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"Zapped" by God

A recently published interview with Msgr. Fred Dolan, the Vicar for Canada, where he talks about discovering his vocation to Opus Dei.

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OTTAWA, Canada (CCN) – Canada's Opus Dei Vicar Msgr. Fred Dolan, like many boys growing up in devout Catholic families, used to play priest

as a child, but he had no intention of becoming one.

Even after he joined Opus Dei as a teenager, he dated "like any other kid" fully expecting to one day marry and have a family, he said in an interview here.

While attending Columbia University and living in the Opus Dei center in Manhattan, the center's director asked him if he had ever considered apostolic celibacy.

After two weeks of prayer, Msgr. Dolan told him, "I don't see it."

God had other plans. On Dec. 5, 1975, Dolan had what he calls his "Road to Damascus" experience. Working on a paper on *Gulliver's Travels*, he decided to take a study break. He went over to the center's book shelf and took down C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. A friend had told him about a scene depicting a lizard on a man's

shoulder arguing with his guardian angel on the other. He found it immediately.

"The Holy Spirit used the pages of C.S. Lewis to zap me," Msgr. Dolan said. Instantly he saw two paths open up before him.

The path of a "numerary," Opus Dei's term for members committed to lifelong celibacy, promised "enormous happiness and fruitfulness."

The other path – that of marriage and a family – also opened up and he saw he could choose it with no problem. He realized instantly, however, the celibate path "was what God wanted" for him.

He's never experienced any doubt that he made the right decision and remains "grateful" for a "powerful sense I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"If you give the Holy Spirit 'carte blanche,' you just fasten your seat belt and hold on for the ride," he said. "It's always pretty good."

He also said Opus Dei's support through excellent spiritual direction and the stress on the Sacrament of Penance helps keep any attacks of doubt or conflict at bay. "Nothing gets beyond the level of a brief skirmish," he said.

Born in 1952, Dolan grew up in Bethesda, Md., as the oldest of six children in a family that took the Catholic faith seriously. His father attended mass daily and his mother converted as a teenager. Dolan said at age 16 he "met Opus Dei just at the right time" through his best friend. Opus Dei means "work of God" in Latin.

Opus Dei gave him input on how to make his life complete, he said. It helped him develop a disciplined

prayer life, take a professional attitude towards his studies, and "aim high in everything I do."

Pope John Paul II ordained Dolan in 1983 at St. Peter's in Rome. For a brief period in the early 80s, the late pope ordained priests from outside the Rome Diocese. He was among 76 priests John Paul ordained that year, including 37 from Opus Dei.

He experienced another profound encounter with John Paul II just before leaving Rome in 1998 to become Opus Dei's Canadian vicar. For the previous five years, he had been living and working at the personal prelate's headquarters. The Opus Dei prelate asked him if he would be willing to go to Canada and suggested he pray about it.

"I can tell you right now the answer is 'yes,'" Msgr. Dolan said.

Before leaving he applied for an opportunity to concelebrate mass with the pope in his private chapel. The pope had a busy schedule that January, including a visit to Cuba, so the chance seemed remote.

Two days before he was to leave for Canada, a nun telephoned and told him to show up the next morning at 6:30 a.m. "You must have prayed to a pretty powerful saint," she told him.

"I did. St. Josemaria," he said, referring to St. Josemaria Escriva who founded Opus Dei in 1928.

"That explains everything," the nun replied.

He arrived in the private chapel and vested up with eight other priests in the sacristy. The pope's secretary came in and asked who was capable of "praying the Mass in Latin in a nice strong voice."

Msgr. Dolan's hand shot up, thinking all the other priests would do the same. Turns out, he was the only one. They entered the chapel, which holds about 30 people, and Dolan saw the pope kneeling at his prie-dieu.

Though he still expected all of the priests to also go with him to concelebrate, he was the only one who was sent forward. "The whole thing was just a dream. He breathed profundity."

Opus Dei celebrates its 50th anniversary of coming to Canada this June, and next year, Msgr. Dolan will celebrate his 10th anniversary here.

Msgr. Dolan always wears his clerical collar. In fact, when he was interviewed by CBC Television's Evan Solomon last year during the height of "The Da Vinci Code" movie controversy, he showed his empty closet, bare except for a few black

shirts and slacks off the sparsely furnished bedroom bed at his residence in Montreal.

He said the clerical garb signals to others, "I exist for you. How can I serve you?"

"It pays to advertise," he said, smiling. He often has people coming up to him, asking for prayer. He now makes a practice of going to the train station or the airport at least an hour early so people can approach them. "If priests are invisible, that shuts down," he said.