Father Bob’s Vocation Story

Very Rev. Robert M. Gillelan Jr.

…campaign to help foster vocations. So here we go. This is my story.

I grew up in Biglerville with a wonderful mom and dad. Mom was Catholic and a schoolteacher, and Dad was Lutheran and a financial planner. And both were very devout in the practice of Catholicism and Lutheranism. One thing I never heard my parents argue about was religion. They had a very deep respect for each other’s tradition, and I credit my mom and dad with laying for me that foundation of faith and morals.

I have a younger brother and an older sister, and Mom was, you know, like clockwork, making sure we all got our sacraments at St. Francis Xavier Church in Gettysburg when we needed to get them. And even as a schoolteacher, for a few years Mom became a CCD teacher, and I often marveled at that. You know, she would teach eight hours a day in the classroom, come home, fix dinner for us, then put us in the car, take us to CCD in Gettysburg, and while there she would teach a CCD class herself. So I think my parents instilled in me a sense of the importance of God and church and service at a young age.

So I went to Biglerville High School, where I ran cross-country, played basketball, played my trumpet in the bands. I won the German award my senior year, and so when I went off to Millersville State College, when it was Millersville State College, I majored in German because it was something I was good at, and I thought maybe I would become a translator somewhere.

I got to spend my junior year abroad in Marburg, West Germany. And when I came back, I was fluent in German, and Pan Am was hiring, Pan Am World Airways. And one of my friends had gone up to New York to interview, but

she was too short to become a flight attendant, so she was rejected. But she said, “Bob, they need German. It’s a critical language. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

So I went up to New York and interviewed, and after three interviews, two in New York, one in Washington, D.C., I was hired as a German-qualified flight attendant, trained in Honolulu. From Honolulu they sent me to London, where I spent my first two years as a flight attendant flying in the internal German service because I spoke German.

And after two years I transferred back to the States, to JFK in New York City, but I hated it. I hated New York City. So I moved to Intercourse, Pennsylvania, because I only flew one time per week. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday I would fly. And if you’re wondering about Flight 103, the one that was blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, that was my bread-and-butter flight. So I flew four times a week, and so I had Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday off.

And it was at that time that I began to feel a kind of restlessness in my life. But I think moving to Intercourse was fortuitous. I would come home from my flights, drive back down to Intercourse from JFK, and just sit outside and kind of chill out and listen to the horse and buggies go by on Route 340, the clip-clop. And I marveled at their simplicity of lifestyle and the intentionality as to how they live their lifestyle, and I wanted that. But I couldn’t become Amish, so I joined St. John Neumann Parish in Lancaster.

And there I became a daily Mass communicant. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday I would go to Mass, and, you know, I was drawn into that faith community. And I was also playing my trumpet in their church for weddings. And one night after a wedding practice, Father Dan Bell asked me if I wanted to come over to the rectory for a beer, and I said yes. I’ll never forget, it was a Miller Lite. And those kinds of things stick in your mind.

Actually, as I was leaving the church, he had a Miller Lite can in his hand, and he just stuck it out of the sacristy door. And then he said, “You want to come over for a beer?” And I said yes.

So we started talking about things, and I told him I didn’t want to be a flight attendant for the rest of my life, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do. And so I’m about 23 or 24 years old at this time, and he said, “Have you ever thought about becoming a priest?” And I said, “Sure, I’ve thought about it since I was a little kid, but not seriously.” And he said, “Maybe you should. Maybe you should.”

And we became friends, and he shared beautifully about his priesthood and what it was like and what it entailed. And he got transferred, and then Father Bob Sharman, who some of you know, came into St. John Neumann, and he took me under his wing and kind of shepherded me up to the point where I finally said, I took that leap of faith on my rock, Big Round Top, Gettysburg Battlefield, and I said, “Yes, God, let’s give this a shot.”

So I handed in my resignation with Pan Am, and I applied to the diocese to become a seminarian, and the diocese accepted me. They sent me to the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, where I was there for five years. That was 1984. I was ordained in 1989, and then I was stationed here in the diocese.

My first assignment was with Father Bernie Pistone, if some of you know him, in Lancaster. And my first assignment was two assignments. It was St. Mary’s in Lancaster and San Juan Bautista, the Spanish-speaking parish, which proved to me that God had a sense of humor. Because as a foreign language major at Millersville, I studied German, Russian, Greek, and Latin. You know, but you pick one of those. So now I had to learn Spanish, which I think I gave it a valiant effort by immersion.

Thirty-six years later, here I am, having had a very varied experience as a priest in our diocese, having many opportunities to do many different things at the diocesan level and the parish level and serving on various committees. It's been a wonderful life. It has. In full disclosure, the priesthood is the hardest thing I ever did, but it's the most rewarding thing I've ever done. And I don't think I should really be surprised at that because Jesus is behind the whole thing. So that's the way he operates.

And that's why, you know, we're doing this this weekend across the diocese. All of these different priests, you know, 90-some priests are telling their story, and all our stories are different and unique, but we have one thing in common. At some point we said yes to God's call. And 90 percent of those yeses had someone encouraging that priest to consider the priesthood.

As Jesus has said, "The harvest is rich, the laborers are few." So as St. Mary's and the Fatima Chapel, let's do our part and pray that the Lord will send laborers to the harvest.

Thank you, and God bless.