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'The Luckiest Man in the Universe'

by JOSEPH PRONECHEN

He was only a small child — as young as 4, perhaps — when the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist first made a deep impression on him.

To this day he remembers thinking, as he watched Father Jon Cantwell of St. Michael's distribute Communion: "The priest must be the luckiest man in the universe to be able to hold God in his hands and give him to others."



Priest Profile

One day, as his pastor was "putting Jesus back in the tabernacle," he now recalls, "I asked God to give me the vocation to be a priest." It was to become a regular prayer — one that God would honor.

Today, 33-year-old Father Roger Landry is a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., serving at St. Francis Xavier



Making sure everyone sees that they're called to be a saint: Father Roger Landry of Fall River, Mass.

(Photo courtesy of Father Roger Landry)

Church in the town of Hyannis on Cape Cod.

The route to his 1999 ordination by Boston Archbishop Sean O'Malley, who was then the bishop of Fall River, is impressive. Educated at Harvard, Landry held leadership positions in pro-life groups in Washington, D.C., conducted medical research at Massachusetts General Hospital, and studied theology in America and at the Angelicum, Gregorian and Lateran Universities in Rome.

He concentrated on marriage, family and sexual issues. Later he studied bioethics at the John Paul II Institute for the Study of Marriage and Family.

Despite the extensive and intensive preparation for the priesthood, Father

Landry insists that "the greatest seminary I ever attended was my home in Lowell, Mass. My dad showed me that real love is capable of bearing any sacrifice for those you love. He translated very clearly for me Christ's commandment to love others as he has loved us."

Father Landry explains how his father endured a grinding daily commute to work a job that didn't please him. Whether sick or healthy, and no matter the weather, off he'd go each day — "without ever complaining, humbly working to support those he loved."

His father's example, he later realized, taught him that "a priest needs to be a father of a parish family and needs to love with the same sacrificial love with which my father loved me. The priesthood at its deepest level is giving up your whole life for those you love."

What's more, his earliest memory is of his mother praying the rosary. "One time as a young child, I surprised my mother when she was full of tears," he says. "I was worried and asked what was wrong. She said, 'I'm praying about Jesus' receive-

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ing the crown of thorns.' It engraved in my mind the living reality of prayer and the meaning of Jesus' suffering for us."

Christian Soldier

What made such a devout young Catholic choose militantly secular Harvard for his college? The advice of a parish seminarian who advised him that, as high school valedictorian, he should go where he would best learn how to preach the Gospel to the contemporary culture. While at the Ivy League institution, he co-founded a magazine, *Peninsula*, "to influence Harvard's culture with ideas grounded in the faith."

One issue of the publication looked at homosexuality; it attracted major media attention and helped spur production of a PBS documentary. The experience provided

Father Landry with key pastoral insights he applies today as spiritual director to men and women in Courage, the organization of men and women striving to live chaste and holy lives despite their feelings of attraction for people of the same sex.

Besides his full parish schedule, Father Landry frequently speaks on bioethical issues and on Pope John Paul II's teachings on marriage. Recently, he was asked to pinch-hit for George Weigel and present John Paul's theology of the body at a national meeting for the Engaged Encounter movement.

"The first thing that strikes anyone about Father Landry is his acute intelligence," says Weigel. "He combines this with a genuine pastoral certainty. I saw that in Krakow where he was a very congenial companion to younger students and popular with them as a counselor and

confessor."

This dynamic young priest credits Pope John Paul II and Archbishop O'Malley with influencing his approach to his priesthood. Both "are witnesses of hope to me," he says, "and have inspired me to try to be a witness of hope to others."

Father Landry preaches primarily by example, according to parishioners of his past and present. "He feels the world needs more prayer, so he scheduled more benedictions for more times to sit in front of Jesus," says Beverly Tavares, Father Landry's former parish, Espirito Santo Church in Fall River.

Tavares marvels over Father Landry's efforts to raise funds for a youth-group trip to World Youth Day 2000. He led 20 kids in a walk-a-thon, she recalls, "in pouring rain 15 miles to all the churches in Fall River. ... He's willing to do what-

ever he asks *you* to do."

Godly Matchmaker

Anna Halpine, founder of World Youth Alliance, has worked with him on life issues in her work with the United Nations. "He always asks the question: 'Will this make you a saint?' And he tells you, do not be afraid to say Yes to God in realizing the answer to that question. He's making sure everyone sees they're called to be a saint."

Halpine also points out that "Father Roger is doing a lot of this through Mary. He is an extremely Marian priest. He taught me the whole *Totus Tuus* prayer of the Holy Father. It's something I've said every day."

It all fits into one of Father Landry's greatest joys of parish work: "to be able to match-make God with those he loved so much to

die for, to open people's minds and hearts to the greatest love story every told and make them aware they're a central character in it."

The other is preparing young people for marriage. He says he strive to help them "enter into God's love for them so that they might fully love each other and bring each other through this wonderful sacrament closer to Christ and closer to heaven."

"He's a genuine scholar of the Holy Father's thought, but he also *lives* the Holy Father's thought," says Peter McFadden, founder of the Love and Responsibility Foundation in New York City. Last year, he asked Father Landry to join the group's leaders for a weekend in the Catskill Mountains. He went the extra mile, says McFadden, "eager to spend a whole week with us."

Every morning he'd lead not only Mass, but also a two- to three-

hour discussion. With afternoon came hike time, "just as the Holy Father would do as a young priest."

Everyone was fully prepared to be deferential to a priest, McFadden says. "But who signed up to clean dishes? Father Landry. He truly sees himself as a servant. Father Landry exemplifies the gift of self."

Oh, and one other thing. Father Landry knows nine languages — "so I can understand better God's revelation and converse more effectively with those to whom the Lord wants that revelation preached. But," he adds with a grin, "I speak all of them with a New England accent."

Joseph Pronechen writes from Trumbull, Connecticut.