

First holy Communion may have planted seed of vocation in deacon

By Debra Miller
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Transitional Deacon Ronal Romario Vega Pastrana has traveled many hours to continue his studies at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, Seton Hall University, South Orange. Almost a 9 hour flight from Colombia, South America, to be exact.

With three siblings and his parents living in Colombia, he hesitantly accepted an invitation to continue his faith formation in the United States from diocesan vocational recruiter Father Mauricio Tabera-Vasquez, whom he befriended in his home country.

"I didn't want to come [to the U.S.]," he said about the initial difficulties of learning English. "It was another culture, another language, and at that point I hated English with all my heart."

Having only a high school competency level of the language, by reading his college textbooks in English, he eventually became fluent in his new language.

"This is what the grace of God can do," he said about learning English. "If you're open to him, he will do that. You pray and he will give it to you."

In January 2018, Deacon Pastrana moved to the United States. He said adjusting to a new life was challenging and being away from his relatives contributed

to his uneasiness. He has not visited with his family for two years, but his determination and passion for his vocation has seen him through the tough transition.

"You have to adapt yourself and try to incorporate your own Colombian culture to the new American culture," he said, "Being able to spend precious time with the Lord, and specially consecrated to him, is the most important thing in my life. The Lord is your beloved. You are there for him. He is there for you. That's especially very good for me."

When he made his first holy Communion at the age of 14, which he described as a scary experience, he worried about making a mistake in front of so many people. But receiving the Eucharist for the first time instantly changed him.

"From that point on, I think God put something in my heart like a vocational seed," he explains.

The priest vestments and blessings bestowed on the congregation intrigued Deacon Pastrana as well. He joined a Legion of Mary youth group, which helped foster his vocation, and enjoyed attending Mass every day. His parochial vicar

then suggested that he might want to attend a vocational retreat, but his mother preferred that he finish school before contemplating any future plans.

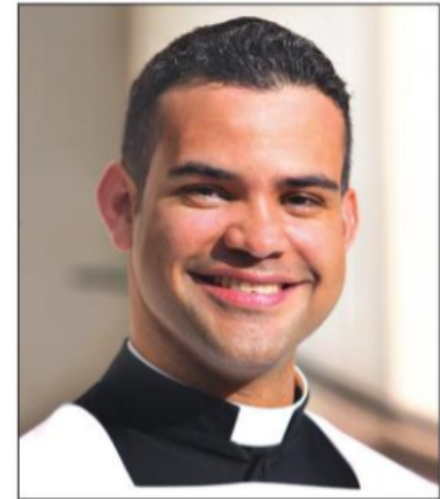
As a young adult, Deacon Pastrana attended Católica Del Norte Fundación Universitaria and participated in a church Holy Hour each Thursday. It was there that his pastor suggested he begin discerning for priesthood.

Although family expectations were for grandchildren and a career, after a few months his parents supported his decision to pursue his vocation. Fast forward to his ordination to the transitional diaconate June 19 at the National Blue Army Shrine, Asbury, and his family was tuned in to the livestream from afar. His mom cried during the ceremony watching her youngest child take his vows.

Now serving at St. James Parish, Basking Ridge, the new deacon conducts baptisms, coordinates marriage preparations, preaches at Mass, and dedicates his day off from school and a work study program to read, hike, play soccer, or take a morning walk "to watch the sunrise."

"I'm joyful. I laugh a lot," he adds.

"It takes time to be in a silent moment, to be open to the grace of God, and God will answer your longing, your yearning for the vocation."



As a bilingual religious, he is also eager to take advantage of that unique skill in the future and build relationships with the Catholic Hispanic community.

He encourages others to consider a path of holiness by being confident in their desire to do so. "Don't be afraid," advised Deacon Pastrana. "Sometimes when we're trying to find the way, or good vocational discernment, we're in a rush: 'Okay, God, talk to me right now.'"

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