

# WE'RE ALL DIFFERENT, AND ALL WONDERFUL

## A MISSIONARY'S JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

By Fr. Zachary Smith, SVD

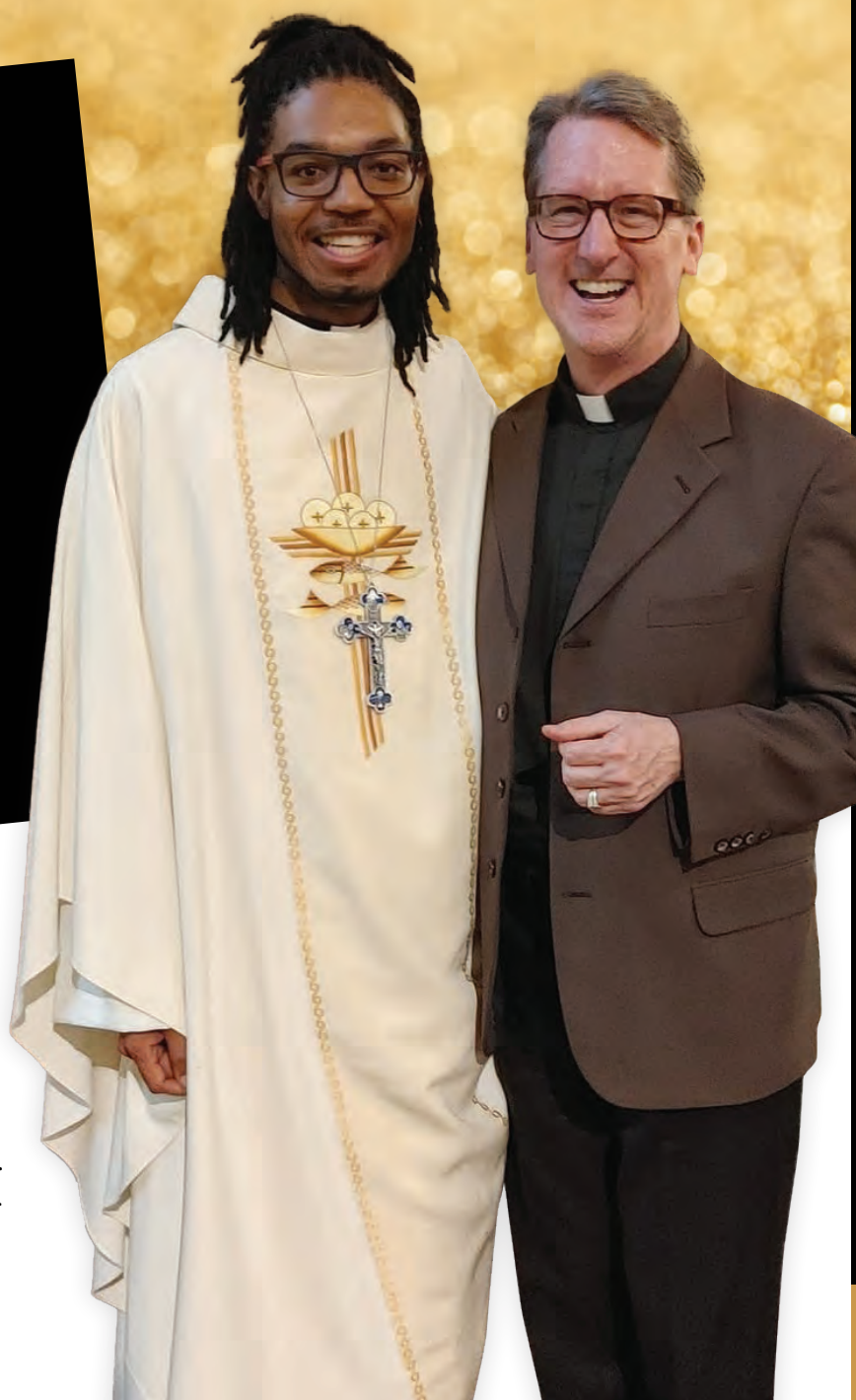
### ME,, A BIRD,, AND A BELL

Even if I spread out both my arms,  
I can't fly in the sky at all,  
But the little bird that can fly  
Can't run fast like I can.  
Even if I shake my body,  
I can't make beautiful sounds,  
But that ringing bell, unlike me,  
Doesn't know as many songs.  
The bell, the bird, and then me —  
We're all different, and all wonderful.

- By Misuzu Kaneko

When I first encountered this poem during my CTP in Japan, I was deeply moved. It reminded me that even if there are many things I can't do or don't know, I can still encounter what I can do and discover what I can know. When we are born, we can hardly do anything and know almost nothing — yet, as we slowly gain the ability to do and learn more, it feels as if our world gradually expands. Each small step builds who we are and enriches our lives.

Fr. Zachary with Vocation Director  
Fr. Adam MacDonald, SVD



My name is Zachary Smith, and I am currently working in Tokyo. I was born and raised outside Detroit, Michigan. Though not Catholic, my family enrolled me in a Catholic school in kindergarten. I still remember attending Mass for the first time; I felt a physical, whole-body reaction. I thought, “The Lord is calling me.” But I didn’t know what God was calling me for. I was eventually baptized at age 16.

The thought of entering religious life never occurred to me. My grade school, high school, and parish were all staffed by Jesuits, and several suggested that I consider joining them one day. However, I wanted to become a doctor, so I ignored their invitation and went to the University of Pittsburgh to study microbiology. Over time, my interest in lab work faded, and I began to feel lost. I became a licensed EMT-B. Many of the patients I met had physical injuries, but others had wounds that bandages or medicine couldn’t heal. By listening to their worries and simply being present, I could help soothe their emotional pain — even if only a little. This experience prompted me to reconsider religious life. I thought I might be able to listen to people’s stories and explore the emotional wounds of the human heart.

I met my first SVD, Vocation Director Fr. Adam MacDonald, on the steps of the cathedral in Pittsburgh. Maybe it was the bagpipes (there was a memorial Mass for firefighters), or maybe the idea of missionary life, but whatever it was, despite knowing little about the SVD, I transferred to Divine Word College — and the rest is history. DWC was a very interesting place, and I was blessed to meet and interact with people from around the world.

In 2018, I came to Japan for my Cross-Cultural Training Program (CTP). I was somewhat excited but mostly nervous, having never seriously studied a foreign language or lived outside the U.S. Learning Japanese was incredibly difficult, but I managed. After two years of language study, just as I prepared for my pastoral year, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The CTP director arranged a volunteer opportunity at Nanzan Elementary School, where I taught English and religion. I’ll never forget how the students approached each lesson with joy. Their openness to question and share inspired me to do the same.

After returning to Chicago, I began to question what kind of ministry I should pursue. I understood my weaknesses — but didn’t know my strengths. When I received the news that I would return to Japan, I felt relief, but also



sadness about leaving loved ones, and anxiety that I had forgotten Japanese.

Those worries vanished thanks to women I met, not in Japan, but during my diaconate. I joined the “Knit Wits,” a group that knits baby blankets and hats for organizations supporting newborns and struggling mothers. Of all the things these women taught me, the words that stuck most were: “Only God is perfect.” Even when my blankets had holes or mistakes, they comforted me with those words. Over time, I realized this didn’t just apply to knitting — it also applied to *my life*.

Until then, I had been a perfectionist, always trying to do everything right. I was afraid of mistakes, chasing perfect grades, trying to be the ideal student. Being a missionary is full of challenges — entering new cultures, learning new languages, realizing how big and small the world is. No matter how hard we try, we make mistakes. We conjugate verbs wrong, use incorrect utensils, or say the wrong greetings. And that’s okay — because only God is perfect.

Now, I have begun a new life as an associate pastor at Kichijoji Church. Everything is a first for me. I still fumble for words, struggle to remember names, and often get lost. But I’m encouraged by the support of those around me — friends I studied with in Epworth and at the Theologate, some of whom have even come as far as Tokyo to reconnect. I think of people like my DWC instructors Dr. Marilyn Taylor and Fr. Bill Shea, SVD, who continue to challenge and inspire me, and so many others who made it possible for me to be here.

I don’t know what work I’ll do in the future, though it’s possible I may pursue higher studies, potentially within the Nanzan School Corporation. Wherever this journey leads and the Spirit guides me, I hope we can build a world where we recognize one another and say, “We’re all different, and all wonderful.”