

‘Down to earth:’ Pasadena parishioner to be ordained a priest Dec. 15

“I think I’m being called to be a priest.”

The young chaperone, only 23 himself, shared that inkling on a hot day in 2006, as members of a youth group from St. Jane Frances de Chantal in Pasadena reflected on how they would carry home from Mississippi the spirit of a mission which had seen them help with the cleanup of Hurricane Katrina.

His calling will be realized Dec. 15 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, where Deacon Robert Katafiasz will be ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore by Archbishop William E. Lori during a 10 a.m. Mass.

He began that 12-year journey with plenty of book-learning – just all the wrong kind.

Deacon Katafiasz (pronounced Cat-uh-FI-us) had followed a tech-prep track through Northeast High School, and then Anne Arundel Community College. He worked one year in a restaurant, five as an industrial cleaner and was his parish’s maintenance man when he began seriously exploring religious orders.

All of this led him deeper into an entirely different type of user manual – the Bible.

“Whenever you’re learning from a tech manual, it’s how to do something with your hands,” Deacon Katafiasz told the Review in November. “That fits that kinetic learning style that I’m good at. Learning philosophy, theology (at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg), I struggled with the lack of application. How do you convey these deep truths into everyday life?”

“High theology doesn’t mean anything unless you break it down. That was a gift that I saw that I could bring, how to break it down, for myself first and foremost, and then for the people. There’s a great grace in being able to meet them where they

are, in the same way the Lord met me where I was.”

That includes that pivotal mission to Mississippi, when the St. Jane Frances coordinator of youth and young adult ministry was herself a pre-postulant for the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

“I saw in Rob a steady and unassuming manner that made everyone comfortable,” recalled Sister Elizabeth Sjoberg, now a social worker in Brownsville, Texas. “What I am most impressed by is his humility. He doesn’t crave the spotlight or attention and is always willing to lend a hand.”

Deacon Katafiasz, who describes himself as being “very mechanically inclined,” held a commercial driver’s license and can trouble-shoot a plumbing problem. He began community college while working fulltime in a Catonsville restaurant, and can whip up split pea soup or a meatloaf. Residing at the former archdiocesan discernment house at St. Matthew in Northwood, he worked in its after-school care program.

All of which makes him uniquely suited for his calling, according to the pastor of St. Mark in Fallston, where Deacon Katafiasz served the first of two pastoral assignments.

“He’s down to earth, which makes people love him,” said Father Gerard Francik. “Rob would work with our maintenance guys when they were in a bind ... with the same spirit as he was giving Communion. He does not mind getting his hands dirty.”

Father Francik, who will vest his brother priest at his ordination, said Deacon Katafiasz reminded him of an earlier era in the church.

“We called some 19th- and early-20th-century priests ‘worker’ priests, because they were out in the field,” Father Francik said. “In France, priests worked in the factory alongside the people. That’s how they would bring the Gospel to them. That’s how I see Rob. Any place the people need to hear about Jesus, he’s there.

“He has all of this world experience he brings to the priesthood. The challenge was the book-learning, but he can do it. He knows his Catechism and knows the Bible. During RCIA he was one of our favorite presenters, because it comes from the heart.”

After his priestly ordination, Deacon Katafiasz will celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving St. Jane Frances de Chantal Dec. 16 at 11:30 a.m.

Both the ordination Mass at the basilica and the Mass of thanksgiving at St. Jane Frances are open to the public.

Katafiasz file

Age: 36

Home parish: St. Jane Frances de Chantal, Pasadena

Family: Son of Kenneth and Rosemary Katafiasz; brother of Cynthia DeBoy, Luke Katafiasz, Rebecca Zuercher and the late Amy Rose Katafiasz.

Education: Northeast High School; bachelor's degree in philosophy, Mount St. Mary's University; master's degree in divinity, Mount St. Mary's Seminary.

Pastoral years: St. Mark, Fallston; St. Louis, Clarksville.

Did you know? His father regularly took him to the annual conference sponsored by the Catholic Men's Fellowship of Maryland; was in "Disciples of Mission," an evangelization program with older adults, when he began volunteering with his parish's youth ministry; credits Father Brian Nolan, a former parish priest at St. Jane Frances, for influencing his vocation; began his discernment with the Capuchin Franciscans.

Click below to listen to a radio interview with Father Steven Roth, vocations director for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, who discusses the formation of seminarians for the priesthood.