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Ecuadoran vacation led to former priest's vocation as missionary

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | May. 28, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: When I asked my good friend Kathy Jarvis if she'd like to recommend someone for this column, she immediately responded with your name. My first question is how you, living in New Orleans, connected with Kathy in Fort Smith, Ark.? Where and under what circumstances did you meet?

Matthew Rousso: We met at the Benedictine Monastery in Esquipulas, Guatemala, in January. I was there with a group of seminarians engaged in a mission immersion program. Kathy was there doing a "look-see" for a mission immersion program she was planning. She asked if she and her companions might accompany us on a couple of delegation visits we were to make the following day, one to a school for psychologically and/or physically challenged children and youth and the other to an orphanage**.**

How long have you been a Maryknoll Mission Educator?

I began my association with Maryknoll in February 1991.

What brought you to that?

In 1981, I went to Ecuador to visit with an Ecuadorian priest friend who lived and worked with me in New Orleans. Although I went for a vacation, I returned with a vocation: I mark that visit as the real beginning of my desire to be a missionary.

Where has that relationship brought you?

It has literally brought me into the homes and barrios of hundreds of poor families in Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and also to a community near Cap Haïtien in Haiti.

How does it allow you to live out your Catholic faith?

One of the teachings of the Catholic church is that by baptism, all are called to engage in the missionary work of the church. In being with Maryknoll, the first missionary society of the Catholic church in the United States, I've had the opportunity in a very direct way to live out this baptismal calling. Maryknoll has come to be my religious community.

Who are your companions in this part of your life's journey?

First, my wife, Janet, companions me and stands with me in trying to respond to our baptismal call. I have been in a Jesus Caritas Fraternity with a small group of priests: We have met once a month for 60 years. Then I consider a number of Maryknoll priests and some Maryknoll sisters and brothers as companions on the journey. I work closely with a Benedictine monk who is the rector of a college seminary -- he is certainly a companion in mission. Two women who are vowed laity living in the community of Caritas -- I treasure them as companions on the journey. And, of course, my small faith community of Maryknoll affiliates here in New Orleans. Finally, there is a larger network of friends and colleagues.

What have you brought to the Maryknoll association?

A dedication to introducing others to poor people as well as to Maryknoll by engaging them in short-term mission programs in various places in Central America; and a willingness to expose my own struggles of what it is to help the poor and to help others raise that question.

What have you gained/learned from your efforts and from the people you've helped?

How to live with a faith that is incarnational rather than abstract and heady. The poor have been trying to teach me for the past 20 years that obedience to the ordinary and everyday demands of life is the way to holiness. The poor are incredibly creative; they can survive because of their faith and creativity.

Can you point to particular achievements or challenges?

Being a mission educator is a challenge in itself. What the church understands about mission has changed since Maryknoll began some 100 years ago. Sometimes new teachings can disturb people because they seem to go against uncritical practices. I'm reading two books right now that I find very challenging: *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity*. I think that possibly one of my particular achievements is to have instilled in many hearts a love and compassion for the poor by my emphasis on the purpose of short-term mission as being with the poor rather than doing for them.

Please say something about your family.

Janet and I married rather late in our lives, so we do not have children of our own. We both come from a religious life background: Janet as a vowed religious, me as a diocesan priest. This common background has served us well as a couple. After marrying and moving to New Orleans, Janet engaged with Catholic Charities in directing a social service center for low-income seniors. She now works as a grant writing associate, trying to obtain grants for a number of projects sponsored by the Jesuits. It has been very good on a number of occasions to be together for a short-term mission program.

Please describe your childhood.

I grew up in a small, south Louisiana town. My family was deeply Catholic: Mass and Communion every day, rosary in the evenings, close to the parish priests, Catholic school with many nuns, etc. My elder brother was 22 years older than I and a priest. He was a strong factor in my going into the seminary after the 8th grade and being a diocesan priest for 24 years.

Are you comfortable in saying what led you to leave the priesthood?

I did not feel called to a lifetime of celibacy, though I was quite happy and well-appreciated as a diocesan priest and pastor. After several years of spiritual direction, counseling and therapy, I discerned I had two vocations that were not compatible in today's Catholic church: priesthood and marriage. It was a very wrenching decision.

I regret that I had to leave and I miss almost everything about being a priest. Sometimes I think we are always being asked to pray for priestly vocations but are not ready to accept all the people God is calling. God is calling many people to be priests and they are willing to say yes, but the church is not ready to accept them. The one thing that continues to gnaw at me is not being able to have a congregation that I can call "my people."

Who most influenced your belief system?

In my young life, my parents, brothers and sisters were the inspirations of my life. In high school, college and theology years, my seminary teachers and spiritual directors all strongly influenced my beliefs. In my priesthood years, it was Pope John XXIII and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. In the last 25 years or so, I've been strongly influenced by the call of the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin and Puebla for us to make a preferential option for the poor. The life and writings of three Latin American bishops have been very close to me: Archbishop Hélder Câmara*, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Bishop Pedro Casadáliga.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

St. Paul's statement that in God we live and move and have our being.

Does it make in difference in your life?

Yes; it tells me who I am in the vast mystery of the universe and life. The realization of my communion with God and all that is makes my life worth living.

What is your image of God and has it changed over time?

My image and understanding of God has changed greatly as I have journeyed in faith. In my earliest years, I suspect my image was of God as one who rewarded the good and punished the bad. But then I began to image and relate to God as Father: One who loves unconditionally (like the father in the prodigal son parable). I still hold to this image strongly, though it does still carry with it an understanding of God as "superparent," which I do not like. I am becoming much more comfortable accepting God as Mystery: Holy Spirit. I think St. Thomas' teaching that we know more about what God is not than about what God is very true. St. Therese Lisieux's explanation of prayer as being in the presence of the one you know loves you grounds me in my relationship with God, the Holy Spirit.

What does the incarnation mean to you?

That in Jesus, we hear and see the face of God. And that every one of us made in the image and likeness of God is a manifestation of the presence of Jesus-God. The Spirit of God lives among us and is present in the entire universe.

Is there anything in contemporary Catholicism that distresses you -- perhaps that you would like to see changed?

I think sometimes Catholicism is seen by many as just another religion with doctrines and dogmas to be assented to, rules to be followed, rigid structures to define us. It is distressing to experience what Fr. Donald Cozzens in *Notes from the Underground: A Spiritual Journey of a Secular Priest* calls "exclusiveness" of Catholicism. Look at all the things that exclude people from coming to the Communion table: divorce, birth control, didn't go to church last Sunday, not married by a priest, gay, etc. It is not easy to deal with these new cultural developments, but these restrictions have made the Eucharist more like a sacrament of exclusion rather than a sacrament of unity.

I think the great challenge we are experiencing in our world and in our church these days is how to live with differences. I think our ecclesial family is not easily dealing with this reality. And "good Catholics" are not even supposed to talk about certain ideas, such as women's ordination or married priesthood. Our Catholic community has come of age since Vatican II; we are a church of thinking adults. But the hierarchical institution has not progressed accordingly. In an interview before he died, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini put his finger on it: "The church is 200 years behind the times [1]."

I still strongly feel that the Catholic church is my dear mother; within this community, I find some of the best people in the world: many wonderful priests, some bishops, a new exciting pope and many inspiring laity; so many teachings that make good sense, especially its social justice doctrines; and a sacramental system that enables me to be nourished, to experience the Holy Spirit of God. And is it not great that we continue to believe in the possibility of reform? We even officially teach "*Ecclesia semper reformanda est.*"

What gives you hope?

It gives me hope to hear more and more people (including some priests and bishops) speaking aloud some of their concerns and questioning some of the practices of our church. Unfortunately, some have done so at great personal sacrifice. When Rigoberta Menchú was asked what gave her hope after seeing her father killed and family and friends disappear, she said: "The silence has been broken." It is the breaking of silence in our church that gives me hope. I like Pope Francis' style and I like what he's saying. They say he is a very humble man, and we have seen this humility demonstrated in his early days as our pope. I trust and pray he will also have the grace to humbly listen. He talks about the importance of priests having the smell of the sheep on them. I take that to mean if we get close enough to people, we will not only pick up their smell but begin to hear their bleats and be able to recognize what they are bleating about.

Are you inspired by any saint?

St. Therese of Lisieux; St. Francis (my patron); Oscar Romero (canonized by the people of God, though not yet by Rome)

I'm grateful for this conversation and to Kathy Jarvis for bringing us together. Do you have any closing comments to or about her?

In only the short time I have known Kathy and in only a few conversations with her, she evidences to me a woman of great faith in Jesus and a special devotion for the poor. I think she has an incarnational faith as I spoke of above. She is the kind of person I like to have as a faith companion and I hope we can have more time together in the latter part of our journey of faith.

**An earlier version of this column gave an incorrect title to Archbishop Hélder Câmara.*

[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 audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [2] from Now You Know Media.]

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