

Fr. Lee joined St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park in 2003 and was ordained to the priesthood on May 20, 2006. He served with Fr. Larry Young at St. Patrick parish in Pinole before moving to CCOP in Pleasanton and then to Holy Spirit Parish in Fremont. Fr. Lee, whose baptism name is Raphael, serves not only God's people in the Oakland Diocese, but also the Thai Catholics here in California: from LA to Sacramento. The following article was published in Catholic Voice before his ordination.

Weerasak (Lee) Chompoonchan's journey to the priesthood began with one good long look. As a youngster Chompoonchan, who attended Mass nearly every day, would watch with a sense of awe as a priest presided at Mass. "I thought to myself, 'He's dressed very nice,'" he recalled. "And I wanted to be like him."

Chompoonchan's call to ministry deepened several years later when he spent time working with missionaries in the hill country of his native Thailand. He traveled with members of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram, a religious congregation based there, who went to northern Thailand each summer to live with and serve members of the hill tribes, who were very poor.

The missionaries faced various challenges, such as walking long distances between the villages they served, Chompoonchan said. "I felt they are Jesus in spirit. They worked very hard, but they looked very happy," he explained. "That was a big motivation for me to be a priest."

Chompoonchan's journey to the priesthood was also bolstered by growing up in a family that he described as "very religious." Born in northeast Thailand, he is the middle child in a family of 10 children. An older sister is a nun and his seven brothers all went to the seminary to be educated.

Despite growing up in a large family, Chompoonchan said that no one went hungry. "We had plenty of food to eat," he said. "We didn't worry about money. We'd just go out and find some food outside when I was a kid." Their diet mostly consisted of rice and fish.

Chompoonchan earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Saengtham College in Thailand. Then the Sacred Heart congregation, which he had joined, sent him to England to study English for two years. After returning to Bangkok, he studied theology at the major seminary.

Needing a break, Chompoonchan left the seminary after completing his theological studies and took a job as a teacher at a Catholic school in Bangkok. There he taught English for two years to students in grades one through 12.

Chompoonchan left the congregation after nearly 14 years – and only one year before he would have been ordained a priest for the congregation – because he felt called to serve as a diocesan priest rather than as a member of a religious community. He wanted to work more closely with people in a parish rather than live in a congregation that required a more structured lifestyle such as scheduled community prayers.

That desire to be a diocesan priest received a boost when his former rector in Thailand, Father Terry O'Malley, relocated to the Oakland Diocese. He invited Chompoonchan to move to the East Bay as well. The prospective priest moved to the U.S. in 2002 and was accepted as a candidate for the diocese's priestly formation program.

Chompoonchan spent a year studying English, first at Holy Names University in Oakland and then at

California State University East Bay before entering St. Patrick's Seminary. He is completing a master's of divinity degree.

The prospective priest spent his pastoral year at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Concord., learning from Father Jerry Brown, pastor at St. Francis, and the parish community. He accompanied Father Brown on visits to the sick and attended meetings with different parish groups.

"Even though I worried about my English, the language didn't matter," he said. "I could feel that we were one in Christ."