

## Introduction

### The Phone Call

**B**efore I was on *The X Factor Australia*, before I performed for a pope, before I signed a record deal, and before I picked up a guitar and sang in front of a crowd for the first time, I was an alienated, messed-up teenager.

Hi, my name is Rob. My mother calls me “Robert” and my parishioners call me “Fr. Rob.” I find it surreal being called “Father,” especially by people who are old enough to be my grandparents. My own late grandfather used to call me “Father” even though I asked him many times just to call me by my name. In my own mind, I am simply “Rob,” but my proper title is “Fr. Rob” as I was ordained a Catholic priest on the fifth of November, 2010.

I never imagined myself serving God and the Church as a priest, and never did I think I would be carrying out my ministry so far away from home! I work in a place called Bendigo, a country town of 100,000 people in the state of Victoria, Australia, 15,570 kilometres from Malta, which is where I grew up.

Even though I fly all over the world now, performing in front of hundreds of thousands of people every year, in my heart and soul, there’s a part of me that’s still the introverted, terrified person I was as a teenager.

By the time I was sixteen, I’d created my own little circle of hell. I was trapped. Anyone who’s been there knows how hard it is. I was literally hiding in my room from dangerous people who I thought were friends. I couldn’t escape my

problems and I didn't know where to turn for help. I was lost, alone, and on the verge of doing something drastic. I cried myself to sleep and woke up every morning soaked in self-hatred, thinking about ways to end my life. Locked alone in my room, rocking back and forth, I wished for some way to stop the pain that consumed me but could see no way out. It felt like I'd reached the end of myself. I wanted it all to end.

But to my surprise, I got out of my dark little room, and I did it with help from an unexpected source: God.



Before I get too far ahead of myself, let me explain how I got into such a dark place.

I grew up in Malta. My parents—especially my mother—went to church. Religion is a big deal in Malta. It's one of the most Catholic places on earth; Roman Catholics make up the majority of the population, there's a Catholic government, and as many churches on street corners as coffee shops in Melbourne.

Like everyone in Malta, I went to a Catholic school. And like everyone, I didn't always get along with my peers. I was mocked, bullied, and I often went home in tears. My father tried his best to intervene with the school and the bullies, but the abuse didn't stop. I began to look for ways to skip school. I would fake an illness, or if I couldn't do that, I would make myself throw up at school so they would send me home. I even changed schools to get away from it all, but by then I was convinced that I couldn't do anything right.

In my mind, I was not worth the effort.

So I shut out the world. My teenage years didn't get much better. I was drinking and smoking, and what friends I did have couldn't understand the fascination for these new and enticing substances. I just wanted to be different.

Drinking led to smoking pot, which led to experimenting with harder stuff. When I was high, I felt a little more accepted, a little more loved. It was the same with shoplifting. It started out as a cry for attention which then became an uncontrollable addiction. Eventually, I couldn't walk into a shop or go to a friend's house without taking something.

I started hanging out with a group of older guys who had money, exuded confidence, and demanded respect. Some people might have called these new friends "thugs." They carried knives and knuckledusters. One friend, the son of a major drug dealer, brought a handgun to school once. These guys picked fights for no reason. I had close calls where I thought people were looking to kill me because of these guys.

And then there was the lying. The only place I felt truly accepted was in my inner make-believe world. In this imaginary cocoon, I had all the love and acceptance I could ever want. I spent so much time in this bubble that I would even talk to friends and family about girls I had dated and adventures I had, believing the events I made up were true. I told so many lies that it got hard to see the difference between a lie and the truth, and I hated myself for it.

The reality was that I hated my life, and I believed that the whole world felt the same way about me that I did.

Eventually, lying got me into the biggest trouble of my life. I told a lie about a drug dealer's son, the head of the gang that I was hanging out with. He had a girlfriend, but I told people I'd seen him with another girl. I was so delusional that I saw it in my head and believed it had happened. I was in a club with friends when someone came in and told me that the guy found out what I'd said and was now looking for me. I was terrified. I ran home and woke up my parents, begging them to hide me because these guys were going to hurt me. The same group had attacked a friend of mine;

his head had been smashed on a hotel door so hard that he ended up in intensive care.

That paralysed me. It sent me to a place where I was terrified and depressed. A mutual friend negotiated a truce so that the gang would leave me alone but only if I stayed away. That was fine with me. I didn't want to go out even if I could.

And that's how I became that guy, trapped in my room. I stopped seeing people. I stopped doing anything. It worried my mother so much that she took me to see various priests around town, desperately seeking their advice and care, hoping it would help, but it didn't.

There was no hope left for me.

Week after week, I stayed in my room. Darkness was my only friend.

Then the phone rang and everything changed.



Miracles don't always look like miracles. The miracle that saved me from myself all those years ago started with a phone call. There was no way I could have known it at the time, but that call has led me to where I am today: wearing a priest's black shirt and white collar, devoting my life to God, and trying to connect with people. I have given my life to reach teenagers like the one I once was.

To this day, I'm still an introvert. I'd much rather stay in my room than preach. Every time I have to I speak, I get tense, and public speaking is my full-time job! It doesn't even matter how often I do it—I still get terrified right before Sunday Mass. Yet every week, I do it scared. I push my fear aside because I have work to do.

These days, a lot of people know me from my concerts and talks, seeing my performance on *The X Factor*, or by following me on YouTube, Instagram, or Twitter. It's amazing,

really, all of this attention, but I have no interest in fame or being known for myself. I do it to make God known and loved in a personal way by those who want to know about him. I try to show people what it means to love God, and if it means I have to go out onto a stage to sing or talk, despite being an introvert, I do it. Don't get me wrong, I love what I do, and I don't want to sound like a martyr. There are a lot of crosses to bear, but I do it gladly because I know how much good it does. Jesus is my "first love" (see Revelation 2:4), and I will sing his praise to anyone who will listen.

During the week, I work like any other assistant parish priest: saying Mass, celebrating weddings and conducting funerals, and visiting people at the parish where I live or at other parishes in the diocese of Sandhurst, which is so big it takes more than four hours to drive from one end to the other. I also lead Stronger Youth, the local diocese's youth ministry. This puts me in front of thousands of high school and college students around the state of Victoria every year. On weekends, I become Fr. Rob, "the singing priest": performing concerts, appearing at speaking engagements around Australia and the world, and using YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat to share lessons on what it means to know, love, and serve Jesus.

Even though I've been doing this for years, I still haven't come to terms with the fact that I swoop in, speak to hundreds or even thousands of people, and then move on to the next performance in what feels like a blink of the eye. It's often a hit-and-run ministry, and it can be frustrating not having enough time to connect with the people I encounter on a deeper level.

I'd like to say I have it all together, but I don't. I'm still at the beginning of my journey. My greatest hope is that you will walk toward God with me, so you can catch a glimpse

of what I believe it means to be a follower and a disciple of Jesus.

That's why I've created this book for you. My hope is that it will be a resource for those who've attended my talks or concerts and for anyone else who wants to get on their feet and walk with God and the Catholic community. If you're anything like I was when I was young and looking for stability or direction or a way out of darkness, then I hope this book will plant the seed of discipleship with Jesus in your heart.

While working in Australia, I've encountered many families who have up to four generations of non-practicing Catholics: families from the great-grandparents on down who have never stepped inside a church except, as they say, to "hatch, match, and dispatch." (That is, to get baptized, get married, or carry out a funeral.) I've spoken with those who have told me of a fall-out with another parishioner or clergy, a loss of faith in God, or disengagement with the liturgy; sometimes the effort and distance needed to travel to get to a church on Sundays has played a role in that disengagement. In writing this book, I want to help them—and you—understand that a search for love away from God is a search that leads away from what our hearts and souls are looking for. I want nothing more than to see Jesus find a place in your heart once more.

The book includes milestones in my life that brought me closer to God. I'm hoping that the lessons I've learned can help others who've been through the same trials or that it might assist people who are helping someone they love through similar rough patches. Prayer and music are big parts of my life, so I've included both to use as prompts for reflection. At the end of each chapter, I want you to reflect on what we've discussed and how it might apply to your life. You might also like to keep your Bible on standby to look

up and bookmark your favorite passages and those quoted in my story. I use the New International Version (NIV), but don't worry too much if yours isn't the same. The important thing is that you have a Bible and keep it nearby.

And I have something special for you. Just for reading this book, you get access to an exclusive section of my website where you can listen to some of my music and watch a few videos. In each chapter you'll find a QR code which will lead you to the extra content. All you need to do is use your QR Code Reader app on your smartphone and you'll be taken directly to the special content. You might even choose to listen to the songs as you read each chapter.



Back to that fateful phone call in Malta. It was an invitation to come to a youth group meeting at a church in Balzan, not far from St. Andrews, where I lived. Actually, the invitation wasn't even for me; it was for my sister, Rachel. I wasn't particularly religious at that point, but I was insulted not to be included and said so.

One thing led to another and I ended up at the meeting. While I was there, I heard someone talk about having a personal relationship with God. How wonderful that sounded! To have a direct connection to someone, to God, who could understand me and what I was going through!

Afterward, I went home, and went back to being scared and isolated my room.

Only this time, something was different. I was ready for a change.

I put an empty chair across from me and talked to it as if someone were sitting there. Day after day I talked. Day after day nothing happened.

Then one day, someone talked back.