

Bro. Francis, O.S.B.

I was born in St. Louis and have two older and two younger sisters, my father was a doctor and until the children came along, my mother was a grade school teacher. Being Catholic has always been a part of my identity. My earliest memories always include our Church and community. My parents started going to daily mass at a local convent when I was in grade school and being Catholic meant we observed all Holy Days, fasts and daily prayer. Three of my mother's brothers became priests and my dad's cousin and one of his aunts were nuns. I "concelebrated" my first mass when I was three, and I still remember standing up during the *oratio* and making all the gesture my uncle, Fr. Pete, was making. I also remember how much I embarrassed my mother by doing this, but at that time I felt I was doing what I was supposed to do. You can say I knew I had a priestly vocation then, but as I grew older I began to deny it. There are many reasons why I refused to acknowledge my vocation, but it was mainly because I thought it wouldn't be a fun life.

I moved to Japan when I was twenty, on a one-year exchange program, in part to "escape" my vocation. I ended up living there for ten years. I got some degrees and got good jobs and had fun: money and excitement. I loved it! And gradually I began to stop practicing my faith because for seven years I lived in Northern Japan (Aomori) and there was no Catholic Churches to attend. But there was a voice that spoke to me in the silent moments. I moved to Japan with one suitcase and lived in a tiny, sparse room, that first night I remember thinking, "Wow! I like this." Soon I heard the voice for first time and it said, "this is like a monk's cell. That's why you like it." And over the years this thought of monastic life often visited me. The voice also kept me grounded. While I loved living in Japan, I was not "one of them." No matter how good my Japanese was, or how well I understood and practiced their customs, I was and always would be an outsider. The voice told me this, and after ten years I realized it was true. I also realized I wasn't just not having fun, but I was missing something that money and excitement couldn't provide. I decided I more education was needed, so I moved back to the States to study International Business.

I also started going back to Church. I found I really was getting something fulfilling from the Mass and the Eucharist. Eventually I began to go daily. I got my MBA and worked in a fairly large hotel chain doing accounting. I had money, I had a good reputation but at thirty-five, something crucial was missing. I remember sitting in my office and thinking, "God, why haven't you gotten me a better job? Why won't you give me something that makes me happy? You know I go to YOUR Church and I follow YOUR rules, when are you going to do something for me!?" Then I realized; I love going to Mass, I love praying, I love reading the Bible, and getting to know God was the most joyous thing in my life. I realized not only I did have a calling to the religious life, but also I would never be happy unless I followed that calling. (And I am pretty sure I heard God laughing when I realized this.)

After much discernment, I enter the English Congregation of the Order of St. Benedict (OSB, Benedictine) at their monastery in St. Louis. English Benedictines were founded in 590 by Pope St. Gregory the Great. St. Gregory walked by the slave market one day and saw two blonde, blue-eyed children that had been brought from England. He saw them as people and decided to send monks (led by St. Augustine of Canterbury) to the barbarian territory of England to bring them the Good News. Many centuries later, under Henry VIII, we had to flee England and then we secretly sent monks through a kind of "underground" to help the faithful in hiding. We have many martyrs. Because of the great need for priests, the English Benedictine monks almost always went on to become priests. We still have this practice, but our lives our much less dangerous.

In St. Louis there are around thirty of us monks, and we have a parish and run a school for boys from seventh thru twelfth grade. I have taught the Old Testament and stained glass. In the monastery I have been kitchen master and Abbot's secretary. I am currently in my third year

of studies at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at Dominican House of Studies right across the street from CUA. I am studying for a Masters in Divinity which I need to be ordained a priest. I consider my life truly blessed and joyful. Being at St. Augustine's is a continuation of God's blessing and I pray for the grace to both serve this community and share God's joy with all.