

Journey of a Priest

by Fr. Ray Jackson OSA
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I was born on December 26, 1933 in the Bronx, N.Y. Owen & Alice Jackson, two immigrants from County Armagh, Ireland were my proud parents. The Depression years were hard for them, trying to raise a family of four children on a trolley conductor's salary. But a strong Catholic faith, together with friends and neighbors provided ample support. One early memory of such support was a benefit dance for our family held at St. Anthony's parish when my father was out of work due to illness.

The Bronx was a wonderful place to grow up during the 30's and 40's. Each neighborhood had considerable ethnic and religious diversity with Irish, Italian and German traditions mingled with Catholic, Protestant and Jewish beliefs. We lived in a four block area with nearly six hundred families packed together into twenty apartment buildings. Windows and front doors were always open during the summer months since crime was non-existent. In retrospect, the neighborhood was a self-contained entity much like any small town USA.

During my teenage years I attended Cardinal Hayes High School about a half hour subway ride from home. Since working after school provided me with pocket money, I got a job working in midtown Manhattan as a messenger boy. The pace and energy of N.Y.C. got in my bones. I was not much of a student at Hayes because neighborhood sports and "hanging around" seemed to constitute the highest values of our gang. A hitch in the Marine Corps changed all that.

Parris Island, the Marines Training Center, you must understand, is no country club. I was told that one day by my drill instructor while he was pounding my head on the barracks floor for asking permission to telephone my family. I learned a lot more than discipline, however. Since I was one of only a handful of high school graduates, other recruits sought my help with the tasks we were learning. Gradually, I began to think of myself as intelligent and competent, especially after completing electronics school and working on advanced complex radar systems.

My Catholic faith also matured during these years. I joined the Legion of Mary while stationed in Japan and with the guidance of Father Bernard Lamond, an Augustinian priest and Navy chaplain I realized that acceptance of Christ called for a commitment to do God's work. Initially for me, it meant persuading my buddies to get back to church, but it was not long before God invited me to consider the Augustinian religious life and the priesthood.

From the marines to the rigors of a pre-Vatican II seminary was an easy transition. I found the routine of early rising, several hours of daily prayer, the labors of farm work and group recreation much to my liking. The natural beauty of the Hudson Valley where I began my training and the quiet atmosphere of the novitiate drew me closer to God. I had made a good choice.

After taking first vows, I continued my studies at Villanova University founded and sponsored by the Augustinians. Here the emphasis was on philosophy as a preparation for the theological studies necessary for ordination. The four years of college at Villanova strengthened my appreciation for learning in general, and, more specifically, created an interest in understanding the problems of the world. When I began the study of theology, the Church's teachings seemed etched in granite, because they had been distorted by a medieval mentality that saw other religions as erroneous and doctrinal purity as essential. Within a few years, however, the winds of change ushered in the reforms and renewal of Vatican II. Within this most ancient Church, new thinking emerged about its structure, worship and openness to the world. Much of there form was common sense: English was better than Latin for public prayer; Community was better than authority for cooperation; and it was better to love, share and listen than to pay, pray and obey.

Ordination day, January 30, 1965, found me surrounded by family, relatives and neighborhood friends. It was a wonderful beginning to a challenging life . I taught high school science and physics for a few years, then spent four years on the Augustinian Mission Band preaching parish retreats, days of recollection and an assortment of similar tasks. The late 60's were, of course, times of great social upheaval, both in the country and in the Church. As the Vietnam War became more divisive and liturgical changes were implemented, debates raged between the liberals and conservatives. I eventually got myself fired from a national retreat house for advocating Church reforms and social change. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

A priest friend, hearing of my situation, invited me to join him in starting a new campus ministry program at Villanova University. The chaplain's model, a sort of Lone Ranger approach gave way to the collegial dynamic of clergy and laity working as equals. I also made a first Marriage Encounter about the same time. It, too, was developing as a lay movement within the Church. We worked long hours with students planning worship, developing programs to sensitize the campus to the plight of the poor and oppressed, and building a ministry identity that welcomed all and offered ample opportunity for sharing and service. By 1976, we had begun a program of studies in peace and justice in order to educate our students about Catholic Social Teaching, a well kept secret from many, even today. All of this gave new direction and meaning to my life. God was calling me to "more misadventure".

In the late 70's I was transferred to St. Rita's parish in So. Philly. Instantaneously, I became not only the pastor of a bi-racial, inner-city, parochial complex, but also found myself as the CEO of a thrift shop, a hospice for bag ladies, a neighborhood youth center, and a multi-million dollar bingo operation. When the Pope rode toward City Hall on a blustery October day in 1979, St. Rita's marked the occasion with a welcoming banner draped across Broad Street from the rectory to an auto dealership. Good times for all!

By the early 80's I was back doing campus ministry at Merrimack College in North Andover, Ma. Mike & Nancy Austin, pillars of New England Encounter, recruited me into the Worldwide family and I began doing four or five weekends each year. Between the campus ministry of counseling, worship, community building and service projects and the weekend experiences of Encounter, I found plenty of possibilities for sharing the gifts of my priesthood.

Since I had taken a few graduate courses during the summer time at the Maryknoll School of Theology, I decided to apply for a sabbatical year in order to complete a Master's degree in peace and justice studies. This "time out" occasioned for me a deeper awareness of the Church's social teaching and a better understanding of the causes of social unrest. It also put me in touch with a whole new group of friends around Chappaqua, New York, where I lived during the sabbatical year. The intellectual stimulation was richly complimented by generous hospitality.

Since my return to Villanova in 1985, I have found many ways to satisfy the four major functions of a priest, namely, to preach the Good News, build community, offer service to all and celebrate the Eucharist. Priesthood on a campus includes everything from wedding preparations to baptisms, confessions to annointings, Appalachian service trip to endless staff meetings. Most recently, I have been teaching courses concerned with social justice in an attempt to educate our students about major social issues of the day and to evaluate them in the light of the teachings of Jesus Christ. My students must read the N.Y. Times each day, write and visit their congressional representatives, do a service project at a soup kitchen and learn to identify the idols in our culture. Priesthood for me demands that I speak prophetically by energizing the community to help the poor and criticizing the community when it strays from God's Plan.

Marriage Encounter has also called me to service. With Bill & Mary Anne Boylan leading the way I have served not only by continuing to give weekends, but also on local, regional and national boards. Conventions, board meetings and weekend preparations demand time and energy, but the rewards of friendship and community far outweigh the negatives.

In 1985, having completed the sabbatical years previously mentioned, I began to write a textbook on social justice. Loyola University Press published this work under the title of Dignity and Solidarity: An Introduction to Peace and Justice Education. The book attempts to give the reader a solid grounding in Catholic Social Teaching by examining several major social problems from a gospel perspective. It answers such fundamental questions as, "Who am I?", "What's happening?", "What are my values?", and "How can I change things?". My hope of course, is that the book may contribute to a better understanding of our global condition and provide some solutions to our problems.

I am now 58 years of age. My life as a priest has covered almost half those years. What the future holds for me only God knows. Having witnessed the incredible fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of communism during the past few years, we know that anything is possible.

We, Americans, need to share more of our wealth with the poor and needy both in our own country and abroad. We need to work more resolutely toward protecting the planet from global warming, deforestation and nuclear and chemical pollution. We should work for public policies that respect life from conception through old age and support programs that enhance marriage and family life.

We, Catholics, too, need to continue the work of reform within our Church. Can a medieval hierarchical governance system be replaced with more democratic structures? Can we not find room for women priests and married clergy? Should the Church not divest itself of its signs of affluence in the face of global poverty? These and similar issues call for renewed dialogue between laity and clergy.

I believe that God has blessed my life in unique ways. Each of us, as St. Paul points out, has special gifts. I believe that my involvement with and love of Marriage Encounter, my teaching, preaching and writing talents, my thirst for peace and justice and my compassion for the needy all stem from the action of the Spirit. God has given me many friends along the way and many opportunities for service. I pray that my friends will forgive my faults and that God's inspiration will continue to guide me.