

It took years to get the true picture

The man who spent time in numerous seminaries, the army and then a spiritual wilderness was just trying to follow the call to the priesthood

By Bridget Spinks

KOREAN-BORN

Scarborough parish priest Fr Benedict Lee from Korea spent 21 years trying to follow his vocation to the priesthood.

For Fr Benedict, the door to the priesthood opened when he had abandoned all hope that his dream would come true.

When I gave up every desire and came to Australia without any hope, it happened. It's amazing' he told *The Record*.

Fr Benedict Lee was born in Incheon, Korea in 1964. He has one brother, John Lee, and one sister, Julia Lee. He said he is very fortunate because he has a lot of Spiritual support from his family.

His family has a "strong Catholic history" and are fifth generation Catholic. "My



Fr Benedict Lee, whose quest for the priesthood of Jesus Christ never left him despite life's considerable obstacles.

PHOTO: BRIDGET SPINKS

family are very proud of me as a priest," he said.

His perception of the priesthood changed markedly from the time he was a 10 year old altar boy in 1974 to the time he was ordained a priest for the Perth Archdiocese in 2002.

"I eagerly went to church

every day for altar serving. At that time, I thought a priest was the greatest man in the world," Fr Lee said of his childhood.

Fr Ben joined the seminary straight out of high school in 1982 in Kagyu in Korea where he realised he had a misconception of the 'priesthood' as he saw only the

"external figure of the priesthood".

He spent four years in the seminary and developed a "more mature image of the priesthood" through the friends he made there. "In the seminary I realised it's not an easy lifestyle, being a priest. There's lots of responsibility and also duty to carry the identity as a priest. I realised how difficult celibacy is, practically."

His seminary studies were interrupted when the Korean Government asked him to complete a three year compulsory term of military service."

"It was a tough time" he said.

"I was tested as a man, not as a seminarian; seminarians are well respected in Korean Catholic culture."

Fr Benedict said that while doing military service he never doubted his calling to the priesthood and the time in service made him even more determined to become a priest.

After three years in the army, he returned to the seminary in Seoul for two years and was ordained a deacon in Incheon Diocese in 1990.

But a problem with a parish

priest sidetracked him from the path to diocesan priesthood in Korea.

It was the beginning of a "painful" 12 year experience of wandering.

He joined the Society of Mary but wasn't "quite suited" there, he said.

"I didn't have any conception of religious life; all I wanted was to become a priest."

He is grateful however for the experience, because through this he learnt what he calls "the elements of leadership" - how to teach others; how to give retreats; about prayer and about guidance.

He left the Society of Mary after five years and spent the next seven as a layman, working as a parish secretary and running a video shop.

These were difficult years for Fr Benedict, as he says he was in despair and "did not understand what God's plan was".

He went to Rome and Japan searching for his vocation but to no avail.

"Honestly, I couldn't sleep and eat properly. I suffered much as I tried to find out my vocation because it wasn't happening in reality. I was

often rejected by people who didn't welcome me to their community."

Although a time of great trial these years also taught Fr Benedict "a great lesson about vocations", he said.

"I realised that a vocation does not come from my own will and desire, rather it comes from God as His gift."

During this period of wandering a Sister of the Beatitude, Sr Peter, who knew Fr Benedict Lee from his time in the seminary, encouraged him to find other ways to become a priest.

"First, she took me to the Carmelites in Korea, but that was an accident; we were meant to go somewhere else first," Fr Benedict said.

"There I met Sr Agnes, a Korean Carmelite and Superior of the Carmelite convent, before she died." Since it was an enclosed order, Sr Agnes asked Sr Gabriel to contact Fr Charlie O'Malley, the parish priest of Sacred Heart at Thornlie at the time.

"I met Archbishop Barry Hickey in 1999 and he gave me a chance. He allowed me to come to Australia and observe a parish for two years under the authority of Fr Charlie

O'Malley. In 1999, I came to Australia to find my vocation," Fr Benedict said.

After his time as a Deacon in Thornlie parish, the then Deacon Benedict Lee went to Armadale for six months.

"Fr Tony Pyers encouraged me to go to St Charles Seminary to learn English," he said.

Fr Benedict spent a year and a half in the seminary and was ordained a priest on 13 December 2002 at St Mary's Cathedral, Perth.

For Fr Benedict, the parable of the prodigal son is particularly meaningful in understanding his own journey as are the writings of Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen's *The Beloved One*.

Fr Benedict sees himself as the prodigal son who has left home over and over again.

"I knew that I was the prodigal son who wasted his Father's treasure and love," he said, reflecting on the time he left his diocese in Korea 12 years ago.

"I was arrogant and I was extremely self-confident rather than giving thanks to the Father. I didn't realise that the Father is always waiting for me to return to His home."

One of the hardest parts of the journey was letting go of attachment to sin and allowing God's grace to work in him.

"Through my past of wandering, I realised that one of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to accept God's forgiveness.

"There is something in us humans that keeps us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning," Fr Benedict said.

In retrospect, and prompted by the fact that many of his Korean friends called him the 'mystery of faith' when he was ordained, Fr Benedict says his faith over the last 40 years has been a mystery.

And for those seeking a calling to the priesthood, he encouraged them not to give up.

"If you are having doubts about your vocation, don't give up because God will provide the way and the means. Although you have doubts, trust in Him and I guarantee that your vocation will be fruitful."