life, the nation’s largest annual pro-life gathering in the U.S. The chaperone for their group from McGill-Toolen Catholic High School was a new priest, fresh out of seminary, whose enthusiasm and joy made an impression on the brothers. The witness of their chaperone, and of other priests they encountered on that trip, moved Connor to begin considering entering the seminary straight out of high school.

In the fall of 2012, Connor started his studies at St. Joseph Seminary College in Covington, Louisiana. Peyton also felt the call to the priesthood on that trip, thanks to the example of their chaperone— but his path to the seminary was not quite as direct as his younger brother’s. “I realized for the first time: ‘Man, I could do this. [This priest] is so at peace with himself and so joyful and having so much fun. I could do this. This is a life that I could actually do,’” he said.

Despite a tug toward the seminary, Peyton decided he would pursue his original plan to study pre-med at Louisiana State University. He would go on to spend three years there in total, dating a girl he met at LSU for two of those years. His junior year of college, Peyton returned to his high school to chaperone that year’s trip to the March for Life — the same trip that had started the tug toward the priesthood several years earlier. At one point in the trip, during adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Peyton perceived God’s voice: “Do you really want to be a doctor?” The answer, as it turned out, was no. “And the moment I heard that, my heart felt more at peace than it had in... Maybe ever in my life. I just knew. In that moment, I was like, ‘I’m going to go to seminary,’” Peyton said. “For a moment, I had a life’s purpose. I had a direction and a goal. I just knew who I was.”

This newfound clarity came at a price, however— Peyton knew he would have to break up with his girlfriend. Which he did. Connor remembers the phone call from Peyton, telling him he had decided to come to seminary. “I was shocked. I was excited. I was extremely excited because we were going to be back together again,” Connor said. In the fall of 2014, Peyton joined his younger brother at St. Joseph Seminary.

'We can rely on each other'

Though Connor and Peyton had always been friends, their relationship changed— for the better— when Peyton joined Connor at the seminary. For most of their life, Peyton had blazed a trail for Connor, encouraging him and giving him advice when he got to high school, after Peyton had been learning the ropes there for a year. Now, for the first time, Connor felt in some ways like the “older brother”— being more experienced in seminary life. At the same time, although the brothers were now pursuing the same path, they still approached seminary life in their own way, with their own ideas, and approaching challenges in different ways, he said. The experience of taking on the challenge of becoming priests helped their relationship to mature. “Peyton’s always done his own thing because he was the first. He was the oldest. And so, he didn’t have an example to go follow then, whereas I did,” Connor said. “And so, the idea of breaking from: ‘We’re going to be the same,’ was tougher for me, I think...But I think in that, in the growing pains of that, we were able to grow and really realize each other’s gifts and each other’s weaknesses and then rely on each other more...now I know Peyton’s gifts a lot better, and he knows my gifts, and so we can rely on each other.” Because of the way his college credits transferred from LSU, Connor and Peyton ended up in the same ordination class, despite Connor’s two year “head start.”

'Getting out of the way of the Holy Spirit'

Now that they're ordained, Peyton said their parents are constantly bombarded with the question: "What did y'all do to have half of your children enter the priesthood?" For Peyton, there were two key factors in their upbringing that helped him and his siblings grow up as committed Catholics. First, he said, he and his siblings attended Catholic schools—schools with a strong faith identity. But there was something within the Plessala's family life that, for Peyton, was even more important. "We ate dinner every single night as a family, regardless of the logistics required to make that work," he said. "Whether we had to eat at 4 p.m. because one of us had a game that night that we were all going to go, to or whether we had to eat at 9:30 p.m., because I was getting home from soccer practice late in high school, whatever it was. We always made it an effort to eat together, and we would pray before that meal." The experience of gathering every night as a family, praying and spending time together, helped the family cohere and support each member's endeavors, the brothers said. When the brothers told their parents that they were entering the seminary, their parents were extremely supportive—even if the brothers suspected their mother might be sad that she would likely end up having fewer grandchildren. One thing Connor has heard his mother say several times when people ask what the parents did right is that she "got out of the way of the Holy Spirit."

The brothers said they are extremely grateful that their parents always supported their vocations. Peyton said he and Connor occasionally encountered men at the seminary who ended up leaving because their parents did not support their decision to enter. "Yeah, parents know best, but when it comes to your children's vocations, God's the one who knows, because God's the one calling," Connor commented.

'If you want to find an answer, you have to ask the question'

Neither Connor nor Peyton ever expected to become priests. Neither, they said, did their parents or siblings expect or predict that they might be called that way. In their words, they were just "normal guys" who practiced their faith, dated throughout high school, and had a lot of varied interests. Peyton said the fact that they both felt an initial tug to the priesthood is not all that surprising. "I think every young guy who really practices their faith has probably thought about it at least once, just because they've known a priest and the priest probably said, 'Hey, you should think about this,'" he said. Many of Peyton's devout Catholic friends are married now, and he's asked them if they ever considered the priesthood at some point before discerning marriage. Almost all, he said, told him yes; they thought about it for a week or two, but it never stuck. What was different for him and Connor was that the idea of the priesthood didn't go away. "It stuck with me and then it stayed with me for three years. And then finally God was like, 'It's time, man. It's time to do it,'" he said. "I would just encourage guys, if it really has been a while and it just sticks with you, the only way you'll ever figure that out is to actually go to seminary." Meeting and getting to know priests, and seeing how they lived and why, was helpful to both Peyton and Connor. "The lives of priests are the most helpful things in getting other men to consider priesthood," Peyton said. Connor agreed. For him, taking the plunge and going to seminary when he was still discerning was the best way for him to decide whether God was really calling him to be a priest. "If you want to find an answer, you have to ask the question. And the only way to ask and answer that question of priesthood is to go to the seminary," he said. "Go to the seminary. You will not be worse off for it. I mean, you're starting to live a life of dedicating prayer, of formation, diving into yourself, learning who you are, learning your strengths and weaknesses, learning more about the faith. All those are good things." The seminary is not a permanent commitment. If a young man goes to seminary and realizes the priesthood is not for him, he won't be worse off, Connor said. "You've been formed into a better man, a better version of yourself, you've prayed a whole lot more than you would have if you were not in seminary." Like many people their age, Peyton and Connor's paths to their ultimate vocation was a winding one. "The great pain of millennials is sitting there and trying to think of what you want to do with your life for so long that your life just passes you by," Peyton said. "And so, one of the things I like to encourage young people to do if you're discerning, do something about it."

DIOCESAN VOCATIONS SPOTLIGHT

*How did
your family*



*influence your
vocation?*

Since our focus for this edition of the newsletter is on the Holy Family, we decided to ask some of our priests and religious in the Diocese what role their family played in nurturing or encouraging their vocation. Here's what they had to say:



Father Deogratias Kisweka

I grew up in a rural area, in a family of seven children and two parents. My father worked as a catechist in a catholic parish that was far from our rural home. Due to that he was given a house in the parish compound. At home my mother made sure that we always prayed after our evening meal daily. Living in a parish compound allowed me to be an altar boy. I was always available for whatever activity that needed my service. I felt as if I were a small priest. I liked and enjoyed that experience. That is how I was drawn to the priesthood as a child. When I asked my parents to join minor seminary after completing my primary education, they easily gave me a green light.

Sister Mara Rose McDonnell, O.P.

It was actually the witness of my maternal grandparents' marriage that helped me in my discernment. They faithfully lived their vows with a joy that seemed impossible, yet very desirable. As I prayed to God about my own vocation I considered the happiness of my grandparents, and asked Him how I could be as happy. The answer was obvious, I would only be happy spending my life in service to God and others as a Dominican Sister.





Canon Micheál Liston

It was only a number of years after my ordination that I became conscious of “the spiritual neighbour hood” of my childhood where people tried to imitate the hidden life of Jesus; his day to day life in Nazareth.

Thóg sé roinnt bliana orm is mé im’ Shagairt gur thuig mé tábhacht, comharsonacht spiorádálta m’óige mar theastaigh ó dhoine saol folaithe Íosa a leanúint; saol Nazarait.

Sister Eileen Lenihan, R.S.J.

American British writer, Bill Bryson, in *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, marvels at the miraculous good fortune of our existence! He says, that for any one of us, “To be here now, alive in the 21st century and smart enough to know it, you also had to be the beneficiary of an extraordinary string of biological good fortune.” Had Bryson been pondering the faith phenomenon through which a person senses the beckoning of a religious vocation - a life of religious consecration- he could equally have said: ‘to be able to recognise and follow such a beckoning, one has to be the beneficiary of an extraordinary string of spiritual good fortune!’



For me, as for most of us, such good fortune came through the influence of family. From an early age my interest in the spiritual was awakened. At home, pictures of Jesus and/or Mary decorated room walls; the Sacred Heart lamp kept silent vigil in the kitchen and the holy water font hung by the door. Our house, like most Irish households of the time, was a hive of activity on Sunday mornings. The family prepared for Mass and soon the entire parish converged on our local church. Frequently evening devotions meant a second visit to the church.

From our mother, we learned the sign of the cross and our prayers, as well as how to be industrious, kind, generous and hospitable not only within the family but towards the children in mission lands. As my siblings and I grew older my father instilled such values as honesty, hard work and always speaking well of others.

My family’s ordinary and extraordinary support nurtured my spiritual awakening and my growing interest in the life and work of the Australian, St Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph of the sacred Heart. After almost 60 years as a Sister of St Joseph, I give thanks to God and to my family that I have been ‘a beneficiary of an extraordinary string of spiritual good fortune!’

FILMS OF INTEREST

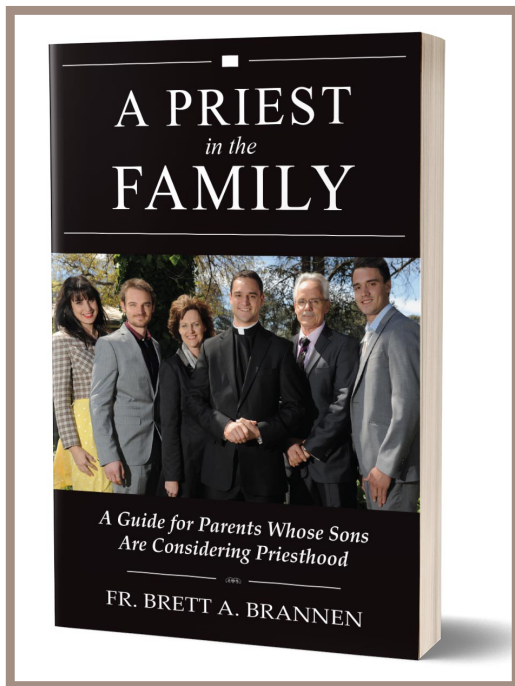


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ff14eqSOGQ&feature=emb_logo



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EMOgG7lfmE&feature=emb_logo

RECOMMENDED READING



A great book for anyone discerning, or working with men discerning, the priesthood.

From the description:

"My son, a priest!?! Won't he be lonely? What about celibacy? Isn't he too young? I just want him to be happy!"

These and dozens of other questions and concerns are common among parents of would-be priests. With his gift for storytelling and down-to-earth wisdom, Fr. Brett Brannen addresses a wide range of issues in *A Priest in the Family: A Guide for Parents Whose Sons are Considering Priesthood*.

Like his previous book, *To Save a Thousand Souls*, Fr. Brannen's new book for parents is filled with humor, anecdotes, and dramatic stories from his own life as a priest. In twelve short, easy-to-read chapters, he explains priesthood, seminary, celibacy, and how a man discerns his vocation—all while keeping in mind parents' legitimate concerns.

<https://www.vianneyvocations.com/product/a-priest-in-the-family/>

SUPPORTING VOCATIONS IN YOUR PARISH?

Please pray for holy vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life regularly. Would you consider having regular Adoration for this intention? Do you currently have any events or initiatives in your parish or schools to support the understanding and promotion of vocations? Would you like to? If we can help to organize something for you, please be in touch!

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VOCATION OFFICE

www.limerickdiocese.org
www.facebook.com/dioceseflimerick
vocations@limerickdiocese.org