

He couldn't escape his destiny ... to be a priest

Joe Pisani, Fairfield County Catholic

Jeffrey Couture wouldn't come to Jesus, so Jesus came to him ... in person ... face to face ... in all His majestic splendor.

He came to him and led him away from a sinful life of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, away from the hedonism that he had slipped into after abandoning the faith his parents had instilled in him as a boy. It was a painful and circuitous path for Jeffrey, but one that took him to a new life, as Father Jeffrey Couture.

Jeffrey's fascination with rock 'n' roll began at 8 years old when his father Fern gave him a Hagstrom guitar and began teaching him to play at 8. Fern and his wife Judy were devout Catholics who made their triplet sons and daughter attend Mass and Catholic school at St. Thomas Aquinas and Holy Family in Fairfield.

But by the time Jeffrey reached 8th grade, he had started straying from the Church. God became irrelevant. He had found a new god — heavy metal groups like Motley Crew, Metallica, Guns 'N' Roses and Black Sabbath. And by the time, he joined his first band, High Treason, he had begun to reject God.

"I started listening to heavy metal and strayed from the Church," he recalls. "But you are what you listen to, just like you are what you eat. I was a kid trying to live the life — the life of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll."

"I didn't go to class my freshman year at Fairfield High School because I partied a lot," he recalls, "so I dropped out and explored playing in a band."

His father gave him an ultimatum and told him that if he wasn't going to follow the rules, he had to find another place to live, so Jeffrey moved to Florida and for \$400 a month got to sleep on a couch in his sister's friend's apartment. He worked nights at Winn-Dixie and at 4 a.m. when his shift was over, he joined the other "metal heads" and partied at bars on Fort Lauderdale beach.

At 19, he was working at a convenience store, drinking, drugging and dreaming about being a heavy-metal guitarist. That's when Jesus stepped into his life in a decisive way. While Jeffrey was selling his blood at a blood bank, there were complications because of the substances he was taking, and he had a near-death experience.

"I woke up on the other side in a big black abyss, and the only illumination came from a light on a hill," he recalls. "I knew I was dead instantly. I knew God existed instantly. I knew I was in purgatory, and I could see Heaven in the distance."

In that moment, he understood his errors and the gravity of his sins.

He said: "It was like, 'Wow, my parents were right about God!' I was wrong. I had denied God. Ignorance is one thing. But I had rejected Him."

Around him were millions of souls facing Heaven and waiting outside the gates to get in, but Jeffrey couldn't get any closer because of his sins.

"I could feel love, grace and everything you could possibly desire and want. It was there in Heaven, but the evil in my soul wouldn't let me go there even though the desire in my soul wanted to be there," he said. "That agony of not being in Heaven is hellish. You burn with desire, and that is the burning of purgatory. It is the most heart-wrenching thing I've ever experienced in my life."

As soon as Jeffrey arrived, his guardian angel came to meet him. He was tall and dressed like a Samurai warrior in brilliantly shining armor. He carried two swords in sheaths crossed in front of him, and he wore a breastplate with overlaid sheets of steel on his arms and hands and a helmet that covered part of his face. His skin was translucent and his eyes were solid black.

The angel took him back to Earth for a review of his life that revealed every sin and every consequence.

"When I experienced a sin I could feel the effect of it on my soul and the effect of it on the other person," he said. "I saw whenever I put myself into mortal sin and when I was responsible for those I had led into sin. And every time I experienced it, I could feel it press upon my heart and take away part of my sanctity."

At the end of his life review, the angel told Jeffrey that he deserved to go to hell.

"I accepted it," he said. "I had to accept it because I had chosen those things. The soul cannot deny the truth of itself. It has to give it to God's justice."

Even though he was in purgatory, he knew that hell was behind him, but his angel would not let him look.

"When I accepted my judgment, I felt a great sadness in my heart, not because I would be punished but because I realized Jesus is real," he said. "I could feel His presence and His love for me and I knew He didn't want me to go there. And I felt sorry."

At that moment, Jesus appeared in all His majesty.

"It was like a lightning bolt behind me and I could feel energy pulsating," he recalls. "He was huge, like a mountain, and then suddenly He was standing behind me in human form. When He made His presence known, I could feel the evil in me trying to escape. Goodness and light and purity were emanating from Him, and darkness cannot exist in the Light."

"At first, I was afraid to turn around to face Him because I felt that if I looked at Him, I would die, but He made me look," he said.

Jesus resembled the image of Divine Mercy, but his hair, eyes and body were emanating light like white fire. No description can capture the immensity of Jesus, Father Jeffrey said.

Then, He opened his mouth and a pillar of fire came out and went into Father, and Jesus said, "I love you. And I forgive you. Do unto others as I have done unto you."

"He purified my soul and filled it with grace," Father Jeffrey said. "It was the only time in my life I have ever felt complete and filled and loved more than anything."

Then, his angel returned him to his body, and when he woke, he was being driven home. Immediately, the real world seemed fake and temporal, a shell. Reality was what he had left behind.

"Within a week, I cut my hair and broke off with all my friends," Father Jeffrey said. He took a Greyhound Bus to Colorado and moved in with his aunt and uncle, who told him he had to live by a few

simple rules: No drugs, no trouble and Church on Sunday. The next day he found a job at Waffle House and met a priest who helped him in his recovery.

During his three years in Colorado, he overcame his addictions and began to think he might have a calling to the priesthood. He eventually went into plumbing and started dating a young woman, but the question about his future remained a mystery.

“Life was just throwing stuff at me,” he said. “I said to my aunt, ‘I don’t know what I want to do — all I want to do is serve God.’ She asked what kind of money I wanted to make and I said I didn’t care about money. I just wanted to serve God, study the Bible, serve others and share my life with them.”

She told him to consider the priesthood and urged him to pray over it. Then, one day at church, a nun was there talking about vocations and pointed at him and said, “Son, you know when God is calling you to be a priest.”

“I heard the voice of God say, ‘Come follow me.’” And that’s what he started to do, but not without challenges.

When he applied to St. John Fisher Seminary in Stamford in 1994, then-rector Monsignor Stephen DiGiovanni sent him back to get a high school diploma. He took a two-year break from the seminary and got some tutoring. In 1999 he returned, and in 2001 he graduated from Sacred Heart University and went to Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He took another break and was away for five years as he grappled with the possibility of marriage. During that time, he managed a Starbucks in Greenwich, but thoughts of the priesthood persisted. Very often, people would ask him about God. He couldn’t elude the fact he was being called.

“God was giving me such a sign,” he says.

He moved to Florida, where he taught religion at a Catholic high school. Once, while he was sitting in front of the Blessed Sacrament and praying to discern his vocation, he recalled something Mother Teresa told him when he met her in New York City. She had grabbed his hand and said, “Follow Jesus. Follow Him — don’t let Him follow you.” And he realized that for so long, he was trying to lead Jesus.

“At that moment, I just said, ‘I surrender.’” Since then, he has never ever doubted his vocation and never looked back.

He was ordained in 2010 and has served at St. Edward the Confessor Church in New Fairfield, St. Mary’s in Bethel and St. Peter’s in Danbury. He has also been chaplain at Immaculate High School in Danbury and Western Connecticut State University. He was pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in Weston and recently installed as pastor of St. Matthew Church in Norwalk.

“This life is temporary,” Father Jeffrey says. “We’re destined for Heaven, and God has a plan for each of us. We have to fulfill Jesus’s mission for us. We all have our own way of doing that. Mine is as a priest. Our goal is to go home to Heaven and lead as many people there as possible.” And that is what he is trying to do ... one day at a time.