

A Journey of Faith: John Vespa's Inspiring Path to Priesthood in Rome

By John Abrahams

Back in 1998, as a fresh-faced Year 8 coordinator at Parade College, I first encountered John Vespa—a reasonably quiet, thoughtful student in my Religious Education class, nestled in the back row of Room 24. Little did I know that this unassuming young man would one day captivate the world with his extraordinary journey. Now, 27 years later, I smile at the memory of those formative days at Waterford, where John and his 261 fellow year level 8 classmates forged lifelong bonds. For John, that classroom was just the beginning of a remarkable odyssey—from a Parade graduate to a priest ordained by Pope Leo XIV in St. Peter's Basilica on June 27, 2025, during the Church's Year of Jubilee.

John's story is one of resilience, faith, and divine timing—what he calls “the Holy Spirit at work.” It began at Parade College, where he entered as a Year 7 student in 1997 and graduated in 2002. John recalls, “those years were filled with laughter, great teachers, and friendships that endured.” A turning point came during a Year 12 street retreat in 2002, when, at 18, John slept rough and served the homeless. “That's where I became conscious of the Spirit working in me,” he later told me, his voice tinged with awe. That seed of vocation took years to bloom, but it was unmistakable.

Post-Parade, John didn't rush to the seminary. Instead, he dove into the hospitality world, starting as a pizza maker and rising to restaurant manager while completing chef apprenticeships in Melbourne. A 2007 setback—being fired from William Angliss—became a catalyst. Undeterred, he travelled to London and Italy, honing his craft. Back in Melbourne by 2010, he studied nutrition, showcasing his versatility. A pivotal moment I clearly remember came around 2016 at Mass at Newman College, where John spoke freely about the priesthood with his insightful questions about seminary life. It wasn't hard to see the internal wheels turning, as John was embracing and discerning a huge decision.

After 17 years of discernment, John's calling crystallized post-Easter 2018. He met Melbourne's vocations director and began seminary life on February 17, 2019. “When I stepped into the seminary, I felt at home,” he shared with me, his eyes lighting up. The COVID years (2020-2021) tested his resolve with online studies, but the community's strength carried him through. His 2022 pastoral placement with Father John Salvano and diaconate ordination at St. Bede's, Balwyn, cemented his path.

The crescendo arrived with an email from the Vatican on June 3, 2025, scheduling his ordination for the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. After prayerful discernment at St. Francis of Assisi in Mill Park, John flew to Rome, staying near St.

Peter's to prepare. On June 27, the world watched as Pope Leo XIV laid hands on him in a resplendent ceremony. International reports from Vatican News hailed it as "a moment of profound spiritual renewal," with the Holy Father praising John's "journey of trust in God's perfect timing." John, visibly moved, told *The Tablet*: "Standing in St. Peter's, I felt the weight and joy of every step that brought me here. It hit me like a wave."

The ordination was a global spectacle, broadcast live to millions. Clad in white vestments, John knelt as the Pope anointed him, the basilica's grandeur amplifying the solemnity. "I was overwhelmed by the love—my family, friends from Parade, and even strangers praying for me," he recounted. A personal anecdote: I remember his mischievous grin during a class debate about faith—now, that same spirit shines through his priesthood.

John's path resonates with others worldwide. *Catholic Herald* quoted him saying, "God always knows the right time—my 17-year wait was preparation." John hoped to visit Assisi and continue to walk in the steps of St Francis and also echo a pre-seminary trip to Assisi that had a huge impact on him and shaped who he is. As John prepares for a life as a disciple in the service of others, he exudes peace. "I'm excited, full of joy, and ready to serve," he told me, his voice steady and sure.

For his Parade community, John's message is heartfelt: "Trust in God and cherish your time at Parade—it's a fruitful place. Learn about Edmund Rice; his legacy lives in us." His story, enriched by faith and grit, inspires all. As John steps into this new chapter, let's keep Fr. John Vespa in our prayers—his journey is a testament to the power of listening to the Spirit.