

LOCAL

# Deacon Joseph Townsend learned about living in community as the oldest of nine home-schooled siblings.

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As a seminarian, Joseph Townsend meets Pope Francis after helping with a meeting on child protection at the Pontifical North American College in Rome in 2018. COURTESY

## Editor’s note: Fr. Joseph Townsend was **ordained to the priesthood June 5** at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More.

Deacon Joseph Townsend’s priestly formation began at home as a big brother, even though he didn’t realize it at the time. ← →

The oldest of nine children home-schooled in Front Royal, he often helped out with his younger siblings’ education, which shaped his view of the kind of priest he hopes to be.

“I have a clear sense that a priest is there to serve,” said Deacon Townsend, 31, who will be ordained June 5. He aspires to be “approachable, a man of prayer and a man of joy for the Gospel, who himself prays and can help others pray.” Catholicism is “not just a set of ideas and dogmas, it has to be a relationship with Jesus, and a priest can help them grow in that relationship,” he said.

Being part of a large family also taught him about life in community, where “you’re drawn out of yourself to be able to think about others first,” he said. “You develop an openness to being attentive to others and serving others, and that’s what priests should do.”

Thoughtful and introspective, he believes “life is crazy, and you can either get very worked up about it or just laugh — at ourselves and life — and be grateful for what God has given us and do the best with what we have,” he said.

Born in Akron, Ohio, he was home-schooled through high school, then attended Christendom College in Front Royal, graduating in 2011. He worked for Geico for three years and was a parishioner of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Fredericksburg when he heeded the call to seminary. “Through Eucharistic adoration, it became much clearer for me,” he said.

From 2014 to 2016, he attended the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, then the Pontifical North American College in Rome. He spoke by phone from there recently as his final year wrapped up. “It’s been an incredible gift to be able to study here, the city built on the blood of the martyrs,” he said. “To be able to stop at their tombs on their feast days makes the faith come alive.”

Before the pandemic, when he and his fellow seminarians walked around Rome in clerical attire, English-speaking tourists would pick them out as Americans and stop them to ask questions. He came to see the interruptions as “a great gift,” a sign that people saw him as approachable and were curious about Catholicism. “Hopefully you’re planting a seed about the joy of the Catholic faith,” he said.

He was ordained a deacon in June 2020, then spent the summer at the Basilica of St. Mary in Alexandria, where he will return as parochial vicar.

Asked about other tidbits his new parish might like to know about him, he said he loves hiking, basketball and coffee. Italian coffee? American coffee?

It doesn’t matter, he said. Coffee “is like grace — there can’t really be too much or the wrong kind.”