

Learning to be a Priest 1: Getting the call

Katy Lewis (BBC)

Michael O'Rourke is living in St Albans and training for the Roman Catholic priesthood. He told us how he first got the "call".

Obedience, poverty and celibacy are not the sorts of attributes that you would normally associate with the young men of today. But that's exactly what you have to commit to if you want to be a Roman Catholic priest in a missionary order.

You may think, therefore, that it's not entirely unsurprising that the numbers training for this role are dwindling. But that's not to say that there aren't men who are prepared to go down this route.

One of them is 26-year-old Michael O'Rourke who is currently living in St Albans, where, as a pre-novitiate with the order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, he is living with other priests in the community at the church of St Alban and St Stephen, while also attending a seminary in London as part of his training to be a priest, a process which could take at least six or seven years.

Liverpool-born Michael told us all about what his training involves and when he first got the call to begin his journey.

Michael, you are training to be a priest. This is a big thing to take on isn't it?

Michael: Yes, it's a big step for anyone. If someone had said to me years ago, "you'll be in a religious order training to be a priest", I would have said "not in a million years", because I don't come from a particularly religious family or a practising family.

So, you weren't in a practising Catholic family but it was a Catholic family?

Michael: Yes, my mum converted when she married my dad, who was from an Irish Catholic background. We went to Catholic schools so the foundations were there for the faith but we didn't used to go to church, even at Easter or Christmas, the essentials! It wasn't that they didn't want us to go, it was just I that I think for my dad, it had been strict when he was growing up so I think he maybe wandered away from the faith a little bit and had had enough by the time he was 16/17.

I think that happens to a lot of people if they're made to go when they're younger?

Michael: Yes, that can happen, whereas with me, I was always curious, so it worked the other way. I think if you see young people coming into the church today, it's the same. They are curious to see what the church has to say and discover what the difference is between having a faith and not having a faith?

So it must have been Catholic School that first got you interested?

Michael: I think so, also I had a great aunt who was a regular at Mass each day. I remember always going round to her house where she'd have the pictures of the Sacred Heart, and she'd always say she was lighting candles for me and praying for me. I think that left an impression on me because she was always a joyful person. Sometimes there's a feeling that people who enter religion are kind of strict but that wasn't the case [with her] and it left a deep impression on me growing up.

So when did you first get the call? Because it's not like deciding to be a doctor is it? And quite often when you talk to priests they've had a calling and almost ignored it, like they didn't want it to happen, but then they do it anyway?!

Michael: I think with me it was a gradual thing. It wasn't something that I would have thought about doing, but looking back with hindsight, I think the call was there in the small things.

I can't explain it but I had an attraction to the church from when I was small. I always felt comfortable there, I always felt at home and I think even as a child I was on a journey to discover God because I was quite an inquisitive child and I used to ask a lot of questions. I used to love science and always asked about why we're here, that kind of thing – I used to drive my mum and dad mad!

In school I always used to be fascinated by astronomy and I did want to go down the science route when I was doing my GCSEs, but I had dyslexia. I didn't know that at the time but I was rubbish at maths. And at A Level I really wouldn't have had a hope because the maths got harder. But at the same time I was thinking maybe it's not science that deals with the types of questions I was asking, maybe it's theology, maybe it's religious studies?

That's interesting because science is very "provable". It's based on hard evidence. And yet having a faith is about well – faith, isn't it?!

Michael: Yes – it's a leap isn't it really! But I think that the questions that I was asking - like why are we here? - were the things that I was searching for. I think that science can tell us so much about the physical world around us but for the deeper questions, that's not what science is for and I think that's where faith comes in. I think that's where God planted the seeds in me to ask these questions and discover him. That's the way I've seen it anyway.

So what did you do next?

Michael: I did A'Levels but I went to a college that didn't offer theology so I ended up doing Biology, History and Geography. However, I wasn't happy with the courses and thought that I should have gone to a college and done theology, so after my A'Levels I went to university to study theology.

At this point I think my faith started to develop more as well. I started to go to Mass and to pray more, and I think that's when I started to feel an attraction to the priesthood as a way of life. But at first I thought 'no' because I was scared! I took a step back and thought I definitely couldn't do it. Not being a very confident person, I thought there was no way I could stand up in front of people give a sermon and say the Mass.

Not only did I think that confidence-wise I couldn't do it but I was also thinking that celibacy was an issue, and moving away from family and friends was a big issue as well because I come from quite a close knit family. I thought that I just couldn't do it, but then as the years went on I began to think about what I was going to do with my life and with my theology degree. I thought maybe I could go into teaching, but again there was a confidence issue.

I graduated and ended up getting a job in ASDA, which wasn't the best of jobs, and I thought 'what am I doing here?' And I think that's when God started to talk to me.

God came to you in ASDA?!

Michael: [laughs] Sort of yes, because although the people I was working with were nice, it wasn't the job for me so it was then that I thought I had to give it [the priesthood] a try.

It's quite a leap though isn't it?! Most people who don't want to work in a supermarket would just go and get another job! There must have been quite a big shift in your mind to decide on the priesthood?

Michael: Yes, but I think in the back of my mind I kind of knew what I had to do, I just think I had been putting it off for a long time.

So what changed? You mention issues like confidence and the vows - celibacy, obedience and poverty are not the sorts of vows that you would expect a young man to take?

Michael: Yes. It was a big step and we live in an age now where [those kinds of vows] are so counter cultural. But I think that anyone who has a genuine love for God sees beyond that. Yes, it's hard and I'm not going to say that it's not, because at the end of the day we're still human beings and we still have feelings like normal people, but it's a worthwhile thing to do, to dedicate your life to, and I think that's where the strength comes from. If this is what God wants then he will give you the means to do it.

I think you can look negatively on celibacy, but I think you can take a step back and say it can be a gift as well. Because that love that you would have for one particular person, well maybe you can use it and give it to other people.

It's a big issue at the moment because the numbers of people like you, training for the priesthood, are dwindling and people are saying that if you let them marry, then that will solve the problem?

Michael: A lot of people do say that, but I would definitely disagree with it. I think that at the end of the day, if this is what God wants of you then you are going to do it no matter what because it's a worthwhile step to take. Yes there are sacrifices but there are sacrifices in other walks of life as well. If you get married there are sacrifices too, so yes, it's a big sacrifice but it's a worthwhile thing to do.

I guess if you're prepared to make such a big sacrifice, it shows that you really want to do the job?

Michael: Yes definitely. And I think that you can also focus too much on saying that it is a sacrifice, but you get a lot from it as well, such as the people that you meet and being able to make a difference.

What did your family think?

Michael: I have a twin brother and he wasn't that surprised. I think he had an idea. My mum and dad were taken aback a bit. I think my mum, like all mums, was a bit nervous at first. She wasn't too keen on the idea especially because joining a missionary order, she was scared where I might be sent to and wondered if I would be lonely or unhappy. But I think that now she's seen what I'm doing she's come round to the idea and is quite happy, I think she's quite proud. My dad, as my mum was, was supportive too. If they know that I am happy doing something then they are quite happy with the choices that I make. They were supportive but nervous at first, but then that's parents isn't it?! But now that they are seeing what I'm doing I think they're quite proud!

Learning to be a priest 2: The training

Katy Lewis (BBC)

Michael O'Rourke is living in St Albans and training for the Roman Catholic priesthood. He told us all about his training.

Liverpool-born Michael O'Rourke, 26, is currently living in St Albans, where, as a pre-novitiate with the order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, he is living with other priests in the community at the church of St Alban and St Stephen, while also attending a seminary in London as part of his training to be a priest, a process which could take at least six or seven years.

Michael told us all about what his training involves and how he decided what type of priest he wanted to be – yes – there is a choice!

What made you want to join the order of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart?

Michael: That's a good question. When I was thinking about the priesthood, I finally plucked up the courage to speak to my Parish Priest to say that I was interested in becoming a priest, and he said 'what type of priest do you want to be? Do you want to join a religious order or do you want to be a Diocesan priest?' At the time I didn't have a clue what the difference was and it took me a long time to figure out what I wanted to do.

I think what made the decision for me was that my Parish church was under the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, so I'd grown up with them. The order also focuses on the heart of Jesus. There's compassion and there's love for people, especially the needy and the poor, and I think that was attractive to me because I've always been concerned about social issues. I think I got that from my dad who was involved in Trade Unions and was a councillor for the Labour Party.

It just chimed with what I was interested in and the reasons for me going down the priesthood route. The reason for me becoming a priest was to be a sign for people and to be there for people. In a world where there's a lot of conflict and a lot of hatred, I want to show God's love, to be like the heart of God on Earth, and that's what the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart are about, revealing God's love for people. I think it's a great sign for today so I think that's really what made me go down the religious order route.

So what's the difference between a religious order and being a Diocesan priest?

Michael: If you go down the Diocesan route you're ordained for one particular area, so for Westminster you'd stay in the Diocese of Westminster. Also, those priests don't take a vow of poverty so they have a bank account and a salary.

In a religious order you do take a vow of poverty, which means that you don't get a salary every month. It sounds a big deal, but in reality it's not, because the order looks after your needs. Although you're not supposed to have a bank account you do get a certain amount of money every month that you live off, so the religious order supports you.

Also you're not confined to one particular part of the country. You can go wherever your religious order is, so for our province it would be Ireland, England, South Africa, Venezuela, Russia and America and you can go round to any of those places.

In addition I think, and people might argue with this, the difference with a religious order is that you can focus on your talents more than a Diocesan priest. So, whereas a Diocesan priest would become a parish priest, when you're in a religious order you don't necessarily

have to do this. Instead, you could work in schools or you could be a chaplain at a hospital, you can really tailor it more to what your talents are.

You might think you'd rather run retreats or work in schools or teach in a university, so it's more varied. You're still a priest and you'd still be saying Mass but you just wouldn't necessarily be in control of a parish or tied to a parish. But the option is also there to be a parish priest if you want, so that's what I think the great thing about a religious order is. You've got the opportunity to be a parish priest but you've got the opportunity to do other things as well.

So why would people choose the Diocesan option?

Michael: I wouldn't like to say! It's wherever God calls you, where you feel that you're called to.

So how do you train?

Michael: It's different if you join a religious order from if you join a diocesan order. In a religious order you become a pre-novitiate and in a diocesan order you become a first year in the seminary. In a religious order, because the training is slightly different and you're living in the community, they start you as a pre-novitiate so there's no strings attached. There's no commitment, it's just to see how you fit in with the community and whether it's for you, before you take any vows.

It's a bit like a taster then?

Michael: Yes – it's testing the waters really and seeing if it's for you, to see if you can adapt to community life, living with different people.

How long have you been doing this?

Michael: I started in February but I'd been in contact with the Vocations Director, Father Dave Nixon, up in Liverpool for a few years, just getting to know him and him knowing me and whether I would be a suitable candidate. But I started on the pre-novitiate in February, and moved to St Albans on the 1 February.

As well as living here and being part of the community, you go to Allen Hall Seminary in Chelsea. What sort of things do you do there?

Michael: You start with philosophy, theology and church history course. I started quite late into the course and I couldn't do all of them so I've been doing two philosophy courses, a theology course and a course in church history.

How long will you be at college?

Michael: You can't really say, because with religious orders you're not tied down to a seminary and you can take time out to do a pastoral placement for a year or so, but courses usually last about three years.

There are certain courses that you also need to take to become a priest - theology, philosophy and courses on the sacraments - so in September I'm going to start at Heythrop College, which is part of the University of London, where I will be doing a Bachelor of Divinity (BD), so that will probably take about two or three years.

You clearly like studying?

Michael: I do and it's a good job really, because it can be quite intense! I like to study. I've already done a degree in theology and religious studies with history, it's what I'm interested in so it's quite nice.

But after doing a BD, that's not the end of it is it? How long does it actually take to become a fully fledged priest?

Michael: It depends on the person, and for religious orders it's a bit different. If you're in the seminary training for the Diocese, it's usually six years. It's more structured, and at the end of the six years you would be expected to be ordained. In religious orders you can become a brother and you don't have to become a priest.

Also it [the time it takes] depends on the person and what their background is. Maybe if you already have a theology degree it wouldn't take as long as those without a degree, so it could be five or six years. But then you could have the training in theology but might not feel confident or ready at that stage to become a priest so you could take six or seven years. I think it's generally up to seven years.

And it's whenever you feel ready?

Michael: Yes, on your part and on your formator's, [your superior's] part. If they don't think you're ready after six years, then obviously they wouldn't put you forward as a candidate. So it's a joint agreement.

But you could just stay a brother?

Michael: Yes, that's the difference between a religious order and a Diocesan one. In the latter, you would be expected to be ordained a priest after five or six years, but in a religious order you can stay a brother and work in the community.

As a brother, you take the vows of poverty, obedience and celibacy as a priest would in a religious order, but you just wouldn't be able to hear confessions or give sacraments or say the Mass.

As a "career" it's not something like a doctor where you map your future out, you don't go into the priesthood thinking I want to be Pope do you?!

Michael: No, I hope not! I don't think there'd be much chance anyway!

But in a religious order there are varied options, so have you got an idea of what you might like to do?

Michael: I think at this point in time I don't have a clue where I'm going to be in six or seven years! I'd like to leave that to God, I'm in His hands. I'd like to see myself in a position where I'm helping people in need, like the homeless. I'm also involved in a human rights organisation called Christian Solidarity Worldwide and they focus on religious freedom. I'd like to see myself in that type of role, but I don't know. In a few years I might be saying I'd like to do teaching or something else so I'm still working that out.

So you're at the beginning of your journey but because you're in a religious order you can call a halt at any time, you haven't made any commitment, you just have to see what happens?

Michael: That's it yes. I think it's about trying all sorts of different stuff to see where you're comfortable, and where your talents are. I could say I'd be a rubbish teacher but you don't know until you try it and it's nice to have the opportunity to do that.

So, where am I going to be in six or seven years – I really don't know! It's just about trusting and following where God leads you.

But so far, you feel you have made the right decision?

Michael: Oh yes, up to now it is! At first I was a bit nervous and a bit scared especially moving away from home for the first time. I was thinking "what have I done?" because you're moving in with people who, under normal circumstances, you wouldn't be living with. It is a challenge but I haven't regretted it one bit.

Do you get advice from the priests that you're living with?

Michael: Oh yes definitely! They're really happy that I'm there and if I did need to talk to them they're there for me. But it's nice to be able to have the opportunity to go to the seminary as well because there are people there who in the same age range as me going through the same stuff. It's nice to go there for a few days but then come back to the parish, to the community.

I feel that you like being in the community?

Michael: Oh yes, I wouldn't want to be shut away somewhere and that's also what's good about being a missionary, you are out with people. It's taking the example of Jesus, he was out with people and that's what we're called to be, we're not called to be stuck away in some room studying all day.

It sounds like once you've made the big decision the rest starts to fall into place. So what advice would you give to someone thinking about doing the same?

Michael: I would definitely say to anyone who is thinking about it, don't be afraid. That's what Jesus said in the gospels. "Don't be afraid, trust in God, trust also in me." Pope John Paul as well was always saying 'don't be afraid to follow God, don't be afraid to give your life to Christ'.

I think young people now are brought up where everything is very self-centred, it's all about what YOU'RE getting out of life, what you can achieve. People see religious life as taking away from what I could achieve, but I think if you follow Christ and you take this route it's not about restricting yourself. I've found that you get much more in return, than what you would necessarily think, from becoming a priest.

So I'd say, don't be afraid, try it, there's no obligation, no one's going to push you into doing something you don't want to do.

Are there people you can talk to for get advice before taking the step?

Michael: Yes. In the religious order you'll always have a formator and it's the same in the seminary as well, you'll have a spiritual adviser who you can speak to if you've got any concerns. But I would say just go and test the waters. If it's not for you, it's not for you, but

nothing ventured nothing gained. You can always come away, it's not a wasted experience at all.

When you look at the world today, do you ever feel a sense of despair at what a big job there is to do?

Michael: Yes, I think so, because St Paul says you've got to be all things to all people and he's talking about being a priest as well. It is such a big job, and if we just relied on ourselves we couldn't do it, but we rely on God and he's gives us the means to do things.

I have dyslexia, I'm not a confident person at all, and this is not a job that I would have thought that I'd be doing, but if God calls us to do something then he's going to give us the means to do it and he's going to be there for us and he's going to give us the strength. You surprise yourself and you grow as a person. The six or seven years of training does sound like a long time but really it's not, it's a time for us to grow and you do grow.

It's about faith isn't it?

Michael: Yes, at the end of the day that's what it's about. It's about trust and if this is what God wants you to do, then he's going to give you the means to do it.

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