



My Journey to Priesthood: An Interview with Fr François Beyrouti

by Archimandrite John Azar
Vocations Director



Voc. Dir.: Welcome, Fr. François, both to this interview and to our Church here in the U.S. I've known you for several years now.

Fr. François: Yes, we first met in 1994. I had just finished my first year of Theology at the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Saint Paul University in Ottawa and decided to visit St. Gregory's Melkite Seminary. Fr. Justin Rose, then a seminarian, was very hospitable and showed me around Boston. One of our stops was at the Annunciation Cathedral, where you were the rector.

Voc. Dir.: Perhaps, you can share with us your early background?

Fr. François: Sure. I was born in Hadeth, a suburb of Beirut, in 1971. By mid-1975, unrest was beginning to spread in Lebanon and the situation in Hadeth became very unpredictable and dangerous. I remember that one day a bomb landed on our house, and luckily no one was hurt. Then a few days later masked individuals came into our house and robbed us while we were having dinner. They came with rifles and one guarded us as the others went through our house and took all the

valuables they could find.

After these events my parents decided to leave Lebanon. My parents, elder brother, and I got into a taxi packed with as much as we could take with us. We went to Jounie and from there took a small boat to Cyprus. We then went to Greece, where my parents worked on papers to come to Canada. In 1976, we arrived in Montreal and visited my uncle before going to North Vancouver where my parents and younger brother still live.

Voc. Dir.: How many children are in your family?

Fr. François: I am the middle of three boys. My elder brother, Joseph, and I were born in Lebanon and my younger brother Anthony in North Vancouver. Our family was hit hard in 2004 when Joseph passed away very quickly of a brain tumor. Faith has always helped us through difficult times, especially this one.

Voc. Dir.: When did you first think of becoming a priest?

Fr. François: Our family was always very close to the Church. My brothers and I grew up serving and very involved in different Church activities.

Whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to do, from the age of seven I would always say "a priest." I eventually stopped saying this because people started calling me the "little priest."

During high school I thought of other things that I would like to do, but was always most drawn to the priesthood, not as a career but as a life of service to God and people. I prayed to know God's will for me and felt a very strong call to dedicate my life to peace, justice, and faith. I also found the idea of serving God to be more satisfying than anything else. By the time I graduated I simply could not think of being happy doing anything else.

Voc. Dir.: What was your prayer life like?

Fr. François: Daily prayer was an important part of my discernment and faith journey. Our family always prayed before meals and went to Church every Sunday. I am very grateful that my parents took their faith seriously and taught us its importance as we grew up.

Voc. Dir.: What were some pivotal moments or people along the way?

Fr. François: In addition to my parents, I was fortunate to have others

who guided my faith journey. Fr. David Monroe, now the bishop of the diocese of Kamloops, BC, was the pastor at St. Edmund's Church. He and Douglas McDonald organized trips for the altar boys to the Seminary of Christ the King and to all the ordinations that would take place in Vancouver. This early exposure to life at the seminary supported the idea of consecrating my whole life to serve God.

My eighth-grade teacher taught us how to pray the rosary and encouraged us to pray daily. Throughout high school I prayed the rosary every day. These were special times for me as my faith began to grow. I felt I was already committing myself to a life of faith.

Amid all the emotional turbulence of high school I think faith kept me focused on moral principles, justice, honesty, and the importance of the Word of God. I began to realize how difficult it was to live my faith, but also experienced the great joy it brought me in knowing that I was doing the right thing. I grew to see the spiritual life as the path to a truer and much longer-lasting happiness than the temporal temptations that quickly end up hurting us.

Two other people also had an extraordinary effect on my life.

In 1984, Pope John Paul II visited Vancouver and an event was held at BC Place, a 60,000-seat stadium. I could not remain seated. I went and stood along the railing. As he was passing by in the popemobile, I felt like jumping over the railing to get even closer, but didn't. When he spoke I found his call for peace, justice, morality, and holiness very profound and felt very emotionally and spiritually moved by seeing him and hearing his words.

Another influence was Mother Teresa. In 1988, my parents and I went to attend an event in a packed 16,000-seat stadium. I felt that I was in the presence of a very holy person. I remember her speech and feeling that there was something very real and deep in what she was saying.

I had been in BC Place and Pacific Coliseum many times for concerts, but Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa were different kinds of superstars. They were superstars you could really

believe in. There was truth and power in their presence and words. I became convinced of the emptiness of a life of acquiring possessions and began to feel even more confirmed in my vocation to the priesthood.

After graduating from high school, I went to the Seminary of Christ the King in Mission, BC, where I completed a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree, with a special focus in philosophy, English, and history.

Voc. Dir.: Did you get any Eastern formation there?



Fr. François: The Benedictine monks of Westminster Abbey, who ran the Seminary, encouraged me to learn more about my Eastern Catholic roots. I read as much as I could about the Byzantine Liturgy and Eastern Christianity. I also spent three summers in the Middle East where I visited Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Palestine, and Egypt. These trips were a great re-immersion in a culture from which I felt I had been violently uprooted.

By God's providence, in 1990 I was flipping through a Directory of

Churches and Dioceses in the United States and found a listing for the Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Newton. I was surprised to learn that we had a seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, called St. Gregory Seminary. I wrote a letter to Fr. Nicholas Samra, the rector at the time, and asked for some information. He wrote back and told me that he was no longer the rector of the seminary but had been appointed the auxiliary Bishop of Newton. His letter was very encouraging and he also sent me some information about the seminary along with some books.

We stayed in touch and he was a great guide and friend during my studies and discernment. He particularly encouraged me to serve our Melkite Church, despite the difficulties. It was a great blessing for me that Bishop Nicholas was able to be at my ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood. It is now an even greater blessing and privilege to serve with a leader who has such a clear vision for the future of our Melkite Church.

My desire to learn as much as I could about our traditions led me to Mount Tabor Monastery in Ukiah, California, in 1992 and 1993, where I attended two intensive summer programs in Eastern Christianity. These programs were run by the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, and the director, Fr. Andriy Chirovsky, encouraged me to register in the newly-established program leading to a Bachelor of Theology degree in Eastern Christian Studies. I went to Ottawa in September 1993, completed the degree, and then went on to complete a Master of Arts and a Licentiate in Theology, both in Biblical Studies.

Voc. Dir.: Were you ordained in Canada? Where did you serve?

Fr. François: Yes I was ordained and have been serving in Canada. I became a reader, sub-deacon, and deacon under Archbishop Michel Hakim. In 1998, Bishop Sleiman Hajjar ordained me a priest and appointed me the assistant pastor at Saints Peter and Paul Melkite Catholic Church in Ottawa. I was blessed and privileged to serve the wonderful people of this parish until 2010. It was an enormous blessing to

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be part of the faith journey of so many people, and I experienced the great love of a beautiful community that became not only my friends, but also my extended family.

Voc. Dir.: Recently, you completed a Ph.D. and D.Th. thesis. Could you tell us a little about what led you to this?

Fr. François: While serving as a priest I also taught Theology courses at the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Saint Paul University, the Ottawa Lay School of Theology, and the Deacon Formation program at the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Ottawa. Teaching these courses helped me to do further research on the early interpretation of the Bible. I became particularly intrigued by Origen of Alexandria, and ended up doing my thesis on the catechetical structure in Origen of Alexandria's "Commentary on the Gospel of John." I focused on the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 and looked into how Origen and the early Church moved from reading texts, to interpreting them, then to applying them to our daily life. This was an enormous challenge, but worth it.

Voc. Dir.: What are some of your hobbies and interests?

Fr. François: Our whole family loves nature and the outdoors. I grew up swimming, hiking, skating, skiing, snowboarding, cycling, and playing soccer and basketball. In 2001 my two brothers, three of our friends, and I went on a 500-mile bicycle pilgrimage from Saint Jean Pied-de-Port in the Pyrenean foothills of southwestern France to the tomb of Saint James the Apostle in the Church at Santiago de Compostela at the northwestern side of Spain, and in



2006 I did a sprint distance triathlon. I also enjoy all kinds of music, love to read, and like researching topics related to culture, Scripture, and the development of Christian thought.

Voc. Dir.: You have given spiritual retreats in some of our American Melkite parishes. As of November 2012 you were assigned as the pastor of Holy Cross Melkite Catholic Church in Placentia, California. What are you focusing on in

your ministry now that you have been incardinated into our Eparchy?

Fr. François: As a united community, we will focus on developing a variety of faith-inspired educational programs and be guided by the words of our Savior: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33). I have met so many wonderful people here and visited their homes, and many have shared with me their dreams and talents.

We are now primarily focusing on the spiritual growth of the community and working to develop pastoral activities for all age groups. During our first parish council meeting, we discussed co-responsible ministry and the need for everyone in the parish to actively participate in the future growth of our Church. Our hope is that through spiritual and community activities we will all get to better know each other and work together in developing a comprehensive model of service where everyone's needs and gifts can be incorporated.

One special focus for me has always been the youth and young adults. In the past, my time with the youth and young adults has shown me their generosity, intelligence, creativity, and passion for the faith. Sometimes, the youth and young adults end up coming to Church more than their parents and they begin to share their faith with their parents and convincing them to go to Church and to go to confession. Overall our parish focus is not on what "I" can do but what "we" can do together.

Voc. Dir.: Thank you, Fr. François! You've given a great insight into your journey and maybe even an incentive for others to think about their vocation. I'm sure we'll talk again. †

Ukrainian Catholic Patriarch *Continued from page 11*

"Pastoral conversion also means we have to discern which methods we use, according to today's way of thinking, in order to preach a Gospel (that will penetrate) inside their realities, to preach to their lives, their hearts," he said. "We have to discern, be converted and not be afraid to look to new

ways, new methods."

Finally, Patriarch Sviatoslav said, people are looking for Christian leaders with an authentic Gospel lifestyle, "not in the external forms" – the art, music or vestments – "but for the substance. And if somebody behaves according to the Gospel he is preaching, the credibil-

ity of that preaching is very profound."

He believes that Pope Francis is a Church leader with that kind of profound credibility and authenticity, a "gift of the Holy Spirit."

This article was based on an article by Cindy Wooden of the Catholic News Service.