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Why are God's calling and a wife together deemed incompatible?

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 11, 2012 NCR Today

I was at a dinner a few nights ago and found myself sitting next a tall, commanding older man I'll call Tim. We started off with the usual bits of conversation: the weather, the wine, dryness of the chicken.

Then I asked Tim what he'd done for a living.

"Priest," he said.

He was ordained just a few years before Vatican II shifted the church dramatically -- "so I didn't become a priest because of Vatican II," he said. "But it energized me. I joined right in with the kind of church begin shaped from it."

He went off to the Philippines, but not to Manila, the capital city overrun with devout Catholics. Instead, he ventured out to the far islands, including Sulu [1] -- a place that was home to Muslim resistance against the central government.

To call Sulu's Islamic history deep is to understate the facts. It was once known as the Sultanate of Sulu, founded in 1457 -- and Islam first came to the island in 1138. A less-than-welcoming environment for a Catholic priest, but Tim's goal was not conversion -- it was health care. He and other missionaries helped set up clinics in the far islands and never spoke of religion.

"It was by example only," he told me.

At times, even that simple example was too much. Four priests and religious Tim worked with were killed in the course of his time there, starting in the late 1950s and running through the 1960s. These were troubled times in the area -- restive Muslims in nearby Indonesia lashed out at their dictator President Sukarno, a troubled moment captured in the film "The Year of Living Dangerously." [2]

And Tim lived through the danger. He served the people to whom he had dedicated himself, and he served the church.

But then something terrible happened.

"I had a crisis of faith," he said.

What kind of crisis? What exactly triggered it? What dark force inside him long held at bay at last broke through to undermine his conviction?

"I fell in love."

I looked beyond him then and noticed a slender Filipino woman sitting to Tim's left, smiling sweetly, nodding calmly. She was Tim's wife -- they have been married more than 40 years.

And so he left the priesthood, though -- he explained -- once a priest, always a priest. You can't just toss it off. He stays involved in the church and serves the poor of Skid Row in Los Angeles through the Catholic Workers. But he wishes -- strongly -- that he could be an active priest. He doesn't understand, even after all these years, why his wife and his calling were incompatible.

The dessert arrived. Coffee was poured. My wife nodded that it was time to head home. We stood, shook hands with Tim and his wife, and stepped away from the table. I looked back and saw them holding hands, smiling at us as we left.

And I, too, wondered why. What was incompatible about this wonderful couple and a life inside the church?

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Links:
[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sulu
[2] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086617