NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

After two attempts to become a sister, woman lives passion through religious education

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jun. 12, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: Mary Naughton has responded to a number of different callings in her 69 years, often with puzzlement and expectation, always with goodwill and good humor.

Mary, what was your childhood like and where did you spend it?

Naughton: I grew up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in Little Flower Parish, a wonderful place! We had the Sisters of Mercy in school and I loved them, especially Sister Mary Louis, my first- and fifth-grade teacher, and later Sister Mary Redempta in eighth grade. There were lots of children on my street and we could play outside every afternoon and all summer until supper time. I am still in touch with some of my friends from Little Flower. I went to St. Brendan's Diocesan High School with some wonderful girls from various parishes and met a Sister of St. Joseph, who was to have a major influence on my life, Sister Helen Bernard (Irene Flanagan), and as a result, at the age of 17 I entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood.

I know religious life was a stopover, not a final destination, in your life. What was that like for you?

Long story! When I was 17, I entered the novitiate. I loved it! Not the crazy rules, but my fellow novices, my "party," as we said in Brentwood, the prayer and spirituality. Unfortunately, it didn't occur to me that being in trouble often for what I considered minor offenses might be a problem. So four years later, I found myself home, labeled "immature and incorrigible," which I no doubt was. Still wanting to be a sister and still incorrigible, I entered another religious community, which shall remain nameless (Camille, the second one was not the Sisters of Mercy!). By Easter, they concluded I was comparing them unfavorably in my head with Brentwood, which I was, so -- home again. This time, I thought, well, I gave it a shot, and You obviously don't want me, so I might as well forget about it.

What led you to religious education and faith formation programs?

I met my husband, Bill, fell in love, had my children and a job I loved, teaching English in public high schools. I thought my life was set. Then, the sister on staff at St. James Cathedral in Brooklyn invited me to be part of a 12-week at-home retreat, a sort of short group version of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. I made excuses, which didn't deter her, and finally, reluctantly, joined the group.

I can't explain what happened, but halfway through the retreat my life turned upside-down. Suddenly, everything I thought I had left behind was right there. It made no sense. Before the end of the retreat, I was applying for a scholarship to Fordham's School of Religion, thinking I wouldn't get it. I did get it, and so I took a sabbatical and returned to Fordham for a year, thinking I would get it out of my system and we could "get back to normal," as my husband said.

That never happened. At the end of the year, with the encouragement of two Presentation Sisters I met at Fordham, I applied to the Diocese of Brooklyn for a position as a parish director of religious education. A year later, my pastor, Msgr. Joe Bynon, changed my title to pastoral associate and asked me to develop an adult formation program. I think I was the first woman to hold that title in the Brooklyn diocese.

How did you meet your husband?

I met him on a picket line at the UN, protesting the British occupation of the six northeast counties of Ireland. Aside from the seriousness of the issue, lots of things happen on picket lines in New York, and he seemed to be the only other person there who thought some of it was as funny as I did.

How would you describe your marriage?

A partnership and an adventure. We've had a lot of fun, very good friends, and raised two amazing children. Not much money! We've also been through my husband's bout with colon cancer and chemotherapy, and, a few years ago, a heart operation, which went terribly bad and resulted in months of hospitalization and rehabilitation.

What is your favorite scripture passage?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself."

Does it make a difference in your life?

It has influenced my entire adult life. Fr. Jean Pierre Medaille, the founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph, admonished the sisters to "love God and the dear neighbor *without distinction*." It seems to me that that is what women religious do in serving the poor and those on the margins, and that's what I've tried to do as a teacher, as a pastoral associate, a director of campus ministry, and a spiritual director.

What is your image of God?

I see God in Jesus, in the dear neighbor, and in my own heart.

Has it changed over time?t

Oh, sure, over the course of my life. I guess as a child, I imagined God as the old man in the sky waiting to catch me in a sin. The God of the ambush, so to speak.

What contributed to the changing notion of God?

I would say my lived experience plus my education at Fordham, and most especially, my good fortune in finding a wonderful Ursuline spiritual director who has both encouraged and challenged me for more than 25 years.

What does the incarnation mean to you?

That "Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his to the Father through the features of men's (and women's) faces."

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

The Eucharist, definitely, "the source and summit of our Christian life," to quote the Second Vatican Council; my relationship with God in prayer; and the Gospel call to justice.

Do you see it in action?

I do. I have been fortunate to serve in three places where the Eucharist was celebrated carefully and prayerfully. I've been able to organize social outreach to the poor, locally in NYC at midnight runs to feed and provide socks and gloves to homeless people, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and in West Virginia, and I was able to volunteer at a Providence House in New Rochelle, N.Y., which provided temporary housing for poor women and their children.

Who most influenced your belief system? Please explain.

My parents were wonderful role models, Irish immigrants who came to this country (my mother only 14 years old), bringing with them only a deep faith and a willingness to work hard to give their children a better life. They just had wonderful Christian values. After them, it was the sisters both in elementary school and high school.

I also have to credit priests I've worked with, especially the Jesuits. Fordham University broke open my sheltered world when I went there as a transfer student from Brentwood. Suddenly, questioning was encouraged, the scriptures were opened, and the documents of Vatican II were read, discussed and put into practice. The sisters I met taught me by their lives compassion, courage, fidelity, and love for the least in society. The priests I worked with encouraged me in my ministry and became my friends, and the Jesuit charism of finding God in all things confirmed my own commitment to love God and neighbor and expanded that to all of creation.

Do you find anything particularly encouraging or discouraging in today's church?

Unfortunately, many things in today's church are discouraging. There is a prevailing rush to the past, a climate of fear and repression, and the hierarchy clearly lives in a different world than the "lowerarchy" -- the rest of us.

The encouragement comes from the awakening of laypeople to their responsibility and the need to take action; for example, the thousands of people who have spoken out and signed petitions against the attempt to subjugate LCWR.

Did you have a favorite parish and why?

My favorite parishes were Brooklyn's St. James Cathedral, Resurrection Ascension in Queens, the Chapel at the College of New Rochelle, and St. Ignatius Loyola, the Jesuit parish in New York.

Why did you leave New York?

Mostly because my husband's health required a consistently warmer climate than New York's. But New York will always be home.

Have you found a welcoming parish in Florida?

After searching and enduring some pretty bad liturgies during Holy Week, I found St. Joseph's Episcopal Church. The first Sunday I worshipped there I literally wept tears of joy for having found a warm welcome at St. Joseph's and tears of grief at the loss of the church I have loved and served my entire life. St. Joseph's rector is a former Roman Catholic priest, now married with children. His assistant priest is a married woman, and 80 percent of the congregation are former Roman Catholics. Not that I am joining the Episcopal church -- I intend to stay and continue to work through Call to Action and every other means available to counter the current climate.

How do you relax?

I am a voracious reader and I read every day -- novels, essays, biography, poetry -- I love to read. I also walk every day, and since we are lucky enough to live in Florida, I swim every day at the beach or in a pool. In the fall, I hope to replace the bicycle and kayak I left in New York.

Do you have a favorite author?

Thomas Merton. My father gave me *The Seven Storey Mountain* when I was about 12, and I was hooked with the first paragraph. I have since read, I think, everything Merton wrote -- no small feat! -- and *The Seven Storey Mountain* several times. He's been a major influence in my life. For recreation, I do love police procedurals, so James Lee Burke, Harlan Coben, Robert B. Parker and Dennis Lehane. But I've read lots of good books -- I just finished *Cutting for Stone*, which was wonderful.

Do you have a favorite TV program?

I probably shouldn't admit this but I love New York cop shows! My current favorite is "Blue Bloods." I also like "The Good Wife."

Food?

Anything Italian, of course. I often wonder how Italian-American girls made it through the boiled potatoes in novitiates! And seafood.

Is there anything appealing in your new living area?

Beach! Beach! Beach! Seriously, waking up to sunshine every day is good for the soul. And I am not a dress-up girl, so wearing shorts and T-shirts every day is heaven.

How do you pray?

With scripture and a form of centering prayer. My spiritual director recently gave me a subscription to "Give Us This Day: Daily Prayer for Today's Catholic," which I like a lot and use morning and evening.

What causes you sorrow?

Violence around the world; war; children starving in our own country and elsewhere; rich people with huge mansions in Palm Beach in which they only spend a few months or a few weeks a year while so many people are homeless; the seeming inability of Catholic bishops to remember what Jesus was about.

What causes you joy?

My husband, children and grandchildren. That my friends are so wonderful. That I am close to my extended family. Poetry, music and dance.

What gives you hope?

My grandchildren. The many, many Catholics who are remaining faithful and quietly doing Christ's work in their families, neighborhoods, jobs.

Is there any spiritual practice you admire in another faith?

I love the fact that in the Episcopal church, every baptized Christian is welcome at the table of the Eucharist.

What do you want from our faith for your children?

The same thing I want for myself -- nourishment and challenge, a way to live as followers of Christ, a faith to sustain them in the ups and downs of life.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

No, but I would like to say that you are one of my role models -- I always remember the first "Roses in December" evening prayer I did at RA about 1985. First of all, you graciously agreed to be the preacher, and then, with all of about 10 people in the church, you reminded us that all over the world on that night, small groups like ours were meeting to remember these women, so we should not be discouraged. Over the years, I have been inspired by your insight and wisdom in the face of very discouraging events.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*.]

We can send you an email alert every time Conversations with Sr. Camille is updated. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Conversations with Sr. Camille to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/01/2015 - 17:43): http://ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/after-two-attempts-become-sister-woman-lags-passion-through

Links:

[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup