

Finding Home

The Many Roads to Becoming a Jesuit

by Patrick A. Fairbanks, SJ

Part of my job as Vocation Director is to read over the spiritual autobiographies of men who start the application process. I am usually awed by the ordinary yet significant ways in which God first invites a man to find a home in the Society of Jesus.

A quick read of the vocation stories on the next page makes it obvious how varied are the holy ways and means God uses to attract people to Himself and to religious life in particular.

The first story tells about how Fr. Bill Bichl found a home in the Jesuits through the door of the Detroit Province. Yet today Fr. Bichl anticipates a sort of “coming home” to his native Illinois, as men of both Provinces make steps to reunification.

A key point to remember is that while Jesuits enter a particular province, we enter the worldwide Society and make ourselves available wherever the need is greatest. Just as we take many paths *to* the Jesuits, we take many paths back out into the world *as* Jesuits.



For more information about the Jesuits, please contact

Fr. Pat Fairbanks, SJ

Vocation Director

2050 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60614

Phone: 773-975-6363

vocations@jesuits-chgdet.org



Vocation director Fr. Pat Fairbanks, SJ, and vocation promoter Fr. Glen Chun, SJ, meet candidates across the two provinces through a variety of vocations events. Learn more on the back cover of this issue.

Vocations

OF THE CHICAGO AND DETROIT PROVINCES



I come from a devout Catholic family. Religion in some form has always been there for me. Both my parents were active in the parish. My brother and I both attended the parish school, and were altar boys one after the other. We liked the nuns and the priests at the parish and were inspired by them.

When I was finishing 6th grade, we moved into Chicago from a western suburb (Wheaton). One underlying reason for the move was that, if I were accepted, I could go to Loyola Academy. And underlying that hope (which was realized) was the further hope that I might receive a vocation to be a Jesuit! Talk about farsighted parents!

I graduated from Loyola Academy in 1949, and went to Loyola University Chicago for college. There I met several

influential Jesuit priests, and thought I'd like to teach. I filed away the remark of one Jesuit that he'd never consider teaching save as a Jesuit priest—but didn't forget it. He introduced me to St. Ignatius's prayer, "Take and Receive." While I did not know what I wanted to do, I *did* know that Ignatius's words, "Give me your love and your grace, and that is enough for me," were true for me.

We moved from Chicago to Columbus, Ohio, while I was finishing senior year at Loyola University in June of 1952. The move put me in the Detroit Province when I joined the Society, since the summer I joined was the beginning of that province. A year after Loyola, while doing a master's at Xavier in Cincinnati, I received a letter from a college buddy who was joining the Jesuits. Upon reading it, I said to the Lord, "You got me!" and applied to join. That was in the spring of 1954, and still here I am.

—Fr. William M. Bichl, SJ



Looking back, I must admit a certain irony meeting my first Jesuit as the professor of "The History of Atheism" course at Marquette University. However, little did I know at the time that what he taught us about Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche would in many ways frame how I have come to understand the Jesuit mission: to help

others discover God in a world whose values are oftentimes dismissive of Him. While at Marquette, I came to see how the work of the Jesuits there meant training young people in the service of the truth, introducing such a diverse student body to the richness of the Catholic way of thinking and to a God who loves each of us so perfectly and infinitely. From Milwaukee I went to Rome and to the Gregorian University where God once again put great

Jesuits into my life. During the school year a young Jesuit priest led me in the "Spiritual Exercises." That year was a real turning point as I began to pray regularly and ask God to help me know how and where I should live my life. I entered the Jesuit Novitiate in Detroit a year later!

So, what does it mean to be a Jesuit today? To me, it means loving Christ above all else and loving all else in Him. It means being with people where they are and sharing intimately in their lives. People trust us. They trust us to listen and support and challenge where need be. Being a Jesuit means constant inner-striving to praise God in all that I do and think and am, giving God not only my strengths but, maybe more importantly, admitting and allowing Him to use all my weaknesses as well. Hardly a day goes by in which I don't burst with gratitude for this vocation!

—Fr. David V. Meconi, SJ



After graduating from college in 1991 with a degree in sociology, I found employment as a trader's assistant at the Chicago Board of Trade. One year later, I was transferred to our London office. As I moved forward in my career, rather than experiencing feelings of ongoing excitement and accomplishment, the modest success I had

achieved left me feeling increasingly hollow. Likewise, the cosmopolitan lifestyle I once valued provided progressively less insulation from the nagging emptiness inside me. This feeling emerged most strongly when a certain question arose from deep inside me: "What is God's opinion of what I'm doing with my life?"

I returned to Chicago at the end of 1994. Although I had never known any Jesuits, I was intrigued by the various signs pointing in their direction. I had received from my father the phone number of a Jesuit community located close to my house. He got it from a business friend who knew the Jesuits personally. I called their community and they invited me to dinner. I was

impressed with their friendliness, hospitality, and the stimulating table conversation. They encouraged me to contact the local vocation director.

As I met more and more Jesuits, I increasingly felt that I could fit in comfortably with this dynamic and spiritual group of men. The more I learned about Jesuit life, the more appealing it became. After a year of candidacy, I concluded that the interior trail of peace and consolation lead me to enter the Society of Jesus.

Although I left much behind when I entered the Society, I feel like I gained much more: a deeper relationship with God and a stronger sense of the presence of Jesus in my life; new talents along with opportunities to exercise them for the sake of the Kingdom; and many close friendships with brother Jesuits and lay colleagues who share our mission. Alongside these there is the occasional challenge or frustration, no doubt. But every type of vocation lived well—married, single, or religious—experiences the same. Perhaps most importantly I realize that my happiness as a Jesuit is not the result of a heroic act of willpower. Rather, I feel that God is giving me the grace to live this life and live it well.

—Fr. Michael T. Conley, SJ