

# “If It Weren’t for God, You’d Have Ended up in Jail”

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<http://www.regnumchristi.org/english/articulos/articulo.phtml?se=359&ca=84&te=844&id=22395>

Fourteen years ago, I left everything to follow God’s call to the priesthood. On the eve of ordination, I can sum up my life’s journey in three stories.



## **The first story is about hockey and misdemeanors**

I was born during a Minnesota blizzard in April, 1975. My earliest childhood memories are of learning to play hockey. When the temperatures plummeted so low that even the outdoor rink-warming houses closed, my brother Dan and our friends and I would point our car headlights onto the old wooden hockey boards at Edina’s Countryside Park. Without a doubt, the hardest thing for me to leave behind was hockey.

My parents had always taught me the faith by word and deed, and I attended Our Lady of Grace Catholic School. So the juvenile delinquency of my high school years came as a complete surprise.

I was looking to be part of a group in all the wrong places. I attended rap and heavy metal concerts, grew long hair and got my ear pierced, vandalized, got into fights, was suspended from school, shoplifted, stole hood ornaments, and –without a license– crashed and totaled my friend’s Jeep Cherokee. Neighbors complained and I had more than my fair share of run-ins with the police. My parents were summoned to City Hall and accompanied me to young offender reformatory sessions. During my junior year, I was so absorbed with a girlfriend that I had little time for anyone else. Years later, my parents told me: “Mike, just get down on your knees and give thanks. If it weren’t for God, you’d have ended up in jail”.

One big reason I am not currently in jail is Dan Moran. At Saint Patrick’s Church, along with Pete Larson and Connie Dittrich, Dan reached out to young people. As my confirmation sponsor, he took a troubled teen out to lunch and asked me: “So, Mike, how’s your spiritual life?” “What spiritual life?” I thought. I fumbled for words. During a walk around Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, I confessed that I didn’t even know if I believed in God. Unfazed, he listened to me and patiently guided me through my doubts. Although I cannot pinpoint a moment when my life did a 180-degree turnaround, Dan was my youth minister, mentor, and friend. Without his influence on me, I do not know where I would have ended up. Perhaps not much further than hockey and misdemeanors.

## **My second story is about falling in love**

After high school, I received a partial scholarship to a small Catholic college, the University of Dallas, and I can only describe that year as the greatest thing that had happened to me yet. I began to find the answers to all my questions. It started with great professors like Father Robert Maguire guiding me through the great books by Homer and Plato, Dante and Aquinas. I began to pray the Rosary, go to Mass frequently, and get up early on Saturday mornings to pray at abortion clinics. As a philosophy major, I planned to study abroad in Rome and Greece during my sophomore year, and I played rugby, made true friends, and developed a positive and promising relationship with a young woman at school. Then it happened.

I fell in love – with the Catholic Church.

Seemingly on cue, I met a Legionary of Christ priest. The way he talked about Christ just blew me away. It seemed to me that, for him, Christ was neither 2000 years nor 2000 miles away. He was someone real, someone alive, someone with whom he must have walked the shores of Galilee that very morning. During a Eucharistic Hour on campus, he preached boldly: “Maybe young men aren’t following their vocation, but don’t tell me that God is not calling them to the priesthood”. Though I

had told no one, I had been thinking about the priesthood, and I was squirming in my pew. I felt like there must have been a spotlight right on me. After the talk, I walked straight into the confessional, went around the divider and said, "Father, I don't have a confession prepared, but I need to see you for spiritual direction regarding the priesthood". The next day, I told him my whole story, and he encouraged me to visit the summer discernment program in Cheshire, Connecticut.

Leaving everything all at once had a way of not fitting into all my plans. Still, over the summer, now and again I would ask the Lord what he wanted of me, half afraid of getting a reply. Then, for instance, I would attend midday Mass at the Basilica of Saint Mary in downtown Minneapolis. Almost invariably, the Gospel passage for that day would be something like: "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he said to them, 'Follow me'. And immediately they left their nets and followed him".

After three months of trying not to hear the answer, I could not take it any longer. One summer afternoon, halfway through mowing the back yard, I just stopped the lawnmower and turned off my Walkman. I drove to church. Kneeling in the Eucharistic chapel in my lawn-mowing shorts, I was at the crossroads. I pleaded aloud: "Lord, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to go back to college, or do you want me to visit the Legionaries?"

Desperate for an answer, I grabbed a prayer book and flipped it open to a random page: "If you see your way clearly, follow it. Why don't you shake off the cowardice that holds you back?" I fumbled frantically for a second opinion: "'Go, preach the Gospel. I will be with you'. Jesus has said this, and he has said it to you". I said to myself, "Houston, we have a problem". Strike three was next: "Why don't you give yourself to God once and for all... really... now!"

Right then, I looked at the crucifix, spontaneously hoping to find one muscle on Christ's body that was not tense in pain. If I could just find one, I thought, then I would not have to give everything. At that moment, I was ashamed to look at the cross. But then, by God's grace, I said "yes". I later realized that it was July 25, the feast of Saint James. The liturgy that day had read, "You did not choose me. I chose you" (Jn 15).

The next four days were a whirlwind. I quit my job at Braemar Golf Course, returned everything anyone had lent me, said goodbye to my friends, packed my things, and bought a plane ticket to Connecticut. At the terminal at Minneapolis International Airport, my mother was crying. "Mary is your mother now", she said. She wrote later:

"I never thought that he would be a priest. Michael was a typical teenager with all the typical teenager inclinations. There were troubled times, caring times, mischief, and moments to melt my heart. I never really considered the priesthood a possibility, but unbeknownst to me, he did".

My father always supported me in following the call, and we have grown closer to God and closer to each other. When I broke the news to him that I was about to fly a thousand miles east to discern my vocation, he stopped for a moment and reflected. Then, he asked me slowly and pointedly, "Mike, are you running to something or running from something?"

### **My third story is about running the good race**

I was picked up at the airport in New Haven by two young men who had themselves just arrived to visit the Legionaries of Christ in Cheshire, Connecticut. As we turned in to the seminary, I saw seminarians doing something I had no idea that priests could do: playing soccer. Once through the front door, I looked into the chapel and saw young men kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration. When I sat down to lunch, I could hardly get a word out before someone was offering me food on my left and drink on my right. There was something about the austerity and the authenticity of the place. "These men have a relationship with Jesus Christ," I said to myself. "I'm home".

I stayed on through the summer candidacy and novitiate, receiving my cassock in September 1994. Since then, preparation for the priesthood has taken me to Switzerland, Poland, New York, and Rome, where my youthful plans to study abroad have been surpassed by seven years of Aristotelian and Thomistic studies in philosophy and theology. I have been with the Holy Father 109 times, including encounters with John Paul II and Benedict XVI. My ministry with boys has taken me to Ireland, Mexico, France, Israel, and the United States. As a newly ordained deacon, I led a Conquest boys' camp in Jerusalem and Galilee, and during a visit to Corinth, Greece, I read from the first letter to the Corinthians: "God chose what is foolish... what is weak... what is low and despised". Rather than call the qualified, God qualifies the called.

During the happiest fourteen years of my life, Christ has shown this prodigal son that he refuses to be outdone in generosity. "Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home".

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*Father Michael Sullivan was born on April 12, 1975 in the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota. There he played ice hockey, played the piano, and slalom skied for Team Gilboa of the United States Ski Association. He attended Our Lady of Grace Catholic School, Valley View Junior High School, and Edina High School. In 1994, while pursuing a philosophy degree at the University of Dallas (Texas) at the age of 19 he entered the Legion of Christ in Cheshire, Connecticut. After obtaining a master's degree in philosophy in 2005 and a bachelor's degree in theology in 2008 at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University in Rome (Italy), he was ordained a Catholic priest. Work with young people has taken him to Ireland, Italy, Mexico, France, the United States, and Israel. He currently works with youth and families in Texas.*