

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 20, 2010 at 9:26am

From berry fields to a microbiology lab

by Robert McClory



Holy Cross Br. Jesus Alonzo

After five grueling years of study at the University of Texas in San Antonio, Holy Cross Br. Jesus Alonzo will earn his doctorate in microbiology next summer. He plans to use that degree to investigate viruses and help develop vaccines for some of the world's most lethal and persistent viruses, like those that cause AIDS, hepatitis, dengue fever and other diseases that ravage large areas of the planet. "Microbiology is a difficult area of study," said Alonzo, an articulate, soft-spoken man of 31, "because there's so much to learn and new developments are happening all the time."

When he was attending St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, in the early 2000s, he was thinking about a career in computer science, but something happened there that radically changed the direction of his life. Alonzo is the sixth of seven children in a family of migrant farm workers. What he had known through much of his early life was travel and hard work -- six months in Washington State picking strawberries, raspberries and asparagus and six months at home in Texas where he went to school until the picking season intervened. Still, through jobs, loans, scholarships and the encouragement of their parents, he and his siblings got through high school and had the opportunity to go to college; five have

earned university degrees.

During his junior year at St. Edward's, a school run by the Holy Cross congregation, Alonso needed a place to live near the campus and rented a room at a house owned by the congregation and occupied by brothers as well as students. He was impressed with the way the brothers lived and decided in time this was the kind of life he was called to. Said Alonso, "It was the community living, the prayer life, the concern about poverty. I prayed a lot and shared my feelings."

His siblings were surprised at his interest and his parents were very doubtful at first. Then they realized this was no impulsive attraction. Alonso began studies to become a brother after graduation, made his first vows in 2003 and his final vows last October. After traveling to Africa and Asia and experiencing the devastating effects of viral disease, he expressed a desire to study microbiology, thinking he might be able to do something to make a difference. Thus began his long stretch of study in San Antonio.

Alonso said he does not regret that his commitment to religious life bars him from marrying and having a family. "This is a complete vocation for me," he said. "It's a fulfilling life, no regrets." And it doesn't bother him either that he is among a very, very small minority of young men who are entering religious life these days. "There's a lot to do," he said. "I think brothers will be around a long time."

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