

Ordination candidate lays down the law to pick up the cross

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LA CROSSE – As a lawyer, Deacon James Altman knows the importance of the law. So when God laid down the law regarding his vocation to the priesthood, he knew he ought to listen.

“I knew I was supposed to be a priest,” he said. “So when I prayed to God, I would ask Him only to tell me where and when. On the one hand, I didn’t want to give up my law practice. I was making good money. But you know if God gives you His answer, you had better say yes.”

On June 28, Deacon Altman will join two fellow seminarians at St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral, La Crosse, to be ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI.

According to Deacon Altman, the many cases of abuse and divorce in which he’s been involved have complicated his pursuing a vocation in his home diocese. Originally hailing from the Diocese of Marquette, he decided to come to the Diocese of La Crosse.

In 1981, Deacon Altman received a bachelor’s degree in psychology at Lake Superior State College in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. He returned to school, attending the University of Michigan Graduate School of Business and in 1984 received a Master of Business Administration degree in finance and accounting. This was followed in 1991 by a law degree from Cooley Law School, Lansing, Mich. Until he was admitted into seminary, Deacon Altman maintained a family law practice in Sault Ste. Marie.

In a small community like Sault Ste. Marie, he pointed out, being party to such cases can lead to some bad feelings among community members.

“There are many people in the community that don’t particularly like the fact that I was on one or another side of a law case,” he explained. “For that



Deacon James Altman

reason, I thought it best to look outside the Diocese of Marquette to pursue my vocation.”

But these considerations did not deter him from following God’s will. He attributes his firm understanding of God’s will in his life to his own firm hold on the sacraments.

“There was never a time I didn’t go to Sunday Mass,” he said. “So many of my seminarian brothers would tell me about how they’d fallen away from the Church for a time. It was never like that for me.”

A turning point in Deacon Altman’s decision to pursue his vocation came when his parish priest asked him if he’d like to be a lector for Sunday Mass. He said that due to his fear of being unworthy of such an honor, he demurred.

“So Father turned to me,” he recalled, “and said, ‘It’s never whether you’re worthy, but whether you’re willing. You’ll wait forever if you wait to be worthy of God.’ So what do you say to that?”

In retrospect, it was the same sort of advice which Father Joseph Hirsch, director of the Office of Vocations, had given him later, when he had become a

seminarian for the diocese.

“God does not call the qualified,” he said, quoting Father Hirsch, “He qualifies those whom He calls.”

And so, after being accepted as a candidate for the Diocese of La Crosse in 2003, Deacon Altman was admitted into the Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, Ohio, and graduated in 2004 with a certificate of philosophy.

On March 17, 2007, Deacon Altman was ordained a deacon by Bishop ListECKI at St. Mary Church, Tomah, where he had spent time as a seminarian.

Earlier this year, Deacon Altman graduated from the University of St. Mary of the Lake’s Mundelein Seminary outside Chicago with a bachelor’s degree in Sacred Theology.

Attributing the foundation for his vocation to his parents Francis and Joan Altman, Deacon Altman said he, his brother and two sisters had grown up in a strong Catholic household. His large extended family – which he said includes at least 100 first cousins – also served as a strong communal witness to the faith as he was growing up, he added.

“Whenever we went to church, we saw cousins, aunts and uncles there too,” he said. “Their faith was simple – never anything over the top. They weren’t thumping on Bibles or anything. They were just good Catholic people.”

Deacon Altman sees his work as a priest as every bit a lifetime commitment as the father of a family.

“What I look forward to doing from birth to death is being a good father to the parish family,” he said, “and reconciling them to God and to each other on a daily basis. From day to day, I want to reconcile and bring people to God – to lead them to the cross. That’s the answer, after all, to all life’s pain and suffering. That’s what Pope John Paul II said.”

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