

SEARCH helped Deacon Bulso find his vocation

ANDY TELLI

When Deacon Andy Bulso was a student at Pope John Paul II High School, he, like so many teens in the Diocese of Nashville, made a SEARCH retreat. It was there that his vocation to the priesthood, which had been lingering in his mind for a while, received a big jolt.

Father Mark Beckman was giving a talk on vocations when he stopped and said, "If any of you are thinking about the priesthood, I want you to know it's a wonderful life," Deacon Bulso recalled. "I felt like I was the only person



Deacon Andrew Bulso

in the room. It was one of the big moments I really experienced a call."

He will answer that call in full when he and four other seminarians for the Diocese of Nashville will be ordained to the priesthood at 10:30 a.m. Friday, June 12, at the Cathedral of the Incarnation.

Bulso grew up in Nashville and attended Overbrook School and Montgomery Bell Academy for one year before transferring to JPII when it opened in the fall of 2002.

After graduation from JPII in 2005 as part of the school's first graduating class and as the school's first valedictorian, he went to the University of Notre Dame where his vocation solidified. While at Notre Dame he got to know a lot of priests. "They were a source of inspiration."

He earned a degree in liberal arts from Notre Dame in 2009 and entered the sem-

inary at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, the following fall.

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in philosophy two years later, and Bishop David Choby asked him to consider going to Rome to continue his seminary studies. After talking with some priests he knew who had studied in Rome, he decided he couldn't pass up the opportunity to study in the heart of the Church.

In 2014, he earned a bachelor's degree in sacred theology and for the last year he has been working toward an advanced degree in biblical theology.

"Bishop Choby told me from the beginning of my studies in Rome to be attentive to what my particular strengths and interests were," Deacon Bulso said. "I noticed that I had a strength in the ancient languages and that I seemed to enjoy studying them considerably more

than my classmates. So that was where the idea of studying Sacred Scripture was born, since in that area I could put my strength in the languages to good use.

"Furthermore, Sacred Scripture is often called 'the soul of theology' and St. Jerome said famously, 'Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,'" Deacon Bulso added. "How could I not be attracted to studying God's Word revealed to us in Sacred Scripture – the very foundation and core of our faith?"

"The Lord has been good to me during my first year in the Biblical Theology program, increasing more and more my love for Sacred Scripture," he said. "I am convinced that my time studying Scripture will make me a better priest all around, since it is such a central part of our ministry, and I hope to bring the

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Spiritual awakening leads Deacon Butler to priesthood

ANDY TELLI

Deacon Ben Butler's spiritual life took a turn when he started to realize all the blessings God provided in his life.

"I had a spiritual awakening," he said. "I realized the blessings God had given me. I grew up in a good family, I did well in school, I had good jobs. I realized it was not my own doing." He also recognized his lack of response to those blessings, Deacon Butler said.

That led to prayer and study. Eventually, his journey brought him to the Catholic Church, and on Friday, June 12, his journey will reach a new milestone. He is one of five seminarians for the Diocese of Nashville who will be ordained a priest.

"It's a little surreal," Deacon Butler said of his upcoming ordination. "The six years of seminary, in retrospect, have gone by very fast. It's an exciting time too because you realize you're



Deacon Ben Butler

going to be celebrating the sacraments, which is an amazing thing."

The ordination will be held at 10:30 a.m. June 12 at the Cathedral of the Incarnation. Deacon Butler will celebrate his first Mass at 10 a.m. Saturday, June 13, at St. Joseph Church in Madison, where he has been assigned as associate pastor.

Deacon Butler grew up in Huntland in Franklin County. In 2006, he earned a bachelor's degree in business management with an emphasis on management information systems from the University of Alabama at Huntsville. After college, he moved to Arizona where he worked as a firefighter for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

"It was an adventure," he said of his time in Arizona. "It was awesome. Other than being a deacon and a future priest, that was the most fun job I ever had. Being outside, working with your hands, the fraternity with the other firefighters, that was a lot of fun."

It was while living in Arizona that Deacon Butler experienced his spiritual awakening. That led to prayer and study. "I started to pray, to read scripture," he said. "That coupled with reading early church fathers led me to the

Church. ... I came to realize it was the church Christ left to be his voice here on earth and continue his teaching. I saw that in Scripture."

He entered the church in 2007 while living in Arizona. It was during this conversion, that Deacon Butler began thinking about the priesthood.

"As I was going through RCIA I started going to Mass regularly. That was when I first had the inclination there might be a vocation to the priesthood," he said. "I wasn't ready. It took me a couple of years to respond and enter the seminary. I didn't feel like it was something I could do."

After two years in Arizona, Deacon Butler moved back to Huntsville and made the decision to enter the seminary in 2009. He had two years of pre-theology study at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, and has spent the last four years studying theology at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans.

After six years in the seminary, Deacon Butler said, "I'm more deeply rooted in the church."

"I realized that all I can do as a priest is only in cooperation with God's grace," he said. "It's my desire to bring people

to God and also to bring God to people, especially in the sacraments. That's why I wanted to become a priest. ...

"In the time I had at seminary I really came to appreciate setting aside time for personal prayer and also really reached a deeper appreciation for the sacraments," Deacon Butler said.

During his summers as a seminarian, Deacon Butler has worked in several parishes, including a summer traveling to parishes across the diocese with the Totus Tuus religious education program for children. "It exposed me to the parishes and to a lot of the people here in the diocese."

He also spent a summer working at his home parish, Good Shepherd in Decherd. "That kind of solidified my response to the call of being a priest," Deacon Butler said. "It was working with the people and the response I got from them, the positive affirmation."

After his ordination, Deacon Butler has been assigned as the associate pastor of St. Joseph Church. He also will serve as the chaplain and teach religion at the parish school.

"I'm looking forward to being a parish priest," he said. ✠

Deacon Dirichukwu eager to join the 'priestly line'

ANDY TELLI

Deacon Nwachukwu Emmanuel Dirichukwu carries his faith in his name. A native of Nigeria, his first name means "child of God" and his last name "belongs to God."

This child of God will commit himself to a life of serving the Lord and the Lord's people when he and four other seminarians of the Diocese of Nashville are ordained as priests at 10:30 a.m. Friday, June 12, at the Cathedral of the Incarnation.

He felt a call to the priesthood even as a child. "I would play priest," he said. "I would use cookies for holy communion. I would make my siblings kneel down to receive communion."

When he was young he would watch



Deacon Emmanuel Dirichukwu

a long line of priests process into Mass, Deacon Dirichukwu said. "That was a moment for me that I really wanted to be among that line. I wanted to see myself in that priestly line."

As he grew older, his vocation became more serious. While in school, he was president of the Catholic student organization and he recognized, "I was a good organizer, calling people together and evangelizing them."

Even though they were raised as Catholics, many young people didn't know much about their faith, Deacon Dirichukwu said. "People couldn't stand up for their faith because they didn't know it. I was motivated to help them."

So he began traveling into the rural areas working as a missionary, catechizing young people, helping the elderly and deaf people.

"I feel like I'm called to preach, to minister to people and provide their both their material and spiritual needs," he said. Most of these deaf people he helped were not rich. "They needed school fees,

they needed food, they needed money. It made no sense to talk about Jesus when I knew they didn't have food."

He would meet their material needs first and "eventually they will be open to Christ," Deacon Dirichukwu said.

After studying in the seminary, he now sees that work "as my own witness to Christ. I like walking with other people, feeling their pains and joys," he said. "I see that theological connection between those works and how to see the presence of God in my life too."

From 2007 -11, he studied philosophy as a Dominican seminarian in Nigeria, and then came to the United States to study theology at Assumption Seminary in San Antonio, Texas. While at Assumption, he got to know the Nashville seminarians studying there and eventually met Bishop David Choby to talk about becoming a seminarian for Nashville.

"I've never met a bishop like him my whole life," Deacon Dirichukwu said of Bishop Choby, "His pastoral approach to life, his care and love is so appar-

ent. ... Finding somebody like Bishop Choby made a difference."

Deacon Dirichukwu became a seminarian for the diocese in 2013 and has spent his summers working at St. Christopher Church in Dickson and at Our Lady of the Lake Church in Hendersonville.

"One of the things that gave me hope even when I was new to the diocese was Father Mathew Perumpally," St. Christopher's pastor, Deacon Dirichukwu said. "He and the parishioners were very kind to me. Father Mathew was a model to me."

He also was appreciative of the welcome and support he received from the people and pastor of Our Lady of the Lake, Father Eric Fowlkes. Deacon Dirichukwu will celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving at Our Lady of the Lake at 11 a.m. Sunday, June 14.

He will celebrate his first Mass at 5 p.m. Saturday, June 13, at St. Edward Church, where the Nigerian Catholic Community in Nashville worships. The community and parish will host a reception for Deacon Dirichukwu after the Mass. ✠

Deacon Gilstrap finds peace in saying yes to God

ANDY TELLI

Deacon Austin Gilstrap's life changed when he said yes to God.

He was working as a bartender in a restaurant but unsure what direction to take his life. "I was searching and I didn't know what I was searching for," he said. "I still didn't know what I wanted out of life or out of school or anything like that. I was just sort of floating through."



Deacon Austin Gilstrap

But at Mass on a Vocations Sunday, Msgr. Bernard Niedergeses, pastor of the Church of the Assumption, invited all the unmarried men under 30 years old to a meeting where he asked them to consider whether they were being called to the priesthood and showed the video "Fishers of Men."

Watching the video, a few things stood out, Deacon Gilstrap said. One priest recounting his vocation story talked of asking himself, "If not me, then who and if not now, then when."

The video also showed priests happy with their life. "I was not happy," Deacon Gilstrap said. "Even though I had been seeking all the things the world tells us

should make us happy, I was not happy."

He left the meeting and went back to the church and prayed, "OK I give up. If this is what you want from me I'm happy to do it. I just said yes. ... Whatever you want from me, I say yes," Deacon Gilstrap said.

"I didn't know what I was saying yes to," he added, but he began to feel a deepening sense of peace.

"From the very beginning, and every day, I have to continue to say yes to whatever God is asking me to do," Deacon Gilstrap said. "That's what's made me happy. The big difference between my life before saying yes and now ... I continue to be very fulfilled and very happy."

That yes has led him to his upcoming ordination as a priest. He and four other seminarians of the Diocese of Nashville will be ordained at 10:30 a.m. Friday, June 12, at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville.

Deacon Gilstrap and the others will be ordained by Bishop David Choby, who brought him and his family into the Catholic Church in 1995 while he was serving as pastor of St. John Vianney Church in Gallatin. Bishop Choby heard his first confession, gave him his first communion, ordained him a transitional deacon and now will ordain him a priest, Deacon Gilstrap noted. "So all of the sacraments, I've received for the first time

from Bishop Choby, except baptism."

His family and all the friends he made while working in restaurants have been supportive of his decision to become a priest, Deacon Gilstrap said. "They've been there to support me in every way they can," he said. "A lot of guys struggle with their parents or friends not supporting them, I have no experience with that."

He entered the seminary at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, in 2007, and studied there for three-and-one-half years. After earning degrees in the classics and philosophy he enrolled at the North American College in Rome in 2011. He earned a bachelor's in sacred theology and has been working toward a license in sacred theology for the last year.

After his ordination, he will take a break from his studies and return to Nashville where he has been assigned to work at the chancery and with the Diocesan Tribunal. Part of the reason he's pausing his studies in Rome is because his parents have been experiencing health problems in recent years, he said, though they are doing better now.

His understanding of the priesthood and his vocation have changed dramatically during his years in the seminary, Deacon Gilstrap said. "I really didn't know what the vocation to the priesthood was about at all."

But through the eight years of academic, pastoral, spiritual and human formation, he said, "you change into a person who can be another Christ. ... It's less an intellectual exercise of understanding the priesthood but a transformation through the grace of God."

Through that transformation, he hopes to bring Christ to all the ways he will serve as a priest, Deacon Gilstrap said. "That's my hope, that I can allow the Lord to continue to transform me into another Christ."

Deacon Gilstrap will celebrate his first Mass at 2 p.m. Saturday, June 13, at the Cathedral. All are welcome, he said.

"The number of people who have prayed for and made sacrifices for all of us in the seminary is astounding," Deacon Gilstrap said. "These people are as much as part of the transformation as we are."

As he approaches his ordination, Deacon Gilstrap said, he's feeling some butterflies. "It's excited nerves," he said.

"For me it feels kind of like, what I can imagine, a new father feels like before he has his first child," Deacon Gilstrap said. "You think about all the ways you're not worthy of the great gift you're being given."

At the same time, he is excited "about the fulfillment of all this work, and school and formation. It's the completion and also the great beginning." ✠

Deacon Johansen looking forward to being involved in lives of his flock

ANDY TELLI

From atheist, to husband, to priest, Deacon Eric Johansen's spiritual journey has been marked by joy and grief. After he's ordained a priest on June 12, he's looking forward to walking with people on their own spiritual journey.



Deacon Eric Johansen

"It's exciting, nerve-racking. I don't feel like we're ever worthy, but God's plans are perfect," said Deacon Johansen, who will be one of

five seminarians of the Diocese of Nashville to be ordained at 10:30 a.m. Friday, June 12, at the Cathedral of the Incarnation. "I'm ready. I'm excited about it."

Deacon Johansen grew up in California and moved to Nashville with his parents when his father took a job here. "I wasn't doing anything important so I came with them. And when they left, I stayed."

After moving to Nashville, he met and married his wife, Kathy.

"I grew up in a very secular home. When I met my wife ... I was a very happy atheist," Deacon Johansen said.

But his wife, who was raised a Catholic, kept praying and prodding him to go to church. "We started going to a non-denominational church. That started the kindling in me," Deacon Johansen said.

His wife kept telling him she missed the Catholic Church and wanted to go to Mass. "The first time I went to a Mass was to shut her up," Deacon Johansen said. "But I found a home there. ... It felt right. I really can't explain it. It was really a feeling ... that said, hey, this is where you belong."

He went through the RCIA process at St. Edward Church and entered the Church at the Easter Vigil Mass in 2000.

But just as he was finding a spiritual home, he was losing the guide who led him there. His wife battled cancer and died in 2003.

"It was inspiring and painful," Deacon Johansen said. The Church and his faith helped him through it, he said.

He and his wife had talked about doing something in ministry, he said. "It had been gnawing at me for a

while." A few years after her death, "I decided to step out and find out."

He met with Father Steve Wolf, then the vocations director for the diocese, who gave him an application to become a seminarian. Deacon Johansen put the application in a desk drawer and forgot about it. But about a month or so later Father Wolf called to ask how he was doing on the application.

"That was the kick in my butt I needed," Deacon Johansen said. He filled out the application and "everything went very smoothly. I thought that is a sign this is where I ought to be."

He entered Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans in 2006. It hasn't always been easy, Deacon Johansen admitted. "I stepped away a couple of times. The bishop has been very generous with me."

He completed his studies this spring; after he is ordained he will begin serving as a chaplain at Saint Thomas Hospital Midtown in Nashville and will be in residence at St. Ann Church.

"I'm excited about where the bishop has put me. I've had some really powerful experiences" while working in hospital ministry for his Clinical Pastoral Experi-

ence as a seminarian, Deacon Johansen said. "I think it's a good fit for me."

"The very first baptism I ever performed in my life was of a 6-year-old girl shot by her 4-year-old brother" in an accident, Deacon Johansen said. "The family's all there. Everybody's in tears." He didn't say much, Deacon Johansen remembered, but simply sat with the family for about three hours. "It was a just a ministry of presence."

After the girl died and he was leaving the room, "the Mother gave me a big, huge hug," Deacon Johansen said. "It's an honor to be allowed in people's lives when they're going through that kind of traumatic experience. It's powerful to be there."

Experiences like that have reshaped his understanding of the priesthood. "I didn't know about being involved in the lives of the people you shepherd. That's the part I'm excited about," Deacon Johansen said. "I'm looking forward to getting involved in the lives of people and walking with them and have them walk with me."

Deacon Johansen will celebrate his first Mass at 12:15 p.m. Sunday, June 14, at St. Edward Church. ✠

SEARCH helped Deacon Bulso find his vocation

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Scriptures to life for my future parishioners, especially in my preaching."

There have been several highlights to his time in Rome, Deacon Bulso said, including having a front row seat to history with the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis.

"Another real highlight was the canonization of Pope John Paul II," Deacon Bulso said. "He was such an inspiration for so many of us, and he holds a special

place in my heart since he was the pope when I was a kid. And then of course he was the patron of my high school.

"I cannot tell you how moving it was to be standing there at the canonization and to hear Pope Francis pronounce the official words declaring him a saint," Deacon Bulso said. "I have been truly blessed in my years in Rome."

Deacon Bulso was ordained a transitional deacon in Rome last October. Serving as a deacon has given him a glimpse into his future as a priest.

"The Lord has provided a couple very poignant moments for me to exercise my ministry as a deacon," he said. "The first was when my grandfather passed away at the end of April. I was able to serve as a deacon at his funeral Mass and I myself officiated the Rite of Committal at the cemetery."

"And then in May I served as the Church's minister at the marriage of my brother, giving the homily and leading the Rite of Matrimony," Deacon Bulso said. "For my family and for

myself these were important moments of seeing my vocation bear fruit and getting a glimpse of the future. Both of these occasions, and many others, have truly kindled in me a passion to serve the people of God as a priest."

After his ordination, Deacon Bulso will serve in the diocese for the rest of the summer before heading back to Rome for the final year of his studies.

He will celebrate his first Mass at 10 a.m. Saturday, June 13, at the Cathedral. ✠