

# From Mammon to God

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**NEW LIFE:** The job fulfilment just didn't add up for a former accountant but Fr Noel Kehoe has since found his true calling as a Redemptorist priest

**THE YOUNGEST** of six children, Noel Kehoe says there was never any real pressure on him as a youngster to achieve academically.

The family business was in the auto trade in Newry, and Kehoe worked spare hours filling petrol or helping with the car sales aspect of the company. His interest in languages was clear in secondary school where he took A-Levels in French, Spanish, Irish and Maths.

“From there I went to university in Coleraine, where I began a degree in European business studies. It gave me both the practical side of things and I had wanted to travel and see a bit of the world so it allowed for that also.”

The languages aspect of the course appealed to him more than the business side, and in his third year he got the opportunity to travel to France for a year's work with a local chamber of commerce. “I was 20 or 21 and it was a whole year where you had to fend for yourself. It gave me a great sense of independence and opened my mind to a new culture, a new way of doing things.”

In his final year, Kehoe began to think about career opportunities for the first time. His final year thesis was based on accountancy and it was a subject that came easy to him.

The graduate milk rounds were happening on campus, and Kehoe was encouraged by a college lecturer to apply for opportunities to be a trainee chartered accountant.

“I was really just applying for the job interview experience – accountancy as a career never really appealed to me. I ended up with two job offers though. I was then in a situation where many others were coming out of university with no offers – this was the mid-1990s – and so there was a pressure on me to take one of the jobs and not to look a gift horse in the mouth. So I took a job with Ernst Young in Belfast.”

At the same time, Kehoe began to think more and more about a lifelong dream to volunteer for work in Africa. He had met many missionaries through both secondary school and also relations of his who worked in the missions had recounted their own experience.

So, prior to being interviewed for accountancy traineeships, he applied for a post in Rwanda with Irish NGO Trócaire. He asked his future employers in Ernst Young if he could postpone his job offer for a year, but they weren't too enamoured with the suggestion.

In Kehoe's personal life tragedy struck when his sister was diagnosed with cancer and subsequently died. So, Kehoe felt a need to remain close to the family home and the choice was in effect made for him.

“I knocked the idea of Africa on the head and began working as a trainee accountant. When something like that happens, there are moments in life when you are stopped in your tracks and begin wondering what life is

all about.”

A year into the role, though, and Kehoe realised it wasn't for him. He had no problems with the actual accountancy, but the job fulfilment just wasn't there. After many hours of agonising over his career options, he looked for guidance in a Redemptorist monastery in west Belfast. While there, he was asked if he ever considered the priesthood as an option.

An interview was set up with the vocations director, where the work of a Redemptorist priest was outlined. Kehoe took a year out from accountancy and returned home to work in the family business and allow himself some head space. He then made the decision to try out life with the Redemptorists for a year and see if it was for him.

“I had a very strong faith, and so I don't think people were that surprised. The first year was a year of study towards a degree in philosophy at the Milltown Institute. It was a different set of values and so I continued on to the second year. At that point there is a choice where you can commit to the next step to becoming a Redemptorist and I continued on.”

Having been ordained several years ago, Kehoe now works as a co-ordinator of community and ministry in Cork, where he works with more than 3,500 young people on an annual basis. “There isn't anything I miss about my old career or way of life. You get used to the way we live our lives. We have a vow of poverty so I don't have a bank account, or own my own house or car – they are all owned by our community.

“That becomes your life in that we have no material needs. My work is very varied, from coordinating projects to teaching and taking young people on retreats and visiting missions abroad. I generally start at 8.30am and could still be working at 10pm. At the moment we have taken on a huge project buying a new foundation building in Cork specifically for young people.

“So I'm dealing with architects and solicitors and planners, and helping to create a new vision of the church and its approach in the 21st century.”

Kehoe recognises it is a period of profound change for the Catholic Church in Ireland, and this change is something he very much welcomes. “I hope what will emerge will be a vastly different church. I wanted to work as a priest to help people overseas, and didn't really understand the structure of the church. Structure is necessary sometimes, but other times not so. I think at the moment it is a time of deep reflection for the church.”

For others considering a life or career change, Kehoe has the following advice: “I think for anybody considering any type of change, a lot of thinking is required and having the space to reflect is key.”

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