

Newly ordained priest, 27, joins Land O'Lakes church

The Rev. Jonathan Emery, 27, is the diocese's youngest priest.



"A priest is meant to take care of his parishioners the way a father takes care of his children." Jonathan Emery
BRENDA FITTERER | Times

By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

Published June 25 2014

Updated June 25 2014

On Faith

LAND O'LAKES — At Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church, the Rev. Jonathan Emery carried boxes of his belongings into the bare office that would become his and reflected on his new role: Roman Catholic priest.

On May 17, Bishop Robert Lynch ordained him and two others as priests for the Diocese of St. Petersburg. The next morning, Emery, 27, celebrated his first Mass.

"A blur," he called it — and a calling. "I was designed for the priesthood."

Emery was born on a Sunday in 1987 after his mom, Robin, and dad, Robert — who once studied to be a priest himself — watched a Mass on a TV at the hospital.

As a child, Emery was inquisitive and bossy, said Robin Emery, 50, a speech and debate teacher who lives in Plant City. Jonathan Emery "played Mass" and dressed as a priest for Halloween and became a big brother to four siblings. He was an altar server at church, but he also loved space camp and wanted to be an astronaut.

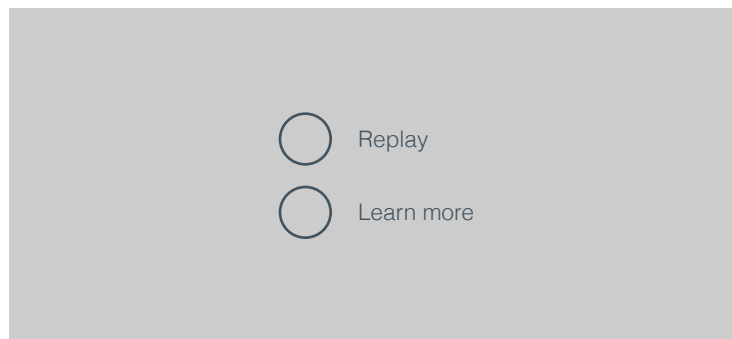
By the time he was a student at Plant City High School, he had changed his mind: He would be a pilot. He worked part time at a movie theater, hung out with friends and made a discovery.

"When I went to Mass on Sunday, the sense of peace would last for hours," he said — a peace he couldn't find anywhere else.

"Because my dad had been in the seminary, priesthood had always been on the table," Emery said. "A priest is meant to take care of his parishioners the way a father takes care of his children."

But priests also give homilies in front of their congregations, and Emery hated public speaking, he said. Plus, priests are celibate, and Emery thought he might want a wife and kids.

"Regardless, I felt the tug in my heart," he said. He applied for seminary. The day after his 18th birthday, he found out he was accepted. Emery's mom didn't think it meant he would really become a priest.



"I thought this was the Emery rite of passage," she said. "That's what Emery boys do — they go to the seminary." Then they leave.

He studied philosophy at St. John Vianney College Seminary in Miami, practiced public speaking and called home often to discuss theology with his dad, a Hillsborough County sheriff's deputy who was diagnosed with colon cancer in Emery's sophomore year.

Robert Emery had surgery and treatment but had to be hospitalized for dehydration, and on July 6, 2007, a day before the hospital planned to release him, he passed out, his son said. The staff couldn't revive him. He was 54.

Friends from the diocese rallied around the family, including Bishop Lynch, who was president and rector at St. John Vianney while Emery's dad was there.

"The night my husband died, (Bishop Lynch) came to my home, put his arm around Jonathan and said, 'I loved your dad. I can't replace him, but I will take care of you,' " Robin Emery said.

Her son — then still unsure he would be a priest — returned to the seminary to finish a bachelor's degree in philosophy and discern his vocation. In his senior year, he decided: He would become a priest. So he moved to St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, where he finished his master's in divinity before his ordination last month.

"We are so blessed," Robin Emery said. "To see Bishop Lynch ordain him, my husband would have been thrilled."

Lynch is grateful to have had the opportunity, he said.

"The relationship his dad and I had has come full circle," Lynch said. "He fulfilled his father's wish, in a sense, to offer his life to God and to the service of others as a priest."

Jonathan Emery, who started this week at Our Lady of the Rosary as the youngest priest in the diocese, will celebrate Masses, hear confessions, and perform baptisms, weddings and funerals.

"I think he'll teach our faith well," Lynch said. "In fact, I've heard he's a very fine preacher. I think he'll make a very good priest."

"On Faith" is a monthly feature about how Pasco County residents live their faith. Send your suggestions for future stories to Arleen Spenceley at aspenceley@tampabay.com.

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