

## **A Choice Led By the Spirit**

By Jeff Duaine, CSSp

When I was going through the admission process of entering the Spiritan formation program almost 30 years ago, I went to my local parish for the pastor's formal letter of recommendation. I vividly remember him asking me in a challenging tone, "Why are you going to the Spiritan formation program, and not the Diocesan seminary?" He was clearly not thrilled that I was entering a seminary program for a religious community, and I scrambled for a response. The fact of the matter was that there was no one clear reason in my mind for the decision at that time except, I was influenced by Spiritans who staffed the high school that I was attending. My pastor responded in a clearly disappointed tone that I had been educated in the parish school for eight years before going on to high school, and he couldn't understand how the diocesan priests who staffed the parish hadn't had a bigger impact on me. As I have come full circle and returned to this same high school staffed by my community as part of my current ministry, I have come back to this question of "why religious priesthood over diocesan priesthood?" I am struck more than ever by how critical that decision was for me as I look back on my journey as a religious over these past three decades.

In response to the invitation to write a reflection on religious priesthood, I didn't desire nor did I feel qualified to do a deep theological study on the difference between diocesan and religious priesthood. Rather, I feel much more comfortable speaking from my ministerial assignments that have shaped my experience of religious priesthood over these years. The primary and most significant experience for me in religious community was the 10 years that I spent in formation. I come from a relatively large family of five brothers and three sisters, so community living was a natural for me. I was used to sitting at a large table and sharing whatever was in front of me and making community decisions based on the needs of the whole group. If anything, seminary life was an improvement in that I had my own room for the first time in my life. I valued the challenge and the opportunity of continuing my educational opportunity at a private Catholic university on the undergraduate level. Truth be told, studying in a university setting with students from other disciplines was probably the most deciding, unspoken factor in not going to the diocesan seminary. I reveled in the openness and opportunity of the formation program that my religious community provided for me.

There are two very positive formation experiences that challenged, stretched, and formed me most during those initial years in religious life and confirmed the choice I made. One was the international novitiate that my community initiated while I was in formation. With decreasing numbers, we were looking across provincial boundaries to collaborate with other circumscriptions. When I was prepared to go to the novitiate, the community had just decided to embark on an international novitiate in Quebec, Canada. I had heard much about the international mission of our congregation over the years, but this was to be my first experience of international living. While some in the novitiate community found it exasperating to have to work out the details of living and praying in a culture and language other than their own, I found it fascinating and energizing to meet and get to know people different from myself. This was a tremendous confirmation for me that

being part of an international religious community just might be for me. Negotiating and discussing how we would pray and live our daily life as religious in training was an excellent preparation for the openness that would be necessary for my future ministries. This basic experience of living with people different from myself forced me to go beyond my own limitations and fears, and begin to experience the immensity of the mystery of God.

The second formative experience for me was the Overseas Training Program (OTP) portion of my formation years. After two years of studying theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, our formation program called for every candidate to do at least a one-year pastoral experience in one of our missions overseas. I remember when I first joined the community that being a missionary was not something that I felt strongly attracted to. I thought that going to a strange land and learning a foreign language was too exotic for me, and best left to the more adventurous members of the community. But as it turned out, I didn't have a choice at this point in my formation, and this was going to be a real test of my vocation to a missionary religious community. I had heard about the work of our Haitian confreres who were ministering to Haitian refugees in New York and Montreal, and I thought this would be a safe avenue for me. At that time, we didn't have any Spiritans working in Haiti, since our expulsion from the country in 1969. Arrangements were made for me to do a four-month language and cultural component living and working with the Dominican community in a rural Haitian parish during the last years of Baby Doc's regime. The plan was for me to have a brief cultural experience and learn the language before returning to New York to complete my OTP working alongside our Haitian confreres in refugee ministry stateside. Much to my surprise, after four short months in this strange land learning a foreign language, I wrote and requested permission to stay the whole year in the parish I was working in.

The experience of being totally vulnerable opened me to a new perspective on religious life and ministry that I didn't want to give it up. This was the final confirmation that religious life and missionary work was for me. When it came time to request a first assignment, I asked to be assigned to Haiti where the Spiritans were just re-establishing themselves after the fall of Duvalier in 1986. Not having many requests to be part of this new mission, the Generalate did not hesitate to assign me to this challenging appointment. If 10 years prior someone had suggested that I would be part of a new mission in a poverty ridden and desperate country like Haiti, I would have said they didn't know me well. Truth be told, I didn't understand very well where the Spirit was leading me.

My first appointment as part of re-establishing the Spiritan mission in Haiti was exciting and difficult at the same time. It was a time of great hope for the people of Haiti in the midst of tremendous turmoil. There was a wonderful spirit of collaboration among my fellow Spiritans as we were energized by this new opportunity for a hope-filled future for the country and our new presence there. I was blessed to work with people of tremendous courage and vision as the Haitian church had a brief moment of identifying with the struggle of a joyful people. I identified more than ever with the Old Testament experience of the Israelites' 40-year trek through the desert with Moses. Aligned with

the *ti legliz* (base communities) movement, there was a very real liberating experience of moving from slavery to freedom as people of faith came together and reflected on their experience of the struggle for life and basic freedoms. With the many ups and downs of this experience at establishing a fledging democracy, my first experience of religious priesthood was an extremely positive and uplifting one that reaffirmed my vocation to identify with the struggles of the poor that were well supported by my religious community. What I learned most was that I had nothing to fear from the people I was sent to serve. On the contrary, I had much more to learn from their experience of faith and walking with them on their journey. Fear comes from gazing in mistrust from the safe sanctuary of our religious communities. It disappears when you rub shoulders and share stories and experiences of the people we are sent to serve.

After three intense years of working in Haiti, my province asked me to return to the States to work in Vocation Ministry. In many ways, this ministry was much more challenging than dealing with the perils of working in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. At least in Haiti, I could easily identify the things that needed to change for people's lives to improve. As Vocation Director, I had very few ways to gauge my success and was facing the dramatic change in religious life as part of a post Vatican II church. The inevitable tendency to judge my ministry based on numbers was a pitfall that I tried not to succumb to no matter how many times I was asked how many new candidates were entering our formation program. The life-giving and energizing part of this difficult ministry was the opportunity to walk with young people who were searching for ways of living out their desire to be of service, even if it didn't mean that our formation program was overwhelmed with candidates. My biggest support during those five years was the network of other vocation directors that helped me stay rooted in what religious life has to offer young people today and continued my formation in collaborative ministry. Working with other vocation directors, I was able to keep things in perspective, especially when there weren't a lot of positive things to report on, and we were able to provide some creative programs to respond to the desire of young people to experience the reality of religious life today. I learned that my ministry was more one of presence and perseverance than anything else.

My next ministry was one that was much more rewarding in terms of touching and being a part of people's lives, but which had its own challenges. Over the period of the next 11 years, I was assigned to two parishes with very different demographics and personalities. The first was actually a merging of three different ethnic parishes, the result of a diocesan reorganization. Forming a single community from what was once Irish, Slovak, and Polish parishes was not only an organizational challenge, but also a personal opportunity that called upon my previous experience in the international novitiate to celebrate the differences that make us one rather than allow them to divide us.

My second parish assignment was marked by a similar multi-cultured element, but was part of a community that was much more involved with social issues. I followed a particularly popular pastor who was well known for his passionate preaching and significant commitment to social justice issues. Public speaking is not one of my obvious gifts, and I was forced to focus on the development of the community and finding ways

for all to share their gifts, including myself. The African American and Hispanic members of this community helped ensure that all perspectives were represented at the table and kept reminding the rest of us why we are catholic. Once again, lifting up and celebrating the diversity of the church was an obvious challenge that I thrived on. Encouraging and enabling people to share their gifts only strengthened the parish in its mission to respond to the Gospel challenge to be church for one another. I was energized by the social agenda of the parish, and was once again challenged beyond my own limitations and could never take success of the parish for granted. Responding to the needs of the poor was a clear part of the identity of this parish community, and this forced me to deepen my own understanding of my religious vocation. I found parish ministry to be very demanding and, at the same time, one of most affirming assignments of my religious life. Once again this confirmed my original choice and enabled me to celebrate my religious priesthood in so many ways than I thought possible.

Finally, my last assignment was to a ministry in one of our educational institutions, the high school where I started my journey with the Spiritans. Having come full circle, I find myself adapting to yet another ministry that challenges me to bring my gifts and talents to a different setting. Working collaboratively with a dedicated faculty and staff, the task of engaging and energizing young teenage boys in the context of Spiritan education seems both daunting and, at the same time, exciting. Building once again on the strong work of my predecessors, I have been privileged to continue carrying out the charism of our congregation by strengthening and supporting the Spiritan mission in this particular ministry. Not having much formal training to work in education, I found that I needed to rely on forming relationships and building trust that has been key to all of my ministries. Again, strong collaboration is an important element that had marked each of these experiences, and I have been fortunate to minister with very competent and extremely professional co-workers. As my leadership skills have been put to the test, I have found that I am only as successful as I allow those around me to thrive and succeed.

As I look back and reflect on my journey up to this point, I realize that God has had a plan for me all along. While I would never have been able to verbalize that 30 years ago when my pastor asked me why I was entering a religious community instead of the diocesan seminary, I am certain that the Spirit was very much at work in that original decision and has been very much a part of my experiences along the way. Openness to the Spirit and a willingness to let the Spirit lead me on that journey has certainly provided me with a variety of ministries that have energized me and forced me to grow in ways that I would have never chosen on my own. As a religious priest, I have had a certain freedom to be myself and be available to others in places and times I would never have imagined possible. There is no doubt in my mind that I have learned more from the people I have been sent to serve than I have been able to give back in return. Religious life has stretched and shaped me in more ways than I can put into words. It has been an amazing journey, and even if I find it difficult to put it into words, I firmly believe that God that was in control all along.

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