

My Early Days as a Priest.

By Father John Catoir, JCD-10/3/18

After serving as a priest for 58 years, I'm often by asked by people who knew that I was a native New Yorker, how I became a priest of the Diocese of Paterson, NJ? I was born in Manhattan, raised in St. Joan of Arc Parish, Jackson Heights, Queens, and I graduated from Fordham University in 1953. The Korean War was still winding down and I was drafted into the U.S. Army, serving my first year as a Military Policeman, and my second year as a Chaplain's assistant.

I knew that I wanted to be a priest, so after my discharge I immediately made an appointment with the Brooklyn Diocesan Chancellor, who told me that their Seminary was at full capacity, and that I lacked any College credits in Greek. I was very disappointed. Not knowing what to do next, I went to the Dean of Fordham U., and asked him to help me get enough credits Greek to make myself more acceptable. He told me that even if I took some courses, I'd have no guarantee that they would accept me because of the volume of candidates.

I still vividly remember his next few words, "Across the Hudson River in New Jersey, the Paterson Diocese is desperately in need of vocations, why not apply there?" I decided instead to apply to the New York Archdiocese. They told me the same thing, "no room at the inn." I finally realized that this was Divine Providence at work and reconciled myself to the will of God. I applied for admission to Paterson and was immediately accepted. After my ordination in 1960, they sent me off to Catholic University in Washington, D.C. to get a doctorate in Canon Law.

When I returned with my JCD three years later, they made me the assistant pastor at St. Brendan's parish in Clifton, NJ, and I was happy at last. As an afterthought, I was also told that I would oversee the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal, part-time. It was hard at first, but I gradually began to see it all as a blessing in disguise. I had been given the power to help many Divorced people who were suffering severely, and I began to understand how the rigid application of canon law was denying them true justice. So, I gradually, I began encouraging some of them to return to the sacraments based on their good conscience.

FYI, that's the reason I'm a huge fan of Pope Francis. He has encouraged Catholics in certain circumstances to rely more on conscience than on the letter of the law, which always presumes that people are living in a state of mortal sin. The fact that we have annulments testifies to the fact that often these early presumptions turn out to be false. God knows that perfection in all circumstances is beyond heroic virtue, and He only calls on us to make a reasonable effort to be good. Perfection is humanly impossible. The enemies of the Pope are quick to condemn people, including the Pope himself, and slow to "lift a finger to help them," as Jesus put it so wisely centuries ago.

The Holy Spirit often leads us in directions that favors mercy over legalism. God bless you for your patience in these challenging times.