

A FAMILY FOUNDED ON FAITH



Catena meets Deacon Albert Lawes, one of three brothers training to become priests

When it comes to the Lawes parents and their seven children, it can truly be said they are a family founded on faith.

While David Lawes is chief operating officer of the Catholic Nottingham diocese office (before that he was with the Portsmouth diocesan office for several years), three of his sons, who are in their 20s, are all at different stages of becoming priests.

Peter Lawes from Maidenhead Circle, brother to David, explains: “Albert was ordained a deacon on 12 July at Plymouth Cathedral. It was due to have happened in Rome where Albert had trained (at the English College), but due to the virus, all the seminarians were sent home. Thomas was ordained a deacon at Wonersh, near Guildford, where he trained. Dominic started at a seminary near Melbourne, Australia in February but all was curtailed by the virus, though he is returning now.”

Since *Catena* first spoke to Peter, Thomas has been fully ordained at Clifton Cathedral. This took place on 26 September. Albert gave a reading, as did his eldest sister Alex, while his

youngest sister, Isabelle, sang the responsorial psalm. Albert will be ordained a priest in June 2021.

Peter says: “Though younger than Albert, Thomas went straight from A-levels to Wondersh with only a one-year break between, whereas Albert went to university and then took the longer course at the English College in Rome. Dominic had a regular job in Melbourne before deciding to follow his brothers.”

David and his Australian wife Jennie have four boys and three girls. The fourth boy, Henry, is Peter’s godson and the only one not going into the priesthood.

Albert Lawes spoke to *Catena* about his decision to enter the priesthood and his journey so far.

“I am what is commonly called a ‘cradle Catholic’. I was brought up in the faith by my parents, both of whom have been examples to me of the Christian life, especially their fidelity to one another and to God. I have a large family, with three brothers and three sisters, but I’ve never thought anything abnormal about that. I wouldn’t say that we had an especially religious upbringing; our main religious practices were grace before meals, prayers before bed, and going to Mass every Sunday. My parents were friendly with our priests and I remember them coming round for dinner, and to bless the house.

“Living in a large family meant that basic Christian acts such as forgiveness and sharing were commonly practised. Talking about the faith was normal to me, and at an early age I fully accepted that there was a God, that Jesus was close to me, and that He and Our Lady looked after me. That’s not to say that I never found being a Catholic inconvenient. I didn’t always want to join the family for prayers because it clashed with a TV programme I wanted to watch, and Mass was often a dull experience. Looking back, much of my catechesis was poor and I wasn’t taught central truths of the faith such as the Real Presence. After my First Holy Communion I served at Mass, but I mainly did it to give me something to do. However, regardless of how I may have felt about prayers or Mass, my parents insisted that this is what we do in our family and that not going was simply not an option. I thank them very much for that.

“The faith was therefore something in which I lived, and throughout my childhood I have had moments of profound religious experiences, moments of grace where God feels tangible. Yet, my faith did not really come alive until I was 18. I had been encouraged to go to a Catholic youth camp in Walsingham called Youth 2000 by my parents and the assistant priest of our parish. Although not feeling especially inclined, I went. I was struck by the love that many of the people there had for God, and most especially I was struck by the stories they told of His love for them. I discovered an awareness of the Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and I realised how little I loved God, how much I ignored Him, and yet

He loved me so much. I went to confession for the first time in many years and at first I cried because I was ashamed, but then the priest said to me: 'I absolve you of your sins,' and I cried even more because I was so happy. The weight of myself that I had been carrying around was lifted, and I have never felt so free.

The Calling to be a Priest

"I first felt the calling to be a priest when I was 18. I found my last year of school very difficult and my plans for my life were not working out. After my recent conversion experience, I had started to pray a lot more. I remember vividly that I was lying on my bed one evening and I asked the Lord: 'What should I do with my life?' I had meant it as a question regarding the direction of my career, I had not ever seriously considered the priesthood. God responded: 'Albert, I want you to be a priest.' My initial reaction was not positive. My stomach tied itself in a knot and I thought: 'That cannot be right!' So, I asked again, and God replied: 'I want you to be priest.' I was not satisfied, so I kept asking and I kept getting the same response. After a couple of weeks, I began to consider the idea. I had just been accepted to university, so I told God that I would think about it over the next three years.

"The calling never went away, and throughout my time at university I deepened my appreciation for what a priest does, the vital importance of the priest for the world. God helped me to understand that He was asking me to offer my life out of love for the world. After university, I was accepted by the Bishop of Plymouth to begin formation for the priesthood at the Venerable English College, a seminary in Rome.

"Formation is an extremely rewarding but difficult experience. To undergo formation means to grow as a human being in a relatively short period of only a few years, so that you are prepared to answer the call to priesthood. In a nutshell, it involves placing yourself under the loving gaze of God and allowing Him to mold you into yourself. It involves great joy, because you learn that you are loved, but also sadness, because you realise how difficult it is to love as God loves. I have had to face much about myself that I struggle with, and also to learn how to see others through God's eyes. Most importantly, in order to say 'yes' to what God is asking of me, I have had to learn that He is asking *me*, with all my strengths, but also my weaknesses, to be His priest. And He asks this of me simply because He loves me. It is an acceptance, not of a job, but of a gift, a way of life that is my personal path to holiness, which will help others to be holy."

A Family of Priests

"My parents never treated the Catholic faith as something extra that we did as a family, but as the centre of our family life. When I had my conversion experience, my siblings had similar experiences around the same time. It meant that in my late teenage years, we were

not only supported in being Catholics by Mum and Dad, but also by each other. The life of faith which I grew up in took on a whole new aspect when it was all of our faith, not simply our parents. My whole family are now able to share our faith with each other in a deeper way, especially the discerning of our vocations. We encourage each other to listen to the voice of God in our lives, and most importantly, everyone in my family prays for each other. As each of us has made big decisions in response to God's call, we have supported one another to live and be faithful to that call.

"For three of us to feel the call to the priesthood, therefore, is not something I think of as especially strange in a family where asking God the question 'What do you want me to do with my life?' is normal and even encouraged. It means that listening to God is something we as a family actively practise. God is calling all sorts of people, but the sadness is, too often we aren't listening.

"However, whenever anyone asks Mum why there is such a strong calling in our family, she simply replies: 'By the grace of God.' We could have turned out like many Catholic families, where the children and even the parents abandon the practice of the faith, but God has been so good to us by helping that not to happen. If you ask me, it is because of the faithfulness of my parents, who gave such good example to us of trying to do the will of God even when life was especially hard. Without their faithfulness, God still could have worked His grace in my life and the lives of my brothers and sisters, but it was through Mum and Dad's fidelity to God and to each other that He did.

The Importance of Faith in Unprecedented Times

"Faith is important at all times, unprecedented or not, but we only really experience the test of faith in times like these. When life is going well, we feel in control. But the feeling of personal control is only an illusion, and something like a pandemic really shows just how subject we are to things beyond our control. It can be a nerve-racking and distressing experience unless we recognise that God is ultimately in control.

"We can know by reason that God is far more powerful than we can imagine, and that nothing could possibly escape His control, yet when we are conscious that we are not in control, even of our own lives, we have the tendency to think that there is no control, that the world is a scary, chaotic place. Faith teaches us otherwise. God asks us to believe in Him, but He does not always let us know exactly what He is going to do, or how the seeming chaos of life is actually part of His plan. He says to us: 'Trust in Me, trust in My love for you. Do not be afraid! You are in My hands.' Faith allows us to say, 'Lord, I trust in You.'

"It is not a blind faith, but a faith assured by what God has already done for us. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are God's eternal proof that He loves us, that His love overcomes all things. Jesus Christ is proof that even the most unprecedented of

situations will be turned into occasions for God to show His love. I have not the faintest idea of what God will do with my life and my ministry, but I trust in Him. Faith is part of what makes life an adventure.

“Sometimes it is easier to have faith than at other times. Sometimes I think: ‘I am not up to this, I don’t know what I am supposed to do.’ Sometimes I am especially aware that I am actually incapable of doing something, that the ability to change a situation is beyond my power. Many people may feel this way at the moment, and it is not a comforting experience. But we have faith because we know God. We know He loves us, and we believe that He is always here giving us whatever help we need to get through it.”

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