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Grand Rapids man's road to priesthood an unusual one

by Charles Honey | Press Religion Editor
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It was 1:30 a.m. on an October night, and Vito Martinez could not get to sleep. His mind raced with all the things he needed to do that day. He sat down at his computer to collect his thoughts.

"Many people would be overwhelmed by the life I now live," Martinez wrote of his routine as a Capuchin friar. "I've learned already that religious life is not easy."

Barely a month into his residence at a Capuchin community in Milwaukee, the young Grand Rapids man was coming to grips with what God had called him to do. It was a lot.

He recounted a typical day, starting at 6 a.m. with morning Mass and a bowl of Cap'n Crunch.

He takes classes until noon on subjects such as St. Francis, liturgical prayer, maintaining personal boundaries and appropriate behavior around kids.

Most afternoons he spends working with the poor at an inner-city parish, serving meals, talking to them about their needs, giving them clothing and the occasional bus ticket.

One day a week he's at a jail helping to lead a Bible study.

After laundry, e-mail, evening prayer and a community meal with his

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fellow friars, he usually hits the hay around 11 p.m.

Even for a guy who not long before had sold cars and worked poker tables to rake in big bucks, doing God's will was hard work. The difference was having a higher purpose.

"My motivation is no longer money or social acceptance," he wrote of his work for St. Conrad's Friary and its social outreach to the inner city. "With each thing I do, I want not just to improve someone's life, but to inspire them to do the same."



Press Photo/Emily Zoladz

Vito Martinez, a former poker dealer and car salesman, has been called to a life of service and says he can relate to those in need.

That conviction has only grown stronger in the months since then. After years of chasing the almighty dollar, and more than a few women, Martinez believes God has firmly yanked him onto another path -- the one leading to the priesthood.

It's a journey he chronicles in a surprisingly frank blog, "The Long Road to Priesthood." In a recent visit home for Christmas break, he expressed no doubt about his chosen route.

"I'm doing what I'm being told, in a spiritual sense," said Martinez, 33, sitting in his home parish of St. Mary Catholic Church. "This is the direction I'm supposed to go.

"I've gone with the grain (of society), and what have I gotten? It's not actually having happiness. Now, I have moments of happiness and I say, 'Life is good, God is good.' "

That wasn't always the case with Martinez, the only child of a single mom who sometimes struggled to make ends meet. He grew up knowing what it was like to eat at the Salvation Army and shop at a thrift store



Press Photo/Emily Zoladz

Vito Martinez, left, talks with to the Rev. Dick Host, of St. Mary Catholic Church, about his decision to be a friar in Milwaukee.



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As a young adult, he knew what it was like to get buzzed on booze, blow \$1,000 at a craps table and get into unhealthy relationships with women. His faith lay more in accumulating gold jewelry and video-game gear than in his Catholic upbringing.

By candidly blogging about his struggles, Martinez could be doing religious vocations a service, says his supervisor at St. Conrad's Friary.

"One of the problems for the Catholic Church today is so few young people can imagine themselves in a religious vocation," said the Rev. William Hugo, director of postulants for the Capuchin friars. "They look at Vito's blog and say, 'This is a real person struggling with the same kinds of issues I struggle with, but he's making this very unusual choice. If he can do it, can I do it?'"

Martinez is a long way from the priesthood. In August he entered his first year with the friary as a postulant, seeing if he's right for religious life.

If he decides to continue, it will take up to six years to complete his training and take lifetime vows as a Capuchin.

Life of service

Modeled after St. Francis of Assisi, about 1,000 Capuchin friars work throughout North America in parishes, hospitals and community agencies.

The Detroit-based Province of St. Joseph includes the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, founded in 1929 during the Great Depression.

Martinez works at a community meal and outreach program in a predominantly black neighborhood, greeting people and dispensing bus tickets and clothes. He takes his role as a kind of host seriously.

"Maybe they don't have anybody that talks to them or looks them in the eye for the entire day," Martinez said. "For somebody to sit down and say how are things going or just engage in small talk is huge for some people."

He also hosts youth groups from the suburbs, introducing them to the diners, and helps lead a Bible study for jail inmates once a week.

In these activities, his background both as a smooth-talking car salesman and low-income Hispanic youth serves him well, Hugo says.

"He's a people person, and he can work a crowd in the best sense of the word," Hugo said. "He hasn't forgotten what it's like to be a teenager or a young adult, and he understands the hard bumps of life that many poor people experience."

Martinez endured some hard bumps and the occasional ethnic slur growing up in Iowa, then in Grand Rapids where he moved at age 15.

His mother, Guadalupe, had worked with the poor in Iowa and was active at St. James Catholic Church in Grand Rapids. Vito was an altar server there for the Rev. Dick Host, now pastor of St. Mary's.

"He's felt some of the sting of prejudice," Host said. "It's made him sensitive to those who might face similar things."

The larger picture

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To read Vito Martinez's blog, "The Long Road to Priesthood," go to vocationstory.blogspot.com

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priest, Host adds.

"He's always looked at that larger picture: service. It's a very real, get-your-hands-dirty-in-the-lives-of-people kind of service."

But between adolescence and the Capuchins, Martinez traveled a more troubled path.

The City High graduate studied at Wabash College in Indiana and Grand Rapids Community College before working at two car dealerships in Grand Rapids, J.D. Byrider and GT Autos.

Some days he would head after work to a poker room and deal a few games of Texas Hold 'Em to make an extra 50 bucks. It was a lucrative life but unsatisfying, he says.

"I had what I was told I was supposed to have," he recalled. "I had a good job, a pleasant income, a nice vehicle, a trophy girlfriend, and I wasn't happy. There was still something missing."

He learned what it was while surfing the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese Web site one day. Exploring the area called "priestly vocations," he felt something strong stir within.

"In that moment, I realized this is what I should be doing. On the one hand, it was an epiphany and a revelation. On the other hand, it was extremely scary. I'm thinking, 'Ok, this is the opposite of what I'm doing.' "

He overcame the fear and kept exploring, talking to Host and others about the possibilities of the priesthood. He also volunteered at God's Kitchen and in other ministries.

"It just came to the point where it was, 'If I have the opportunity, I'm going to try this.' My life has been happy since then."

Host looks at that decision with the knowing wisdom of a veteran priest.

"I don't think he chose it," Host said. "It was chosen for him. God chooses, and sooner or later we realize it and we give in."

Martinez is not sure where his long road to the priesthood will lead him, what God has in store or even exactly who God is. But he says he will follow wherever God leads.

"God *is*, that's about the best I can do," he said with a smile. "I feel whatever God is, I'm on the right track to where I should be."



Courtesy Photo

Vito Martinez, in front, is shown with some of his Capuchin friars, who are committed to service to the Catholic Church.

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