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Marist brother sees hope for the future of religious life

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Mar. 18, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

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Profession: Scholar in residence, Marist College
Lives in: Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

***Sr. Camille*: Sean, although you have strong credentials as a major superior of your congregation from 2001 to 2009 and are well known and respected among leaders of other communities, you were brought to my attention by two men not in religious life: Gene Zirkel and his brother, Deacon Don Zirkel,whose story appeared in this column in 2012[1]. I'd like to begin by asking how you know either or both of them.**

Sammon: I've come to know Gene through a group called the GMC, or Greater Marist Community. It's made up of some Marist brothers and others who were once canonical members of the congregation and their families. Many in the group come together annually for a retreat and picnic; smaller groups meet more regularly by region for social events and faith sharing. Prior to their move to Florida, Gene and his wife, Pat, had long been part of the annual retreat, often in a leadership role.

Your professional credits include a doctorate in clinical psychology and a position as international clinical director of House of Affirmation from 1982 to 1987. You've published 10 books and often have served as keynote speaker at conferences of many kinds. In which of these arenas have you found the greatest challenges?

My work as the international clinical director of the House of Affirmation was both rewarding and challenging. In the first place, I had the privilege of working with outstanding colleagues. Also, many who came to the house for its residential and educational programs were an inspiration: people willing to face challenging questions about life and the changes taking place in our church and its religious orders.

There has, however, never been a "golden age" in religious life. Each era has had its challenges. We need to use our energies to address today's, including the changes that very few welcome.

What impact have these changes had?

We've learned much from all that's transpired. One, religious life was never intended to be an ecclesiastical workforce. Two, our way of life belongs within the charismatic church and not the hierarchical church. Three, religious life is meant to be the church's conscience, reminding that large body continually about its true nature, about what it longs to be, can be, must be.

Young people coming to religious life today are reminding us that community and a vibrant life of prayer are as important a part of religious life as the ministry of our congregation.

The challenge that faces us today is building a future for religious life -- dreaming, taking risks, being willing to

change yet again so that this way of life can continue to be the leaven within church and society that it is meant to be.

And the greatest satisfactions?

I'm one of those lucky people who has loved just about everything he's been asked to do in life. It's been the people whom I've met in my various ministries that have made all these endeavors worthwhile: generous, thoughtful, hopeful people determined to make this world a better place.

What is your current position?

I'm a scholar in residence at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. One of the great joys of this position is being back in touch with young people once again. We have many over to our community for supper and conversations. I like to cook and they like to eat, so it's a good match.

What are your books about? Do you have a favorite among them?

The books I've written address a variety of topics: sexuality and celibate chastity, alcoholism, religious life and its future, life transitions and especially the transition at midlife. I'm working on another at the moment, *Creating a Religious Life for the 21st Century*. I hope to have it completed by the fall of this year.

A favorite among them? Yes, *A Heart that Knows No Bounds*, a short book I wrote about the life of the founder of my congregation [St. *Marcellin Champagnat]* at the time of his canonization in 1999.

With whom did you spend your childhood?

Both of my parents were immigrants to the U.S.: my mother, Mary Bradley, from the north of England and my father, Matthew Sammon, from the west of Ireland. My mother in particular instilled in me a love of reading.

I have an older brother, Henry, or Hank, as most people know him, and a younger sister, Moira. Hank is also a Marist brother and works with the National Religious Retirement Office; my sister, Moira, is married and has two children and three grandchildren. For many years, she worked in guidance and administration in the New York City public school system.

Where did you grow up?

In New York City in Yorkville during the 1950s and early 1960s, when the Third Avenue El was still in existence. A different world and neighborhood from what exists there today. Both my parents stressed education as being very important in life.

Though I didn't know it at the time, my brother, sister and I grew up in what is today called a "bicultural household." I remember well one day when the three of us were driving my mother crazy, she said in exasperation, "I don't know where we went wrong with you children. You act so much like Americans!"

Who were your teachers?

I was blessed to have the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary of the Springs as teachers at St. Vincent Ferrer elementary school. Marjorie Tuite (then Sister Marie Veritas) was my elementary school principal. These women had a wonderful, open attitude toward life and managed to pass it along to their students.

I went to St. Agnes High School, and it was there that I met the Marist brothers.

Did you have role models or personal heroes?

During the late 1960s when I was in college, people like Daniel Berrigan and others became role models. They seemed intent on changing our world, fostering peace instead of violence, willing to risk even personal freedom for what they thought was right.

What led you to religious life?

Personal contact with the Marist brothers. When I met the brothers, I found myself drawn very much to their way of life and the work that they were about. They seemed very human, had a strong sense of community, and were friendly to one another and to us, their students. I found a clear sense of family among them; moreover, their expression of faith seemed very much tied to everyday life.

What have you considered the blessings and challenges of the Marist international missions?

Helping young people fall in love with God is both a blessing and a challenge these days. Our founder, Marcellin Champagnat, was fond of saying that "to teach children and young people, you must love them first and love them all equally."

Though many associate the Marist brothers with schools, our work has always been evangelization of the young, particularly poor young people. Our founder gave us the name "the Little Brothers of Mary," and quite honestly, it's the one that I prefer. He saw schools as the means in his time for evangelizing, but he didn't set out to establish a school system.

Today, almost 4,000 Marist brothers and approximately 40,000 laywomen and men work with 650,000 young people in Marist institutions in 80 countries throughout the world.

We also have a desk at the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva advocating on behalf of the rights of children. Our apostolates today are diverse, from elementary schools to large universities. We have a school for handicapped street children in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We work with boy soldiers and host an international volunteer program for young people looking to give a year or two of service.

We take to heart the instruction of our founder: "A brother is a man for whom the world is not large enough."

You've held many positions in and outside of the Marist community. Which among them offered the greatest challenges and satisfaction?

As I mentioned earlier, I've been lucky enough to have enjoyed just about everything I've been asked to do in life. During the time that I was president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, our leadership team -- Christian Br. Paul Hennessy, Marianist Fr. Patrick Tonry, Fr. Roland Faley [a member of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis] and Sulpician Fr. Jerry Brown -- visited the Congregation for Religious and other Vatican offices each year. Most years, we went to Rome with the officers of LCWR. For me, these joint trips were the most effective of those we made. Sr. Janet Roesner was then its executive director, and Dominican Sr. Nadine Foley and Sister of Providence Kathleen Popko were presidents successively. Members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious taught me a great deal about sisters' love of this way of life; their zeal for the mission was inspiring.

Can you cite learnings garnered from those under your care or tutelage?

They've taught me a great deal about courage, integrity, faith, hope, honesty. Whether working in mental health or serving as province or congregational leader and now more recently spending time with young people once

again, I'm struck by the many exceptional people I've met. People willing to face many challenging issues in their lives, others determined to make the world a better place, still others whose faith is an inspiration, their sense of hope a reminder about just how important that virtue is today, and their honesty a foundational element in all their relationships.

Where do you find your best support?

I've been blessed in life with a small group of longtime close friends. They've helped me grow through their interest and encouragement as well as the challenges they've raised and the love they've shared.

My family has been another source of support. We're as crazy as any other family but have remained close-knit over the years.

The members of my congregation are still another support. I've been a brother now for almost 50 years. I could not imagine a better way to have spent my life.

My faith has also been a great support. I feel blessed that Jesus Christ is such a central part of my life. I also consider myself privileged to have come to understand that faith, at its best, calls us to be of service to others, to be compassionate with ourselves and everyone else, to eschew privilege and position.

Do you have any short- or long-term goals?

Several, actually. One of the reasons I came to Marist College was to set up a center to promote the renewal of religious life in North America. I'm trying to establish a structure that will inspire hope, provide needed resources for renewal, and be cost effective.

Marist, because of its close working relationship with IBM, is known nationally for its IT resources, so the means for establishing this type of a center are readily at hand. I hope to be able to put aside the time needed to organize what I have in mind and to find some funding for several aspects of the project.

Anything else?

I'm working on two books at the moment. I mentioned one earlier, *Creating a Religious Life for the 21st Century* . The second focuses on community life. Because we've grown up in families, many congregations believe we have the skills to live in community. But religious communities are not families; they are, instead, groups of adults who have come together to live their life intensely around the Gospel. The skills needed for family life are different than those needed in community. We have to find ways to make honesty nonthreatening, to support and care for one another in adult ways, to be able to express affection, negotiate disagreements, and celebrate and pray in a meaningful way.

Finally, I'd like to be part of a generation that managed, with God's grace, to give birth to a new era in religious life. I'm optimistic about the future of this way of life.

How do you pray?

The way in which I pray has evolved over time. Today, the presence of God lies at the center of my prayer life. It's quieter than in the past: a simple being with God rather than a talking to God. I find it important to include the Eucharist regularly in the time I set aside.

Being a Marist brother, Mary is an important part of my prayer. She models what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

Several. First of all, the Old Testament readings relating the life, fortunes and misfortunes of David have great appeal to me. No doubt, he was a bold sinner. And yet God in his mercy raised him up to lead his people. His friendship with Jonathan; his involvement with Bathsheba, his manipulations that led to the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite; the death of his son, Absalom -- David was a very human person, full of passion, full of life, flawed in many ways but always relying on God's love.

In the New Testament, the exchanges between Jesus and Peter have always appealed to me. I'm surprised Jesus didn't lose patience more regularly with this man who would later head up the early church. Peter was unfinished, impulsive, earthy and passionate. Yet the love of Jesus Christ managed to tame him and give him the courage to do great things.

What makes you happy?

Simple things. Time spent with good friends, the satisfaction that comes from a job well done, bringing a challenging project to completion, a good book, being of help to others, taking risks, having a sense of integrity, living a passionate life.

Thank you, Sean. May your challenges and joys increase.

[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.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert signup [3].

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