

# The Journey Continues

## the Vocational Story of a Young Seminarian

This year, our small Vietnamese Catholic community of St. Nicholas Church in Laguna Woods celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Since St. Nicholas has been my home parish since my high school days, I would like to make a humble contribution to our community celebration by writing a short article about my priestly-vocational story. One of my hopes is to make myself known to the parish community. Although St. Nicholas is my home parish, I am relatively *unknown*, even among the Vietnamese community. Among the American community, I am almost totally unknown. This is rather unfortunate because my ordination is coming up shortly. Another one of my hopes through this article is to appeal to the young people of our parish; that through God's grace, they may find their proper vocations in life—whether that vocation be priestly/religious, married or single.

My name is Vu Tan Hien, also known as “Anthony” after my patron saint Anthony of Padua. In Vietnamese, the name “Tan Hien” means a whole lot. I believe that no other language can adequately capture its meaning. In English, one can translate it as *perpetual sacrifice* or *consecration*. But at best, these translations are vague and cannot render justice to the name. When I think of my name, I can say that I was either “destined” or “doomed” to be a priest. But the name alone does not automatically make one a priest. The journey to the priesthood is a tedious journey: usually filled with sorrows as well as joys, anguish, anxiety, fear and trembling. In our post-modern world, the idea of “particularity” has a special place and

emphasis: each one of us must look at the other in his “otherness;” that is, in his “particularity.” In this sense, my vocational journey to the priesthood is also particular: it differs greatly from other people's journeys.

The journey began when I was baptized a Catholic in Da Lat, the south of Vietnam. I came from a big family, myself having been the youngest. Like most other children, I never took much interest in the Catholic faith. Going to church was more of a custom/habit than anything else. However, I did believe in God—although I only turned to him in times of tribulation. In 1992 part of my family and I had the fortune to settle in the United States, the so-called “Land of Promise.” As a teenager then, I had the whole wide world in front of me: a world full of promises but also a blurred one. My faith was still the same all those years—neither stronger or weaker. I did not think that I would be on track for the priesthood one day.

When I was in high school, I attended Sunday Masses in Vietnamese at St. Nicholas. I never joined any youth group or any organization within the parish—something that I regret now. Around the year 1995-96, I happened to have read a few spiritual booklets about the dead, eternal life, and the like. It was then that I felt a strong call to be a priest. I began to take a lot more interest in the Catholic faith, by reading more and more about Catholic doctrines. I also attended the monthly “Vocation Fridays” at the Vietnamese Catholic Center, where I encountered many brothers and sisters from different religious

orders. I was pretty sure back then that I would end up being a priest myself one day. The one thing I was not sure about was *where* I would end up as a priest. So after high school in 1999, I left California to join the Redemptorist Order in Dallas, TX.

I later realized that my vocation was not that of a Redemptorist, nor was it to be in Texas. So in 2003 after I finished studying philosophy, I decided to come back to Orange County and join the Diocese of Orange. Bishop Tod D. Brown of Orange and Fr. Wilbur Davis warmly welcomed me. Then I was sent to St. John's Seminary (Camarillo) to study theology. I hoped that I would have a chance to settle down in Orange and to get connected with our St. Nicholas community since St. John's was not too far from Orange County. However, only after one year at St. John's, Bishop T. Brown gave me the opportunity to study theology elsewhere: this time, at Louvain, Belgium. I gladly seized the occasion to go to Louvain, the oldest-existing Catholic university in the world (since 1425). Thus, my journey took me once again to a new place. In the Fall of 2004 I came to Europe, the birthplace of Western civilization and the place of the growth of Christianity.

I studied for three years in Europe. Europe has changed me in many ways. I began to look at the Catholic faith, society, and the world in a totally different way. My way of thinking and my approach to the question of the Catholic faith have greatly changed. Europe helped me a great deal to think critically about many things. I might as well say that I have undergone a "Copernican Revolution," or a 360-degree change, in my understanding of the faith as well as in my spirituality. For all these, I am greatly indebted to my time there in Europe. It was a unique experience and I would not trade anything for it. But at the same time, I

also had the chance to witness first-hand the secularism and liberalism in Europe today. It was sad to see the land where Christianity once flourished now so religiously desolate. European Catholicism has been on the decline, so much so that some people believe that it cannot decline any further—the only direction it can go is UP.

After I finished my theology studies in Louvain I came back to Orange in August 2007. For the past year I have been doing my pastoral/internship year at St. Joseph Church in Placentia with Fr. Tim Ramaekers. It was a good experience for me. Now I am getting ready for my deaconate ordination on Saturday, November 22, 2008. My mother passed away from this life on Saturday, November 22, 1997. By a mere coincidence, but more likely by God's providential guidance, my deaconate ordination takes place exactly 11 years after her death, both on a Saturday. Eleven years ago, I would never have imagined that things would turn out this way. God truly has his own ways of working!

If God wills, I shall be ordained a priest on June 6, 2009. When that day comes, it will be a special occasion for me myself, for our family, friends and our parish community. I am sure that some Vietnamese Catholics will congratulate me with these words: "Congratulation! You have reached the *end of your journey*." Their good intentions are clear, but my journey does not *end* with my ordination—nor does it begin with ordination. My journey started when I was baptized a Catholic. It will only end when I breathe my last breath, uttering out the words of the Psalmist: *In manus tuas Domine, commendo spiritum meum*—"Into your hands Lord, I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31). In the meantime, my journey *continues*.