

PROFILE

MOST REV. JOHN WONG SOO KAU

Birth

Date & Place: 6th June 1968, Karamunting, Sandakan

Catholic Faith

Baptism: 14th July, 1968, St Mary's Church, Sandakan

Confirmation: 19th August, 1979, St Mary's Church, Sandakan

Family

Father: Paul Wong Shui Tshun, a hawker selling yong taufu (stuffed bean curd) and fish balls at Sandakan central market. Passed away in 1995 at the age of 75.

Mother: Rose Chung Thiem Yin, a housewife residing in Sandakan.

Brothers & Sisters: John is the 7th of 11 children in the family, having five brothers (Michael, Simon, Joseph, Vincent and Anthony) and five sisters (Maria, Anna, Mary, Imelda and Pracida) who are all residing in Sandakan.

Education

Primary: Cheng Ming Chinese Primary School, Sandakan (1974 - 1979)

Secondary: St Mary's Secondary School, Sandakan (1980 - 1986)

Training: Carmelite Spirituality, Teresianum Institute, Rome (2002 - 2004)

Employment

Salesman, Hanamay Sdn Bhd (1987 - May 1990)

Priesthood

Preparatory Course: July 1990 - Dec 1991 at Catholic Diocesan Centre, Penampang, Sabah

Seminary Formation: Feb 1992 - Dec 1998 at St Peter's College, Kuching, Sarawak

Ministry of Lector: 7 April 1995

Ministry of Acolyte: 20 Nov 1996

Pastoral Immersion

1996 - St Dominic's Church, Lahad Datu;

1997 - St. John's Church, Tuaran

1998 - Sacred Heart Cathedral, Kota Kinabalu.

Ordained Deacon

8th January, 1998, Sacred Heart Cathedral, Kota Kinabalu by His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Bishop Datuk John Lee.

Ordained Priest

21st January, 1999, St Mary's Church, Sandakan by His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Bishop Datuk John Lee.

Ministry

Assistant Rector: January 1999 - June 2002 at Sacred Heart Cathedral, Kota Kinabalu

Rector: Since September 2004 at Catholic Diocesan Centre, Penampang;

Coadjutor Archbishop: June 2010 - Appointed by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and ordained on October 1, 2010 at Sacred Heart Cathedral, Kota Kinabalu.

SHORT SHARING BY MOST REV JOHN WONG OF HIS PRIESTLY JOURNEY

[taken from his Priestly Ordination Booklet dated 21 January 1999]

Proverbs 8:35 says, "For the man who finds life, he will have favour from Yahweh."

Throughout my life I felt that God has not forgotten me, His humble servant. He is constantly guiding and protecting me along the journey of my life. I was born and baptised in the year 1968. I am the seventh in a family of eleven children with three elder brothers, three elder sisters, two younger brothers and two younger sisters. I grew up just like any other child. I received a normal education from Primary one to Form five. Besides my studies, I had to help my parents in their farm and also to gather firewood for the family's use as well as helping to look after my younger brothers and sisters. I had never dreamt of becoming a priest. I only wished to become a simple teacher, teaching in any one of the schools near my home. But this one and only dream of mine faded away due to my poor S.P.M. results.

In 1984, when I was in Form Three, Rev. Father Chi was transferred to Sandakan as the parish priest of St. Mary's Church. Since then, we had masses in different languages. Seeing Father Chi alone serving in such a big parish, I felt a desire in me wishing to help him to serve the people. I believed that was the very moment that God had sown His seed in me to serve His people. Thus, the thought of becoming an instrument of God to serve His people came "on and off" to me because I was too scared to mention it to others.

Furthermore, nobody had ever mentioned to me what a priest was or what sort of life of a priest would be like? It seemed a "sacred thing" to me. So, I could only keep that thought for myself and never shared it with others. After completing my Form Five in 1986, I worked as a salesman travelling around Sabah for three and a half years. During these years, I was actively involved in the choir and youth activities in my own parish. It was at this time that I felt again the strong desire to serve in the Church. Due to my poor command of English, I first thought of becoming a Chinese catechist only. Later I was told that I could learn and improve my English in the Catholic Diocesan Centre in Kota Kinabalu. With the strong encouragement from Rev. Father Chi, my own brothers and sisters, and also my friends, I entered the minor seminary at the Catholic Diocesan Centre in 1990.

During the course of studying English for one and half years, my struggle to master it was a real torture as English was a subject I seldom passed during my school days. But the encouragement and support from my friends and classmates helped me to overcome it.

In February 1992, I was accepted to enter the major seminary in St. Peter's College, Kuching. Seven years of priestly formation was really a time of "grace" for me. In the college, I was fed with information and formed by the seminary staff. Most important of all was that, all these years, God, through the seminary staff, had revealed to me of who I am and what my mission is. Hence, I thank God for His loving kindness and also thank all those instrumental in my formation, past and present, for their patience and unceasing encouragement.

Reflecting back on my "Vocation Calling", I feel that God has never forgotten me as He has promised (Heb. 13:5). I am very much well assured by the prayer and encouragement from my family members, my friends as well as my brother seminarians during my journey of priestly formation. My ordination to priesthood is really a gift of love from God. It will be the beginning of my new life which needs your continuous support and constant prayer.

Praise the Lord!!

JOHN WONG SOO KAU

HIS PRIESTLY JOURNEY CONTINUES TO HIS EPISCOPAL ORDINATION

[Write up taken from the Episcopal Ordination Booklet 1st October 2010]

God Works in Mysterious Ways

Most Rev. John Wong, initially shocked by the appointment, accepts the Will of God to become Coadjutor Archbishop. The appointment of Most Rev. John Wong Soo Kau to be the Coadjutor Archbishop of the Archbishop of Kota Kinabalu Diocese in Sabah came as a big surprise for many, including the man himself.

He was rushing to the Bundu Tuhan Retreat Centre at Kundasang on 7th June 2010, a day after celebrating his 42nd birthday, to attend a weeklong seminar there. Among the unopened mail he brought along was a letter with a Bangkok postmark, the city where the office of the Apostolic Delegate of Pope Benedict XVI is located.

On reaching Bundu Tuhan, he found time to read the letter and was shocked by its contents, informing him of the appointment. He was in a daze for almost two days before he found courage to respond. "This is impossible," he thought. "There are so many who are capable, have the ability and even in age or seniority, and on top of that I'm supposed to return to Sandakan and serve in the diocese there. In reality, I had started sending some of my personal belongings there and due to start in July. My mind was set then, suddenly this letter came and I asked, 'Is it true?' I was confused." However, upon deep meditation and contemplation, Father John Wong finally found strength to accept the Will of the Father. His devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother, has given him a deeper understanding of what obedience means.

He followed closely the steps of Mary and responded, "May what you say be done," even when he could not comprehend the event that was unfolding before him. He, like Mary, just kept it in his heart, took a deep breath and said "Yes!" He told a Catholic journalist later that he had prayed to God for strength, so that he could serve well in his new pastoral ministry.

Episcopal Ordination of Most Rev. John Wong

The initial fears are understandable; after all he is only 42 years of age and has been a priest for just over 10 years. Even when he was a teenager, he was more comfortable just to serve, rather than to be a leader. Moreover, it is true that there are other fellow priests in the same archdiocese who are more senior in age and experience, perhaps in knowledge and intellect as well.

It is yet another event in the local Church by which God demonstrates that he works in mysterious ways. His ways of election, since the selection of King David in ancient times to this present age, are quite beyond the comprehension of man.

Faith Formation

He recalled at a recent interview that the biggest influence in the formation of his Catholic faith during childhood was his mother, Rose Chung Thiem Yin. The new Coadjutor Archbishop for the Archdiocese of Kota Kinabalu is the 7th of 11 children, as big in number as a football team, having five brothers and five sisters, and being the fourth of six boys. The Wong family celebrating (Rose) mum's birthday in 1994 at the old family house.

"Mum brought us up in faith. She faithfully brought us to Church for Sunday Mass even when it was in English. She was most faithful in ensuring that all the 11 of us would attend the Sunday Mass, travelling to St. Mary's Church, now a Cathedral, from their home by bus.

"This strikes me very much. And because there are so many of us and fearing that some of us might get lost in the crowd, she would gather us and leave ahead of the others immediately after Communion, before the final blessing," he said.

She made sure that all the 11 children were baptized. In the case of Fr. John, born on June 6, 1968, he was baptized just over a month old by Fr. Michael Mewo and he received the Sacrament of Confirmation at the age of 11.

Among the parish priests in Sandakan then were Fr. Thomas Sham and Fr. John Lee, now the Archbishop Emeritus of Kota Kinabalu Diocese. It was when Fr. Tobias Chi came to St. Mary's Parish when he stressed the need for having Sunday Mass in Mandarin. "It was also during this time that Fr. Chi began to promote activities in Chinese, including the growth of the Catholic Women's League, youth activities, the prayer meetings and the Legion of Mary. "That suited me very well, for I only knew Chinese then and naturally was more inclined to join the Chinese activities. I started getting involved, especially in the Chinese youth and choir."

Early Call

It was when teenage John was in Form II that he began to think seriously of the future. Two main thoughts came to mind. One was to become a priest and the other was to settle down in married life.

Fr. Chi, the then parish priest at St. Mary's Church, was the biggest influence for John's consideration for a priestly vocation. "He was alone, having to cope with such a diverse Catholic community. Somehow, I just had the urge to help him to do something, whatever he asked I would do it. I like to serve, not to be a leader," Fr. John said this at the interview.

Well, like it or not, after the ordination on October 1, 2010, he shall be a Coadjutor Archbishop, who is destined to become the overall shepherd of the flock when Archbishop John Lee retires.

Another aspect of Fr. John Wong's character is that he is a man of few words, preferring just to show his service through action, and not words. "I feel that kind of service helped me a lot. What is more important is that action speaks louder than words," he said. That attitude seems to be fixed to the character of this new Coadjutor Archbishop.

Two ideas, therefore, were clearly occupied his mind then. As he was actively involved in the Chinese youth and choir at the Church, his girlfriend too was doing the same. In the case of his second choice of a married life, he even thought of wanting to have six children. As for a married life, he would take up teaching as a profession. "I like to become a teacher, like to teach. There was one teacher by the name of Lilian (a former teacher at St. Mary's Secondary School) who inspired me." He even found out the earnings of a teacher and made a calculation that with the teacher's salary he would be able to have enough money to get married at the age of 28 or 29 years old. As he proceeded further in his secondary education, the idea of getting married became stronger. He passed his Form III exam and entered into the Science Stream in Upper Secondary.

Episcopal Ordination of Most Rev. John Wong

His ambition to become a teacher slowly diminished, and the wish to become a doctor emerged. What could have motivated the change of mind? Money! He could earn much more as a doctor.

Meanwhile, the other life ambition of becoming a priest, was still there, but hidden. Yet, surprisingly, during those two years whilst young John was in Form IV and V, he remained most active in Church activities, so much so that his mother Rose used to tell him, "The Church is your home already and your house is like a hotel to you."

A Deal with God

Then, when the Malaysian School Certificate Examination (SPM) was approaching, John was a worried young man. During all his term exams, he was never able to pass in the Bahasa Malaysia language test. He was always poor in that subject throughout Form IV and V.

"I was able to do well in other subjects, like science, mathematics and geography, but BM always pulled me down," he recalled. A few months before the SPM exam, the idea of taking up the priestly vocation resurfaced.

John had previously been told that one of the strict conditions for those aspiring to be trained as a priest was to have a pass in SPM with Grade II. That means he had to get a pass in BM. It sounded like impossible to him.

So he made a deal with God! "If it is really your call for me to priesthood, then allow me to pass with at least Grade II in the SPM exam ahead," he told God. He sat for the exam in 1986 and whilst waiting for the results, started work as a salesman the following year engaged in direct sales without basic salary, being paid commission based on actual volume of sale. "It was no easy job, having to go from house to house and travelling non-stop from town to town in Sabah. After three-and-a-half years, I gained lots of experience of life," he said.

It was in March 1987 when his third sister, Mary, called him while he was busy on these travels promoting sales in Kota Kinabalu, informing him that he had passed the SPM with Grade II. John of course remembered "the deal" he made with God, but there appeared to be a form of resistance to accept it. He returned to Sandakan and had to see the certificate for himself and to see with his own eyes if he had truly passed the exam. Despite that fact, he continued with his job as a salesman, difficult as it was.

The Final Push

He went on working for two more years after returning to Sandakan where he resumed being active in Church. In 1988, a catechist, Stella Yong, was posted there to assist Fr. Chi in pastoral work with the Chinese community at St. Mary's. "I wanted to be like her, to serve like her and I told her so," said John. But the reply from Stella, who was trained as a catechist in Taiwan, told him, "At the moment, we have no male catechists for the Chinese community in Sabah, only in Taiwan. Why don't you become a priest instead?" she asked. Little did Stella know that John had considered becoming a priest as one of his two options in life!

During that time, Fr. Nicholas Ong, now the Vicar-General of the Sandakan Diocese, was attached to St. Peter's College, a major seminary in Kuching. During one of his home visits to Sandakan, Stella arranged for Fr. Ong to meet up with John at St. Mary's rectory. Fr. Ong asked John to read a passage from an English newspaper and then asked: "Do you understand what it said?" John answered, "No!" John admitted that during all his school life from Primary One to Form V, he had never passed the English subject. Fr. Ong then advised the young Catholic from the same hometown of Sandakan, to go to the Catholic Diocesan Centre (CDC) in Penampang to learn English.

A few months after that visit, Fr. Ong sent a letter to John, saying "Hope you are doing well", presuming that he had already taken his advice and studying English at the CDC. That letter had a strange impact on John and made him truly reflect and come to a final decision, to go or not to go.

Remembering those six months from January 1990, Fr. John said, "A lot happened and it was a real struggle." Finally, in July that year, he said "Yes!" and told Fr. Chi, who came to Kota Kinabalu and talked to Fr. Jan Van der Salm who was the then rector of CDC. Fr. Chi was told that if that was the intention of John, then he had to do so as soon as possible.

John's plan was to enter for the training course for aspirants secretly. When he made this proposal to his eldest brother Michael, the latter flatly rejected it, advising his younger brother that he had to do so properly and hand over everything before leaving. For, he was then the youth leader of the Chinese community at St. Mary's. He had to hand over the youth ministry to someone else prior to his departure.

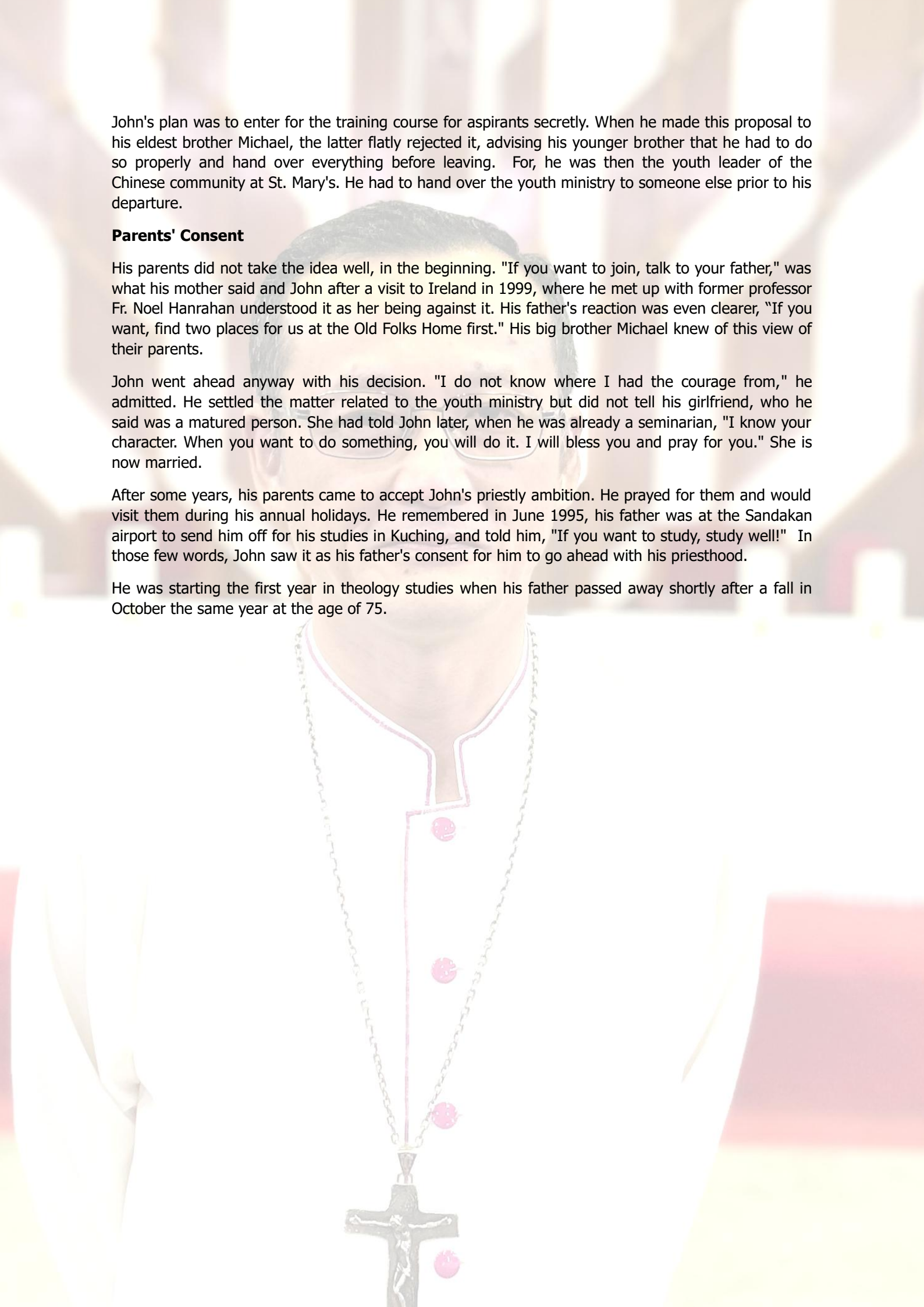
Parents' Consent

His parents did not take the idea well, in the beginning. "If you want to join, talk to your father," was what his mother said and John after a visit to Ireland in 1999, where he met up with former professor Fr. Noel Hanrahan understood it as her being against it. His father's reaction was even clearer, "If you want, find two places for us at the Old Folks Home first." His big brother Michael knew of this view of their parents.

John went ahead anyway with his decision. "I do not know where I had the courage from," he admitted. He settled the matter related to the youth ministry but did not tell his girlfriend, who he said was a matured person. She had told John later, when he was already a seminarian, "I know your character. When you want to do something, you will do it. I will bless you and pray for you." She is now married.

After some years, his parents came to accept John's priestly ambition. He prayed for them and would visit them during his annual holidays. He remembered in June 1995, his father was at the Sandakan airport to send him off for his studies in Kuching, and told him, "If you want to study, study well!" In those few words, John saw it as his father's consent for him to go ahead with his priesthood.

He was starting the first year in theology studies when his father passed away shortly after a fall in October the same year at the age of 75.



25 YEARS ON HIS JOURNEY IN THE MINISTRY

During a brief interview with him on the 30th November 2023, Archbishop John Wong Soo Kau shared the following challenges and experiences.

25 years life as a priest. How has it been anything more than plain sailing for you?

There is no journey that is just smooth sailing. If it is just ups or downs only, it will be very boring. But that does not necessarily mean it is a negative thing. These ups or downs would make life more interesting.

As examples, I was 6 and a half years with the Aspirants in CDC. During this time, when the students did not respond well, naturally you would feel frustrated and angry, but would you consider it was "down"? Or when as a Bishop, when you organise a Diocesan event and there are those who do not want to participate or do not respond. Of course, it is very disappointing but that is not a hindrance to moving forward because there are the other parishes who are eager to move on together. And would you consider it is negative/down? So "ups or downs", it is part and parcel of life. A lot of patience is required.

What were and are the major challenges for you as Archbishop?

The major challenge is to keep faithful and at the same time to remain down to earth. As God has been faithfully guiding me for 25 years I want to also respond in faithfulness. I strive to keep faithful in my prayer life. To lead my priestly life as a Bishop to the fullest and this is a great challenge.

As a Bishop, you have to be the father figure, reflective of our Father in Heaven and this is not an easy task. I have to be very patient and full of compassion. Being compassionate whilst ensuring compliance is indeed not easy.

Sometimes as a father figure, you tend to be reactive instead of being responsive. But at the end of the day, I always believe that whatever course of action or decision that I have made, it was always guided by the Spirit of the Lord. I may have made those decisions innocently but not ignorantly; Innocence in allowing/is to allow the Holy Spirit to guide me.

Why I say that my journey has been guided all this while is because even before I joined the Seminary, God has been preparing me. I was an extreme introvert person and after completing my secondary schooling, I actually took up a job as a salesman knocking from door to door. This job does not have a fixed salary but just purely on commission basis. No sales, no pay! I did this for 3.5 years and looking back, this was God's way of preparing me for my priestly journey where I cannot afford to be an introvert.

We know you hardly have any free time. In the little free time that you have, how do you generally spend it?

I somehow don't quite agree with the question because God gave all of us equally 24 hours a day. It depends on our time management. If you say you do not have any free time at all then maybe you did not manage your time well. I think we do have at least 30 minutes of free time in a day.

Whenever I have free time, besides prayer time, I love to exercise. I am almost addicted to exercising actually. I used to play badminton, football and futsal but lately since the pandemic, I go jogging, brisk walking and mountain climbing. And it is while jogging or walking that I also spend time to think and reflect. As for mountain climbing, it is almost like a personal retreat for me.

To help me move on smoother, I also have a close circle of friends comprising lay people both men and women. This is apart from the official Presbyteral circle I have. I find that this kind of fellowship is important, to keep me grounded and where I can actually be just my plain self!

Any special message for all who are together with you celebrating this milestone of yours?

The call of the Synodal Journey is so appropriate at this time because in this journey, the Pope mentioned about Participation, Communion and Mission. No matter what position you hold in the Church, no matter how big or small, we have to journey together. The mission for all baptised is to participate and once you participate, you are in communion with one another.

In addition, the Pope also says that when you go for a mission, we need to extend the tent to be an inclusive church, not exclusive.

So, in essence, let us all journey together.

