

Oil worker surprises colleagues by choosing to don Roman collar

A man whose life was turned upside down by a simple question from a priest will soon be ordained a deacon.

Seven years ago, JD Carmichael had a stable and high-paying career as an environmental analyst. After many years of hard work in university, he had earned a degree in Environmental Economics and Policy. Hired by Nexen to work in the oil-and-gas sector, he had bought a house in Fort McMurray, ready to settle down and live out his life. For someone just in his late 20s, it was a life many could only dream of.

But things suddenly changed as Christmas approached in 2012. With feelings of uncertainty and lack of purpose, Carmichael turned to prayer. He could sense in his heart that God was calling him toward something different.

Six months later, he quit the job, put the house up for sale, and set his life on a new path – becoming a Catholic priest.

“The more I thought about it, the more it made perfect sense – there’s nothing more worthy I could give my life to,” Carmichael said. “There’s always been a draw for me to serve in the Church, even from an early age. When I was a kid I had this feeling, this desire to be like the Apostles, and that has stuck with me for years. I’ve always had this desire to be an Apostle of Christ.”

On June 27, Carmichael and fellow seminarian Curtis Berube will be ordained to the transitional diaconate, the last phase of their journey toward priesthood in the Archdiocese of Edmonton. For Carmichael, who has experienced many challenges and triumphs along the way, the ordination at St. Joseph’s Basilica feels like the natural next step.

“To know I’m now becoming deacon, it just feels normal,” he said. “God has led me through a number of things and has reaffirmed with me that this is where He wants me; this is where He’s calling me to be.

“So I’m happy to just keep going on this journey: to discern His will the best I can, and do His will the best I can.”

Carmichael was born in Fort St. John, B.C., on July 7, 1985, into a devout Catholic family. He was an altar server as a young boy and read at Mass as a teenager. His mother taught Sacramental Preparation and Catechism at nearby Indigenous reserves, and Carmichael would often tag along when she did.



JD on his Baptism day Carmichael family

His family moved in 2000 to Sherwood Park, east of Edmonton, and Carmichael completed high school there. With a lifelong passion for hunting and fishing, his initial plan was to become a wildlife biologist.

On a trip to Kenya with fellow university students, Carmichael learned that conservation and protection of wildlife had many facets that went beyond the world of biology. After that adventure, he enrolled in Environmental Economics and Policy at the University of Alberta.

But even after earning that degree and winning a high-paying job in his field, Carmichael longed for something more meaningful. On his 40-minute drive into work each morning, he prayed, asking God to show him what direction he was meant to take. Maybe it was a change in career, returning to school for a master's degree, or any number of other options.

Then, at an Advent retreat in Fort McMurray in 2012, Carmichael struck up a conversation with Father Paul Thekkanath.

"The priest was telling me how busy he was, he had confessions and all these things scheduled to do, so I asked him what I could do to help," Carmichael explained. "He asked if I could read at Mass that night. I said, 'Yeah, that's no problem, but what I can do to help *you*? I want to help you with what you're doing.'

"Then he just looked at me and said 'What is it you're asking?' And the way he put it, it just rang in my head. What *am* I asking? All the prayers I've brought to God ... what is it I'm really asking Him to do?"

That simple question changed everything. Suddenly a vocation to the priesthood was the constant question on Carmichael's mind. As he took that long drive into

work each morning, every time Carmichael imagined himself as a priest ministering to people, it filled him with excitement.

When Carmichael brought these thoughts to his family, not only were they supportive, his brother David was not even fazed.

“I remember when I told my brother, he was just like ‘Oh yeah, you’ll become a priest.’ It was no question to him,” said Carmichael. “My family was not shocked at all.”

“About a year into it, my dad said, ‘You know, I see you going all the way with this.’”

Being the youngest guy in the office, and with a long career still ahead of him, Carmichael’s resignation did come as a shock to many of his co-workers. His decision to leave industry to don a Roman collar was not one they heard every day.



JD at Doig Reserve Catholic Church in northern B.C., after a day of cleaning the church. Carmichael family

Carmichael contacted the Franciscan Friars in Edmonton and proceeded to do a postulancy with their Little Portion fraternity in Victoria. He stayed there throughout the year of 2013. While he ultimately didn’t feel a vocation to the friary, it gave him a first-hand look at what life in a religious order was like.

In 2014, he enrolled in St. Joseph Seminary in hopes of becoming a diocesan priest.

Coming from an environment of oilsands and refineries to one of Aquinas and Aristotle, Carmichael found the academics at seminary daunting at first.

But his experiences with the friars – soup kitchens, hospital ministries and

retreats helping men recover from addictions – were a positive reinforcement during his days devoted to study.

“I’m really thankful for that postulancy year,” he said. “Having so much academics was very heavy at times, but it was OK because I already knew what this was working towards. I knew what was waiting on the other side.”

His years in seminary came with their share of other trials. Carmichael was not able to sell his home in Fort McMurray, so he had to choose a voluntary foreclosure that strained his finances. In his first years as a seminarian, the vow of celibacy also played on his mind.

“I always had a fear that if there was anything that would lead me away from the priesthood, it would be falling in love with a woman,” said Carmichael. “But while in seminary God actually gave me the experience of having a close friendship with a woman. And through that I could say, ‘No, I’m not leaving seminary for this. God really is calling me to be a priest.’”

“That experience showed me that this is my calling. It strengthened that calling and it took away that fear I had. And I understood that if God is calling you to that vow of celibacy, He gives you the graces for it.”



JD's First Communion photo Carmichael family

Carmichael will be making the vow of celibacy as part of his diaconal ordination. Recently, the thought that he would never have children and a family of his own began to worry him again. But God had an answer.

“It was on my head for a day or two,” said Carmichael. “Then the other day we had a school Mass with Our Lady of Mount Carmel students, and there’s one girl who serves at the Mass, her name is Michelle. I was holding the door open as

the kids were leaving for school, and she said, 'Bye Brother JD, I love you,' and I just said, 'I love you too.'

"It was so unexpected; she never says anything to me normally. And I thought, 'Yeah, I know who gave me that one: thank you, Lord. You do give me children. You give me a lot of children.'"

Carmichael is now in the final months of his internship at the St. Agnes and St. Anthony parishes in Edmonton. Working with Rev. Joby Augustine CFIC, he has learned a lot about priestly life. He was fascinated to see how much relationship-building is foundational to the priesthood.



JD during his Confirmation with Bishop Weisner Carmichael family

"That's the biggest takeaway from being in this parish. What we have here, what we do, it all revolves around people," he said. "Even as an intern, I've had people come and ask me for advice, share important things of their lives with me, had those very intimate, confident discussions with people."

"It's made me much more people-focused – everything here happens out of relationships."

As deacon, Carmichael will be able to baptize, and witness weddings and funerals. After ordination, he still has one more year of study at the seminary, including the synthesis he will write to earn his Master of Divinity degree. Then he must prepare to petition Archbishop Richard Smith for ordination to the priesthood.

But for Carmichael, his journey doesn't end there. To him, achieving priesthood feels like another step in a journey he will be on for the rest of his life. It's a journey directed by God, always bringing Carmichael closer to Him.

If he finally takes that big step as Father JD, a priest with his own parish and parishioners, Carmichael is particularly looking forward to the sacrament of reconciliation.

“It’s such a beautiful sacrament, and really, it’s a joyful sacrament,” he said. “A lot of people don’t look at it that way, but God is offering you His forgiveness, to bring you back into relationship with Him. It can be a really life-changing moment for people.

“It’s gotten me thinking sometimes that, God willing, the first thing I’ll do when I become a priest is go to that confessional and say ‘I’m here now.’”