opusdei.org

“Heaven is in Vallecas”

José Manuel Horcajo is the parish priest of San Ramón Nonato, a church located in Vallecas, one of Madrid’s most well-known neighborhoods, and the author of “Al cruzar el puente” (Crossing the Bridge) and “Diamantes tallados” (Cut Diamonds), two books of stories around the parish life. In this interview, he shares the origin of his vocation and reflects on the priesthood.

06/25/2025

The dynamism in Fr. José Manuel Horcajo's life can be seen more in his eyes than in his movements. Contrary to what one might imagine from reading his books, he doesn't rush about… but he's always paying attention. "The things that happen in my parish don't come from a preplanned strategy or a set of ideas I've laid out, a kind of protocol I dreamed up and am now applying, but from God's will for each day," he says. That's why the pastor of San Ramón Nonato lets himself be led: "My friendship with Jesus guides me," he explains. That's how he understands the priesthood. That's why the vibrant life of this parish, located just across the Vallecas bridge, makes sense.

“I think God is asking something of me”

His priesthood wasn’t part of any life plan either: “I never thought about becoming a priest,” he says. For him, as for his family and friends, this calling came as a complete surprise. They didn’t believe him when he shared his decision to enter the seminary. The only exception was his girlfriend, who told him simply, “Now I understand why I felt I had to pray so much for you.”

He first felt that God was asking something of him during a retreat. He recalls that just saying the words, “I think God is asking something of me,” to the priest preaching the retreat was enough for him to understand that this “something” might be a vocation to the priesthood. He left that conversation feeling very nervous, but he found peace by following the priest’s advice

that day: to pray the rosary. “It was the first rosary of my life! I didn’t even know how the beads worked. I just started praying the best I could with the other people in the parish. And when I finished the rosary, I felt an incredible peace. All the nervousness I had when I came out of that conversation was replaced by a great peace, and I was left with that first encounter with our Lady. It was like I felt her telling me: ‘Don’t worry, my son. I come from God, and you are in our hands.’”

“Each person is a face asking me to be holy”

For Fr. José Manuel, a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, the friendship and advice of other priests are a support in the demanding mission he’s carried out since 2009 in a neighborhood known for its high population of immigrants. “In this parish, you have

to keep people motivated, to give them hope and a sense of purpose," he explains. And for him, that goal starts with bringing people closer to the sacraments.

The parish keeps its doors open from dawn to dusk, and many people come to prepare to receive the sacraments: children, the elderly, families… All in catechesis. There is a strong network of volunteers behind them. "We expose the Blessed Sacrament, and people come to pray, and things happen," he says. That, for him, is the explanation for everything that goes on.

The demands from people are constant, intense, and varied. But he never becomes numb to it. And to a great extent, that's thanks to the sacrament of Confession: "When someone opens up to me about their struggles, their traumas, even if they're small, I experience a deep

love of Christ for that person, a special tenderness that doesn't come from me," he shares. "If it were just about paperwork, offices, or meetings, they would all become just another case."

There is no shortage of difficulties. At one point, a campaign against the parish and against him personally left him feeling deeply discouraged. He even questioned whether all the sacrifice was worth it. "It was one of those moments when you say to yourself, 'So *this* is how they repay me after all I've done to help?' And you think, 'Maybe I should just go somewhere quieter and stay out of trouble.'" He emerged from that moment of weakness sensing that the Lord was inviting him to share in his Cross in a special way.

What keeps him going is the conviction that "they have suffered more." That motivates him to face

each day's trials and to demand more of himself. "They're the ones who push me," he says with conviction. "Each person who walks through the doors of my parish is a face asking me to be holy."

pdf | document generated automatically from https://opusdei.org/en-ca/article/heaven-in-vallecas-vocation-parish-priest/ (11/19/2025)