



Fr. Branigan Sherman

Once Ignited, I found My Match

I grew up in Lake Tahoe, California. Like many boys, I loved sports and wanted to be the best at whatever I did, from soccer and basketball to baseball and skiing. And the more adrenaline and potential glory involved, the better.

Aiming for the US Ski Team

Alpine ski racing became my main passion when I was 4 years old, and at age 12 it became a year-around sport due to summer training on glaciers in Oregon, Canada and Europe in preparation for the coming season. That's simply what you did when your goal was to make the US Ski Team and compete at the World Cup and Olympic level.

When I was 15, I joined a ski academy in Salt Lake City, Utah that was known for its coaching and training. By the time I was 16, I was ranked 3rd in the country for my age in slalom, and moving up in giant slalom, super-g and downhill as well. At the end of that season, my Yugoslavian coach called me into his office. It was time to analyze how the season went and plan out the summer training. He told me, You're skiing well and getting good results, but if only this happened one year earlier! His point? In his eyes, for me to be on track to making the US Ski Team, I needed to pull off those results when I was a sophomore in high school, not a junior.

Fine. That simply motivated me to step things up a notch, and I'm sure my coach knew it would. I was off to France, Switzerland and Norway that summer, training on glaciers with two of the top coaches in the alpine skiing world: one a Swede, the other a Norwegian. It was a very productive summer, and going into the winter of my senior year, everything was looking great: my sponsors gave me the same top-of-the-line equipment being used by those competing on the World Cup circuit, my race schedule was all planned out, and I had trained well in the months leading up to that winter.

But there was one problem. A certain thought entered my mind and began to reappear every so often: You can't ski race forever. What will you do with your life after ski racing? That season went well, but my results weren't exceptional a reality which put me at a crossroads and forced me to make a very difficult decision. I could either take the famous year off after high school in order to buckle down, improve my results and try to make the US Ski Team which in practice normally turns into two or three or more years, postponing going to college indefinitely or I could go to college. Going to college was the equivalent of throwing in the towel during a boxing match. For very few, it eventually led to making the US Ski Team. For most, it became a slow exit out of the world of alpine ski racing.

Several of my friends some getting similar results that I was getting, some getting better opted for the year off in order to try and make the team. Part of me wanted to do the same a decision that my coaches would have seen as a good one. But deep down, I knew I wanted to do something more with my life than ski racing. I just didn't know what that something was. All I knew was that college was probably the best way to prepare me for whatever it would be, and it would give me time to figure things out. In the meantime, I could continue ski racing at the NCAA level, thereby keeping my options open (seen as crucial for those in my generation!). So I made the decision to go to college.

It was during my time at Middlebury College in Vermont that I began to perceive God's hand guiding my life. Even though I was raised in a solid family with loving parents who sacrifice themselves for their children and even though we went to Mass on Sundays and I attended CCD each week, we didn't know the Faith very well. So

at college, when I started receiving direct and indirect challenges to the Catholic Faith from my Protestant friends, I found myself incapable of answering very simple questions. Why do you go to a man to confess your sins? I go straight to God. Why do Catholics worship Mary? Why do Catholics believe that good works will get you into heaven? Where is that in the Bible? My dad began receiving similar challenges from friends and acquaintances that he soon realized were Fundamentalists. And not having many answers, he began to look for them.

A Desire Is Ignited

During a visit home for Thanksgiving my junior year at Middlebury, my dad played me a tape of Scott Hahn's conversion story that a Catholic friend had given him. It hit me hard, and I was in tears while listening to it. It caused a lot of things to go on inside of me: on the one hand, after listening to not only a tremendous conversion story but a dynamic explanation of the basics and beauty of the Catholic Faith, I was frustrated that I had never learned what he spoke of with such conviction; and on the other, a desire to learn and spread the faith was ignited within me.

That conversion story tape led to many other Hahn tapes (it seemed like I always had one of his tape sets in my truck, somewhere amongst the ski boots and other sports gear) as well as several books on the faith. When I finally began to understand better what we as Catholics believe and grasped the solid basis for our beliefs about the nature of the Church, about the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and what the early Fathers of the Church believed and taught my convictions deepened and set me on fire. I could at least call myself a convinced and somewhat knowledgeable Catholic at that point. But vocation and priesthood were not even on my mind. Not yet, but God was guiding me in that direction, though at the time I had no idea.

Toward the end of college, I stopped ski racing, having slowly realized that there is indeed more to life than flying down snow-covered mountains. I was becoming more restless inside, and I knew I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. Continuing with ski racing no matter how far I could possibly take it didn't appeal to me anymore. Neither did the routes my college friends were choosing (settling into well-paying jobs, traveling, teaching, pursuing a MA degree, etc). I wanted to do something big; that much I knew. When I looked at possible careers and life decisions, I would ask myself: And then what? So you travel the world and see many places. You make your \$50,000 or \$100,000 a year settling into a good job. Or you get your own little plot of land in the mountains, start a family, etc. When you get to the end of your life and look back on what you have done, what will you be able to say to Jesus Christ? Will he be pleased and say, Well done good and faithful servant. You worked hard for me for my Church. You've spread to others the fire I set in your heart?

After graduating in 1994 from Middlebury College, I went home to frame houses for my dad and helped him start a Catholic radio station. I could perceive God's hand guiding me. I started going to daily Mass with my family and praying the rosary. Just a year earlier I had gone to confession for the first time in 13 years. And in August of 1995, after our application for an FM frequency was sent to the FCC for the Catholic radio station we wanted to start, I took my dad up on his offer to pay for a year of theology classes at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. So I packed my truck, headed to Ohio, and entered their graduate theology program.

Getting Antsy for God's Will

But I didn't go just to study. I was getting antsy, and I wanted to figure out what God wanted me to do with my life. And I was finally free to tackle the vocation question. Before heading out to Steubenville, my girlfriend and I agreed that after our three years together, we needed to let each other go.

Driving up onto the Steubenville campus, the first thing I did was walk down to the perpetual adoration chapel. I wanted to put everything once and for all in God's hands. When I knelt down before our Lord, I prayed something to the effect of, Lord Jesus, you know that up until now, I have been the one trying to dictate the direction of my life. I am tired of doing what I want to do; now I want to do what you want me to do, even if

that means becoming a priest. But you know that I am a spiritual infant: I don't know how to hear you and I don't know how to see you. So if I think you are guiding me in a particular direction, I will go after it whole-heartedly, trusting that if you are my loving Father which I know you are you will either keep opening doors for me or close the door and redirect me, blessing me regardless, because you know that all I want to do is your will. I ended with, Lord, take my will, unite it to yours, and strengthen it like iron. And that became the gist of a prayer I would pray every day as I began to go to daily Mass, pray the rosary, and spend time before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

The even if that means becoming a priest part was something I winced at before adding it into my prayer to Our Lord. Being a priest was something I didn't want I wanted marriage but I wanted to be fully open to whatever God wanted and had planned for me. Within a couple of months, I could see myself as either a husband and a father, or a priest; the desire for both was equal. Strange, I thought. Halfway through the year, I actually started desiring the priesthood. That was really strange, but I realized the only explanation was that God was transforming my heart and desires according to His will and plan for me. My zeal was increasing, and I started truly to appreciate the special role of the priest and how powerfully Christ was transmitted to people through holy priests.

Finding My Match

The following June, 1996, I went on an afternoon retreat with a Legionary priest, Father Michael Goodyear. I was awed at how reverently he celebrated the Mass. When I went to him for confession, I could tell that he was on a mission and the only thing that mattered to him at that moment was my soul. Such was the impact that I decided to unload my whole discernment process on him later that same day and ask him about the Legion of Christ. After listening to him explain a little, I saw a match between who I am and what the Legion is especially with regard to the Legions mission (their plans were big), their apostolic zeal, and their love for Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church.

That moved me to visit the Legions Novitiate in Cheshire, CT later that summer. Doing so let me see and experience the reality that Father Michael spoke of. Seeing how the seminarians were normal guys (they liked sports and were good at them) and how they were on fire for spreading the faith, I realized that the only way to find out if this was indeed where God wanted me was to try it on by living the life of a Legionary in the summer Candidacy program. So I entered the Candidacy, continued to see the match, and entered the Novitiate and received my cassock in September of 1996.

I've continued to see and experience Gods guiding hand throughout my preparation for the priesthood. He has led me to the pearl of great price, something far greater than I had ever imagined as a boy flying down those ski slopes and enjoying his creation to the full. He has continued to pour his grace upon me, preparing me to be part of his army of chosen instruments in whose hands are entrusted the mysteries of salvation. He has prepared me to be his priest.

During my discernment, one particular conviction has really stuck with me: that God has a plan and has created each of us for a specific mission. And when he sees his children seeking out that plan and willing to embrace it, he reveals his plan and guides us into it. He is our Father; he loves us, and when it comes to revealing his plans, he doesn't play games. He wants to reveal and guide, but he wants to see that we will be faithful in following him when he entrusts us with the priceless gift of our vocation.

Father Branigan Sherman was born in Santa Monica, CA in 1972 and grew up in Lake Tahoe, CA. He graduated from Middlebury College in 1994. He entered the Novitiate of the Legion of Christ in Cheshire, CT, in 1996, obtained his BA in Philosophy from the Legions Pontifical University Regina Apostolorum in Rome, and then worked in the Legions vocation office for North America. Having completed his BA in Theology, he currently resides at the Legions General Directorate in Rome and is working towards his Licentiate in Theology. Father Branigan also serves on the Executive Committee of Immaculate Heart Radio, a growing Catholic radio network

founded by his father, Doug Sherman, when Father Branigan entered the Legion of Christ.

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