

Br. Stephen - Vocation Story

“Who is that guy in the brown habit that seems to randomly appear on the altar some Sundays?” That guy is me. For those of you who may not know me, I am Br. Stephen Cantwell OFM, Cap. The OFM stands for the Order Friars Minor and the Cap. stands for Capuchin. I am a Franciscan, a member of the first order branch that St. Francis of Assisi started. The Capuchins are one of the reforms of those original Friars. There are many, many, reforms of the Franciscans but the Capuchins get their name from their large hoods or capuche, which was the sign that we were associated with a more contemplative life. I am currently in my final vows, which means I’m committed for life to the Order, and also in studies to be a priest at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

I grew up at Immaculate Conception. I was baptized in the Church on August 26th, 1990. My parents (Scott and Aimee) had 5 children (Kaitlyn, Samantha, Jake, and Suzanna) of which I am the second oldest. My family lived in Wyncote until I was in third grade when we moved to Summit Avenue, and I was able to walk to ICS every day where me and my siblings attended. I was educated in the Faith there and received First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation until my graduation in 2004. I was even a part of the young men’s group, the Cross-bearers, mostly because I lived 3 houses down from the Stantons so rides were easy to come by. I attended Bishop McDevitt High School, graduated in 2008 and then attended college at Penn State where I majored in Civil Engineering.

From there my life looked very typical. I attended 9pm Mass in college most Sunday nights and continued to do so after college, when convenient, in my travels as a Construction Manager. I moved a lot in my first two years but eventually got a job working for L.F. Driscoll which brought me back to Philadelphia, living in the Graduate Hospital Area near where I was assisting in the building of labs, office space and a new hospital for the University of Penn Health System. It was during this time that I wanted to meet new people and went to a young adult group at St. John the Evangelist in Center City. This would prove to be a crucial step on my path to religious life, though at the time I hoped it would help me find a girl to date and marry. The group was, and still is, called Jack’s YACs. It was there that I went from attending the group to leading the group with a few others. From sitting in the back of mass, to singing and learning how to play the guitar at the front.

St. John’s is staffed by the Capuchin Franciscan Friars. There was a priest assigned to the group who I became friends with named Fr. Brian. The vocation director, Fr. Rafa, also lived at the downtown parish and on one Easter Vigil he asked if we could meet. I agreed and steered us to a favorite bar of mine where I kindly told him that I had briefly thought about the priesthood in high school but felt called to marriage. I knew almost nothing of religious life. To my surprise after my flat-out rejection of a call to religious life, he remained in touch. At the time I believed that I could not possibly be called to religious life because I was not nearly “holy enough” to join or be able to live a life fully for Christ. This is a common misconception many have when it comes to any vocation, call it vocational imposter syndrome. It is easy to trick ourselves into thinking

the Lord does not call us to be more than we think we are. Eventually Fr. Brian was reassigned and Fr. Rafa invited me to a Come and See weekend retreat in which guys went to discern the order. I agreed but only to get a weekend outside of the city and to see my friend Fr. Brian, who had moved to Cleveland. I honestly had no intention of discerning religious life or the priesthood. That weekend, as it turned out, had a lot more in store for me than I thought.

The retreat house was a 4-hour drive away from the city on the border of PA and MD in a secluded location. The place is called Alverno, named after the mount La Verna in which St. Francis received in prayer the gift of the stigmata. When I first arrived, I was struck by how quiet the place was. Not only did I live in the loud city, but I had consciously chosen to surround myself with noise at every waking hour of the day. There was a peace to that place that I have come to know as the peace of God, given to these friars who had a life centered in prayer. The graces from that weekend would take some time to explain but essentially two main thoughts came to me. First, if the Catholic faith was true then it required me to center my entire life around God, which was not how I was living at the time. Second, these friars were normal men trying to follow the Gospel together and I wanted to join them. Up close they were not perfect but just men working towards holiness, and I realized I could do that. This was a shocking revelation. Admittedly, I threw up that Saturday morning of the retreat out of nerves when I realized this. For me, a man who had established himself in Philadelphia with a job, friends, and family, this meant giving up everything that I had ever planned for. But the life I was living, while not bad, was missing some crucial element so I remained unfulfilled. This knowledge of what I was to do was not easy for me to accept. Later, it proved difficult for my family and close friends to accept as well but thankfully that eventually changed. It was a great risk the Lord was asking me to take. However, He made it clear that He would provide for me if I walked towards it.

So, I returned from the retreat with a resolve to be more Catholic. To pray the rosary, attend daily mass, and return to confession after 15 years of keeping myself from the sacrament. As a result, the Lord seemed to be pouring His Love out and actively guiding my life. At the same time, I continued to discern with the Capuchins. I visited the postulancy house in Frankford in which friars and first year postulants minister and live at the Padre Pio Prayer Center which is located at St. Joachim Church. I visited the post-novitiate house of studies nicknamed Cap College in Washington D.C. I was even happily blessed to get a ticket to attend the Beatification of Solanus Casey, a Capuchin Blessed, in Detroit with hundreds of the friars. Through all these visits all signs continued to point to joining the friars. So, I eventually decided to apply and found that by God's Grace I had fulfilled many of the requirements to enter and was accepted. I then left my job in June 2018 to start in Philadelphia as a postulant in July of the same summer.

Entering postulancy was a major adjustment. The lifestyle of prayer and ministry were radically different from the autonomy and life I had lived in the city. But fortunately, I found that the life of a friar seemed to fit me pretty naturally. The ministry in the area near Kensington was challenging. However, then, and now I truly believe it is the place that the Lord asks us to be, to serve and be with those in the prison of addiction which affects so many in our world. It was a blessing to start in Philadelphia in such a beautiful

ministry. I also assisted Sr. Linda, a sister of St. Joseph, who ran an aftercare program, ESL classes, and a retreat house on top of managing the church of St. Joan of Arc. She was and is a great inspiration to me of consistently providing ministry as a vocation and to dedicate one's whole life to it. Throughout the year I grew to know the Franciscan tradition more and got to know the brothers, especially my classmates, who entered at the same time as me.

In May of 2019 we stayed briefly in a transition program in St. Louis, which was created to get to know the other postulants from the other provinces in the United States and Australia and to get us ready for the novitiate. Novitiate is the second year of religious formation and is a year away in somewhat of a year-long retreat. The Capuchin's have a common novitiate in Santa Ynez, California, common meaning it includes all of the provinces in the North American Conference. Novitiate is an intentional slowdown with minimal ministry and a more rigorous prayer life. This was a challenging year for me in a completely different way than my first year. I enjoyed ministry life and the east coast so to take a break was not easy. But it bore, and continues to bear, spiritual fruit and by the end I discerned that I still wanted to enter the Capuchins.

Novitiate concludes with a friar typically entering into 3 years of what are called simple or temporary vows. These are the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience characteristic of religious life. We are given this period to live the life before making the decision to extend those vows for the rest of our lives. I professed my simple vows in July 2020 in the midst of the pandemic in Pittsburgh, PA where our motherhouse is located. I was happy to return to the province and closer to my family as I moved to Washington DC to the house of studies and to attend Catholic University. During the novitiate I had decided to study for the priesthood. In the Order we first discern whether we want to be a brother then we discern if we are called to the priesthood. Many brothers choose to be priests but there are some who are called to follow St. Francis more closely and choose the path of the lay brother.

During the four years I have spent in the post-novitiate I have been happily busy. The main ministry of the student friars is to study, mostly Theology. However, we also do other ministries alongside our studies and travel for other province events. In my time in DC I have taught catechism, worked with a ministry called A Simple House in South-East DC, ran a bible study, and assisted at a local parish with young adults (also name Immaculate Conception). I have also been a part time chaplain at a trauma hospital, been the house director for the Capuchin Volunteer Program along with many other events in DC and throughout the province. Cap College is a large house in DC which currently has 25 friars in residence, 12 of which are currently student friars, others are friars from around the world who come to study or to learn English along with other brothers who support the house or do other ministry.

One of my favorite events that we run in DC is called Cap Cafe. It is put on twice during the school year and we open up the house to have Adoration with preaching and worship music. It is followed by a social which has snacks and live music made and performed by friars. This is a fun and good event for many reasons but one of which is that it is run by the student friars. Each of us is allowed to share our gifts and talents and

show others our spirituality and hospitality. It is one of the events that shows what it looks like to have brothers live together in unity as the psalms say. It is here that I've even gotten to use some of my management skills in coordinating the event and contributing with baking or music. If you want to see info about these events and others, you can follow the friars on Instagram @capuchincollegefriars. This account is managed by the student friars as well.

In the years after novitiate, I have grown to come to know better who I am before God and in the community. I learned to follow the balance of prayer and ministry along with being present to the house. This stage of formation is the final discernment of joining the Order for life and at the end of my three years I, and the Order, discerned and gave me approval to take solemn vows. I made these vows for the rest of my life in the presence of family, friends, and friars in August of 2023. It was truly a blessed day in which I could not have asked for more grace and peace to be given to me, or more love to be felt, not only from the Father, but from the many people there to witness it.

I am currently working on my studies which, God willing, will be completed in one year. At that time, I hope to be ordained a transitional deacon in 2025 and then a priest in 2026. From here I could be assigned to any of our houses in PA, OH, MD or DC. I thank Fr. Howarth and the parish community, those of you who know me and who don't know me, for the warm welcome and support in my vocation. Especially Mary Kate Guerin who asked me to write something to update the parish on my vocation story. Most appreciated are the prayers. Prayer has been my solid foundation in building a relationship with God and I know firsthand the many graces that are given from faithful prayers. So please continue to pray for me, vocations to religious life and priesthood and Our Church. This path is good but not always easy. It is certainly worth it though, so prayers help. I look forward to my sporadic visits to my home parish and to seeing all of you! And as always, if you know any men interested in religious life, let me know! Peace and Good!

- Br. Stephen