

Loyola Blakefield alum's 'organic' path to priesthood included rugby

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When you ask a young and bearded priest about his days playing and coaching rugby, you might hope to hear the word “smite” and possibly references to the crushing of serpents’ heads in his answer.

In that sense, Father Joshua Laws let us down.

“It’s a great team sport,” said Father Laws, 30, after his June 20 ordination for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. “Everyone has to be working together.”

It may sound like a go-to answer befitting of a politician or chairman of the board, but the new priest walks the walk.

“For me, the decision to enter the seminary was like that,” Father Laws said. “Here was an area of my church that needed help – we needed priests. That’s where the need is; that’s where I want to be.”

Father Laws will spend the summer assisting at Holy Family Catholic Community of Middletown, close to 80 miles west of his home parish of St. Stephen in Bradshaw, where many are thrilled but few surprised by his vocation.

“As an eighth-grader, he came to me and asked why I didn’t invite him to go to the vocational dinner with (Cardinal William H. Keeler, archbishop emeritus of Baltimore),” remembered Kellie Reynolds, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry for St. Stephen.

The dinner was an event for older high school students.

“I said, ‘Don’t worry, Josh, I will invite you when it’s your time,’ ” Reynolds said.

Father Laws’ mother, Duffy Laws, said her son began talking about the priesthood as young as age 4.

“We never pushed it, and we never said no,” she recalled. “We just said, ‘That’s good,’ as if he was talking about being a fireman or something.”

The young Father Laws’ conversations with parish priests were similar to his peers questioning a firefighter or police officer about their uniforms.

“Where do you buy your clothes?” was one question his mother remembered.

“You could just tell the wheels were spinning in his head to figure it all out,” she said.

Though he lives out a religious vocation himself, Deacon Frank Laws, who was part of the ordination liturgy and serves at St. Stephen, also attributed his son’s call to

the priesthood to no human other than his son.

"We did the same thing with him that we did with our other kids," Deacon Laws said.

"We told them to find a passion and pursue that passion."

Father Laws describes that passion as an "organic thing I could sort of trace through my life."

Robert Schlichtig, now dean of students at Loyola Blakefield, coached Father Laws when he played rugby for the boys' high school in Towson.

"He wasn't the kind of kid you knew was going to be a priest, (the kind who was) a church-mouse and always going to morning Mass," Schlichtig said. "But he was thoughtful, and clearly had a strong spiritual life and wasn't afraid to show it and ask questions."

For Father Laws, "spirituality was not an otherworldly thing, but about working in this world with the poor and marginalized," added Schlichtig, who became aware of that quality when he led him and other students on a service trip to the Dominican Republic.

The students spent the first two weeks in a mountain village, building a foundation for a medical clinic. For the second part of the trip, they worked with Haitian refugees in the city, tearing down their hovels, which were made from metal salvaged from paint cans, and replacing them with concrete structures.

"People would feed us when they could barely feed themselves," Schlichtig remembered.

Duffy said that her son was deeply affected by "how generous the poor were."

"That was all he talked about when he came home," she said. "It blew him away."

In addition to action, prayer and reflection were also indispensable parts of Father Laws' spiritual development, his father pointed out.

"He's got a really deep faith for a 30-year-old," Deacon Laws said. "At 30, I was light years from where he is."

At 20, Father Laws impressed his father by undergoing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a month of five hours of prayer and a Mass daily, as well as journaling and reflection, according to Deacon Laws, who completed the exercises himself at 39.

A portion of the Spiritual Exercises, he said, is devoted to "getting you to a place where you experience the need for salvation."

"It was the most emotionally painful thing I've ever done," Deacon Laws said, speaking for himself. "It pierces the façade you present for yourself."

His son's experience with the Spiritual Exercises relieved him of any illusions ahead of entering the priesthood, he speculated.

"These are the places we don't like to be in and the things we don't want to know about ourselves, but he's been there and he's walked there," Deacon Laws said.

Father Laws looks back on the rigor with fondness.

"The experience of God I had in (the Spiritual Exercises) continues to be such a rock for me," he said. "Now, over 10 years later, it's a well I draw life and energy from."

Given his own opportunity to point to formative experiences, Father Laws mentions his gratitude for being a part of the Catholic community - as a student at Loyola Blakefield and, later, at Loyola University Maryland, and as a teacher at The John Carroll School in Bel Air.

He emphasizes Justice Action Week, an archdiocese program in which he and other high school students stayed at St. Dominic in Hamilton while performing service work in the surrounding neighborhood.

"Through that, I developed a love for the city," Father Laws said, adding that he sees himself as one day being a "priest in a neighborhood."

"I hope to join with people who are poor and suffering, to be with them in their lives and join in their work to help make the city a better, more peaceful place to be," he said.

"He loves people," said his mother. "And he loves the poor. And he loves God. You put those three together and he will make a good priest."

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