

“God writes straight on crooked lines”

I am constantly reminded of that old, but very poignant saying, “If you want to give God a good laugh, tell Him your plans.” I can honestly say that this is so very true in my journey to priesthood! When I was 21 years old I was ready and prepared to enter seminary and begin my formation to the priesthood and fulfill a lifelong dream I had since I was very young. Well, now at 44, and rapidly approaching 45 and certainly not so young anymore, my life took a very different path to get to where I am today. God’s plans are not our plans and sometimes it has been hard to discern God’s will, but here I am at the threshold of fulfilling my lifelong dream and I cannot tell you how excited I am to be alive and how ready I am to become a priest of Jesus Christ in the Voluntas Dei Institute.

I am a Miami native born to Cuban parents that came in the first wave of exiles from the island fleeing the Communist Castro regime. I am the middle child of Aldo and Maria del Rosario Peregil Ibarra (both deceased). I have an older brother, Aldo Jr., and younger brother, Anthony, both married with children living in the State of Florida. I am what you would consider a cradle Catholic, Catholic since the day I was born. At a very early age, I was most intrigued by the church and especially by the priest, and always wanted to know more about what a priest did. I remember after I took my First Communion that I was invited to be an Altar Server and I was ecstatic. I wanted to be on the altar and I loved serving mass, especially Midnight Mass and the Easter Vigil, I loved the pageantry of it all. I loved the smells and bells as is often stated. Of course at the time I had no idea what went into becoming a priest, I had no idea of the many years it would take to prepare; all I knew is that that is what I wanted to do. Now as I stated earlier, the road to the priesthood has been long and winding, but that was God’s will for me, and it has made all the difference.

While in High School, I became involved in a discernment group sponsored by the Archdiocese of Miami and attended several Vocation Awareness Weekends at St. John Vianney College Seminary. I was ready to commit to the seminary right after High School, but as I said before, God had other plans, as so often He has had for me throughout my life. After a long battle with cancer, my mother passed away at age 47 a month and a half after I graduated High School. I had no other choice but to discern what God was asking of me at that time and I felt that God was calling me to put on hold my desire to enter the seminary and stay home, find a job and help my father, my siblings, my little brother who was 8 at the time, and my elderly grandparents. It would take three years for me to finally enter the seminary for the Archdiocese of Miami.

I entered St. John Vianney College Seminary in August of 1991 and graduated in 1994 with a BA in Philosophy. Following my three years there I entered St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida in August of 1994 and graduated in 1998 with a MA in Theology. My time at St. Vincent was some of the best years of my life. The seminarians that were there along with the faculty made our formation challenging but fun, if you can understand seminary formation not as an oxymoron, but as true authentic spiritual, human, and academic formation for the priest of the future. Around this time the Church was contemplating adding a pastoral



year to formation and our class was to be the first group of seminarians at St. Vincent to be assigned for a full year in a parish. With my luck, I was assigned to St. Mary Star of the Sea in Key West, Florida. Paradise to many, I have to say that it was not for me. I meet some wonderful people that are still very dear to me, but my rectory living was less than favorable. No

need to get into all the details except that I was transferred mid-year to two parishes in Broward County, St. Luke’s and St. Vincent’s along with a teaching assignment at St. Thomas Aquinas High School. Little did I know that this teaching assignment would later become my future ministry in a very short amount of time. I returned to the seminary for my fourth year and completed my MA in Theology along with a pastoral assignment that the formation team deemed necessary due to my rather haphazard pastoral year. I was the only one in class to have to do this. I was not happy, but in God’s plan I was able to work with the Diocese of Palm Beach community of Genesis Daybreak, a sister community to the community of L’Arche Daybreak in Canada, founded by Jean Vanier. I was assigned to work with adult men and women of different intellectual disabilities and capacities. I cannot tell you enough about what a blessing it was to work with that community for that year. At first I was most apprehensive, but the residents of those two houses made me change my whole outlook on persons with disabilities, their genuineness and loving authenticity taught me to be sensitive to those that society often marginalizes because they don’t seemingly fit the norm. Still to this day I am forever marked by my time with them, I hope never to forget what they taught me.

It was a tough year though, both personally and emotionally, and I felt that I was burnt out. I needed to take a break and this was one very tough discernment turning point because I was to be ordained a Deacon that May, and I asked the Archbishop of Miami take time off. He was not pleased, he told me to take five years and then come back. Those five years came and went and I was never accepted back to the Archdiocese. That was a very difficult realization for me, but once again God's plan is not my plan.

As I stated earlier, I had a teaching assignment at a local High School and this would now become my ministry. After asking for a period away from the seminary, I began to teach High School in September of 1998 and except for two years I have been teaching ever since. I love what I do, but deep down inside I have always felt that God has been calling me to more, and I have never stopped discerning my vocation to the priesthood, In 2007 after returning from the Diocese of Venice and Christ the King Seminary in East Aurora, New York, I returned to Columbus High School to once again minister to High School students.

In September of 2007, Fr. Julian Gonzalez asked me if I was still considering the priesthood in my life and he invited me to come and see the Institute that he

belonged to, Voluntas Dei. I was going to be in New York for a retreat of Marist Educators and had the pleasure of meeting Fr. Tony Ciorra at Fordham University and shared with him my story and my desire to serve God as a priest and he too invited me to come and see Voluntas Dei and see if the Institute was a possibility for me. I began meeting with the Gold Coast team in Ft. Lauderdale and in March of 2008 I attended my first National Meeting in Newark. Since then, I never looked back. I trusted in God and his providential guidance that lead me to become a part of this great family and have never looked back. My vocation to the priesthood has grown, matured and been ever so encouraged by all our sisters and brothers, who have not only welcomed me but welcomed me as one of their own family members. I feel at home in Voluntas Dei and look forward to serving fully as a priest within the Institute. So now, as I am approaching the final stages of priestly formation, I am first and foremost grateful to God for bringing me to this point in my life and am excited and truly humbled to be called. I hope and pray with God's help and your love and support to be a good and holy priest. Be assured of my prayers for you and your families. I thank you for your time.

God Bless You Abundantly,

Alex

Alex Ibarra

A reflection from Alex nearing ordination

Greetings in the Lord!

“May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment”

These words have never rung more intimate to me than as I reflect on what will take place exactly three months from this writing. Three months of what has seemed a lifetime in the making. As I approach this life changing experience of ordination, I can't help but reflect on the preceding immediate step, which I freely take before ordination can take place, to enter into Stability and become a fully vowed and committed member of the Voluntas Dei Institute. Stability in Voluntas Dei is to reaffirm my vows in steadfast loyalty and enter into a deeper relationship and family bond, not only with my



sisters and brothers of Voluntas, but of the greater Christian family. Ordination to both the diaconate and priesthood is one thing, being part of a brotherhood, but entering into Stability is something else, it is to be part of a family, to be a brother to all in a permanent way. To me, Stability is a familiar event, a reaffirmation of living

out my baptismal promises in the world, to become part of, in a more intimate expression, a member of the larger family that is the Universal Church through Voluntas Dei.

One can say that the journey has been arduous, but as things with our spiritual life go, if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. That has certainly been true in my case. One thing is certain as I look back at this whole journey of mine to this moment, it was all part of God's plan and infinite wisdom, more so, it was all on God's time that I be here at this threshold now with you. Time is moving quickly and I have so much to do. Truthfully, now all I have to do is what I have been doing throughout this whole journey...in the immortal word that my former spiritual director used to tell me all the time, “*Fiat*, let it be done, If God wants you, He will have you. Trust God's will, ALWAYS.” I believe that it is no accident that my journey has lead me to the Voluntas Dei Institute, God wouldn't have it any other way. Suffice to say, here and now, living in the present moment...trust God always...may God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment. I am looking forward to our special time together in August. Be assured of my prayers for each of you each day, please pray for me.