

From Professional Rugby Player to the Priesthood

Father Matteo Olivieri spent several years studying law in Italy to become a magistrate, while earning money in the meantime as a professional rugby player. Here he recounts how our Lord showed him his path in life as a priest.

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A young man is walking quickly along the streets of central Rome,

without paying attention to the beauty of the Renaissance monuments and the ancient churches. Matteo has to decide what to do with his life. Will he take the written test for the competition to become a magistrate, his goal after many years of study and sacrifice, or change course and commit himself to what he suspects our Lord is asking of him.

Without realizing where he is, he enters a famous old church. What he finds inside will solve his dilemma. But let's take a step back in time first.

An unexpected trip: World Youth Day in Toronto

Matteo was born in 1987. His father is a doctor and his mother runs a business. In the summer after his second year of high school, he traveled to Toronto's World Youth Day with a group of young men on a trip organized by a center of Opus

Dei in Verona. “After that experience,” Matteo says, “I started going around to a center of Opus Dei, where many of my friends were, taking part in the activities of Christian formation offered there. I realized that in the Church one could receive many different types of callings, for example, the apostolic celibacy of the numeraries in Opus Dei, which I had never considered before.”

During his high school years, Matteo started playing rugby, a sport that he liked a lot and that accorded well with his strong physique. So much so that in future years he will spend time playing for a professional rugby team. As his Christian life grew and deepened, Matteo also began to consider his professional path in life: “I realized it was a question of putting one’s life choices before our Lord, of choosing along with Him,” Matteo continues. “I chose law

because I had and continue to have a very deep conviction of justice, and I felt very motivated to take the judiciary exam as soon as I had the opportunity.”

To prepare for the exam to become a magistrate, after graduating in law Matteo attended a school for judicial studies and began to practice law at the office of a family friend.

An autumn gospel

“In 2013, I went to play professional rugby for a French team, a desire I had always had. The competition for the magistracy was approaching, so I was very busy with the demands of both sports and studying.”

“One autumn morning,” Matteo continues, “I read a verse from the Gospel that deeply moved me: *What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? (Mt 16:26)*. I realized clearly that all these

plans for my life, as good as they were, would never give me the joy I was looking for. At that moment, I discovered in my heart the call to the priesthood. I called Father Giovanni, a priest friend of mine, whom I had met at the Opus Dei center in Verona. He advised me, first of all, to continue my studies and my job as a rugby player, and to begin praying more insistently for light to see if the priesthood could be my path in life.”

Father Matteo's vocation

A few months later, Matteo found himself walking through Rome trying to decide what to do with his life. After entering that old church deep in thought, he suddenly found himself in front of Caravaggio's famous painting “The Vocation of Saint Matthew,” in the church of Saint Louis of the French which he had entered without realizing it. His

mind is made up: he will begin preparatory studies at the seminary.

Seven years later, on May 12, 2021, Matteo was ordained a priest and is now parochial vicar of the churches of Jesus the Good Shepherd and Saint John the Baptist, in the town of San Giovanni Lupatoto in the province of Verona.

“In my vocation as a priest, I always carry in my heart the image of the donkey at the water-wheel, which St Josemaria liked to use to explain the importance of persevering work and faith in God: trusting in God while turning the ‘wheel’ that is the interior life. For me it means to keep working even if the fruits remain hidden. Here in my two parishes I have found people who have a lot of trust in me and I try to respond to their affection with my work as a priest.”

Oh blessed perseverance of the donkey that turns the water-wheel! Always the same pace. Always the same circles. One day after another: every day the same. Without that, there would be no ripeness in the fruit, nor blossom in the orchard, nor scent of flowers in the garden.

Carry this thought to your interior life.

(Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 998).

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