

Texas Catholic Herald News

Five minutes with Father Charles Van Vliet

By Jonah Dycus

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HOUSTON — Raised with seven siblings in rural Ontario, Canada, Father Charles Van Vliet's experiences growing up on a farm have served him well.

"I learned the value of hard work from an early age and how to operate and repair equipment," Father Van Vliet said. "My father was also a carpenter and I used to help him on the job during the summer vacations."

The Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) priest currently serves as the pastor of Regina Caeli Community in Houston (based at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church). But before he was called to the priesthood, his mechanical background and an early interest in aviation prompted him to join the Royal Canadian Air Cadets during high school.

"I was fortunate to receive two scholarships for flying when I was 17 and 18 years old," Father Van Vliet said. "The first one was for a license to fly gliders and the second for a private pilot license."

He went on to pursue a two-year aircraft maintenance course in North Bay Ontario, and from there was employed with Frontier Helicopters out of Abbotsford, British Columbia. The job took him all around British Columbia, Northern Alberta and into the Yukon and Northwest Territories. Eventually, he was travelling to Europe with the company.

But Van Vliet was drawn to the priesthood and pursued further studies in philosophy and theology at Thomas Aquinas College (TAC) in California.

He continued to work as a helicopter mechanic during the summers to pay for the studies, "something that made other students jealous," the priest said. "I was working in Europe for the most part and making enough in the summer to pay the year's tuition — a luxury not many students had."

After graduating from TAC, his spiritual director suggested he contact the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) due to his love of the Latin Mass. The following year he was in the FSSP seminary in Germany and was later ordained in Ottawa in 1996.

Father Van Vliet recently discussed his unique background and love of the priesthood with the *Texas Catholic Herald*.

TCH: You worked as an aircraft maintenance engineer for more than 10 years before joining the seminary. In what ways did that experience apply to forming your perspective as a priest? Are there any notable correlations between that vocation and your current vocation as a priest?

Father Van Vliet: My experience as a carpenter and helicopter mechanic has been a great aid to my work in the FSSP.

I was assigned during my second year of priesthood to oversee the construction of our seminary in Denton, Nebraska. This project would span from 1998 to 2010, when the final phase would be complete with the dedication of the Chapel. The overall project was more 100,000 square feet of building, requiring much supervision during each phase of construction.

If it were not for the years of carpentry with my father and repairing helicopters later in life, I would not have been able to survive this project.

TCH: When did you originally feel the "call" to the priesthood? What drew you to the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter?
Father Van Vliet: The call to the priesthood first came through my pastor in Abbotsford when he was jokingly calling a few of us young men "Father So and So" after a Sunday evening Mass.

I had not really thought of a vocation seriously until that evening. From that time forward the thought of the priesthood kept coming back until I finally entered the seminary.

TCH: Regina Caeli is the only Archdiocesan parish to offer the sacred liturgy and Sacraments exclusively according to the Traditional Latin rites. What else would you want readers to know about the parish?

Father Van Vliet: Regina Caeli is entrusted as a personal parish to the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, a society of apostolic life established by Pope St. John Paul II in 1988 to offer the sacred liturgy in all of its solemnity according to the Latin liturgical books of 1962.

Since it is a personal parish, any person who wishes to join may become a member or supporter. I am the founding pastor and responsible for overseeing the construction of the new facilities for the parish on the land donated for that



Father Charles Van Vliet serves as the pastor of Regina Caeli Community in Houston (based at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church).

The parish has many young families; in fact, of the registered parishioners earlier this summer, 40 percent were under the age of ten. For a small parish, we have many young families and we will need to supply their needs for a full sacramental life, as well as their needs for education and socializing.

These large young families are the future of the Church and we are truly blessed, but these families are also struggling to make ends meet, and this gives us an extra challenge for fundraising. Forty percent of the parish will not have jobs anytime soon.

TCH: What would you consider the most rewarding aspect(s) of being a priest?

Father Van Vliet: A rewarding aspect of being a priest is being able to absolve the penitents of their sins and give them the Body, Blood Soul and Divinity of our Lord in Holy Communion. Administering the Sacraments and seeing to the spiritual needs of the parish is very rewarding.

TCH: What do you like to do in your spare time (when you have spare time)? Do you have any specific hobbies or activities you enjoy?

Father Van Vliet: My hobby is woodworking and building things. Working on the property right now is enjoyable, even if it is hot and humid outside. I enjoy working closely with the architect, who is also a parishioner, in designing the church and other buildings.

TCH: Do you have any words of wisdom or insight for those discerning the priesthood or religious life?

Father Van Vliet: If you feel you have a vocation, do all you can to protect it and discern it.

Pray frequently, go to confession regularly and avoid activities that can endanger it ... Strive after purity of mind and body, for this disposes us better to discern His will. You should also seek a spiritual director to help in the discernment process.