

## First blind seminarian at Mount Angel sees beyond external trappings



Tony Del Castillo, a second-year theology student for the Diocese of Orange, California, walks with his guide dog, Dagwood, toward the church at Mount Angel Oct. 1. Del Castillo was turned away from the first seminary he applied to due to his blindness. "It was tough," said the 40-year-old. "But it was a good lesson in patience and perseverance." (Katie Scott/Catholic Sentinel)



Katie Scott  
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**ST. BENEDICT** — Tony Del Castillo cannot see. Yet he says a friend's question years ago helped him perceive people with clarity, to look beyond an individual's quirks, foibles and facades.

"God used her to open up my eyes in a sense," said Del Castillo, the first blind seminarian at Mount Angel Seminary in its 130-year history.

The 40-year-old sat in a classroom in October recalling the early impetus for his vocation journey. His guide dog, a black Labrador named Dagwood, rested at his feet. A lecture on modern philosophy had just finished and Mount Angel professor Andrew Cummings collected his notes.

"When I make a controversial point and it gets too tense, Dagwood lets us know with a growl," said Cummings with a smile.

Del Castillo, a second-year theology student for the Diocese of Orange, California, was born with Leber congenital amaurosis, an eye disorder that affects the retina. His brother has the same condition.

The boys' parents, both committed Catholics, were advocates on behalf of their sons and others with disabilities, fighting at the state and national levels to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

"They helped me learn to speak up for myself and to be an advocate," said the seminarian.

Del Castillo is a skilled pianist and drummer, and after high school he studied jazz at the University of Southern California.

One memorable day his friend Lisa, a devout Christian, asked him in a nervous tone of voice, "How can I love you better?"

"The way she said it, I knew she wanted to know how she should treat me as a blind person," recalled Del Castillo. "Most people don't know if they're going to say something offensive. I told her to treat me like she would anyone else. But her question spoke volumes because she included the word 'love.' What she was really saying was, 'What's the best way to get beyond the surface? Because you are someone that I like as a friend but can love as a brother.'

"That was one of those points that inspired me to grow in my faith," Del Castillo said. "It started to change my whole outlook on life and how I look at other people. God's sight tells us that we have to look past what's superficial."

His revelations prompted his involvement with USC's Catholic center and a music ministry. Since there weren't hymnals in braille, Del Castillo listened to the music to memorize it by ear.

"The music was a good teacher," he said. "I learned more about things we believe as Catholics because music can convey teachings about social justice, the Eucharist, God's love."

Del Castillo started considering the priesthood in 2003, but his passion remained music. He earned a master's in popular music and taught blind youths percussion.

It was a chance to transmit the lessons he'd gained from his parents. When students would come up to him and say, "I can't do this or that in school," he'd say, "Yes, you can. I've done it. But you need to learn to be an advocate for yourself."

The seminarian added that blindness has helped him identify with a range of people "who are thought of as 'the other,'" and he hopes through his vocation to lift up those who've been dismissed — "be they homeless, immigrants, or dealing with racism or sexism."

In 2014, Del Castillo began seriously to explore the priesthood and went through a discernment process. He applied to a seminary and received unanimous recommendations that he was a good candidate.

"Unfortunately, the rector of that seminary basically told my vocations director: 'Tell him that he shouldn't even apply.' They didn't know how they were going deal with me."

Del Castillo sent a letter to the rector saying he understood the concerns but that he'd like to discuss ways it might work out. It was fruitless.

"That was tough," said Del Castillo. "But it was a good lesson in patience and perseverance."

Eventually he applied to Mount Angel, which was open to the possibility of a blind seminarian, and he began studies last year.

"I was amazed by how peaceful it is here, and the people are awesome," said Del Castillo, who holds no animosity toward the first seminary. "It wasn't right how they handled it, but in the long run this is better how it worked out."

Del Castillo has adapted well at Mount Angel. He's often able to get course material in braille or audio or scan a book and convert it into audio. He regularly uses a touch-screen tablet that includes braille.

As self-sufficient as he is, Del Castillo reaches out for assistance when needed. It took a while to get comfortable navigating campus, "but the guys are great and helped me out," he said of his fellow seminarians.

"And Dagwood here, he helps me be more independent," he said, adding with a grin that "the guys think of him as the seminary mascot, and he's also a holy dog."

He once took Dagwood outside for a bathroom break and encountered a group of seminarians about to start a walking rosary. They invited Del Castillo to join, but he had lots of homework to finish and kept trying to tug the dog back inside. Dagwood had his own ideas. "And, well, guess who ended up praying the rosary that day?" Del Castillo said, laughing.

Father Steve Clovis is vice president of administration and director of human formation at Mount Angel. "There are things that Tony and Dagwood depend on us for — simple things — and they give us profound things in return," said the priest, who'd stopped to say hello and scratch the guide dog, then off-duty and therefore available for pats and scratches.

"They inspire us and humble us," said Father Clovis. "They remind us of what we can give and be for others and what others can give and be for us. It's been a blessing having them here."

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