

Francis YAGAU, My life to the Seminary

My name is Francis Yagau. I come from a furthest parish in the Diocese of Alotau, in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. The name of my parish is Saint Alphonsus Parish, Nimoa.

There are five siblings in my family. I have a sister named Mary, and she is the eldest. I have three brothers, namely Martin, Jeffery, and Tiroy. I am the second born in the family. I also have a stepsister named Martina who is the daughter of my father's first wife. After the death of Martina's mother, my father met my mother who bore the five of us.

My mother died in 2002 when I was in grade six (6) in primary school. Since then my father has taken over the place of my mother and has become our mother and father. Our parents were very faithful to the Christian faith, particularly the Catholic faith. They brought us up religiously.

Nimoa Island is located further up the east in Milne Bay Province. It is a small island, which accommodates the population of about 500 or less. The parish was set up by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Congregation (M.S.C.) somewhere in the 1940's. Before the missionaries came to the island, there was already a small Catholic church erected on the island by a business man from the Philippines named Leo Paulisbo. The first missionary and the founding father that set foot on the island was Fr. Kevin Twomey, an M.S.C. priest from Australia. It was from Fr. Twomey that the parish came to flourish up to this present age.

My vocation to be a priest is not a dream for me. I chose the vocation late. I can remember one day when my teacher came to the classroom and asked us about the kind of vocation we would have when we finished school. What I had chosen was to be a doctor or a teacher. My dream to be a doctor or teacher did not work out well since I am not intelligent enough. I graduated from the primary was selected to go to high school. I went to Sacred Heart Secondary School in Hagita, a Catholic school in Alotau, Milne Bay Province. At this time I lost myself in social activities.

In the school I saw many students who are always happy and proud of themselves. There were students who had attitude problems; they drank and smoked marijuana. Because of their behavior, they had many friends in the school. Some had girlfriends; on weekends they would meet with each other and share whatever they had. I saw this as a good way to socialize and to explore new things. I felt jealous about the others because of their unending behavior. I told myself that I had better try this out. Probably it would be a good idea.

Later on, I got engaged in drinking and smoking of marijuana and also fell into a boy-girl relationship. This affected my studies and my attendance at school programs. When the school year ended, I went home for holiday and still I applied the same negative life at home. I made home brew and invited other youths to drink.

When the holiday break was over I returned to school to begin the 2005 academic year. Upon my arrival at the school on the first week of February 2006, I found out that my life was not settled. I felt guilty, and without informing the school, I left. I was guilty because I was a drunkard returning to school. I went to town and found a job. There I was offered a job to be a deck crew of one of the local boats servicing our area.

I worked for about 8 months and a half. In the following months I was asked by a businessman whom I was working for to work in a small mini-trade store. I worked that long, but my mind was still in school. Sometimes I left to go to a faraway place just to reflect about school and cry. At this point, there were people who sometimes criticized me. I thought to myself that I had better go somewhere to find an education.

There was no chance for me to get an education since the place was far of town. I held onto the challenge and was hoped that one day God would answer my prayer. I joined the youths at home and help them with church activities. At times my fellow youths would put me down and tell lies about me. I kept in my heart and was looking forward to a successful end one day.

I still worked as a storekeeper in this trade store, but one bad thing was that whenever

I received my pay, it was consumed in beer.

It then came to a time when I was marked to marry a young girl who came from Misima Island. Her name is Clerah. She was beautiful and charming. She agreed to marry me, but I did not agree because I was still too young at that time. Whenever she asked me for something, I would give it to her; but my giving did not mean that I loved to marry her; my giving meant that I had to give her what she wanted because she came from a faraway place. Therefore, I had to provide her things, since a few of my relatives had asked for her to come.

It came to a lucky time when I heard that the parish priest was looking around for dropout students from primary and high school who wanted one more chance to further their education. I heard about it and began asking people about it. I told my employer about it, and he agreed to let me go. I discussed the matter with my girlfriend and she agreed to that I should go back to school. She promised me that she would still come to visit me at the school.

In the beginning of January 2007, I got on a dinghy and was transported up to the mission station where the school is. I was among the thirteen students who were enrolled at that time. Twelve of these students had completed the tenth grade, while I only in the ninth grade when I had left.

Before we were registered, we were asked to sit for an entry test. The requirements were to be above the passing mark. I do not know what these all would mean, since I had stayed in the village for a long time and the test would therefore be very difficult for me. Three days before the test, all my friends were busy going through their notes and revising. I do not have anything to study. When I asked them for help, they ignored me. I was very sad, because if I failed this, there would not be another chance. I went to my dad and talked to him about it, and the word he said is "try your best." When the entry test came we all went into the kitchen for we did not have a classroom at that time. Everybody chose to sit at the back. I came in late and saw my chair in front of my friends. I walked to the front and sat down. I was nervous. I heard some of my friends whispering about me. Some were laughing at me. There was so much talking and then a sizzling sound coming from different direction in the kitchen.

I looked up to the supervisor, Fr. Tony Young, the parish priest and smiled. I looked at the test papers and saw the initial U.P.N.G or University of Papua New Guinea; my heart was thumping. I felt the sweat gushing down my back heavily. My skin was shedding off from its normal position. I knew definitely that I would fail the test. I was so drowsy and my eyes were down on the floor. The supervisor greeted us with a morning welcome; I said nothing for I was carried away looking at the sweat running down my legs.

My thoughts brought me back to the time when I left school without completing it fully. I put my hands on the desk and lifted up my shoulders to cover my mouth from other students sitting next to me. I thought of my father's words, "Try your best." "I will try," I murmured.

I killed myself with a thought of being a failure. I had already defeated myself before entering for the entry test.

Here come the test papers! I got mine and flipped it over. I could hear that there was a lot more talking and giggling everywhere. I knew that these questions are quite easy for these people. I made no sound but sat and looked at the pages of the papers. Just a few seconds before we began, I asked my supervisor if I could have some water. He brought me a glass of water, and then I quenched my thirst.

I held my pen and tried to write for the first time after a year out of school. My hands were shaking and the papers were wet. I do not know what to do. I had no idea of what to write in the test. I wanted to raise my hands to seek for help, but I was ashamed, thinking that the others would laugh at me. I struggled so much in this test. For the first thirty minutes or so, my papers were blank. I do not make any attempt to answer anything. The questions were all about mathematics and English. One hour had gone now, and there were about another sixty minutes more remaining, so I made a decision to leave and go home. It was at this time that I saw a question that had an algebraic expression on it. The question took my attention and so I spent some time looking at it. I answered the question perfectly with what I knew at

school some years ago. After starting with this one question, I was able to answer the rest of the questions. All my friends left and I was the only odd one to leave after the third hour.

A month later, we received the results from the Unicenter in Alotau. I did not see the results, but it was another man from the village who saw it and then came to the village to reveal that I came third in the entry test. I couldn't believe him. He told me that he had just come from the parish center and saw the notices pinned up at the bulletin board of the parish. That same night I received another message from my parish priest that I had to go to the parish before the beginning of March. I listened to my parish priest and was taken to the parish immediately.

I could not believe my eyes when I saw my name in third place after a female while the rest were all down the line. I could have failed this! I would never have thought of aiming for this score! I put my forehead against the bulletin board and dropped tears. I told myself that this is the beginning. I went to the house and saw my dad making me a small study table and a chair. I sat and asked my dad, "Dad, do you believe that I am third in the entry test?" He looked at me and said, "If I do not believe it, why should I prepare you a table and a chair?"

So in 2007, I began my first year in Nimoa Hope Academy School. We did not have a classroom, so we were given an elementary classroom to go for studies. Sometimes when the classroom was needed for other purposes, we would be sent out to have class or to do our work under the trees. Another problem was we did not have a tutor to give us inputs for the subjects. The school was a mobile school, but it was connected with the University of Papua New Guinea through the Milne Bay Unicenter in Alotau. Therefore, most of the lecture notes and courses are very high: we needed someone who had the experience to tutor us.

Despite of this, I continued on to take up the challenge. We struggled to find means and ways to survive in the school. My parish priest was so kind that he did not ask much about school fees. I knew that I had failed many years ago, and now that I was here, I would try my best to do the rest. At the end of 2007, we sat for our yearly exam, and one thing that I would never want to share it is, we all failed the exam. The result was send in via mail from Alotau. All the students were worried. Sadness engulfed us, as we could find nowhere else to go.

I was the head boy that time and so, I called up a meeting for further discussions with my fellow students. It had become a very hard task for my parish priest by now. He had to find a tutor and a classroom.

Just before the beginning of 2008, news came that someone had volunteered to be the tutor of Hope Academy. The man's name was Colman Bogevrea. He was a teacher by profession. He was the first person to lead tutorial classes of the school. From this time on I challenged the difficulties that lay ahead of me. I was asked to write to several institutions in the country. I did so. I was working towards it. I focused my mind on two things that I wanted in life: to be a teacher and a doctor. I spent my time with many teachers and asked them of their experiences; I went to the hospital to help the nurses or just spend time with the nurses asking them questions. Many of them were happy and were willing to assist me. I talked to them about my dream to be a medical and then a doctor.

From 2007 to 2009, the two solid years, my mind never settled on a specific vocation. I had a lot of pressure coming from outside to interfere with me. I never wanted to be a priest. I wanted to find a job that has a lot of income all the time. I wanted to live in a luxurious house, and own a car and a video or T.V. set in my house. This was my dream before. Another force was that my ex-girlfriend had finished college and was back for her first year in teaching. She was telling me to find a better job, and then we would both get married. We regained our friendship, but not to a strong extent. I also forgot all about Clerah; she no longer exists in my mind.

It was not until 2010, February 24th, on Wednesday, the eighth week of the year when I was shocked with something. This month and day was the graduation day for the six students; four of us males and two females. During the speeches, the former Bishop of Alotau Diocese, Francesco Panfilo, S.D.B., said, "When you climb the mountain, you will be very exhausted; but when you are on the top of the mountain, you will enjoy the cool breeze and the sight everywhere around". This part of the speech still echoes today everywhere I go. After

five years in the seminary, it is still fresh. He also said that many people want to be rich, but only a few want to be poor. These words struck me; I did not want to stay any longer or to shake hands with anybody else. I had taken the words too personally, because that was what I was thinking of at the beginning.

After the ceremony, I ran out of the crowd and straight to my room. I locked the door and cried. I did not know what to do next. My aunties and sisters came to my room and heard me sobbing. They thought that I was having a stomachache. My dad opened the door and entered. He held me and lifted me up in his arms. He sat next to me and asked me what was the cause of my crying. I told him that I would not tell him until then next day. That evening I talked to my parish priest and he directed me to the bishop. I went to the bishop. I spoke to the bishop and the bishop agreed with me.

The next day I told my dad that I chose to go to the seminary. He looked at me and smiled. But he did not believe in me, because I was a drunkard and a short-tempered person. So he challenged me saying that he wouldn't be surprised to see me returning home with the report of being drunk or of fighting. I then made a solemn promise telling him that I would not drink anymore. To make it more concrete, I said alcohol is the urine of Satan that has a satanic taste. I said this because I did not want to drink anymore. I also told my dad not to tell anyone about me going to the seminary because many people have known about me with my former girlfriends.

Then on Easter Saturday, I boarded the diocesan mothership, M.V. Morning Star II from Nimoa and traveled down to Alotau. I arrived at Alotau on Easter Monday. On Tuesday I boarded M.V. Miva, a small boat for the parish where I will be going to do my formation year. I arrived at Sideia Island at about 7 o'clock in the evening. I was greeted and welcomed by Fr. Ronny Victoria, a Rogationist priest, who was my formator for that year.

I continued on with the formation program up until the end of the month of October, when I was taken to another parish in the diocese. I stayed there until the end of 2010. And in the beginning of 2011, in February, I with my two of my brothers namely, Japheth and Roy, left the diocese to continue on with our studies in Sacred Heart Inter-Diocesan Major Seminary in Rapolo. We did our first year of philosophy in that year, 2011. In 2012, we were transferred to Catholic Theological Institute in Bomana which affiliates with Holy Spirit Seminary. We completed our two years of Religious Studies in C.T.I. (2012-2013) and in 2014 we continued on to our Spiritual Year program in St. Fidelis Seminary in Madang under our Spiritual Director, Fr. Mars Oabel, a Vincentian Priest.

After completing the Spiritual Year program, we then came back to Catholic Theological Institute in Bomana to continue our first year in Theology.

Looking back to the past years, my experiences are still fresh and I still feel the damply road of struggle. I am not too far from them; they still give me a fresh bite every day when I think about them. I still care for those who were part of my life, especially my close friends who have contributed to strengthening me and helping me to make a decision that is better. My decision to change from becoming a teacher or a doctor is no longer in my mind. I do not regret deciding against those vocations anymore. I no longer worry about getting rich or living a luxurious life. I freely chose to live like Christ in embracing poverty.

I do not think about my lifetime girlfriends anymore, but I was thankful to them for giving me a space to persevere in my vocation. Sometimes they told me that I was very rude; in reply I will say, I am very sorry for my actions and I accept the challenge ahead.