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Four new priests now serving in the Diocese of Boise

Updated: 1 day ago

The following story appeared in the August 26 Idaho Catholic Register.

With a heavy and sorrowful heart, I share the troubling news that our brother, Father Robert (Toto) Mendez, was arrested this afternoon in Nampa, Idaho. It is our understanding that he faces charges of sexual battery of a minor. At present, we have few details, but as this matter unfolds in the public eye, we expect to learn more. In light of these grave circumstances, I have removed Father Toto's faculties pending further clarity.

I humbly ask for your fervent prayers, for the alleged victim, for Father Toto, for the faithful of St. Paul's community in Nampa, and for our entire Diocese as we navigate this painful moment. May we entrust ourselves to the intercession of St. Michael the Archangel, seeking his protection and guidance.

In Christ's mercy,
Bishop Peter



Father Robert "Toto" Mendez, a member of the Neocatechumenal Way, is one of two new parochial vicars at St. Paul's Parish in Nampa. (Courtesy photo/Father Robert Mendez)

By Emily Woodham

Staff Writer

Father Robert “Toto” Mendez never considered becoming a priest until, at age 24, he went to India. After nine months of being a part of a mission there for the Neocatechumenal Way, he felt a call to the priesthood. (The Neocatechumenal Way is a Catholic association founded in Spain during Vatican II that provides post-baptismal formation to adults who are already members of the Church or to those far from the Church who have been attracted by the testimony of Christian life.)

“I fell in love with the Church; I fell in love with God,” Father Mendez says of his experience in India. “Deciding to become a priest was the best decision in my life. Because once you say yes to God, He starts moving things in your favor.”

Father Mendez serves as a parochial vicar at St. Paul’s Parish in Nampa.

Father Mendez grew up in a small city on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. Although his family was faithful to the Church, he was not very religious.

In 1996, when he was 16, his father passed away suddenly from a heart attack. The tragedy strengthened the faith of his family, he said. “Through his death, I realized how God becomes the father of the family, that He really does not abandon the orphan or the widow,” Father Mendez said.

He stayed in Costa Rica to pursue his bachelor’s degree in International Relations and his master’s degree in International Cooperation, which he finished when he was 23. But, he says, he did not find happiness in his success as a student or in his career.

“I was lonely. I was bored with money, work, girlfriends, the things of the world,” he said. In 2004, he decided that life had to have more meaning than he was experiencing.

"If God exists, I thought, He cannot want for us this miserable life," he said. "I prayed, and I realized that there is something beyond earthly happiness, so I decided to go and to search for it."

Father Mendez spoke with people in his parish, who were members of the Neocatechumenal Way. The association sent him to Italy for a week of prayer and discernment. At the end of the week, he was asked if he was ready to go anywhere in the world. Even though the place he was to serve – India – was drawn from a basket, he believe the call was providential.

"I traveled half the world without speaking English, just trusting in God and His Providence," he said.

In the Neocatechumenal Way, missionaries live among the poor, adapting to their customs and preaching the gospel through the way they live. Of all the difficulties of adjusting to a life without any connection to his home in Costa Rica, learning English was among the most difficult tasks for Father Mendez. After six months, he still was unsure of where God was calling him. He stayed another three months, and that's when his heart opened, he said.

He attended seminary at a Neocatechumenal Way seminary in Bangalore, in the south of India, the safest area for Catholics. Catholicism only makes up 1 percent of the population, which is predominantly Hindu. Because it is illegal to convert others, the missionaries must present the gospel through the way they live and act, without speaking directly about Jesus.

This witness-in-action has converted many to the Church, Father Mendez said. As people notice the difference in the lives of Catholics, they become curious about their beliefs and motivations. Finding out about the love of Jesus is so powerful that the people are willing to be baptized although it might cost them relationships with friends and family, or even their lives, he said.

"One man said to me, 'We have 30 million gods, and none of these have ever told me that he loves me. Only your God has told me that He loves me as I am.' "

The Neocatechumenal Way has seminaries and communities around the world, including in several cities throughout the United States.

"The aim of their seminaries is to form missionary priests. The only condition is to be open to the will of God, to be open to whatever He wants," he said. In abandoning oneself to Providence, he said, one experiences God's love and provision in a profound way, he said.

In 2015, he went to Rome on a pilgrimage with missionary families of the Neocatechumenal Way.

"Pope Francis met with us, and then laid hands on us and sent us. We cannot go anywhere in the world if the Church does not send us," he said.

Father Mendez was ordained to the priesthood in 2016. Two years later, he returned to his native Costa Rica to reconnect with his family, especially his mother. He worked in three parishes in his diocese. Then in 2021, he began working in a Catholic school.

During his vacation this summer, he decided to meet an old friend who lives in the Diocese of Brooklyn. At first, he thought of going to Brooklyn to serve, but he decided to consider other dioceses in America who needed priests. Among the dioceses that stood out was the Diocese of Boise. He contacted several dioceses. Father Caleb Vogel, vicar general of the Diocese of Boise, replied to him the most quickly.

After staying in New York for a month due to paperwork, Father Mendez arrived in Boise at the beginning of August. He was assigned as a parochial vicar at St. Paul's.

Not having seen Idaho before he arrived, he is delighted by the state's beauty and is impressed by the population growth in Idaho, which presents opportunities for building up those in the Church as well as evangelizing those who do not know Christ or who have fallen away.

"Our God is a God of life," he said. "The most important thing is to announce to the people the love of God. We need to especially bring back our youth ... The Word of God brings happiness. We need to show them this happiness in God."

Diocese of Boise gets two more priests from Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy

