

Fr. Pat Coakley... Who am I?

My name is Fr. Pat Coakley. I am a Missionary of the Sacred Heart from the Irish Province of my Order. I have been ministering in St. Catherine's since 2004 and I became Pastor in 2008. I am an Irish man from the city of Cork in the south of the country. I am from a large family of sons. I was one of eight boys born to Michael and Norah Coakley.

My father came from farming stock in the south west of the country while my mother came from the city of Cork. When Mom and Dad were just married they bought a ruined property that my Dad rebuilt into our family home. After the fact they were told that it was the home of a priest.

I was educated by the Presentation Brothers. They are a teaching Order of Monks. All of my family was educated by these Brothers. During my High School years I so loved the Brothers that I asked permission of my parents to finish school in their Junior Seminary. I wanted to know more about being a monk and living in a monastery. In 1974 after I graduated High School I applied to join the Novitiate of the Presentation Brothers. In my late teens I was full of love for the church. I wanted to live the monastic life.

The actual experience was nothing like I imagined it to be. The truth is I was not ready. After two and a half months of prayers and community I left. I was very upset with myself. I kind of wandered into Christmas that year not knowing what to do and thinking my life was over. I was eighteen years old.

After Christmas I kind of stumbled, maybe pushed more like it, into Hotel Management training. I definitely needed a wakeup call. For the next few years I learned to be a Hotel Manager from the bottom of the ladder and working my way up. The call to the monastery never left me. I realized that I needed to try that again.

A few years passed and I applied to join the monastery again. The second time happened in a different monastery with different people. I loved it. I absolutely thrived in it. The place was your typical Victorian monastic building with ghosts and dark corners and lots of shadows. One of the nicest things that I remember fondly to this day was when the community gathered for night prayers. When prayers were done and the great silence enveloped us we would all sit in the darkness of the monastic chapel wrapped in our cloaks and just sit quietly. I want you to image a building like Hogwarts. Sitting in the church I would see the moonlight through the stained glass windows. It was heavenly.

After a year I took my first vows as a Presentation Brother. I was called Brother Daniel. The second year I was sent to the capital city of Ireland, Dublin. I joined a small community that managed a Catholic boys school. I was actually allowed to teach some of the boys with

supervision so that I would get a taste of what it was like. The intention was for me to go to College and graduate with a teaching degree. Well into the academic year I started to feel lonely. I didn't know anyone around the place. Then I realized some of my class mates from the Junior Seminary joined a congregation of priests called the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. I decided one day to go and visit them.

I had a great time. Then they invited me to come and have dinner and meet everyone in the Seminary. I had an even better time. There was great energy among the students. Many of them were within a couple of years of being ordained to priesthood. When I was home alone I sometimes wondered, "How come, they heard a call the priesthood and I didn't?"

I always imagined that a priest was a kind of Superman. He could just about do anything. He was an expert. He knew theology. How to deal with upset. Death and blood wouldn't faze him. How come I was not like them? I used to have a dream that always upset me. I saw myself as a priest walking down the street. Then there was an accident and someone shouted to get a priest. Then I saw myself running away every time. That to me was definite proof that I was not called to priesthood but instead to become a monk. To confirm my proof I decided to subversively interview one of the guys in the priest's seminary.

Over coffee I kind of asked him what he might do if he were present at an accident. I couldn't believe his answer. He said that he would be absolutely terrified. He would be tempted to run away. I thought, "that can't be right?! That's how I would feel." I started to realize that the difference between us was profound. John Finn said to God, "Yes Lord, I hear you calling me. I am scared to death but I know that you will be with me. So, yes." My prayer to God was more like, "Yes Lord, I hear you calling me. However I can't go because I need to do a degree in Superman, Theology, Psychology, Blood and guts, and whatever else life wants to fire at me. I am not ready." I realized that I was putting obstacles in the way of saying my yes to God. I was shocked.

To confirm it I started to listen more. There was a TV report about a massacre of nuns in El Salvador. The CNN reporter interviewed one of the sisters who survived. It turned out that some of the sisters used to go to the hills to nurse some of the revolutionaries. The reporter asked sister if she realized that she was putting her life in danger. Sister responded by saying that you don't think about your own life when you are trying to help someone else. That was the clue I needed. If I was a priest walking down the street and there was an accident, like everyone else, I would run to try to help in whatever way I could. There wouldn't be time to be running away. Just to absolutely confirm the truth I happened to be talking another day with a priest who told me some stories about his priestly life. He talked about a man who committed suicide by jumping off a building. Someone decided to call the priest to come and say some prayers. The priest told me that he was sick for the rest of the week because of the trauma.

I realized that the only way I would actually know that God was calling me to priesthood was to actually try it. My poor mother and father could not figure me out at all. I remember my mother saying to my Aunt Chris, "I wonder sometimes does he know what he wants?" I knew exactly what I wanted. I just wanted some time to figure it out. I left the monks in June and I joined the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in September. I was a bit nervous. At this stage even I knew that my life was worthy of a Hollywood movie. Maybe Tom Cruise would have played me well.

The student house of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart was in the mid-West of Ireland in Galway. My new friends were now cattle and sheep. I was in the countryside. I remember the first day. After dinner I kind of wandered around the house opening doors and wondering where everything was. I stumbled into the parlor. Think of the joy when I saw a baby grand piano. I spend the next couple of hours happily tickling the ivories. The next day at nine o'clock we gathered in one of the classrooms. Fr. Liam walked in. First impressions were that he seemed a bit grumpy. One of the first things he said was, "Who was that person who was playing the piano last night?" I nearly died. Typical! One of the guys gave me up. Fr. Liam looked at me and said, "You are going to be our new Organist." I actually died then. What on earth did I know about organ playing or accompaniment? Well, I learned very quickly. Hours were spent practicing and learning new hymns. There were lots of occasions where I was a nervous wreck trying to pick my way through psalms. I started teaching students how to sing. I started to like liturgy. Very quickly I learned to type. I learned how to play the guitar. I started singing myself.

Life was very exciting very quickly. I started to love the road to the priesthood. My parents saw very quickly that I was happy too. The second year of my seminary training saw me go to College. I am the only one of my brothers to go to University. They told me I was qualified to do a degree. My God, three years later I graduated with a degree in English literature and Philosophy. After four years in the country we headed to the big city of Dublin again to study Theology. Things were getting a bit more serious. Having graduated with a Degree in Galway they told me I was now qualified to do another degree in Theology. My God, three years later I graduated with a degree in Theology. I have a thousand stories about student life in the seminary. Basically we were eating machines that prayed and studied every day. I remember the day they ordained me to the Diaconate. Only one more year and I would be ordained a priest.

Coming to the end of our training we all wondered where we should go to work as priests. During my student years I heard a lot of stories about our mission to the Barrios of Venezuela. I wondered if I was feeling the call to go there. Others in the seminary predicted that I would go to Rome and study Music and Liturgy. I opted for Venezuela. In order to prepare myself my Superiors sent me to Spain to study Spanish after Christmas. I was to be ordained in June of 1986. I loved living with the Spanish priests of my Order. I adored Madrid. I also discovered that I was pretty good at the Spanish.

I have to pause here and tell you a funny story. I would sometimes join the priests when they celebrated the parish Mass at 6pm. I was determined to be able to celebrate Mass in Spanish before I went to Venezuela. I asked Fr. Rubio if I could celebrate the parish mass alone to get the experience. I assured him that I could do it. The great day arrived and I was terrified. I stood at the altar and addressed the people of Madrid telling them that I was learning Spanish and this was my first time celebrating alone. I had it all written down. Then I started. "My brother and sisters, let us call to mind our sins." "Hermanos, recordemos nuestros peccados." The problem with learning a language is that many words look the same. I misread the word "peccados." Instead I read "pescados." "My dear brothers and sisters, let us call to mind our fish!!!!!!" They all roared with laughter and I didn't understand why. I didn't have enough Spanish to ask either.

Coming into my third month, March, learning Spanish I got a phone call one Saturday afternoon telling me that my Dad had a massive heart attack. I was very shocked and frightened. I suddenly realized that my Dad might die and he would not be able to see me ordained a priest. I dashed on a flight home on Sunday. My poor Dad was very agitated. They told me that he had some brain damage. It was terrifying. The nurse asked me a question. She said my Dad kept saying the word "Blarney." She wondered if I could make sense of it. I told her that my reception after my Ordination was going to be in Hotel Blarney. Thankfully my Dad got better and he was present at my Ordination day. That was the most blessed time. We spent the summer visiting all kinds of relatives. I gained weight that summer.

Very quickly the day came for me to fly away to Venezuela. I can't describe to you how distraught I felt saying goodbye to my Dad. I realized that I might never see him again alive. I have to tell you that I went to South America via New York. I visited with my Mom's relatives in New Jersey for a week. It was sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas. On the day I landed in America for the first time, they told me that they wanted to take me to the Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes Christmas show. The only tickets they could get were for that afternoon. On my first day ever in America having landed in Kennedy Airport totally disorientated, they took me to see the Rockettes Christmas show. Is that an omen or what?

Venezuela was amazing and challenging. I had to get acquainted with a whole new world, a different climate, a new language, different ways of doing things, impoverished church, no facilities, nada! During the year I spent there my mother would write to me telling me that Dad was sick again. He went into the hospital eleven times while I was away. I saw a picture of my mother and she looked worn out. I thought, "what on earth am I doing here? I should be at home giving some help and support to my family." I decided to go home. This was not well received by the priests in the mission but I didn't care. My father was dying and I wanted to be there. Dad died about four months after I came home. I got to visit with him and at the end his death was a blessed event for all of us. On that night I testify that the angels were singing.

This is my life and I am only half way done. I feel sorry for you, my reader. After the death of my father I was given some time to readjust. They allowed me to do a counseling course

that helped me to re-orientate again. Then I was appointed to London, England. That was the greatest. I loved every part of that experience. I flourished. I saw London. Went to shows sometimes. Met very interesting people. One of my friends from those days is Jeremy White. He is a Base Baritone with the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. Jeremy used to get me tickets to see the Opera. We were fortunate in the parish because Jeremy was one of our cantors. Can you imagine? We had an Opera singer as our cantor.

I will give you a Jeremy story. He would sing the Exultet every Easter but sometimes he would not be sure that he could make it, especially if he was singing at Covent Garden that night. One Easter Saturday night he was singing but he assured me that if he got the 11.10pm train from King's Cross he would be at the church on time for midnight. It got closer and closer and no sign of Jeremy. I was his back up. I started to panic. I was also holding the Pascal Candle. "Lumen Christi" etc. In the corner of my eye I saw Jeremy running up the street in a full tuxedo. He rushed past me outside on the church steps. He still had make up on his face from the stage. As I was doing my Lumen Christi coming down the aisle of the church in darkness Jeremy was at the lectern turning pages and getting ready.

I loved the memories of London. After eight years of that I was sent back to Ireland to take up a post as High School Chaplain. That allowed me the opportunity to be near my mother in her old age which I appreciated. During the long hot summers I was given the opportunity to come to Texas and work with other Missionaries of the Sacred Heart scattered around south and central Texas. My presence in their parishes afforded them the opportunity to take a break. I did that for a few years in the mid/late nineties. For another period I made a segway into Hospital chaplaincy training.

During that time my dear mother died. Finding myself at a cross roads again I asked to come to Texas for the summer to get my head straight. While I was in San Antonio I decided that I wanted to come and live in Texas because I love it here so much. I had a chat with Bishop Gregory Aymond who told me that he would be happy to give me a job if I got my Visa sorted. It took another year but one fateful day I landed in Austin and they took me to St. Catherine of Siena. The rest as they say is history, bit of heartache, lots of joy, great challenges, ate too much barbecue the first year, look great in my cowboy outfit. The end.