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Capuchin Vocation Update Province of St. Joseph

A dream...

...a vocation...

...a test.

(The Midwest Capuchins are blessed this year to have Todd Wieschowski as a postulant. The fact that Todd is a Capuchin postulant is nearly a miracle, since he had a debilitating disease that normally would have disqualified him from religious life. Vocation Update share's Todd's vocational journey in his own words.)

What was wrong?

I had ulcerative colitis beginning about three years ago. It is a hereditary disease in my case that caused inflammation of my large intestine resulting in bleeding and severe diarrhea. This is a very debilitating disease because it affects one's ability to work or go to school. Because of its impact on life, it also affects a person's moods.

None of the medications that treat it really worked for me. In the end, my only hope for a cure was to have a very expensive surgery. But I couldn't afford that. In the early years of the disease, I was on and off jobs. It depleted all of my savings very quickly. Eventually I had to quit my job completely. But unemployment would not carry me through the treatment periods. After unemployment expired, I had no income and couldn't afford cobra (personally paid insurance). I wouldn't have been able to pay deductibles even if I could have afforded the insurance.



Todd with Bro. John Corriveau, general minister of the world-wide Capuchins during the provincial chapter in June, 2005.

What was it like for you?

I remember well what I thought: 'Oh God, why is this happening to me?' But then I decided that I had to learn to accept this disease, to find the good in it, and use it as a teaching tool for others. Not until I was able to accept it, could I live with it. I had to learn to love the disease in order to be healed of it. When God gives you a gift, you either choose to love it and use it, or throw it away and hate it. There is always a gift in a burden. I had to find out what was the gift within the burden of the disease that I was carrying. I found a couple gifts. First, I gained a lot of knowledge about the disease and the surgery I needed. Knowledge itself is always a gift.

A second gift was that, once I had the medical knowledge, I could explain it in common words that others with similar diseases could understand. This allowed me to help other patients when their doctors couldn't always communicate well with them. The third gift was that I learned to have more faith in the Lord. I learned to trust in God. Accepting the disease gave me trust in Christ whom



Todd at a St. Clare community eucharist presided over by community member Bill Cieslak.

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This painting by Ugo Moi entitled "Serenity" captures Todd's recent experiences. The turbulent blue sky reminds him of his surgery and recovery in the hospital. The stretch of orange at the horizon recalls the hope that kept him going. The water riveting through the firm yet changing earth suggests his personal journey.

(Ugo Moi's image used with permission. You can access Ugo's website at www.ugomoi.com)

I knew would do what was needed with me. There were many moments of moving from fighting the disease to trusting the care of Christ. During one of these moments I was reading the Bible at home with my cat Socrates by my side. When I realized that Christ would take care of me, I just cried as I felt the two hands of Christ holding my shoulders from behind me.

A fourth gift is that *Vocation Update* even wants to write about this experience. Perhaps my story will help someone struggling with his decision about joining religious life or not. It's another unexpected gift from the disease that I never would have expected to be there.

My fifth gift was gaining a friend out of the process of the surgery. My family could only be around on weekends. Well, the day after surgery, I got up to take a walk down the hall. When I got to the nursing station and turned the corner, a Dominican sister named Joyce was there. I greeted her, and she asked for my room number. Every day from then until the day I left the hospital, sometimes three times a day, she was with me, holding my hand or whatever. It was really touching. I don't know the meaning of her relationship with me. But I felt there was a reason she was there and brought into my life. I suppose its that in times of need, if you ask, it shall be granted unto you. I asked God to send someone to be with me. He sent this sister into my life when I needed her.

How does this involve your vocation as a Capuchin?

I thought of a religious vocation before I got sick three years ago. I talked to a priest regarding a recurring dream about a Franciscan friar. It starts when it's dark, thundering and flashing. A voice within the darkness tells me to go to a big cathedral. People are scrambling everywhere for their lives. I open these huge wooden doors with metal handles and step in. The doors close behind me, and the scene changes to a beautiful blue sky with lush green tall grass. In the distance is a figure coming toward me dressed in brown. I realize it is a Franciscan. He stoops to grab a lamb, putting it over his shoulders like the Good Shepherd. And the dream ends.



Scenes from Todd's reception as a postulant.

I told my parish priest this dream. He asked me how often I had the dream. I told him I was having it for several months, perhaps a dozen and a half times. He suggested that I seek out the answer as to whether this was a call to religious life. He gave me a copy of the *Guide to Religious Ministries* that talked about all the different religious orders. I filled out a generic card in the magazine and got a response from the Capuchins and a bunch of other orders. I was most interested in the Franciscan and Benedictine orders. I worked most with the Capuchins because they were the first to respond. But the Franciscan in the dream was a strong indication to me of what to choose.

I decided the Capuchins were right because of my trust in God and his closeness that were growing from being sick. My faith was increased. This dream (out of darkness you shall step into light) is why I sought out religious life. It was a step out of the dark part of my previous life: drug use, divorce, losing trust in the Lord at a young age upon my parents' divorce. The Franciscan figure in the dream caused me to consider Franciscan religious life. When I explored that life in the Capuchins, I found their acceptance of people with open arms for whom they were, regardless of the blemishes they have.



Always the vocation directors! John Holly and Bill Hugo help Todd pose for an official photo as a postulant.

Vocation Update

The Capuchins reflected Francis: his humbleness and hospitality through their love for everything on an even plane. Nothing and no one is lower or higher. Everyone is the same. Abilities can make individuals better at something, but the fundamentals of Franciscan life are that everyone is equal, plain and simple. That is what I really like about the overall Franciscan way. The Capuchins really reflect that. After reading books about Francis and the Franciscan order, I can see myself being that humble, generous, and hospitable person. Basically, I see a little bit of Francis in myself, regardless of whether others do. When you can see Francis or Christ in your own life, that helps you move forward.



Todd with Provincial Minister Dan Anholzer after signing the official letter of reception into postulancy.

I had the dream before getting sick. So, the dream pointed to a way out of the darkness of my life before that. Then I got sick. Suddenly the sickness seemed like an impossible obstacle. But I learned to accept it as a good ladder to climb. "If God wants this for me, God will find a way," I told myself. During the whole time I was sick, this attitude about my vocation was part of accepting my disease. For more than a month and a couple of weeks, it looked like there was no way to have and pay for the surgery. I knew I could not enter the Capuchins without the surgery. So, I told God that if he wanted me to be a Capuchin, he had to find the way. It was about my life and my vocation.

It seemed that the surgery from start to finish would run about \$100,000.00, and that was totally out of my ability to pay without insurance. Then, Medicaid reconsidered my application without my knowledge and granted me health benefits. Michigan also gave me temporary assistance to help pay for my day to day needs. To really put the icing on the cake, Medicaid went retro and paid for many of my past health bills that before I had no idea how I was going to pay. It came out of the blue.

If it didn't work out so that I could be a Capuchin, it

wouldn't have bothered me because I would have understood that God wanted me to look in a different direction. If my entrance was not possible, I would have had to reconsider my previous discernment. Maybe the dream was really leading me somewhere else, and my sickness was a correction of my direction. However, I really suspect there would have been something in the dream that would have indicated I was being led into a different direction.

Sometimes you don't understand all the signs in the beginning. But since I've been at St. Clare Friary in Chicago to prepare for postulancy, I have not had that dream. I feel that God knows where he wants me, and he will keep at me in a way that I will understand him and know of him, so that he can lead me to where he wants me for that time. It's kind of like Jonah and the great fish. No matter where he went, God was nitpicking at him until he went to the city to fulfill the ministry God had in mind. God did the same to me, nitpicking until I got to the right place. I think the dream stopped because I'm where I'm suppose to be.

Why does God lead you somewhere and then put obstacles in the way that seem to make it impossible? It's all about trust. If you trust in the Lord, there is not a mountain or hill that cannot be overcome. "Have trust in me, and it will all work." But it's all about whether you will trust in the Lord. The obstacle is put there to test faith. In the test you earn the trust of God. It's like getting your dad's trust to use the family car as a teenager. If your behavior is responsible, you build trust. Do something stupid that causes an accident and the trust is broken. So, in the end, I had to build trust, and God gained trust in me through my responses to the obstacles. It's a trust building exercise. God leads you somewhere and then puts incredible obstacles in your way. In the process of working it out, you grow in faith and trust, and so does God. Because God lives in each of us. He's in and around us.

(Todd began his postulancy at St. Clare Friary in Chicago on September 1, 2005.)

Todd made his first Capuchin vocation weekend one year ago this month. If you would like to consider entering postulancy next September 1st, now is a great time to contact Fr. John Holly, Vocation Director.

920-915-4400 Jholly1953@yahoo.com