

E-mail brought 'unexpected call to conversion'

Luke Strand looks forward to life of service as priest

This is the second in a series of articles introducing readers to the six men who will be ordained priests for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee Saturday, May 23.

By Karen Mahoney

Special to your Catholic Herald

As a college student studying at UW-Oshkosh, Luke Strand was like many college freshmen. Carefree and on his own for the first time in his life, he gave little thought to the consequences of his actions.

At the end of his first year, he received an e-mail from a close friend that literally knocked him off his feet.

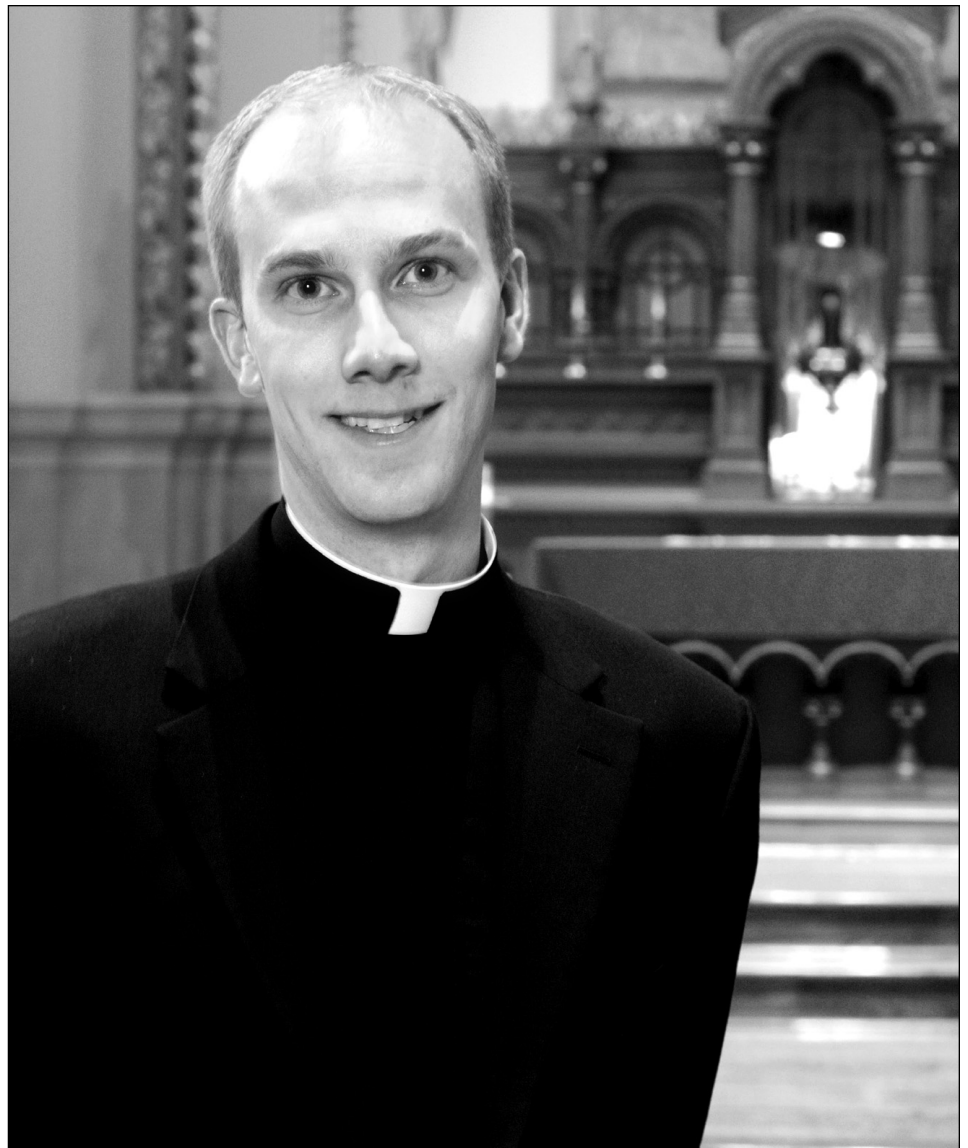
"My friend called me to explore the important things in life," explained Strand, 28. "What had God created me for? How was God part of my life? Where might I find fulfillment, etc. Upon reading this unexpected call to conversion, I immediately began bawling my eyes out."

Making his way to the Newman Center chapel, Strand was surprised to find it open at such a late hour. Sitting in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he realized that God was calling him to live a Christian lifestyle.

"Being a Catholic Christian meant more than periodically going to Mass on Sunday," he said. "It was from this experience that I began living my faith and that events began to ensue which led me on the path to priesthood."

After completing his degrees in human resources and marketing in 2003, Strand entered Saint Francis de Sales Seminary; he will be ordained a priest May 23.

While he expected to marry, have a large family and live the "American dream," deep down, he acknowledged that he was often searching for something beyond what the world seemed to provide. From time to time, his grandparents would suggest to Strand and his two brothers, while they attended Kettle Moraine High School, that they consider the priesthood, but it always seemed unrealistic, too much and too ridiculous to pursue.



Through an e-mail, a friend invited Luke Strand to explore "the important things in life." That e-mail that he received at the end of his freshman year in college was a call to conversion, according to Strand who will be ordained a priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese on Saturday, May 23. (Catholic Herald photo by Ernie Mastroianni)

"But at that precise moment (of his conversion), God began putting the right people in my life at just the right time," he said. "Newly-ordained priests, seminarians from the Diocese of Green Bay, and committed Catholics helped to foster the vocation that God had planted in my heart," he said.

Almost as if God sent them as reinforcements to confirm the call, Strand

credits his pastor from St. Bruno Parish, Dousman, a diocesan priest who ran a homeless shelter in Oshkosh, the chaplain of the Newman Center to help him identify the gifts that God implanted in him for the priesthood.

"I never would have expected the entrance of these people in my life, and yet, it was through their witness and love that I am where I am today," he said. "Their dedication to the Gospel, devotion to our Lord, and love for the church called me outside of what I wanted, to

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truly begin to make a gift of myself and fulfill what God wanted in my life.”

Making the decision to enter priestly formation was one thing, telling his family and friends was another. While most Catholic families might be astounded to learn that their son was interested in the priesthood, for Jerry and Bernadette Strand, the announcement rocked the close knit family of six.

“Most families today do not expect their sons to become priests, and in our family there are three of us in formation for the priesthood, which obviously adds a unique dynamic,” he said.

Strand’s sister Theresa is in her second year of college at UW-Madison, his brother Vincent is in his first year of studies as a Jesuit scholastic, studying at Fordham University in New York, and brother Jacob is in his first year of theological formation at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, studying to be a priest for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

“My parents and siblings have been very supportive,” he said. “And when I told my friends of my intention to enter seminary, many of them said, ‘Well, Strand, it’s about time!’ I was in Oshkosh while discerning my call to priesthood; so many of my close friends were able to see it being fostered within me. Without their encouragement, support, and the community that I had at UW-Oshkosh, I don’t think that I would have been able to make the decision because of how

counter-cultural it really is.”

During his formation, Strand ministered to youth and young adults. He and a priest friend began a youth and young adult camping ministry six years ago called Catholic Youth Expeditions, Inc.

“God has also given me the opportunity to give talks to high schoolers and college age young adults throughout the archdiocese,” he said. “I have also done a great deal of parish work from administration to liturgical preparation.”

For a year, Strand served St. Dominic Parish, Brookfield on a pastoral internship. He lived in the rectory with the pastor and learned about the inner workings of parish life. He also worked in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, jail ministry, hospital chaplaincy and in adult day care for the mentally ill.

For the times Strand is fearful and feels unworthy for such a vocation, he relies on prayer, and credits one of his role models, the late Pope John Paul II, to work through those feelings.

“He said, ‘Prayer makes a priest and through prayer a priest becomes himself.’ I will never be worthy or have the right to be a priest; it is God alone who qualifies us for such a task,” he explained. “We must heed the words of Jesus, ‘Be not afraid.’ There is the fear of not relying fully on God’s providence, of taking things into our own hands, of not fulfilling others’ expectations, of demands that will be made of us, of the sacrifices involved, of the

scandal that has hit the church. And yet, when this fear is offered to the Lord, it requires us to rely on him and helps us to remember that he is God and we are not.”

Strand unwinds by spending time running, hiking, backpacking, camping and waterskiing.

“In the summer months, ultimate Frisbee and volleyball are two of my favorite pastimes,” he said. “I also appreciate the opportunity to sit down with friends over a cup of coffee and just talk about life. I love road trips and listening to a wide variety of music.”

Reflecting on his future, what Strand anticipates most of all is celebrating the Eucharist with the people of God.

“I cannot fathom what it will be like to celebrate the Eucharist,” he said. “I am unbelievably excited, yet profoundly humbled that he would call me to such a service.”

As a priest, Strand recognizes the true call to service and has no goals other than fulfilling God’s plan for his life.

“I am called to give everything for Christ and his church, even when it is not convenient and easy, even when others do not understand my actions,” he said “As priests, we live sacrifice and service not as a job or a career, but as a life. Our priesthood must be one of service, because this was the life of our Lord and this is the life that will bear fruit for the life of the world.”