

By Gregory Sawaka

A cloud of misty fog drifted and hung over the reed-parted lake of Balimo on the morning of December 26, 2003, obscuring the nether shores from the naked eye with a smoky membrane of cloudy moist soot. There was an absence of carols and decorations, but my mind was enveloped in the fond memories of those festive celebrations many a years ago with the rich aroma of the succulent liturgical celebrations sweeping proudly in my wave of thought. They gently brushed on the shores of discernment, whispering "what now" and "where next, bro."

It was the morning of Christmas, and, as was the custom in the little sleepy town of Balimo, the parents and most of the elder members of the community were preparing for the various services, while the young were still trying to grasp the events of the night. Under an okari tree along Igida, stood Sowati or Soti Saiko (pronounced psycho) cranking out his repetitious jokes, entreating the early morning risers, while his ever faithful companion, the size of a boy, but mature in age, scurried about, a beer cup in his hand, whilst soliciting a group of girls, with no luck, I assumed, but a fake yes to get him out of their way. Little piss I thought.

He was always lurking around the group waiting for Saiko to prep him up with the hard earned dope from the last trip down the river. He should probably give him a pounding before Saiko comes to his senses and knows what is about to happen to his faithful servant. But hell, this was Christmas, we were all called to give and live a little. The new year was still coming, and he'd be still around, the little thwart. These were the fond thoughts of those many a years gone by, before my serious thought of quitting a life of drugs, and all the world's enticing adventures, for the priesthood.

The study for the priesthood is little if not the story of the unexpected circumstances that were about to happen in my life. When you think about it, it's no surprise that people like me have a hard time, explaining parts of my life that are central to me, that are often beyond words. To cut it short, I entered the life of the Seminary in 2006 in Kap in Madang at the minor Seminary for the next two years, 2006 to 2007. I was still afresh with the jovial memories of the world that I had left behind to join a life that I had now come to accept as a new birth.

At the age of 24, I found myself in Good Shepherd Seminary, where I would be for the next three years, 2008 - 2009. Broadly speaking, the years in Good Shepherd were the best years of my seminary life. It was an experience like that of a spiritual poetry. I became aware of my own ethics and values that were seemingly corrupted by the morality of the world that I had left behind. By that time, I greatly understood my past life for how bad it had been, but in its own way it had also formed me into who I am. Besides stoking a love of life, I had now come to love. The year 2010, I was on pastoral exposure, and in 2011 I was in Bomana.

Ah Bomana, the Catholic Theological Institute, the three inches of the brim. Just three more years and I would be a priest. But alas, little did I know that like all bitter but yet full-of-life romance stories, here awaited trials that would challenge the core institutions of my vocation to the priesthood. It was just a few weeks into the semester, when I received the news that my Mother had been diagnosed with cancer. That forced me to suspend a year of studies to take care of my mom. That resulted in my taking another pastoral year the following year. By 2014 I was back in Bomana. In 2015 I saw the tragedy of yet another study suspension due to my having been diagnosed with Dengue. 2016 was another year of pastoral placement.

In brief, my journey has been rough and long, but my desire to be a priest is just another raw language of a young man listening to the vernacular of the priestly call. My life is a painting of the many paragons of the beneficence, of what choices in life can do to a person. That I take gladly with both hands, knowing that the Lord is always there with me, for I take a step and he takes two.

As time has evolved so too has my comprehension of my vocation to the priesthood. I have come to see the challenges of my life as a dialogue about choices. It is like an intuitive analysis of a personal conviction trying to make sense of what I have chosen to be. That conviction is rooted in my personal participation and observation, continued in the pauses of

reflection, and coupled with a firm belief in the call to the priesthood. I am not here by my mere desire alone to the vocation of the priesthood, but with all the graces of God's providence and love.

Gregory Sawaka Daru

Kiunga Diocese.