

Witness of Friar Gabriel Maria Neri

*“Always be ready to give an explanation
to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Peter 3:15)*

On December 3rd, 2000, my parents attended Sunday Mass at the parish of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary in Houma, Louisiana. My mother was pregnant with me at the time, and during the Mass her water broke and they left to go to the hospital. I was born the next morning, on December 4th, 2000. My parents took this as a sign that I would do something for God in my life. I was given the name of Jacques Henri Dupre, and was baptized at the same parish.

When I was two years old, my parents and I moved a little further “down the bayou” to Bourg, Louisiana, where I spent the greater part of my childhood. I was raised in a Catholic family with Catholic neighbors. The faith was spoken of in the home, and I have gone to Mass most Sundays of my life. Growing up we went to the parish of St. Joseph in Chauvin. I have always identified as Catholic, but at some point in middle school I began to have the mentality of, “Maybe there is a God, and maybe not. Maybe it is Jesus, maybe it is someone else. I will go to church, because I do not want to go to Hell.” This kind of mentality made me somewhat a believer, but during this time period I basically did whatever I wanted and Christ was not the center of my life (I and my attachments to the world were).

When I was fourteen years old, in eighth grade, my neighbor Caleb invited me to something called “Chapel Night” at the chapel of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Little Calliou. The date was October 7th, 2014 (the memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary). I did not want to go, but I eventually gave in and went. Chapel Night was an event that was led by the Deacon of my home parish, where we would set the chairs in the chapel in a circle and have an open group discussion about anything and everything. The topics varied from faith to politics to school: anything that the group would bring up was welcome, and Deacon Gary would guide the discussion. The Holy Spirit was truly present at these meetings. Looking back on it now, years later, I can see the fruits of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and also laity who practice their faith well with perseverance. It was at these Chapel Nights that I gradually understood that Jesus is truly God, and that means He wants all of me, and that means that I need to make some changes in my life. I began to ask deep questions (Deacon Gary would call me a “sponge”); I was thirsty for the truth, drinking in everything of the faith that I could. I began to pay attention at Mass, and I began to go the sacrament of confession frequently. I wanted to be holy.

At this time period my home Diocese, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux had a lot of events for young people, and I went with my parish’s youth group to a lot of these. I first met the *Little Friars of Jesus and Mary* at an event outside of my Diocese called Abbey Fest in 2015. Deacon Gary introduced me to Fr. Antonio (the Servant Superior in Louisiana). Later that evening Fr. Antonio and another brother got a ride with us back to the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. On the bus I asked Father many questions. I did not have the desire to join immediately, but I was fascinated by the answers that he gave (*cf. Luke 2:47*).

The following Saturday there was an event in my Diocese called Youth Rally. Near the end of the event the Diocesan Vocations Director at the time, Fr. Andre’ Melancon, did a vocations call. He had said “If there is anyone here who feels the Holy Spirit pushing them to maybe consider that they might have a call to the priesthood or to the religious life I invite you to please come to the altar.” I remember sitting in my chair with my heart burning, and I was thinking “I don’t want to be a priest, but what is religious life? Maybe it means to be a holy person.” Mr. Nick Prosperie came to my mind. Mr. Nick is a faithful married man, and in my youth (and still to this day) has been a beautiful witness to me of a man who follows Christ. The thoughts that came to my mind were “Mr. Nick is a holy man; he is not a priest. I want to be like Mr. Nick. Ok I’ll go up, I want to be holy.” So I went up with that mentality.

As time went on, I felt a growing desire to become a priest. I began attending daily Mass more, and going to the adoration chapel with my dad and a group of men to pray the Rosary and morning prayer most mornings. I thought about being a friar, but I was back and forth. Diocesan Priesthood was where my heart was most of the time.

In high school, my heart was divided regarding my vocation. I felt the call to the Diocesan priesthood, I sometimes thought about religious life, and on top of all of that I fell in love with a girl. Having a spiritual director (Fr. Alex Gaudet) during most of that time period helped me to discern the voice of God (*cf. 1 Samuel 3:1-18*).

I eventually began the application process for the seminary, but the Lord gave me a strong sign not to pursue the seminary yet. He indicated to me that I was not yet mature, and I needed more life experience. Even as I was applying, my heart was still divided between priesthood, religious life, and married life.

A few months before my high school graduation, I met with Fr. Antonio to tell him that I felt this division between Diocesan life and Religious life. His advice to me was to look at the Gospels and match them up to the life of the Diocesan Priest, to the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*, to other vocations, etc. Months later, while altar serving at Mass, I understood what Fr. Antonio meant when I heard how St. Philip ‘hitchhiked’ to evangelize someone (*cf. Acts 8:26-40*), and I thought about how the charism of the community allows the friars and nuns to live that part of the Scripture. (In the scriptures we see St. Philip walking in the desert where he is welcomed into a man’s chariot; he explains to him how the Old Testament scriptures point to Christ, and then baptizes him. Our charism reflects this scene in the scriptures, because in our hitchhiking and evangelizing our goal is to use the scriptures to lead souls to the sacraments of the Church!)

I graduated from South Terrebonne High School in May of 2019 and a few months later found a job at a local hamburger restaurant, where I worked off and on for about a year. In that time period Fr. Alex had me read through the Gospel of Mark. As I read and prayed with that Gospel, I gradually began to see the charism of the *Little Friars and Nuns* more and more in the scripture: *Jesus lived a life of radical poverty...the friars and nuns try to do that. Jesus lived a life of wandering through the streets of the world preaching...the friars and nuns try to do that. I want to do that.* During this time period, I also helped give rides very often to the friars and nuns, so by default I was being helped spiritually and learning more about the charism. This desire in my heart grew stronger and stronger.

At some point I had a reflection as I was looking at the stars one night. I smiled, because the Lord revealed to me through reflection that when I discerned marriage, I was sad and anxious, and when I discerned Diocesan life, I was less sad and anxious, but I was still both. Now that I was discerning with the Friars, I caught myself smiling at moments throughout the day...I found joy in my life (*cf. Psalm 119:16*).

I was given the opportunity to enter the 6 months of discernment with the community on February 23rd, 2021 (at the age of twenty), in Matamoros, Mexico. It was in my 6 months that I understood the will of God for my life with certainty through prayer and signs of confirmation from the Lord. I had received some signs before I entered, but in the 6 months I received certainty without doubt.

During my 6 months, I had a dream where I was wearing the scapular that one wears in the 6 months of experience and speaking to a priest who I know from my home diocese. He was happy to see me, and asked me what I was doing. I said, “I am about to start the 6 months of experience with the Friars, but I will wait as long as I need to because God has given me the certainty that this is His will for my life.” I had this dream on August 22nd, 2021. The next night (August 23rd – exactly 6 months after entering the 6 months of discernment), I had another dream where I was speaking to my Servant Superior, Fr. Michael. In the dream, I told him, “I have two dreams to share,” and he said, “They are for your perseverance.” A few months later, I shared these dreams with Fr. Nathaniel in Louisiana. He told me that what I’d said in the dream about being about to start the 6 months could be symbolic for, “now that I have finished the 6 months of discernment, I am about to continue on to my 6 years of formation” (months being symbolic of years). Several months later, in April of 2022, I shared these dreams with our founder,

Friar Volantino. He told me that Our Lady of Fatima said to the shepherd children, “Come to me for 6 consecutive months, and I will tell you who I am and what I want from you,” and he pointed out that I had received the certainty of my vocation at the end of my 6 months of experience. So I saw that the promise of Our Lady of Fatima was true, and I saw it happen in my own life because in 6 months I understood God’s will for my life with certainty! Obviously, these are only a few among other signs that I have received from the Lord to help me understand His will for my life.

I was transferred back to the community in Louisiana, USA, four weeks after the major hurricane Ida. I returned to my home town turned upside down: many houses were destroyed, and many people were living in cars, tents, outside, etc. The people needed food, water, and supplies. Many were without electricity. The parish of Holy Family in Dulac, where the Friars are, became a place of supply and help for our people in Bayou Grand Caillou (though the parish, too, had been damaged). It was a difficult and beautiful time; the fruits of our evangelizing to a people in suffering were great, and the Lord accompanied us (*cf. Mark 16:20*).

On November 1st, 2021, I entered the Postulancy: a time of formation, including pilgrimages hitchhiking to places like Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City and the Blessed Sacrament Shrine in Hanceville, Alabama.

On October 4th, 2022 I entered the Novitiate and took the religious name of Friar Gabriel Maria Neri. I had received signs for this name, and also wanted to take up the challenge proposed by Pope Benedict XVI: “Dear friends, it is your job to knock on people’s hearts in the name of Christ. Entering into union with Christ, you yourselves can also assume the function of Gabriel: to carry God’s calling to mankind” (Benedict XVI, *The Roman Observer*, Sunday 30 September 2007).

Later in October, I had the opportunity to go to Italy for my first time, where our whole community worldwide gathered in Sicily for the priestly ordination of the founder of our community, Fr. Volantino Verde. Not long after his ordination, he sent groups of us to hitchhike through Italy to evangelize. I hitchhiked with some sisters: we visited places like Rome, Assisi, Cremona, Padua, etc., and were able to pray at the tombs of Saints like St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Francis and St. Anthony, etc. Most importantly of all, we were able to evangelize, spreading the message of the Gospel of Christ and the importance of the Sacraments of the Catholic Church to the people we met along the way.

After returning to Matamoros in February of 2023, I led hitchhiking pilgrimages to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City and the Shrine to the Mexican Martyrs in Guadalajara, and continued my formation with the community. Several months later, I hitchhiked from Matamoros to Louisiana to visit my family and the community for a couple of months before being transferred to Sicily, Italy, where I am currently. So now I am beginning the next chapter of my religious life as I am trying to improve my Italian while living in the country in which my community was founded.

Each day in community has been and continues to be a place of learning and growing to understand who is Christ and what does He want from me moment by moment. Living in community has taught me how to step outside of myself and to strive to be like Christ to the others. I’ve learned that it is a process that does not happen overnight, but Christ accompanies us along the way (if we let Him).

As Friar Volantino often says, “All for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the most souls possible, for this is the aim and the eternal crown of our faith” (*cf. 1 Peter 1:9*)!

Friar Gabriel M.N.
November 5th, 2023