

“THANK GOD MY PARENTS DIDN’T STOP AT SEVEN!”

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My parents, Larry and Marie (Whelan) Meagher were married in 1954. Just under a year later Raymond was born. Over the next 5 years Francis and Mary Therese and Joan were born. With 2 boys and 2 girls some might have thought “you have a good thing going - 2 of each. Don’t mess up a good thing.” I’m sure glad that God had different plans and my parents were open to those plans, because I “messed up a good thing.” I’m number five. My younger sister Terese (# 6) messed things up a little more. Then my mother had a miscarriage and Peter (# 7) went to heaven. God knew that we’d need a little more “inside help.” When my brother Tommy (# 8) was born on November 27, 1968, he really “messed things up.” You see, Tommy has Downs Syndrome.

Surely my parents asked the Lord “Why?” and, at times, with great anguish. There were all the challenges of raising 6 other children in a working class neighborhood of Queens, NY, where alcohol, drugs, sexual promiscuity, rebellion and occasional racial tensions and violence were realities their children would more and more have to contend with. Tommy’s birth helped bring them, and later on, all of us, to our knees – literally. Out of necessity, family prayer became a far more consistent reality after Tommy was born. It was a matter of survival. (Before I was 18 years old I would experience the death of a best friend and the deaths of two brothers of another very close friend – all due to drug and alcohol abuse.)

Our family prayer was a work in progress. It grew significantly through my parents’ involvement in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Two great lessons we learned as a family, were simply - make family prayer a habit, and, when things are difficult, always turn to God in prayer first. One of the practices that developed early on was praying with Tommy every night before he went to sleep. It began as a time to ask God to miraculously heal Tommy of his Downs Syndrome. Over the years it became clear that God intended this prayer for *our* healing far more than for his.

My parents had to persevere in prayer for all of their children. In my own foolish rebellion, by the summer of 1979, just before my senior year in high school, I was developing some pretty destructive habits involving alcohol and marijuana. Amazingly though, by God’s grace, I never stopped going to Sunday Mass. In the midst of this folly, late one night as I came home from a time of “partying,” I quietly slipped into the house, only to be “caught” by Tommy. As I passed by his room, he simply asked me “Joseph, would you pray over me?” This was obviously not what I was interested in doing, but I couldn’t say no to Tommy. So, I sat on the floor by his bed and placing my hand on his shoulder, as I had done many times before when we were growing up, I said a brief spontaneous prayer. He quickly fell back to sleep. That was when the Lord began to “speak” to me. I became very aware of God’s great love for me, and in the context of that love, I began to see some of the lies that I was living and the sins I was excusing. I experienced both great sorrow and even greater joy because I knew that the Lord was in a sense, welcoming me back home – like the prodigal son. The result was the beginning of a new conversion in my life that brought many challenges, but many more joys, and no regrets.

Little by little I began to let God call the shots in my life. By Divine providence, after high school, I attended Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. There my faith grew tremendously and I began to be formed as a Catholic Man, as apposed to being the man of the world I had been becoming. Although I could not see it at the time, it was during these 4 years at Franciscan that the seeds of my priestly vocation were being deeply planted in my heart. Yet, because I experienced the natural and holy desire for marriage and family, I presumed that marriage was the vocation through which I would serve the Lord and fulfill his purpose for my life.

During the summer of 1984, following my graduation from college, I spent 2 months doing youth and young adult evangelization in Montreal, Canada with some fellow Franciscan alumni (in preparation for John Paul II’s first visit there). For almost the next 2 years I was a part-time campus minister and part-time graduate student at Seton Hall University. During that time I began dating a young woman who I grew to love very much and intended to marry. In the midst of my plans I had an experience one day that would change everything.

I was attending Mass at the Seton Hall University chapel. As the gospel was being proclaimed, it seemed, through the words of Jesus, that God was speaking directly to me. The reading was from the Gospel of Matthew: At the sight of the crowds his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples: "The harvest is good, but laborers are scarce. Beg the Harvest Master to send out laborers to gather in his harvest" (9:36-38).

At that moment I was overwhelmed with joy as I felt in Jesus' words a personal invitation to not only receive Jesus as the first love of my life, as He already was, but to give my heart and life to Him as the only love of my life, and in this single state to help "gather in the harvest" as a Catholic priest.

Particularly over the next 6 months there was of course much struggle concerning whether I could live "single for the Lord." I also worried about, Jan, the girl to whom I had sincerely expressed intention to marry. Little by little the Lord put my heart at ease and made it very clear that He would take care of each of us in his own perfect way. Twenty years later I am happy (but not surprised) to say that I truly delight in living single for the Lord and being a priest and shepherd of souls. Jan too is happily married and raising her family. Well, back to my story...

In the midst of a time of discernment I moved into St. Antoninus Parish in Newark., where I lived for just over a year. There under the mentorship of a very holy and wise pastor, Fr Jim Ferry, I learned to serve in the parish in many varied ways (e.g., I shoveled snow, cut grass, cleaned toilets, painted walls, lead prayer meetings, participated in the ongoing neighborhood evangelization efforts, etc.). With Fr Jim's encouragement and guidance I discerned a call to the diocesan priesthood, and entered Immaculate Conception Seminary where I continued that discernment and preparation for the priesthood. On May 30, 1992 I was ordained a Catholic Priest for the Archdiocese of Newark. I had the privilege of having my father, who was ordained a deacon in the Brooklyn Diocese in 1977, vest me at my diaconate ordination and then serve as the deacon of my Mass of Thanksgiving after my priesthood ordination.

My first assignment was St Aloysius Parish in Caldwell, NJ. Providentially, my present assignment, St John the Apostle Parish, in the towns of Clark and Linden, where I have been for over 11 years, is the site of the Respect Life Office and the post abortion healing ministries of Project Rachel / Rachel's Vineyard of the Archdiocese of Newark. It was here under the care of the late Msgr. Richard McGuinness, that I experienced the mercy and power of God in a new and life-changing way through ministering to women and men who were deeply wounded by abortion. During this time, in part due to the urging of those who were post abortive, I also became more involved in sidewalk counseling at a local abortion clinic. Yet, my earliest inspiration in pro-life work came from the example of my dear departed mother, who at 17 was the first of her siblings to come to America from Leitrim, Ireland. She was a powerful intercessor and advocate for unborn children and their mothers.

As I now serve as Director of the Respect Life Office in the Archdiocese, I hope to build on the work of my predecessor Msgr. McGuinness. I am grateful for the wise and generous labors of Michelle Krystofik, my associate director. I look forward to supporting those who have been "in the trenches" of pro-life work. I am very hopeful about a powerful new voice for the unborn which is rising up from the ashes of a "culture of death." I speak here of those post abortive women and men who are being transformed by Divine Mercy. I am also very hopeful about a new generation of young adults who, having experienced first hand the emptiness and slavery of a promiscuous society, are more and more discovering a true freedom in generously giving themselves over to our Lord and His purpose for their lives. All these are the living gospel of life and are on the front lines in proclaiming the sanctity of human life.

There continues to be so very much both sacred and desecrated ground to cover in proclaiming the gospel of life, including the areas of human sexuality/theology of the body, Natural Family Planning, bioethics (e.g., in-vitro fertilization, stem cells and cloning), end of life issues, and capitol punishment, as well as the Catholic mission of forming a culture of life, including, among other things, participation in the political process. From the ashes of a culture of death, God is raising up a new and courageous generation of those who have been inspired and challenged by the life, words and holy death of Pope John Paul the Great. I am very hopeful that as always, God's grace is and ever will be more than sufficient for the task at hand. "With God all things are possible." Please pray for me, for the Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of Newark and for all believers in Christ, that we may each do our part in this mission of Jesus and of his Bride the Church.

"Blessed Mother Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Unborn and of all the America's, pray that all of us may do the good we each have been called to do in Christ Jesus our Eucharistic Lord and King ."

"Yes Lord, send me."