

## Vocation Story

My vocation really started in December 2008 when some Franciscan Friars of the Renewal came to my parish for a mission / retreat week. I was 22 at the time. I had been brought up a Catholic, attended Catholic schools and gone to mass every Sunday of my life and I had thought this was enough. I had never felt the presence of God, or knew what Grace was, but I was not aware that one could feel such things as these. God for me was quite an abstract thought and I had no idea you could have a real relationship with him. However during that retreat I became aware of the awesome presence and power of God and I realised that up until then I had not had any real knowledge of God let alone a relationship with Him and that I had simply been going through the motions with regard to my faith.

During the mission I felt a strong desire to go to confession and I felt that if I didn't go then I would regret it. So I did go for the first time in years. Afterwards I felt the happiest and most peaceful I have ever felt and with hindsight I think it must have been my first awareness of Grace. It was like I had not lived up until that point or ever felt completely whole up until then. This feeling lasted about 10 days or so and then gradually faded, but I never forgot the experience, it stayed with me.

During Holy Week 2011 a friend lent me the autobiography of Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk, called the 'Seven Story Mountain'. As I was reading the third chapter where Merton describes the Franciscan ideal I felt a strong desire to visit the Franciscans of the Renewal and to discern whether I had a vocation with them because I felt their apostolate of helping the poor was the best thing one could do with one's life.

I eventually plucked up the courage to visit in the new year and this began a two year discernment period with them where I visited for vocation weekends and did two one week live-ins. However things were not progressing very quickly and whilst I liked and respected all the Friars, for some reason I didn't feel I fitted in or that I was 'one of them'. This was a feeling that they themselves had about me.

During my 20s I didn't really have the courage of my convictions with regard to my faith because I was surrounded by people who had no faith and no respect for Christianity. In addition, not one of my Catholic friends who I had gone to school with had continued to practise their faith in adulthood and so I became quite insular about my faith and was reluctant to share it with other people. This probably didn't help me when I was with the Friars who were all very confident and gregarious.

In the meantime I remember watching the film 'Of Gods and Men' about the Cistercian monks of Tibhirine in Algeria who were martyred in 1996. I remember feeling very attracted to their way of life of simple manual work and prayer. Their witness also touched me deeply.

After a few years I started to receive some spiritual direction from the Friars. I had originally received some spiritual direction when I first visited the Franciscans from a Carmelite nun, but hadn't felt inclined to go back after she had lent me a book by another Cistercian called 'Grace can do more' written by Andre Louf, which I really hadn't enjoyed.

The direction provided by the Franciscans consisted of discerning whether I could live a life of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of God, whether I could accept and live by the evangelical counsels of poverty and obedience and we discussed the possibility of a call to the priesthood by reading the letter to the Hebrews.

At the end of this spiritual direction we felt it would be sensible to continue the path of discernment by visiting some other religious orders over the next 12 months and seeing if anything appealed to me. Then at the end of this period if I still felt the call of a vocation I should make a positive step and apply for entry somewhere.

Therefore I visited my local seminary for a vocations day and also visited another monastery for a monastic experience weekend. Around the same time I also met by chance two Cistercians from Mount St Bernard at the Carmelite monastery in my hometown. This

prompted me to visit Mount St Bernard too and of all the places I had visited Mount St Bernard was the place I felt the most at home and the most at peace.

I particularly liked the purity of spirit here, helped by the purity of the architecture and the lack of external stimulants, which helps to focus the mind on God alone. I also liked the emphasis on solitude and silence, particularly at the beginning and end of the day.

For me the Cistercian life is a life where every moment is dedicated to God and all our focus is on Him who is the source of all life. This is the way of life I had felt a deep longing for for quite some time.

Looking back I am surprised that there were so many Cistercian promptings in my discernment, because it was not until quite late in the discernment process that I began to consider the Cistercians as an option. I think this just goes to show that God allows us to move at our own pace and doesn't force things on us, but gradually reveals his will to us and waits for us to catch up with his way of thinking!