

Feeding the soul

Dharen Brochero Garavito aspires to be a priest of the people

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Clad in a striped skullcap and white apron, Dharen Brochero Garavito flips a skillet of sizzling shrimp in the air with what appears to be a practiced hand.

He pulls the tray of blistered tomatoes from the oven behind him, arranging them with care on the plates before adding the shrimp and rice. A drizzle of mango puree and a "sparkle" of lime zest later, Dharen presents his dish, explaining the components in a lilting accent that reflects his Colombian roots.

His confidence and comfort in the kitchen exude an air of professionalism not unlike that of his culinary hero, Gordon Ramsay, minus Ramsay's accent and biting criticism. Dharen smiles often, a jokester, he admits.

But beneath the charisma and culinary prowess is a farm boy whose simple upbringing in a remote Colombian village lacked luxuries such as shiny kitchen equipment and infused cooking oils.

A boy whose faith, guided by the priest of the village church, led him to conclude at age of 14 that he also wanted to pursue the priesthood. Now 23, Dharen is in his first year at Mount St. Mary's Seminary, and is fulfilling that same vocational vision, a vision that has never wavered since he felt God's call nine years ago.

AN UNLIKELY VOCATION

Though Dharen never shied away from sharing his vocational aspirations with family and friends, few believed his teenage pronouncement would come true.

His friends thought he was joking, he said. His father, a police officer, refused to acknowledge it, his lack of support essentially ending their relationship for a period of time, though they have since reconciled. His mother, a Protestant, begged her son to consider becoming a pastor in another denomination so he could marry and give her grandchildren.

Dharen understood their doubts. He wasn't a stereotypical man of the cloth.

"Some people think the vocation is being dressed like a priest with this rosary in your hands," Dharen said. "Here I was in

regular clothes, at parties, dancing."

This was the boy who received more than a few beatings for disobeying his father's rules, the same child who originally wanted to be a doctor and loved accompanying his mother to the hospital where she worked as a nurse, hoping to get a glimpse of the surgeons as they stitched and sliced on the operating tables.

His peers knew him as the class clown, silly and laughing, who always had a girlfriend to dance with at parties. He was smart, too, an avid reader awarded a prestigious academic scholarship after graduating from high school to study English at an institute in the city of Cartagena, Colombia.

But he was also a person of faith. His introduction to God began in early childhood after his parents divorced and his dad remarried. Dharen went to live with his stepmom's mother, Celina, whom he considers his grandmother, although they are not blood relatives. Seeking company, Celina, would take him along to Sunday morning Mass at the village church.

At first, he had to be dragged, but later, he started going willingly, even when his grandma couldn't go. His change of heart was largely due to the new priest who took over the village parish.

The Rev. Freddy Romero was young and charismatic, a "cool priest," according to Dharen. Dharen became more involved with the church, as an altar server and lector, and later the sexton who unlocked the building in the morning and closed it up at night, ringing the bells whenever someone died.

On weekends, Dharen traveled with Romero to the other village churches in the parish. He loved seeing how people would light up at their arrival, and the exhilaration he felt when he delivered a reflection during service.

A DIVINE MISSION

Though Romero urged him to consider the vocation, Dharen was initially skeptical.

"I said, 'Father, you live alone, you are not married, you work all the time.' That does not seem like a good life," Dharen recalled. "He told me, 'You are happy if you do what you love.' That really made me think."

Dharen loved many things. He loved poring over the thick medical texts he would get from the village library. He loved watching "CSI: Miami!" He loved helping out at the library, where he was part of a group of volunteers who sought to revive the largely empty building with



Staff photo by Bill Green

Dharen Brochero Garavito sautés shrimp in the kitchen of Mount St. Mary's Seminary near Emmitsburg, where he is in his first year of seminary.

literacy games and spelling bees. But mostly, he loved making people happy.

"I see people become happy when they see the priest, welcoming him like he was part of their family," Dharen said. "And I thought, 'If that's happiness, can I be happy, too?'"

He prayed on it, and realized that Romero was right. His own vocation was exactly what Dharen was meant to do.

Specifically, Dharen felt called to a missionary vocation, to be sent to some far-

away place, sharing God's message with the poor — poor in terms of lacking faith, whether or not that also meant financially poor, he clarified.

He considers his time in the U.S. as fulfilling that mission, though Emmitsburg was not exactly part of his initial vision. After graduating from high school in Colombia, he moved to Cartagena to study English while also working at a hospital.

(See **PRIEST D4**)

Priest

(Continued from D1)

Although in Colombia, aspiring priests can enter seminary directly after high school — most theological seminaries in the U.S., including the Mount, require prospective students to attend a four-year college first — Dharen realized with a wisdom beyond his years that committing to a life of celibacy and God at 16 years old might be a bit pre-emptive. He saw the break to pursue academics and employment as a way to discern if the priesthood was truly for him.

He found his work in the hospital's medical offices "boring," more paperwork than practice. He didn't feel the satisfaction at the hospital he felt when he was working with Romero.

He felt called to be a different kind of healer — of souls rather than injuries.

Life outside of work was particularly challenging during this time, too.

Despite his simple upbringing, this was the first time in Dharen's life he truly experienced hunger, sometimes going without food so he could use his meager earnings to support his mother, who was also struggling at the time.

"Studying, working, not eating ... it was tough," he said.

After a year, he decided to enroll in a missionary seminary in Colombia.

He recalled boarding the bus that would take him to the school as the last time he ever seriously felt doubt about his decision.

"I was sitting there and the bus hadn't started moving, and I was like, 'What am I doing?'" he recalled. "I wanted to step out. But then I said, 'I think I can make it,' and I stayed on, and the bus started going."



Staff photos by Bill Green

Sizzling shrimp in the kitchen of Mount St. Mary's Seminary near Emmitsburg.

His experience in the Colombian seminary was different from his studies at the Mount.

"They just send you to a parish and work," he said of the Colombian seminary. "You learn by just doing, and there are a lot of restrictions. Here, you are responsible for your own vocation. There are advisers and directors, of course, but it's up to me to nourish my vocation."

CULTURE CLASH

Dharen appreciated the autonomy. But transitioning to a new seminary while also adjusting to a strange culture with its own language, traditions and customs comes with challenges.

In addition to the philosophy and language classes required for all first-year

seminary students, Dharen also takes an American civics and culture class with other international seminary students. He was amazed to learn the history of gun legislation, as well as the concept of "dry" and "wet" areas under Prohibition.

"Like, places where you can't drink?" he asked. "That's some crazy stuff."

Before starting at the seminary in September, Dharen spent two years in his diocese of Norwich, Connecticut. Like all seminarians, his diocesan bishop selected the Mount as the place for his priestly formation.

It was through the Norwich diocese that Dharen came to the U.S. Though he had little interest in the so-called American dream, he applied at the urging of a

friend who knew someone in the diocese.

And while he aspired to be a missionary, Dharen had never even traveled outside his home country at that point. Priests from Norwich came to Colombia to interview a group of 25 prospective candidates, including Dharen.

His interview, done in English, was "really rough." "I could speak English, but it was this made-up Latino English probably strung with grammar mistakes," he said. "And I was so concentrated on my words, I didn't have time to lie."

But Dharen concluded that "they must have got what they needed" because two days later, he was told they wanted him, and within a few weeks, he was on a plane.

In some ways, he found life in Emmitsburg more culturally shocking than Norwich.

"In Norwich, I noticed things but I didn't have that anthropological background," he said. "I was kind of in this little world of my parish, too."

During his time in Norwich, Dharen assisted a diocesan priest in his church while also taking classes at the University of Connecticut to earn his Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification. Though thousands of miles from home, the largely rural community reminded him of his agrarian upbringing.

While others turned up their noses at the potent smell of cow manure, Dharen welcomed it, relaying a Colombian saying to his parish priest — "smells [like] money."

"When you have cattle in Colombia, you are a wealthy person," he explained.

He enjoyed his classes, acknowledging that even after he studied English in Colombia, there was room for improvement.

THE PEOPLE'S PRIEST

More than studies, Dharen revealed in his work in the church, creating a new training program for the altar servers, testing the culinary waters by cooking dishes for small church group meetings. He even won over the sometimes ornery senior members with what he called "hug therapy."

Rather than greet parishioners with a handshake, Dharen would envelop them in hugs. His warm embraces became so popular that the elderly congregants would line up after Mass to receive their hugs.

"He's very loved, very much a part of our family," said the Rev. Rick Ricard, the priest whose Connecticut parish was the one in which Dharen worked. Ricard added that the parish was looking forward to Dharen's visit at the end of March, for Holy Week.

Ricard named Dharen's warmth, approachability and youthful energy as the source for his parishioners' connection with him, particularly the young altar servers he trained.

Editor's note

This is the third in a six-part monthly series about Mount St. Mary's Seminary. Stories will explore the students and spiritual life of the Emmitsburg-area program, which is one of the oldest and largest theological seminaries in the country.

"I always like our young leaders, who can help young people to get excited about their faith in a way that is affirming, and hopeful and hope-filled," Ricard said. "For me, too, I enjoy that energy, that creativity."

Finding creative ways to make church relevant was important to Dharen. He feared becoming too comfortable, too settled and complacent. He wanted to be open to new ideas, to strive for improvements and innovations.

Dharen hopes the church, too, will embrace new ideas, acknowledging that the institution no longer holds the significance in people's lives that it once did.

"The church is like a computer," he said. "The software is the same as it's always been. But we need to update to work with the people of the time. It's not changing, just updating."

Similarly, his priestly formation has not changed his identity. He's still the same prankster with a love of criminal forensics, likely the influence of his father, whose work things he was never allowed to touch as a child.

Dharen formed a team of seminarians who will compete in a forensic competition at the university next month under the name "Bless Us Stanley Rother Investigations" — a tribute to the seminary graduate and priest whose beatification puts him on the path to becoming a saint.

His once-doubting relatives now accept his vocation, including his no-longer-estranged father, but they treat him differently. His mother sees him as a spiritual adviser, while his grandma Celina addresses him using "usted," the formal form of "you" in Spanish typically reserved for authority or senior figures.

"I say no, Grandma, I am still your grandson," Dharen said. "Tell me when I'm rude, or scold me if I'm late. I am a servant of God, yes, but that doesn't make me different."

Dharen hopes to bring that same spirit to his future congregation after he is ordained. He pictures himself as a simple priest, an academic but not someone holed up studying in an office.

"I want to be among the people, telling them God loves them, listening to them without judging," he said. And he hopes to cook for them, too — not necessarily Food Network-style fine dining, but meals that fill their stomachs and souls.

"When you cook for somebody, you don't think about if they will see your skills," he said. "You think to make them happy. That is the best way to be rewarded."

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