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News & Features

Decision to follow God's call to priesthood is powerful witness

*archived from: 2010-03-15*by: **Chuck Moody, Associate Editor**

Perhaps the priest from the Diocese of Pittsburgh who best can relate to the recent decision by a top prospect for the Oakland Athletics to give up his professional baseball career and enter the seminary to discern a possible call to the priesthood is Father Joe Freedy.

Grant Desme, a 23-year-old outfielder, announced in January, about a month before spring training began, he was entering the seminary of the Norbertine Fathers. Desme's decision followed a season in which he batted .288 with 31 home runs, 89 RBI and 40 stolen bases in 131 games for two of Oakland's Class A farm teams. He was named the most valuable player in the Arizona Fall League, where he batted .315 with a league-leading 11 home runs and 27 RBI in 27 games, and he was considered to be Oakland's eighth-best prospect by Baseball America.

Father Freedy didn't play professional baseball. However, he was the starting quarterback since his sophomore season on an NCAA Division I football team at the University of Buffalo, which played in the Mid-American Conference, a conference that has sent a lot of players — including Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers — to the NFL.

"Every time I hear someone tell their vocation story I'm inspired," said Father Freedy, who on March 9 began a special assignment from Bishop David Zubik as diocesan director of vocations. "Each call is so unique and personal. What seems to have touched so many people about Grant's story is the fact that he was on the national baseball stage and appeared to be headed for stardom when he decided to follow God's call. To see someone pass up the opportunity for potential celebrity status to follow God's call is a powerful witness.

"Grant's decision did bring a lot of memories back to me. I was happy to read about how he's been so supported by his teammates and friends, and I can definitely relate to that. I certainly had some fear about what my teammates and coaches would think, and I was amazed at how supportive and encouraging they all were when I told them about my decision."

Father Freedy was ordained to the priesthood in June 2008, and he most recently served as parochial vicar at Good Samaritan Parish in Ambridge and St. John the Baptist Parish in Baden, and part-time chaplain at Quigley Catholic High School.

"Though I thought about priesthood on and off throughout my life, I first seriously considered it as a possibility when I was heading into my senior year in college," he said.

"Before the time came for me to seriously consider the possibility of playing football after college, I had already made my decision to enter the seminary. After my senior season, an agent contacted me about the possibility of working out in preparation for some kind of professional combine, but the Lord by that point had shown me clearly that he had different plans for my life, so I never pursued it."

Father Freedy, 30, grew up in Bethel Park, and he was a member of St. Thomas More Parish. After graduating from Buffalo in 2002, he entered St. Paul Seminary in Crafton, and he graduated from Duquesne University with a master's degree in philosophy for theological studies in 2004. He completed his graduate studies at North American College in Rome last year.

Mother Teresa once described prayer as “God speaking in the silence of our hearts and us listening,” Father Freedy said.

“The more I was silent before the Lord, especially at Mass and eucharistic adoration, the more clearly I began to hear his call to follow him in this particular way,” he said. “Though many fears arose in my heart and mind when I considered everything that I thought entering the seminary would mean for me, in the depths of my heart the Lord gave me profound peace, joy and excitement about pursuing a vocation to the priesthood. I knew these were confirmations of the call I was hearing.”

There were many factors that influenced his decision to enter the seminary, Father Freedy said.

“My family provided the foundations of the faith for me while I was growing up,” he said. “I’ve had happy and holy priests to look up to throughout my whole life. As I look back on my life, I can see so many different ways that the Lord prepared me to hear and answer his call.

“I had been dating a girl for over two years when I decided to enter the seminary. Before I decided to enter the seminary, I figured that after college I would get married and get a job that would support my family.”

Father Freedy remains happy with his decision to become a priest.

“I love being a priest,” he said. “It’s difficult for me to even imagine being anything other than what I am. God truly does fulfill the deepest desires of our hearts. He knows what’s best for us and what will make us happiest in this life, as well as what will lead us to union with him in the next life.

“While I have difficult days and times of sorrow and suffering like anybody else, in the deepest part of my heart God’s joy and peace reside, because I know the one who has called me will never abandon me.”

Father Freedy said it’s difficult to say what the most rewarding aspects of his priestly ministry are.

“We’re all called to be conduits of God’s love, and so anytime the Lord allows me to see that someone has encountered his love through me, is a moment of profound joy for me,” he said.

In his new position as director of vocations, Father Freedy deals extensively with men who are considering the priesthood.

“The most important thing any man who is considering the priesthood can do is pray,” he said. “To be still and allow the Lord to speak in the silence of his heart. It’s in the silence of his heart that a revelation of love takes place, and a man comes to recognize the particular call he’s received to the priesthood.

“Along with prayer, especially eucharistic adoration and Mass, I found talking to the vocation director and other priests very helpful. Being able to speak out what’s going on in one’s heart and mind to someone who has been through a similar experience can help bring clarity to one’s discernment. As Jesus said to Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, ‘Be not afraid.’”

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