

‘Home felt like church’ for future Baltimore priest

This is the first of three profiles of men who are on schedule to be ordained priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in June.

Pictures, both moving and still, figure prominently in the discernment of Deacon Matthew J. DeFusco.

Released on Christmas Day in 2012, the latest film version of “Les Miserables” included a Hugh Jackman depiction of Jean Valjean that resonated.

“It just spoke to me about the priesthood,” Deacon DeFusco said, “something about his life, the way he was a servant to the widow and the orphan and the poor, and those oppressed.”

Fast forward a year, and to a postcard from Israel, where his brother, now-Father Andrew DeFusco, was on a seminary retreat to the Holy Land. The front is an image of two fishermen with their nets in the Sea of Galilee. On the back is handwriting that the younger brother has memorized.

“These are the kind of men Christ chose to lead his church and bring his mercy and hope to the world.”

“It’s symbolic of the support and encouragement he’s given through the process,” Deacon DeFusco said of a message he carried in his breviary for years. “We don’t talk every day, but he’s definitely been there for me ... whatever the hill or mountain I’m facing.

“Christ calls most of us in the context of family. He uses those natural familial bonds to bring people to his Father.”

The DeFusco brothers, who will join the Carrions, Fathers Michael and Patrick, as the only archdiocesan priests who are siblings, can attest to the value of parents who visibly practice the faith.

Their parents met while undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. Their father's work as a chemist took them to New Jersey, North Carolina and then Maryland in 1998, where they settled in at Immaculate Conception in Towson in part because it offered an adoration chapel.

"We thought everybody had had pictures of Mary and the Holy Family, and crucifixes," Deacon DeFusco said. "I remember friends coming over and saying, 'Gosh, it feels like church in here.' ... Our church kind of felt like home and home felt like church."

His brother wasn't the only priest who influenced his vocation.

Deacon DeFusco first pondered the priesthood as a middle-schooler, a pull that returned while he was studying abroad in Rome, during his sophomore year at the University of Dallas, in his mother's hometown. On retreat, he had "a powerful encounter" with the North American College seminarian serving as the chaplain for the Dallas students - now-Father Michael DeAscanis.

"He had a zeal for life," Father DeAscanis said. "When we see a man who's well-balanced, a man of faith, with good human formation, you say, 'I hope this man is called to be a priest.' "

Deacon DeFusco first served his country, as he gave three years as a Coast Guard officer in Pittsburgh. He then earned a master's degree from the University of Baltimore, was considering both law enforcement and law school, and wondering, "Where am I supposed to be?"

By January 2013, Father DeAscanis was the director of vocations for the archdiocese.

"The week I called him was the same week they offered a discernment retreat for young adults and professionals," Deacon DeFusco said. "When I finally showed up, I didn't even have to listen to a talk, I needed an application."

Deacon DeFusco didn't wait until he was enrolled at Mount St. Mary's Seminary to dive into parish life. In spring 2013, he served in an unofficial capacity at St. Louis in Clarksville, and observed the ways of Monsignor Joseph Luca, its pastor, "I

remember him telling me from the outset,” Deacon DeFusco said, “ ‘we do a lot of things well, but we don’t do everything well. Keep track of that, to do better wherever you go.’ I took that approach with all my assignments.”

Some of those influences were at Immaculate Conception last May 27, the day after he was ordained a transitional deacon, when Deacon DeFusco preached his first homily, but not before being overcome with emotion.

“My brother (associate pastor of St. John in Westminster) was the celebrant,” he said. “Father Joe Barr (pastor of Immaculate Conception) was there, as well as others who had mentored and supported me. My little brother, Joseph, was an altar server.

“Two minutes before we were to walk to the narthex, I just started crying, as if I had lost a parent. It wasn’t nerves. It was joy. Somebody once said, tears sometimes are just the reaction when you know you’ve experienced the presence of God. Your soul doesn’t know what to do except to just cry.”

Deacon Matthew J. DeFusco

Age: 34

Sponsoring parish: Immaculate Conception, Towson

Family: Son of Andrew J. and Caroline DeFusco; two sisters and two brothers, including Father Andrew DeFusco, associate pastor of St. John in Westminster

Education: Bachelor’s in politics, University of Dallas; master’s in legal and ethical studies, University of Baltimore; philosophy, Mount St. Mary’s Seminary, Emmitsburg; completing theology, St. Mary’s Seminary, Roland Park

Pastoral assignments: St. Mary, Hagerstown; Resurrection of Our Lord, Laurel; St. Peter Claver, Baltimore; University of Maryland Medical Center; St. John, Westminster; Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Ellicott City; Baltimore Basilica; Our Lady of the Fields, Millersville