



A Note from Fr. Joe

I am very much looking forward to getting to know as many people as possible in the coming weeks at Immaculate Conception Parish and St. Theodore Mission. To jump start the process, I would like to share a few things about me and my life.

I was born in Livingston, MT in April of 1954, so that makes me 60 years old. I made it through 60 so now I'm looking forward to 70. If anyone wants to know my actual birthday and is good at liturgy, here is a clue: When I turn 85, God willing I live that long, my birthday will be on Easter.

I attended St. Mary's parochial school in Livingston for 8 years while growing up and thought about becoming a priest at that time. When I went to the secular high school, my vocation was put on hold while I chose to seek out worldly experiences. I participated in football, wrestling and tennis but injuries made it hard for me to excel in any of the sports.

I started going to MSU and studying Electrical Engineering, but the daily commute from Livingston and long weekends working at a local restaurant proved to be too much. So I joined the Air Force and got to see a good share of the US as well as Japan, Korea and the Philippines. After 4 years, I went back to MSU using the GI Bill and pursued a degree in the relatively new field of Computer Science. During this time I worked for the On Campus Living department as a hall supervisor where I met my wife to be Wanda. After a whirlwind engagement of 6 months, we were married in December of 1979 at Resurrection Parish in Bozeman.

My first job out of college was at Anaconda Aluminum in Columbia Falls, MT. We lived in Kalispell where my twin sons Nicholas and Nathan were born in October of 1980. We were attending church at Evergreen, but when the twins became colicky, sitting in the crying room for the whole Mass proved to be too much and we stopped attending Church. This started a bad habit which went on for approximately 25 years.

When the aluminum plant started having some layoffs, we moved to the "Oil Patch" in Texas where I worked for ARCO. Everything in Texas is big, including the roaches. After 3 years in Texas, we moved back to Montana to take a job at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana so we could raise the twins in a good environment and be closer to our families. The next 12 years were filled with all the joys and challenges of raising children and pursuing careers. Unfortunately, during that time, Wanda and I grew apart and after some counseling determined we wanted to get divorced.



More to come in future bulletin inserts...



A Note from Fr. Joe (continued)

In the last note I ended by mentioning my divorce which may have left a few people wondering how I could become a priest. I eventually went through the processes of getting an annulment which allowed me to be eligible to apply for priesthood. It also seemed like I was rushing through a good part of my life, so I wanted to backtrack a little.

I am the oldest of 4 children in our family, with my brothers Fred (1 yr. younger) and Gerry (4 yrs.) pictured with me on their left and my sister Mary Pat (8 yrs.). We grew up on a dead end street in Livingston, so I have many

fond memories of playing kick-the-can and other games in the street in front of my house. There were no cars parked on the streets in those days.

We lived 3 blocks from the Catholic grade school and 4 blocks from the High School, so we came home to a hot lunch most of the time. We thought it was a treat to get to eat at the cafeteria in the school every once in a while. Since our dad (Pat) owned a grocery store with a custom meat counter, there was never a shortage of good food on our table. I actually thought chicken was a delicacy because we only ate it at most once per week. Our mom (Mary Ann) is a great cook, so every night we would all sit at the table when dad got home from work and have a wonderfully prepared meal.

Flash forward a few years now to the 1980's and I'm busy supporting and raising a family. The twins, (Nicholas & Nathan) were 2 weeks late in their delivery and came out weighing almost 6.5 lbs. each. (You do the math.) Needless to say, my wife Wanda was very uncomfortable during the later stages of the pregnancy. Other than the colic that I mentioned last time, the twins had a pretty uneventful early life. Their biggest challenge was frequent ear infections, so we ended up having "tubes" installed in their ears and having their adenoids removed. No broken bones or other visits to the emergency room.

As the twins grew older, Wanda and I came to realize that we had some differences of opinion on the best way to raise them. I believe this is one of the key things that eventually lead to our divorce. When the boys were 16 years old we separated and they chose to come live with me. I have a special place in my heart for single parents after being their sole care giver for 3 years. My job required 50 hours/week and taking care of the kids and house took up what was left over. I didn't have much time for myself, but that is what parenthood is often about, sacrifice. And just when I thought I was getting the knack of being a single parent, Nicholas developed Type I Diabetes. So our meal routines had to be altered to support his new dietary requirements. Not to mention dealing with the depression that comes when a young adult learns that he is no longer immortal and has limitations to deal with.



Next, the onset of mental illness ...



A Note from Fr. Joe (continued)

Other than the diabetes with Nicholas (left), the High School Years were busy but relatively uneventful. Nick worked at Perkins baking pies and Nate worked at Taco Johns to provide themselves with spending money for their extracurricular activities. They were both good students and took advanced placement courses in subjects they liked. They also chose to follow in my footsteps and go to MSU to pursue a degree in Computer Science.

In Nate's sophomore year, his brother started reporting back that Nate was acting very strange. He was very paranoid about what he thought people were saying about him and couldn't sleep very well. After seeing a psychiatrist and starting on some anti-psychotic medication, he quit school and came back to Helena to live with me. After a few months, he went to live with his uncle Gerry in Spokane for a change of venue, to see if that would help with his paranoia. Things only got worse though and he ended up in the Eastern Washington Mental Hospital after attempting suicide. He was released into my custody after 3 weeks and so began my journey of working with the mentally ill.

After a few months of severe depression where all Nate did was sleep, eat and go to visit with his mental health counselors, he eventually started working again in fast food. The constant care and worry for my son took its toll on me and I was starting to "lose it" if you will. A friend at work who had been through something similar with one of her children, mentioned Dr. Gary Mihelish (a Dentist) and NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). I attended one of their 12 week Family to Family classes and found the answers for many of my questions and a way to help my son and the mentally ill through advocacy.

I became very involved in NAMI. I trained to be a Family to Family instructor and taught courses to others who were just starting to deal with mental illness in their families. A small group of us worked to get the initial NAMI-Walk going in Helena and set the stage for subsequent annual Walks that have now grown to over 1,500 people and raising \$150,000 to support NAMI efforts in Montana. A few years later we took on a project to bring Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for first responders to Montana. After attending a weeklong training session in Memphis where CIT was started, we brought what we learned back to Montana and proceeded to put on the first CIT training for Police officers and Sheriff deputies in Helena. This program has been repeated and expanded to many other cities now across Montana and is a regular part of the Montana Law Enforcement Academy's training curriculum.

While this was all going, my son Nicholas started manifesting his mental illness. He had graduated from college and was gainfully employed but something wasn't right in his life. Nick had a gift for math/computers and excelled in his classes. His last two years of college though, he started telling these horrible tales of how he was being bullied by other students. A couple of years later when he did have a serious mental break, I realized that his stories were part of his visual hallucinations. If you have seen the movie "A Beautiful Mind", that is a great example of what my life was like with Nick during those years. So once again I got to go through the trials and sorrows of helping another son deal with his mental illness.

Next up, my turn dealing with depression and finding God through and in my suffering.



A Note from Fr. Joe (continued)

By all appearances, my life would have seemed to be going great to a casual observer. I had come to grips with my sons' mental illnesses and become very active in the NAMI movement advocating for the mentally ill. I had a good job at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana with a number of good friends with whom I regularly went on evening and weekend mountain bike rides in the hills surrounding Helena. I was working out twice a day and probably in the best physical condition of my life. But my spiritual life was a mess. I was seriously depressed and contemplating suicide.

My business partner at the time was a practicing Catholic that had been to a Cursillo Journey the previous year. He kept hinting that I should consider attending the upcoming Cursillo in East Helena. Except for a couple of ad-hoc visits, my shadow hadn't darkened nary a Catholic Church for over 22

years. But something deep inside kept tugging at my heart that this "Cursillo" thing was something that I should do, so I said yes.

In November of 2003, I participated in the Cursillo Journey at Ss. Cyril & Methodius Church in East Helena, MT. It was a major conversion experience for me and I learned what it meant to be a Christian. I came back to the Church and became active in various ministries as well as staying involved with my "Fourth Day" bible study group. Committing myself to daily reading of the Bible and prayer, I eventually came to a point where I asked God: "What do you want me to be when I grow up?" (I was 49 at the time.) The first thing that came to my mind was to become a priest! I said to myself, "yeah, right." But whenever I prayed, I couldn't shake the idea of priesthood, so I decided to talk to my pastor and spiritual director about this calling. I didn't know it at the time, but Fr. O'Donnell was the vocation director for the Diocese of Helena and when I mentioned this to him, he got this little grin on his face, God had sent him a live one. His advice was to start pursuing this vocation and if it was God's will, all the hurdles that I had imagined would be overcome.

So I embarked on the journey to priesthood; filling out all the paperwork, taking all the psychological tests and being grilled in interviews about why I thought I was called to the priesthood. There were times when my confidence waned, but I kept pressing forward and slowly but surely, all the hurdles were overcome. My last big hurdle came as I was challenged by God to take a leap of faith and resign from my job at BCBSMT. The seminary at that time was still questioning whether I would be able to persevere in that environment because of my advanced age compared to the younger seminarians. They had not approved my application yet. But trusting in God, I turned in my letter of resignation, quite to the surprise of my VP, and headed home. On my way home I was wondering to myself: "What the \$%#* have I done!" When I arrived home though, I found the letter of acceptance from the seminary in my mailbox.

The seminary years are next, the final installment of my abbreviated history.



A Final Note from Fr. Joe

Entering the seminary at the age of 52 proved to be a challenging experience. Most of the young “men” at Mount Angel Seminary were between 17 and 25 years old. They were all on fire for the Lord, but their maturity level generally needed some work. Enter “Formation”.

Formation, for lack of a better description is parenting on steroids. Our formation directors were all priests that were each assigned 15+ seminarians to work with throughout the year. We would meet

with them every two weeks to discuss 3 of the 4 “Pillars of Formation”: Human, Intellectual, and Pastoral. These were called the “External Forum” because all information dealt with what could be observed and objectively measured. For instance, if you were consistently late or missing prayer times or mass, this would be documented, discussed and recorded in your personal file that was annually reviewed by your vocation director and Bishop. The key was to be showing improvement in all three areas over the course of your stay at Mount Angel. Those men who weren’t ready to become priests would generally discern out within a year or two at the most.

As for me, I was older than 3 out of 5 of my formation directors during my 6 years in the seminary and generally wasn’t as intimidated by them as the younger guys were. I knew that the process they were following was intended to provide me with constructive feedback to help me become a better priest. We generally had some great discussions about priesthood and I suspect they even learned something from me occasionally as I would share some of my life experiences.

The fourth pillar, Spiritual, was handled by a separate priest and considered part of the “Internal Forum”. Everything that you shared with this priest was considered completely confidential and would not be shared with anyone else. It provided each of us a great sounding board for discussing those personal challenges that we weren’t quite ready to go public with. These priests also helped us develop and mature in our prayer life.

My biggest challenge was persevering in the classrooms with all the young men and their sometimes juvenile antics that could prove to be a distraction. I generally sat in the very front of the class so I wouldn’t have to watch what was going on. I love to learn new things, so the 6 years of classes was a pure blessing for me and I hope to be able to share much of what I learned with you in the coming years. My diligence in the classroom paid off with a 3.92 GPA and I was selected to give the commencement speech for our class graduation.

There were a couple of physical challenges for me during this time: dealing with the occasional kidney stone and the onset of arthritis. My chief mental challenge was to keep from worrying about my sons struggling with their mental illnesses back in Montana. Through prayer and perseverance though, I made it to graduation and now I get to be here in the Deer Lodge serving all of you.