

Pax Christi member finds seeds of transformation in the church

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Oct. 30, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Among my favorite Pax Christi memories is one of Nancy Small leading a few hundred of us in a prayerful protest against the first war in Iraq from the steps of Brooklyn's St. James Cathedral, which barred our entry, to Assumption Church, which welcomed us. We walked in total silence except for a drumbeat. Along the way, we offered inquisitive spectators fliers explaining our absence from the huge pro-war rally in Manhattan on the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge. We were few compared to the thousands who supported the military action. I recall that *The New York Times*, which covered the large rally, concluded with a mention of our resistance.

Sr. Camille: Do I recall that that was in 1991, 10 years before the attack on 9/11?

Small: Yes, I believe it was in 1991, after the first Gulf War began.

What else do you remember about that day?

Our nation was pounding the drumbeat for war, so we decided to drum for peace. I remember how united it felt to walk in silence to the lone beat of a drum. There was a strong sense of purpose among us. The drumbeat, to me, was like the heartbeat of peace, urging us onward. Our shared passion for peace was alive and present in our marching and in the prayer service that followed. It was a powerful, prophetic witness that has stayed with me over the years.

I think that memory is important to me because it identifies you as a hard-working, quiet, organized peacemaker. And peaceful yourself. Surely your time as Pax Christi Metro's coordinator in New York provided you with many memories. Any for sharing?

There are so many! A highlight, of course, was the annual Good Friday Way of the Cross. Our annual pilgrimage of prayer across 42nd Street brought a prayerful presence to the heart of the city as we prayed for justice and peace in the shadow of buildings that were soaring icons of power and prosperity. More than anything, I remember the strong sense of community, creativity and commitment among Pax Christi members in New York. I found a similar spirit in Pax Christi members around the country when I served as the national coordinator for Pax Christi USA. Their commitment to peacemaking flows from deep faith and a belief in the power of Gospel nonviolence to transform our world. I truly believe Pax Christi is the Catholic church's best hope for peace.

I knew you in New York City. Where and with whom did you spend your childhood?

I grew up as the fourth of six girls in a working-class family in the town of Northbridge, Mass. My parents worked hard to give all of us the chance to attend college. My mom is Lutheran, my dad was Catholic, and we were raised Catholic. I became very involved in school leadership, sports and music as well as in our parish Catholic youth organization. There were many good things about Northbridge, but it always felt too small to me. I was eager to experience life beyond small-town living and the adventures that the world had to offer.

What schools did you attend?

I attended public schools in Northbridge. From there, I went on to Boston College, where I came to know a number of Jesuits who were formative in my growth and spiritual formation, and I discovered the gift of Ignatian spirituality. I received my Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, where I discerned more fully my vocation as a Catholic laywoman in ministry. My faith was enriched and challenged by studying with people of many faith traditions from around the world.

Did you have any heroes, heroines or role models while you were growing up?

I was deeply influenced by the TV miniseries "[Roots](#) [1]," which aired when I was in high school. I remember being glued to the TV and riveted by what I saw. I had been pretty sheltered from the Civil Rights movement, but this opened my eyes and heart in ways I could never have imagined. Rosa Parks, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders in this movement soared to the top of my list and became giants for me. I was a long-distance runner in high school and college, and I admired Joan Benoit and Bill Rodgers. I also was inspired by women who were striving for equal rights during the women's rights movement.

And now?

Dorothy Day and Etty Hillesum are two peacemakers who inspire me greatly, along with Martin Luther King Jr. and many other contemporary peacemakers. There are many women religious who have opened locked doors in our church, paving the way for the work that I do, and I hold them with great gratitude. They are the cornerstone of the church that I believe in, and their influence in my life is paramount.

How did you meet your husband?

Carl Baniszewski and I met in 1995, when I served as the interim national coordinator for Pax Christi USA. Pax Christi's national office was in Erie, Pa., where Carl is from. We married in August 1999. He is a gentle soul with the patience of a saint who warms hearts with his quiet, caring ways. He has an amazing ability to recognize what is most essential about a person or a situation. He is someone who takes time to think before he speaks, and when he speaks, it is well worth the wait. He's grounded in God and has a delightful, witty sense of humor. He shows me what it means to live a simple, meaningful life and teaches me how to love unconditionally. He's a devoted social worker, now in the field of community development and planning.

What led you to live in Massachusetts?

My father's health was declining, and the weight of his illness on my mother and sisters was becoming too much. Carl and I decided it was time to move closer to be of help.

What is your work there?

I serve as a hospice chaplain, offering pastoral care to people in the final stage of life as well as their loved ones. I also serve as a spiritual director, work I have been doing since my spiritual direction training in 1994. I offer programs in contemplative spirituality and occasional retreats and workshops on various spirituality and justice topics. For the past several years, I've been working on a book called "Seizing the Nonviolent Moments," focusing on individuals in scripture who used nonviolence in a given situation. I also serve on the board of directors for Pax Christi Massachusetts.

How does it connect with your spiritual interests?

There's something sacred about working with people who are in the final stages of life, honoring and affirming

who they are and their life journey while also accompanying them through joy, sorrow, fear, reconciliation, suffering, death and resurrection. It takes me into the heart of the paschal mystery and reveals the face of God to me again and again. My spirituality and peace work taps into the great hunger that exists for God -- a hunger to grow in relationship to God, to recognize God's movement in the rhythm of daily life, and a passion for God's peace to take root in our world and bear fruit in a harvest of justice.

Nobody gets through life without enduring disappointments or hurts. Have any such impacted your approach to life and relationships?

I think they've taught me the importance of treasuring life and giving yourself wholeheartedly to it. They've also taught me some difficult lessons in humility, forgiveness and reconciliation. Looking back, the difficult chapters in my life have been stepping stones to new growth, albeit painfully. I've learned how to bend with God to pick up the pieces of life and together make of them something new. There have been a number of times when I've gone to prayer with my brokenness and my eyes have opened more fully to the brokenness of Jesus and his presence in my situation. And that has led to a deepening of my relationship with God.

The same could be said of positive situations, graces and great loves. Have any made a difference in your approach to life and others?

I think I've become more aware of those things I too often take for granted and instead try to recognize and honor the profound gift of abundance in my life. I remember a question I came upon during my spiritual direction training. The author made the point that each of us is given a measure of love, and he asked, "What will you do with the love you've been given?" It's been important to me that my love be generative, bearing fruit in the life of our world in some way. And sometimes this love is regenerative, captured in the words of Isaiah 57:12b -- "You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." This is the kind of love that binds up the brokenhearted and builds the foundation of a new world out of the remnants of the old.

What is your image of God?

There's no single image for me that captures the fullness of God. But my image is certainly incarnational. I experience God as the Holy One who longs to be closer to us than we are to ourselves, a God who abides with us, rejoices with us, weeps with us and refuses to abandon us, no matter what. Sometimes God takes the form of a hovering spirit with broad, sheltering wings; sometimes as living water quenching me in parched places; often as holy hands reaching out, molding and shaping the clay of my life in the spirit of Isaiah 64:8 -- "We are the clay, you are the potter -- we are all the work of your hands."

Do you have a favorite scripture passage or parable?

There are many that are among my favorites. But one that captured me long ago and still finds resonance in my soul is Psalms 42:7 -- "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me." I came upon it on a retreat long ago when I was praying at the ocean. It spoke to me of the deep in God calling to the deep in me, the depths of God's love calling to the depths of my longing for God. When God's deep reaches into our deep, the union is thunderous, like the rush of a waterfall crashing on the rocks below.

How long have you lived in your current parish?

More than any one parish has been the spiritual home that Carl and I found in the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. We came to know them and worship with them during our Erie years and grew to love their way of life, monastic prayer, life-giving liturgies and commitment to justice. We became Oblates several years ago as a way of formalizing the sense of community we share with these prophetic women.

How do you pray?

My most treasured form of private prayer is contemplative prayer with scripture. I love the term that Benedictine Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr uses -- "romancing the Word" -- and that is a form of prayer I treasure. To sit with scripture, steep myself in it, journal with it, to allow it to enter into me and me into it. It always amazes me how a beloved scripture passage will open up in new ways depending on what's happening in my life. I am also a lover of silence. I walk most mornings in the early morning stillness, awakening to God's rising presence in the dawning day. I cherish my annual eight-day silent directed retreat, a practice I have been doing for more than 20 years. It is a vital part of the rhythm of prayer and reflection that I weave into my life, leading me deeper into the heart of God and self.

What changes do you think would improve the church?

I was born the year the Second Vatican Council began, so it and I share a 50th year of life in the church. Maybe that's why the vision of Vatican II feels like it's deep in my bones and being. I have taken to heart the words of the council that through baptism the laity are consecrated into a holy priesthood and called to act as a kind of leaven. I think there is much to learn from the current situation of women religious in our church. The leaders of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious have spoken of their situation with the Vatican as evidence of a much larger movement within the church, the type of crisis that so often precedes transformation. I see the seeds of this transformation all around me, the spirit stirring and moving in the hearts of so many people longing for a church where all people and voices are honored and heard. Women religious are at the heart of this transformation, and their prayerful response to the Vatican indictment, standing firm in who they are while remaining open to the invitation of the spirit, is a model for all of us to uphold. They remind us that no matter how often leavened dough is pounded down, it rises yet again.

As a Pax Christi member, what changes do you believe would improve our world?

I would love to see an outpouring of interest in nonviolence and of its use to transform our world. I believe we have only begun to tap into the tremendous potential nonviolence offers. It has the power to transform us individually and as a people. Its power is like the loaves and fishes in the Gospel story -- the further the food is shared among the crowd, the more there is. So, too, with nonviolence. The further it is shared among the members of the human family, the more its power grows. And the greater our world becomes.

Does any particular injustice lay claim on your passion and energy?

I uphold the image of life as a seamless garment, woven in a way that we are all connected to one another in the web of life. And so there are many areas of justice work that I care about deeply. One that is particularly close to my heart is the injustice of war. I join with those who believe that organized violence is not the solution but is instead the clearest example of human failure. I have met those whose lives have been forever changed by the horror of war, both innocent victims and veterans haunted by memories of their service. War tears apart the human family with inhumane actions, and the journey toward healing can be long and hard. As new weapons of war are developed, such as drones, the "enemy" becomes even more dehumanized, with attacks coordinated remotely, further separating us from the consequences of our actions.

Is there anything you wish I had asked?

I wish someone would ask you these questions, Camille! I would love to hear your answers. You have so much wisdom to share with others, and you are truly a shining light in our church and world. Thank you for who you are and all that you do.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com [2].]

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