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Essay on staying with the church carried journalist, teacher into spotlight

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Nov. 26, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

***Sister Camille*: Paul Moses, you're an exceptionally good writer. When did you discover your ownership of that gift?**

Moses: Thank you, Sister Camille. I always liked to write, but I didn't start thinking that I could be a writer until a professor in an introductory creative writing course at Brooklyn College suggested that I pursue it. It's a good thing; I wasn't doing very well in my major, psychology.

As someone who served on the faculty of Brooklyn College for 20 years, I'm happy to know one of my colleagues encouraged you. Did you have literary mentors, personal or in the print world?

I owe a lot to people I've worked with at New York *Newsday*, The Associated Press and *The Hudson Dispatch*, both while I worked there and afterward. In terms of writers whose work I especially admire, I think it would be hard to find anyone who crafts a better sentence in the English language than Graham Greene did. And he told a pretty good story, too.

Yourrecent essay[1] explaining why neither people on the right or the left could convince you to leave the Catholic church was especially powerful. May I ask you to summarize that for our readers? I know that's a challenge.

Last year, the Freedom From Religion Foundation took out full-page ads in *The New York Times* and other newspapers aimed at persuading liberal Catholics to "quit the Catholic Church." And *Times* columnist Bill Keller, whose work I admire except on the topic of his lapsed Catholicism, urged: "Summon your fortitude, and just go." As Keller pointed out, Bill Donohue of the Catholic League seemed to concur, since he wrote that "maybe a smaller church would be a better church."

Well, I love the church despite all its many faults, and I thought these critiques were way off the mark because they totally ignore the transcendent, mystical aspect of the church. They reduce Catholic beliefs to a set of political talking points. I expressed this by describing how warmly the church community responded after my father's death last year. Some readers reduced that to the idea that, yes, the Catholics handle death well. But I was after something larger: that God's people make up the Body of Christ, a mystical concept that encompasses the living and the dead, my deceased father and me. This is what the church is about, and it far transcends quarrels over political priorities.

What response did that elicit?

I got a great response**.** You never know what will happen when you write about religion, especially if you touch on it in an emotional way, as I did in this article in the *Wall Street Journal*. A few dozen people who tracked down my faculty email at Brooklyn College sent personal messages; nearly all were touched by the piece in a favorable way. Many described themselves as liberal Catholics who felt isolated. Two diocesan newspapers

asked to reprint the article, and Cardinal Timothy Dolan linked to it on his blog.

Do any authors, teachers or role models stand out as inspiring your own career?

My father, Bernard L. Moses, was not especially enthused at first about my entering the journalism field because he was concerned I wouldn't make a living, but his interests in urban problems and religion are basically my interests, and his intellect, his truthfulness and his search for wisdom inspire me. He was director of management at the New York City Housing Authority and a great student of urban poverty. He was a Jewish convert to Catholicism and a devoted student of Catholic social teachings and the Bible. He and my mother gave me a great appreciation for the written word.

Also, I think I would join many of my colleagues from New York *Newsday* in saying that the columnist Murray Kempton was a journalistic inspiration.

Can you name a favorite journalist?

Of those writing now, it would be Jim Dwyer, columnist at *The New York Times*. He can write a human-interest story that tugs at your heart or cut down an imperious public official with a few well-reported facts -- always without the odor of ideology. In the book *102 Minutes*, which sets out what occurred inside the burning World Trade Center, he and Kevin Flynn do both -- a heartbreaking story about heroism and death and a clear-eyed investigation of what went wrong in the buildings' construction and evacuation.

Are you a full-time journalist?

In 2001, I began a second career as a journalism professor at Brooklyn College, my undergraduate alma mater. It turned out that teaching really agrees with me, more so than I realized it would before I started. At first, I saw teaching journalism as an extension of my journalism career, and it is: Some students go on to become successful journalists and will hopefully bring good journalistic values with them. But now I enjoy teaching for its own sake. I really like working with the Brooklyn College students.

Please say something about your professional activities, their satisfactions and discouragements, if any.

Being a journalist is a license for curiosity. In recent years, I've been writing historical books, which for me are journalism about the past. Recently, I completed the historical research for my next book -- a history of New York's Irish and Italians, to be published by NYU Press -- and switched off to doing interviews about the contemporary situation to complete the manuscript. The interviewees were so fascinating. All I could think was, "I love being a journalist." It was good to be back out there with a pen and notebook in hand.

The most discouraging thing about journalism for me is that so many of my fellow journalists are so discouraged. Newsroom morale is terrible. That stems from years of layoffs, which result from changes in technology. When times were fat, all the newspaper publishers did was whine about how the rising price of newsprint made it hard to achieve profit margins in excess of 20 percent. They failed to invest in the Internet, and Craigslist and others filled the void. Backward-looking, defensive leadership: Sound familiar? The bright side of the new technology is that there are new ways to tell a story and even to start up a news organization. But it's easier for me to be upbeat, since I have my teaching job. I sympathize with the many journalists who continue to do good work every day, despite the industry's problems.

Where, with whom and in what circumstances did you spend your childhood?

I'm a Brooklyn boy, oldest of four sons of Anne and Bernard Moses. I grew up in a relatively suburban part of Brooklyn -- attached single-family and two-family houses with a small yard -- and that's where I still live, in the

same ZIP code.

What schools did you attend?

I went to Mary Queen of Heaven School in Brooklyn's Flatlands section, taught by the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill, N.Y. Then I went to Nazareth High School, where the Xaverian Brothers were a significant influence in my life. I got a bachelor's degree at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, which had some great teachers and the advantage of being free in those days. And then I received a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Would you please describe your current family?

I live with my wife, Maureen, in southern Brooklyn. Our son, Matthew, lives in the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn and is engaged to Lisa Loen. Matthew is a writer and TV producer -- he is a really good writer and holds an MFA in playwriting from Yale. Our daughter, Caitlin, a fellow UMass alum, lives in Long Island City, Queens, and is engaged to Ryan Hinkis. Caitlin is an administrator for Project Sunshine, a charitable organization that helps hospitalized children. She does some astounding good works there.

How, when and where did you meet your wife?

Maureen Collins and I met in 1974 when working on a cursillo weekend held for college students at St. Paul's Cursillo Center in Brooklyn's Greenpoint section. Maureen was studying nursing at Catholic Medical Center; I was a junior at Brooklyn College. We married in 1976. For the last two decades, Maureen has been the school nurse at Bishop Kearney High School, a Brooklyn school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. It's a job that allows her to do what she does best: to help people and to offer compassion to those who need it. In my many years in journalism, I've often gotten to report on what seems "important" that day -- what people are buzzing about. But when Maureen tells me over dinner what she's been doing in her work, whatever I did that day can seem very unimportant in comparison. Did I say she's beautiful? She is.

What do you consider your everyday challenges?

Inner peace. People think I'm calm, but I'm not sure that's so. I might brush off something during the day, but at night the anger or indignation might gnaw. A little indignation can be a good thing in journalism, but not at 2 in the morning.

What gives you the courage and wisdom to address them?

Talking things through with Maureen helps. Centering prayer helps. Going to Mass helps.

What is your favorite Scripture passage or Bible story?

The story of the prodigal son has to be the best story ever told.

Does it make a difference in your life?

Not enough. In the story, Jesus has the father go to what would seem to his audience at the time to be an absurd length to forgive his prodigal son. This is the image of God that Jesus preached and his model for our own behavior as well.

What is your image of God?

Just a saving presence. If I try to visualize it, it's a kind of blurry image of Jesus, similar to one my parish uses

on the cover of a booklet handed out at funeral Masses. It depicts a misty Jesus -- the face is unclear -- with arms outstretched in welcome. I like the New Testament image of the disciple Jesus loved leaning his head against Jesus' chest at the Last Supper. He can't see Jesus' face that close up, but feels his presence.

Has it changed?

Yes. For example, when I first became enthusiastic about the Catholic faith as a teenager, I would imagine God by visualizing Jesus as a friend -- smiling, bright-eyed, welcoming, understanding. An older brother. That's the image the Xaverian Brothers put before us, and it was meaningful. But that changed over time.

Can you say why?

As my spiritual life became more contemplative, I adapted.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

God's saving presence.

Do you see it in action?

I do, sometimes. I see people I know changing slowly as barriers to realizing God's presence break down. I see it in myself, too. No one stands still; everyone is evolving spiritually.

Who most influenced your belief system? Please explain.

My parents certainly provided the foundation, and the sisters at Mary Queen of Heaven told Bible stories that hooked me at an early age. My teenage involvement in cursillo through the Xaverian Brothers at Nazareth High School gave me an upbeat, forward-looking image of the church that has survived 30 years of institutional attempts to drag the church backward. Reading Thomas Merton helped me transition to a more adult faith. Marriage to a woman of faith is a great influence, too. Priests and sisters imbued with the spirit of Vatican II helped a lot when it seemed the hierarchy just didn't get it.

How do you pray?

I practice centering prayer, which I try to do daily. I participate in a small group at St. Columba, my parish, on Monday nights, and I like to read the classic mystic writers, such as Teresa of Avila. I can't say I am very good about letting go of my thoughts of the moment, but it seems there are pockets of quiet, even if I don't realize it. Over time, centering prayer has been transformative for me, as it is for many people. I like to read the psalms beforehand, which I began doing after the first of what have been many visits to the Benedictines' Mount Savior Monastery near Elmira, N.Y.

Paul, that's something else we have in common. I've been going to that monastery every year since 1975. What does Christianity ask of you?

That's a big question, and I am going to fall back on the Baltimore Catechism: to know, love and serve God in this world.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

A good marriage and wonderful children. Of course, those accomplishments are hardly mine alone.

Professionally speaking, it would be my book *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* *[2],*

published by Doubleday in 2009. As a journalist, I had no business venturing into medievalist territory. But something just clicked.

What in contemporary Catholicism or distresses you?

For a long time, it's been characterized by a defensive, circle-the-wagons attitude. This is the attitude that caused the cover-up of the sexual abuse crisis. It's an attitude that has turned off so many people to the Catholic faith. There is such a fear of dissent and criticism and a resistance to independent thought, whether it is on the part of journalists, women's religious orders, theologians, lay associations like Voice of the Faithful, Catholic periodicals. It's one reason I support *Commonweal* and *NCR* -- we need independent Catholic voices. They make for a better church.

Is there anything you would change?

I would look at changing the way bishops are selected. The process is too removed from the people -- even from the diocesan clergy. The political litmus tests used in the past few decades have limited the talent pool. Good candidates were passed up.

I think plenty of American bishops stifled what might have been an inclination to disagree with their more negative colleagues and their politicized agenda. Perhaps Pope Francis will give them the courage to change the conversation within the U.S. hierarchy.

What causes you sorrow?

The death of a loved one causes me sorrow. But I think true sorrow is such a deep emotion that it connects us with our most intimate selves, and thus, in some way, to God's presence.

What causes you joy?

Connecting with other people is what gives me joy and not, say, solitary moments in the way of one of my favorite writers, Thomas Merton. Maureen and I work on retreats for Catholic Engaged Encounter. When we connect with each other, the rest of our team and the engaged couples on one of these retreats, that gives me joy.

What gives you hope?

I'm pretty optimistic -- hope is the neglected virtue, I think. Talented, committed young people give me hope. Believing in a God gives me hope.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

We've both taught student journalists to end with some version of that question. But no, you've been very thorough. Thanks very much, Sister Camille and *NCR*.

[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 [3] from Now You Know Media.]

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