

As a child he played at being priest

Many years later, Fr. Edgardo Jara Araya, OFM, celebrates Mass at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Triangle, Va. For Fr. Lalo, as parishioners call him, it has been a long journey since he discovered that the Lord was calling him to holy orders.



THE AMAZING CALL OF GOD

Text and photos by Octavio Duran, OFM

Edgardo Jara Araya always wanted to be a priest, so much so that from the time he was a child he wore his father's long white shirts to simulate a chasuble.

With his friends, he pretended to celebrate Mass or lead processions in the Maracaná neighborhood of Ciudad Quesada, an agricultural and livestock district in the province of Alajuela in Costa Rica.

Everything indicates that he was

born with a priestly vocation.

"My father, Victorino Jara Jiménez, always wanted to be a priest, but his father did not allow him to go to the seminary, and my mother, Melitina Araya Gamboa, explored a vocation as a religious sister for about four or five years," says the now-Franciscan priest, better known as Father Lalo. "During a vacation, she decided not to return to the convent, and some time later she met my father."

Ciudad Quesada, also known as San Carlos, is located at the foot of the central mountain range and, according to Fr. Lalo, is a town with many religious values. Its parish is currently the San Carlos Borromeo Cathedral of the Diocese of Ciudad Quesada.

Father Lalo doesn't actually remember that he played at being a priest. He read about it in the letters his mother wrote to him while he was in his first novitiate at the Convent of the Santuario Santa María del Pueblito, in Querétaro, Mexico, in 1999. He ended up there because of a visit to Querétaro two years earlier when Fr. Lalo rediscovered his vocation after meeting a Franciscan friar in the Temple and Convent of the Holy Cross.

But a family situation interrupted his novitiate, and he had to return to Costa Rica to be with his younger brother Víctor, who was going through a serious depression due to harassment he received because of his sexual orientation.

"It was very difficult, but, with the help of God, one day I was able to get up and say, I have to leave my vocation because I need to be with my family," says Fr. Lalo.



Passionate about Hispanic ministry

Attentive to the Latinos at St. Francis of Assisi Church, Fr. Lalo spares no effort to keep up with their spiritual needs.

The worst was yet to come

“On Good Friday, when I got up, I didn’t see my brother in the house and, together with my sisters, we started looking for him. My instinct was to go looking for him behind the house where a small river passes,” recalls Fr. Lalo. “Suddenly, I saw all the pill bottles that my brother was taking for depression under an oak tree and, near there, his inert body on the river bank.”

With that deep pain, he wondered how he would communicate the tragedy to his parents, but they were not far behind. When they saw the body of their son, they could not contain their despair and also wanted to throw themselves into the river.

“I don’t know where I found the strength to hug them,” says Fr. Lalo. “We waited until the authorities arrived to identify the body.”

Two years after the loss of his brother, the young Edgardo entered the diocesan seminary in San José, Costa Rica, but his desire to be a friar still haunted him, and, during the third year of theology, he decided to take some time figure out what to do.

For six years he tried to discern God’s call. Meanwhile, he worked teaching ethics, philosophy, psychology, and religious education in two Catholic schools in northern Costa Rica.

Being a dynamic young man, he was one of 18 young leaders from the Federation of Cooperatives of Costa Rica who got the opportunity to participate in a cultural exchange in Canada.

When he returned to Costa Rica, he studied business administration and worked in a bank in his hometown, where he became the head of the international department.

“I had a house, a car, and many friends, but over time I realized that they were not really friends,” says Fr. Lalo. “Everything was party and joy.” Like St. Francis of Assisi, Fr. Lalo began to realize how shallow his life had become and that he had to change not only his lifestyle but his role in God’s call.

Time passed, and one day, ten years after the death of his brother, Edgardo saw his mother smile again on Christmas Day.

He contacted the Central American Franciscan Province, but the vocation director recommended he look for a province in the United States where they accept older candidates.

Through the internet, he communicated with the friars of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe in New Mexico, whose director of vocations was Fray Gonzalo Moreno, OFM, whom he had once met in Mexico. A year later, he began his second postulancy in New Mexico.

During the formation process, he met some friars from Holy Name Province, who told him that on the East Coast there were more Central American friars and that was not as arid as the Southwest.

While waiting to begin his third postulancy, this time with Holy Name Province, he spent the summer at Holy Name College and helped at San Camillus Parish in Silver Spring, Md. where he worked with Ecclesial Communities, something similar to what he already experienced when he was a teenager and a member of a Base Ecclesial Community in Ciudad Quesada.

Upon completion of his novitiate, he was sent to the Franciscan

School of Theology in Berkeley, Ca., where he earned a Master of Divinity before being ordained a Franciscan priest in 2017.

His interest in Base Ecclesial Communities — he is an advisor to BEC’s in the United States and a member of CEB Continental — will be reflected in his doctoral dissertation on this topic at Fordham University, where he is currently completing a doctorate in pastoral theology.

Currently, Fr. Lalo is in charge of the Hispanic Ministry at St. Francis of Assisi in Triangle, Va., where he continues his studies online because of the pandemic.

Due to Covid, the Archdiocese of Washington asked him to pray the rosary during the month of May, which he did through his Facebook page. At the end of the month, the parishioners asked him to continue communicating with them on the same medium. Thus was born “Cafeteando con el Padre Lalo,” a program through social media that has reached a great audience and many followers.

This talented friar quickly connected with his audience and now collaborates on two programs on a local radio station, Radio Unida.

Two Saturdays a month he participates in the second hour of “An Encounter with Jesus and Mary,” and two Sundays a month he collaborates on the program “Marriage: A project of God.”

“The media is a good instrument to evangelize the people of God,” says Fr. Lalo, who has followed an amazing path towards the priesthood and the service of God. ■