

My Journey from Shamanism to Ordination

by Deacon Moualee Thao



I was born and raised in a shamanism society. I experienced shamanism through my mother. She was a shaman (spiritual healer) for our family and the community. In the shamanism beliefs¹, one cannot choose to become a shaman unless the shamanic spirit chooses or calls that individual. When the spirit chooses someone to become a shaman, that person experiences or suffers from very poor health. Prior to my mother becoming a shaman, she became very ill for many years. Due to her illness, she decided to become a shaman and soon after that her health was restored. Hmong people believe that suffering from poor health is a call from the spirit. So, in order to restore one's good health, the individual being called needs to perform animal sacrifices and become a shaman.

After the Vietnam war ended in 1975, our family came to the United States. My mother stopped practicing shamanism. My mother and my family converted to Catholicism in 1981. My mother was a good

Catholic and trusted Jesus to forgive her sins for what she practiced before becoming a Christian. My mother was born into eternal life on April 2009 at the age of 82 in Milwaukee, WI.

From my childhood to today, I experienced shamanism and God. As far back as I can remember I have always had a passion to help others. As I grew older, my desire to serve others grew stronger. I decided to apply to the Diaconate Formation Program a couple of years ago. I was accepted into the program and began my four-year journey. During these four years, I faced many challenges along the way. One of the biggest challenges I had was the English language. I had a difficult time comprehending the readings.

There were numerous times when I thought I was not going to make it through the program. My wife was a big supporter. She always encouraged me to hang in there. She said, "You will never quit because I am here to support you and the Hmong Catholic Community is waiting for you." I truly believe that the Holy Spirit was speaking to me through my wife because after hearing her saying those words, I felt at peace. I felt energized and more focused on whatever I needed to do in class. In addition to my wife's support and encouragement, I always prayed. I thought about how Jesus suffered and died on the Cross for us, and he never complained to His Father about his suffering. The encouraging words from my wife and the thought of the sacrifices that Jesus made ignited my heart and helped me to overcome all of the obstacles during my four years formation in the Diaconate Program.

What does ordination mean to me? There are many different ways on how each individual views or values ordination. For me, ordination means that I was called by God to serve. Who do I need to serve? My call was to serve all peoples. There are approximately 20,000 Hmong people living in Milwaukee, WI and over 500,000 Hmong people living in the United States. However, there are less than 500 Hmong Catholic in Milwaukee, WI and less than 5,000 Hmong Catholics in the United States. Because Hmong is my native language and I hope I can help the non-English-speaking Hmong Catholic to grow in their faith and evangelize the non-Christian Hmong as well. My goal is to bring the Good News of Christ to the Hmong communities and beyond.

¹ Shamanism: practices and beliefs linked to communication with the spirits of nature and the spirits of dead people through ritualised possession (by the spirits) of a shaman, who serves as a medium. . . it stresses harmony with the forces of nature and healing (Pontifical Council for Culture, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interrelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html).

Lastly, my journey from shamanism to ordination is a gift or a call from God. I was blessed by God by answering His called to serve His people. My recent ordination celebration was not about me, but it was about God's calling. Therefore, I am committed to serving God and others under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, my Archbishop and priests. I will need all of you, brothers and sisters, to pray for me, because I am still learning to become a good deacon and will be facing many challenges. However, with your continued prayers and trust in the Lord, I believe we will fulfill God's Mission.

About Deacon. Moualee Thao: *Deacon Moualee was born and raised in shamanism and then converted to Catholicism in 1981. He was ordained a permanent deacon on September 8, 2018 in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, WI. He is a refugee from Laos. He came to the United States in 1979 from a refugee camp in Ban Vinai, Thailand. He has been serving the Hmong Catholic community in Milwaukee for over 25 years as a lay person. He will continue to serve the Hmong Catholics and other ethnic groups at St. Michael and St. Rose in Milwaukee, WI. He is self-employed and living with his wonderful wife and four children in Germantown, Wisconsin.*