

# KEN GROOMS

**“So, are you a Protestant or a Catholic?”**

Transitional Deacon Ken Grooms was on vacation in Europe in 1987 and aboard the night ferry from Holyhead, England, to Dublin when a storm suddenly came up in the middle of the Irish Sea. The boat began to rock, and he lost his grip on the pole he was hanging on to and fell onto a seat next to an elderly Irish lady, who posed the question.

Having no knowledge of the troubles in Ireland, Deacon Grooms took it as a sign that God was speaking directly to him.

The words shot out of his mouth: “I’m a Protestant, but I’m converting to Catholicism!”

“I had no idea where [those words] came from,” said Deacon Grooms. “I never even thought about being a Catholic before. When we landed in Dublin I made a beeline to the first Catholic church I could find and told the pastor I wanted to convert!”

A few weeks earlier, as a graduate student at the University of South Carolina, Deacon Grooms had a conversion experience. One night while studying, he said, he felt a darkness come over him and a deep sense of guilt.

“This lasted for only a few seconds,” he said. “Then I heard the voice of Jesus: ‘Know that I am with you always, until the end of time.’ I said [to myself], ‘That’s it!’ I was instantly converted. I knew that God had a plan for me and that my life was changed forever.”

Born in 1963 in Charleston, S.C., the fifth of six children, Deacon Grooms was raised a Southern Baptist. His father didn’t practice the faith, but his mother was devout.

“She took us to church every Sunday,” said Deacon Grooms. “Because I was a quiet child, I didn’t stay in the

childcare very long at church. Mom let me stay with her in the pew. I remember sleeping there with my head resting on her lap. Maybe that’s why I always felt at home in church.”

The priest at the church in Ireland told him to go back to America and sign up for RCIA. He returned to the University of South Carolina and began catechism lessons with a priest who was the campus minister. He was received into the Church at Easter 1988.

In 1989, Deacon Grooms moved to New York to study at Fordham University. He also worked as a volunteer for the Missionaries of Charity on weekends, which, after leaving Fordham prior to a degree, became a full-time volunteer position for him for the next two and a half years.

Eventually he met a family from Merrick who was looking for a full-time caregiver for their children and grandparents. He worked with the family for the next 20 years.

After his conversion, Deacon Grooms had contemplated a vocation to religious life. In 2012, sensing a call to monastic life, he entered Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina, a Trappist monastery and daughter house of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. But after only a year, he discerned out.

“I felt lonely,” Deacon Grooms said. “There were retreatants there, but we weren’t really supposed to talk to them. We didn’t take a vow of silence, but it was close enough.”

He returned to Merrick and began attending daily Mass and Eucharistic Adoration. He discerned a call to diocesan priesthood but, at age 50, he thought he was too old. He contacted his spiritual director, who assured him he wasn’t too old and put him in touch with Vocations Director Father Joe Fitzgerald to begin the seminary process.

Deacon Grooms entered Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, Mass., where men over age 30 are sent to study for the priesthood. This spring he received his master of divinity degree.

“I always told him he would be a priest one day,” said Father Stanislaw Wadowski, pastor of the Church of St. Anne in Brentwood, who has known Deacon Grooms for almost 30 years, since their volunteer days with the Missionaries of Charity. “I had no doubt he had a priestly vocation. He is great with the elderly, with street people, nuns, priests, kids and families. I was always impressed by his journey.”

When asked what he looks forward to the most about becoming a priest, Deacon Grooms responded, “That’s an easy one — the people.”

“I’m amazed at how humble and kind and generous people are,” he said “and how much they love God, love the Church and love their clergy.”



PHOTO BY ED CASEY