

Seeds of priestly vocation grew in underground churches during Soviet regime

From underground to lockdown, Deacon Roman Kobyletsky's journey to the priesthood spans from worshipping in secret under a Communist regime to an ordination with only a few family and friends because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deacon Kobyletsky will be ordained on May 23 at St. Josaphat's Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in Edmonton. Crowd limits mean that only 15 people will be present, but it will be livestreamed so his family overseas can watch.

"It's not the first time an ordination is going to be with a small number of people. I think that for the first three centuries of Christianity, it was kind of underground ordination because the Church was persecuted ... The Church already has that experience," Kobyletsky said.

"When you're living with an underground church, you still have hope that one day the church is going to be free. But living in a Soviet Union, you have more doubts that it's going to happen during your life."

The differences are obvious. Under the Soviet Union, the Church was persecuted and the government actively worked against belief in God. Under the COVID-19 crowd limits, being "underground" is voluntary to prevent the spread of a pandemic.

"Here we're relying even more so on God's blessings and God's presence in the world and within our lives," said Bishop David Motiuk of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy. "In times of openness, in times of challenge, God is always present with us. And the Church is always open. The Holy Spirit continues to act."

For Deacon Kobyletsky, the "underground church" is a metaphor he uses to describe his ordination, which says has been four decades in the making.

Roman Kobyletsky was born 40 years ago to Yaroslav and Halyna in Lviv – the largest city in western Ukraine – the youngest of four children and the only boy. At the time it was dangerous to be a Catholic. The country was part of the Soviet Union, so priests and worshippers went underground, celebrating the Divine Liturgy in secret. If caught, they would face arrest, be spirited away, or worse.

"The priest would come to the house and no one knew when exactly he would come because everything was controlled by the government, even phones. They could listen," Kobyletsky said. "We knew that on big feasts, like Easter, it's more likely that the priest would come on a Sunday."

“Our family was active in the underground church,” Kobyletskyy added. “Some priests would come to my house for the liturgy, which had a big impact on my vocation. I saw very nice and good examples of priests, because being a Christian in an underground church meant that you’re going to be persecuted, and to be ready for that, because one time it can happen.”

When the priests were inside their home, the family made noise – sometimes clanging dishes – so that neighbours wouldn’t know what was happening. Sometimes there were natural distractions.

“Sometimes when we forgot to use the dishes, dogs outside would start barking. Even God sometimes helped us,” Kobyletskyy quipped.

Kobyletskyy’s parents taught their children prayer, catechism, and love of God.

Bishop Motiuk said that experience will continue to influence Deacon Kobletsyky as a priest.

“When you have to hide, when you grow up in the underground church and still those seeds of faith were planted within his heart and within his whole being, especially by his parents and those who were close to him, that sense of the domestic Church is going to be something he’s going to carry through with him in his ministry,” Bishop Motiuk said.

“It’s a sense that the Church is not something abstract, something institutional, but it starts within the family. I think it’s going to have a lasting impact on him and in his ministry.”

When he was 15, Kobyletskyy attended high school in Lviv. Upon graduation, he planned to study medicine but his application was denied.

“I never thought about being a doctor of medicine anymore,” he explained. “At the same time, the priest is also a doctor. But the priest is giving not for the body but for the soul.”

Kobyletskyy knew from a young age that he was called to be a priest. It just took him a while to answer.

“If you can interview every priest, every story is going to be different. But very common, or the same, is that you have been chosen,” Kobyletskyy said. “Is it actually a vocation, that God calls me, or is this my imagination?”

“I saw a priest’s life is not a very easy life, and I questioned myself many times. Every priest is chosen by God, even if sometimes he would like to escape that ministry or vocation. God reminds you from time to time: ‘This is your vocation and I can wait as long as you want. I have time. Come and see Me when you’re ready.’ That happened to me. I tried that at least a couple of times.”

Kobyletskyy spent a year at a monastery, then studied theology in the city of

Ivano-Frankivsk. After six years, he planned to be a priest but still had doubt that he was “worthy” enough.

“I think that Jesus on the Cross helped me to figure out that even if I’m not worthy enough but if it’s God’s calling, this is what I’m supposed to do.”

Before his ordination, Kobyletskyy wanted to work to earn some money. His sister Hanna told him there was lots of work and a large Ukrainian community in Edmonton, where she lived.

He came to Canada in 2011 and worked in the oil industry. In 2016, he went to Ottawa to upgrade his theology studies and English skills. Three years later, he was ordained as a subdeacon and later a deacon. Finally he accepted Bishop Motiuk’s invitation to be a priest in the Edmonton Eparchy.

“First of all, I can serve God and people,” Kobyletskyy said. “I think that God chooses people to ministry because He loves them. God provides everything that I need for that ministry. This is the vocation of all my life. Preparation for that ministry was for 40 years. Thankfully He didn’t prepare me for 100 years like Abraham for his first child!”

Initially Kobyletskyy was homesick for Ukraine, where his parents and a sister still live. However, he has now planted roots permanently in Canada. He met his wife Erica here, they married, and welcomed daughter Sophia on July 30 last year.

Kobyletskyy is looking forward to his ordination, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. His advice to anyone is to “recognize the spirit when it calls you” to your individual vocation – and not give up.