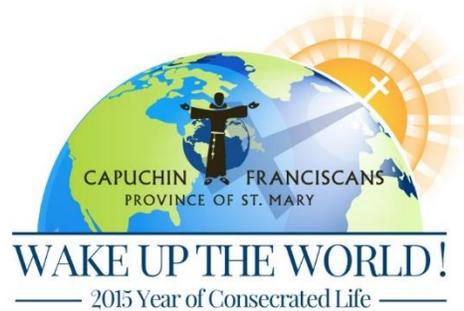


St. Pius X welcomes its new priest!



From Fr. Erik Lenhart, O.F.M. Cap.

Episode I

I am very grateful to be at St. Pius X for my first assignment. This summer has been a wonderful moment for me – graduation, ordination, moving to Middletown, and now beginning ministry here at St, Pius X.

Born in Hagerstown, MD, I worked on the Appalachian Trail in MD, and coached tennis and cross-country before joining the Capuchins. My journey into the Franciscan Spirituality really began when I was a cadet at West Point. By chance, I read a biography of Francis of Assisi, who also desired to be a soldier. This connection led me to become a CapCorps volunteer at Capuchin Youth and Family Ministry (CYFM), which planted the seeds of a Capuchin vocation.

I entered the Capuchins in 2008 and finished my theology training (MDiv, ThM, STL) at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry in 2015. In my spare time, I enjoy running, tennis, board games, learning Spanish, science fiction, guitar, comic books, and musical theater.

Thank you all for your warm and generous welcome!

Getting to know your new priest!

Episode II: The First Time I Became a Brother

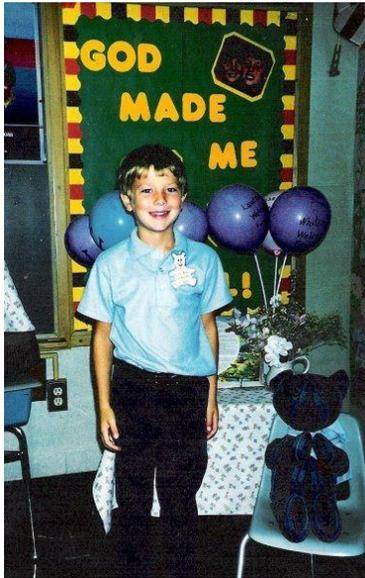
I've been a Capuchin Franciscan Brother for over seven years now, but the first time I became a brother was when my sister, Anna, was born. I was immediately biased against her because I had wanted a brother, so I was pretty disappointed at first. But as I got to know her better, she grew on me.

I'm grateful to my parents and sister for my childhood. Those times echo the word "fidelity" to me. My parents were both committed and faithful people in a variety of ways. They modeled for Anna and me enduring examples of fidelity. Examples are the best lessons. Longfellow wrote, "Example is the living law whose sway mortal men more than any written law obey." Both my mom and dad worked at their respective jobs for over 30 years. Both –much to the embarrassment of my sister and me- rarely missed one of our sporting events. One time, my dad drove ten hours from MD to NY and back in the same day to see my first college cross-country race. My mother never allowed me to miss Mass despite my continual appeals for religious freedom and guaranteed "sick days."

Sometimes the lessons we learn from our families can be painful also. Family is the school in which we learn the difficult lessons of human relationships. Family life is the theater where these dramas unfold. Every family is touched in some way by the painful events of depression, disease, and death, and my family is no different. Scripture contains many examples of "difficulties" among family members: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, David and Absalom, Ruth and Naomi. Even Jesus, Francis, and Claire have familial complexities in their lives that aren't resolved quickly or cleanly. The Lord, however, can offer us meaning and hope in these situations by inviting us into the Paschal mystery: life – to death – to New Life.

Episode III: High School – West Point

High school is a strange time. One day, I would love to give a graduation speech at high school. I'd love to tell graduates that life isn't really like high school. High school is so small, and little defeats can feel devastating. It was in this powder-keg pressure cooker of high school that I began to pray often. My prayer was pretty selfish back then and mostly revolved around asking God for favorable outcomes for sporting events/tests/social interactions.



Even in the high school mire of heightened social anxiety and emotions, I look back at my teenage years and see the seed of religious life germinating. Being a member of cross-country, track, and tennis teams nurtured the desire that we all have to give our lives for something greater than ourselves. I think this instinct to be part of something greater is at the core of our families and our Church. For a seed to grow, it must allow the dirt to penetrate its waxy coating. For it to produce fruit, it must give itself to the soil.

I think there is something in human spirituality, part of what it means to be a human being in the fullest sense of that term, which compels us to live in this covenant. Covenant is the grand metaphor for human life, where God and we have an intimate relationship. In the Book of Exodus (33:21), I love this quote where God says to Moses, *I know you by name and you have found favor in my sight*. Part of this intimacy with God unfolds in prayer, and the other part unfolds in the realm of human relationships.

This gift takes place in many different arenas. We want to have some kind of family, we want to feel like we're doing meaningful work, and we want to matter to the people around us, so families, sports teams, the military, and religious orders like the Capuchins, all stem from our deepest human desire to be part of something greater than ourselves. My time at West Point (2001-2003) also nurtured this desire to spend my life to be part of something meaningful. Our deepest desire is for a relationship with the Lord and others, and in my life, that desire took root and shape within the Capuchin Franciscans.

Episode IV: Cadet to CapCorps (2001-2004)

When people learn that I went to West Point, they tend to be impressed. They shouldn't be. I've become more and more convinced that my acceptance to the U.S. Military Academy was the climax of a series of clerical errors. I was only there for two years, and the truth is that I was a crummy cadet, and I would have been a terrible soldier.

I am grateful for my time at West Point, however, because there I first encountered another terrible soldier – Francis of Assisi. Francis of Assisi was captured in his first skirmish with Perugia. He was very sick when he was a POW, and began to pray deeply. My own prayer deepened at West Point, and I began to attend Mass frequently. It was a time of spiritual awakening.



I discovered Capuchin Youth and Family Ministries (CYFM) conveniently located across the Hudson River from West Point. After my sophomore year at West Point, it was clear to me that I would join the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, James Whistler, Adam Vinatieri, and Timothy Leary as non-graduating cadets. After leaving, I began a year of service as CapCorps volunteer and youth minister at CYFM. It was that experience where I met the Capuchin Friars, and God began to nourish the seeds of my vocation.

Episode V: CapCorps Volunteer– University of Scranton

At West Point, I was pouring through books about St. Francis of Assisi. I was so impressed with him and the people who followed him. Of course, I had never met a friar, so I was surprised when I met a Capuchin Franciscan Friar at West Point – “They still exist after 800 years!” My year as a CapCorps volunteer (2003-2004) was a lovely experience of prayer, youth group, and retreat ministry. I continued to be impressed with the friars nearly 800 years after the death of St. Francis, which we will celebrate this coming Sunday.

After completing my CapCorps year, I knew I wanted to deepen my faith. I enrolled at the University of Scranton, a lesser known Jesuit school but not lesser quality. I majored in Theology/Religious Studies as well as running Cross Country and playing tennis on the university teams. My senior year at Scranton, my dad was hospitalized with a condition called pancreatitis stemming from an endocrine disorder called MEN-1. He spent four months at John Hopkins Hospital before he died on April 16th, 2006, which was Easter Sunday that year. Looking back, I was very thankful for those four months that allowed my family and me a chance to say goodbye and prepare ourselves for the grieving to come. During the past three months in my ministry as a priest, going through the process of grief has also been a source of empathy for connecting to those who have lost loved ones. I don’t believe that God ever wills people to suffer, but the Lord can transform suffering into sources of love and mercy. Even in nature, manure and dirt can give life to seeds buried in darkness to burst forth with great fruit.

My dad’s death prompted me to think about how I want to live my life. The experience with the Capuchins left an impression on me and spent several months thinking if that might be the life and vocation where seeds might blossom and bear fruit.

Episode VI: Appalachian Trail RidgeRunner and Ph.D. flunky

After I finished at the University of Scranton, I began working as a tennis coach at a country club and the local high school in my hometown of Hagerstown, MD. I was also a substitute teacher, which is the most difficult job I’ve ever had. When I was in high school, I was probably a jerk to the sub, so it was “right and just” that I would suffer as a sub. Things balanced out however because, in the summertime, I had the wonderful job of being an Appalachian Trail RidgeRunner in MD. My job was to be a resource for hikers who were looking for the next water source, campsite, or road outlet. I also did some light trail maintenance and kept track of trail use patterns. I hiked about 10 miles a day and camped out four nights a week. I read about 40 novels that



summer. It was a deep experience. I was by myself in nature about 90% of the day, so I had plenty of time to pray and reflect on my life. I was “finding myself,” but not in the lazy, indulgent, and destructive way, which many young people experience. I felt God encouraging me to deepen my faith, so I applied and entered into a Ph.D. program in Biblical Studies at Catholic University of America. My first semester I took Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac. My second semester I dropped out. My brain was pretty fried, and there was no way I would have been able to continue for the four+ years. At the same time, I felt that same call to deepen my love for the Lord. I was on the path of a theologian (*one who studies the faith*), but what I really desired was to be a Theophile (*one who loves the Lord*).

Episode VII: Postulant – Final Vows

It doesn't matter if you're married, single, or celibate, there comes a moment or many moments where your commitments and integrity are tested. In a new relationship or a new job, there's lots of initial excitement and energy. At some point, however, those thrilling flames will fade and enthusiasm wanes. That is a time where real commitment emerges. In the words of my college cross-country coach, “Anyone can have a great race when you feel great, but can you have a good race when you feel like garbage?” When enthusiasm for one's life/vocation/job wanes, the cool light of morning casts a sober light at the demands of our commitment. I was coasting as a friar from 2008-2011. It was a fun time, and zeal was running high. 2011-2013 were more difficult times. I was in the middle of studies (5 years of grad school), with no end in sight. In my school-fatigue, I pursued other interested like music and stand-up comedy.



While I enjoyed open-mics and shows, ultimately they were distractions from my commitment as a friar.

One of life's major life challenges is the temptation to compare ourselves to others. Multiplying this challenge is social media, which provides endless opportunities to compare our real-life worst days to another's online highlight reel. Looking back, I fell into the trap of “compare and despair.” My friends were getting married and having kids, and my own life was losing its luster. I was playing the classic game, “The grass is always greener on the other side.” A wise friar told me, “If the grass is greener on the other side, you better water your grass!” Through prayer and focusing on my own vocation, the energy and enthusiasm returned and I made my final vows with confidence on July 19th, 2014.

Episode VIII (Last one): Capuchin Franciscan Friar

Everything living changes. If something is not changing, then it's dead. Relationships also are alive and ever-changing. When a couple decides to marry, the reasons for why they love each other will change through the decades. The original reasons for marrying remain true, but they will deepen and come to reflect the time that the couple has spent together. On some level, to be with someone is to suffer along with someone. The challenge is to respond to suffering in a way that strengthens the relationship.

When I first entered religious life, it was a great celebration, and I received much support from parents and friends. Getting the habit is exciting since you're putting on a new identity and praying in the habit that friars have worn for 800 years. The habit, however, is just an external symbol. The real conversion is a process that never ends because our covenant with God is always getting deeper. The sufferings that accompany life are all opportunities to deepen your relationship with God.



It's a difficult thing and you have to cultivate certain skills if you're going to persevere. I can use the analogy of cross-country running, which I used to do in college. Cross-country is, in college, a 5-kilometer race, and I remember our coach saying everyone in college is a good athlete and has had similar training. Everyone knows the things you have to do to perform during races and everyone practices the same way. Over the first two miles, everyone is in great shape and doing fine. What separates the people who are going to finish in an excellent way from those who aren't is the dedication you give when it gets really hard, in the third and fourth mile. Can your training meet that challenge of pain and can you rise to the occasion? The challenges of religious life are not physical pain, but there are still challenges that you have to go through. One thing I'll say is that in the past seven years I've been a Capuchin, I've been really fortunate to have good role models for who a Capuchin is, and with this guidance, I've been able to deepen my relationship with God.