



# CALLINGS

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT VOCATIONS

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## From India to the Great Plains – a Jesuit’s international journey

By Fr. Paul Coelho, SJ

The first opportunity I had to know the Jesuits was during high school in Ahmedabad, India, a Jesuit-run school of the Gujarat province. It was during those high school years also that I first considered the possibility of becoming a Jesuit.

But becoming a Jesuit was not something most kids thought of or did. It could be the cause of amusement and ridicule from my peers. And then there was the question of my family as well. I remember mustering all the courage I could, for I was a timid child, to tell my parents. My father was not excited at first, and said he thought I was too young. He suggested I should at least finish college before making that decision.

In retrospect, I suspect he was hoping I would possibly find a coed who might help me change those plans. I was a 14-year-old then, a senior in high school, and with no option but to obey my father. I know that in my enthusiasm to join the Society – a strange feeling of bursting enthusiasm, actually, that was taking hold of this timid guy – I did not accept his plan too well but, nonetheless, gave in rather meekly.

I graduated college with a degree in psychology before turning 19. During these eight years of high school and college, both of which were Jesuit institutions, I met a number of wonderful Jesuits. And in college, to the frustration of my father, I found myself getting even more attracted to the Jesuits – enamored of their commitment, their sense of joy, and their idealism.

There was another piece in this desire to become a Jesuit as well – the thought that if a life is to be worthwhile, it must be spent in “worthwhile” endeavors. During those years, especially while in college, I was a bit of an idealist. I wanted to do something that would be meaningful for me for the rest of my life. I remember thinking that some day, when I would become an old man (I just presumed I would live a long life), that I would like to look back and say, “You know, it was a life worth living. I didn’t just waste it.” Somehow becoming a Jesuit seemed to have the potential to satisfy that desire.



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And of course, but to a lesser degree, there was also this searching that was going on in my faith life. Don’t get me wrong. I was never the pious type – timid yes, but never pious. And to this day my family teases me that I was the only one at home who could not recite our family prayers without blanking out.

When I think of why I continue to be a Jesuit today, however, I feel my faith life plays a more significant role than it initially did. And the reason for that, I reckon, was fostered during the long years of Jesuit formation – when we learn how to pray and to serve. These were also years when I encountered, and was guided by, some wise Jesuits. My life today has evolved immensely from those early years, maturing to become more prayerful, compassionate, and obedient. My daily decisions in serving others are influenced by my prayers which, in turn, feed that desire to continue to serve.

Another important part of my Jesuit life has been that of living in community. I enjoy the camaraderie. More importantly, there is this way in which the lives of those in my community touch mine and encourage me to become a better Jesuit. This is deeply satisfying. And this is why I have continued for 28 years in what has →

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truly been a journey of exploring God's presence in my life.

A life-altering change in my life as a Jesuit came in the early 1980s – while I was still in formation, studying philosophy. I had been a Jesuit for just four years when the superior of the Nagaland mission came to the philosophate asking for volunteers for this remote, isolated and underdeveloped mission in northeast India. The conditions, he told us, were tough. And there were just a handful of Jesuits working there.

I know, without any doubt today, that I was young and foolish then. I stuck my hand up promptly and said, "I'll come!" My provincial decided that I should first visit the place and then, as all good Jesuits do, make a discernment before deciding; Jesuits are always encouraged to discern before deciding.

In the month that I spent there that summer in 1981, I fell in love with the place and the people. The following year I left my home province in western India and moved roughly 1,800 miles away to the easternmost corner of the country, to work with the Nagas. It was not an easy transition. The language, culture, food habits, and lifestyle of the people were so totally different. Yet when the heart is set on something, I guess one finds the reasons to stay. I stayed.

Then in 1999 I came to the United States to work on a doctoral degree in education at Marquette University. The hope was that these studies would prepare me for the new apostolic ventures we were focusing on in the



FR. PAUL COELHO, SJ TALKS WITH STUDENTS AT RED CLOUD HIGH SCHOOL.

mission in the area of higher education. I arrived in the U.S. not without some apprehension. I was not sure how I would fit in, how well I would be able to function, or whether I would feel at home and accepted.

But it took me all of two days to realize that a Jesuit community anywhere in the world is essentially the same. And despite the differences – in the ways we talk and the houses in which we reside – these differences are superficial. At the deepest levels we are amazingly similar. We have the same kinds of concerns and the same frustrations. We share similar dreams and passions.

I have experienced this commonality in other places as well – in Europe and elsewhere in Asia. The similarities are so strong and striking that I am convinced that the Jesuits have their own unique identity – a "Jesuitness" that transcends political, cultural, geographical, and demographic borders. As a Jesuit, you really are at home in any Jesuit community anywhere in the world. You participate in a common yet unique history and culture, indulge in common jargon, are infused with a common spirituality, and share a common dream. So you are never an outsider, never a foreigner. Even now, as a Jesuit from India working with Jesuits from the Wisconsin Province, serving the Lakota people of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, halfway around the globe from where I was born and raised – I know I am with family. **E**

## Jubilee Year celebrates three college roommates who changed the world

The Jubilee Year honoring St. Ignatius of Loyola on the 450th anniversary of his death in 1556 and St. Francis Xavier and Blessed Peter Faber on the 500th anniversary of their births in 1506 started Dec. 3 with the Feast Day of Xavier.

These three college friends and roommates at the University of Paris ended up becoming co-founders of the Jesuits along with several other close college friends. (See *Jesuit Journeys* magazine - winter 2006.)

With the exception of Ignatius, who was older and had already undergone a profound religious conversion, these college friends were not all that different from most college students today. While they came from good Catholic families, there were plenty of temptations with college parties, rowdiness, getting in trouble with school officials, and



threats of sexually transmitted diseases to keep them on the straight and narrow when virtue alone might fail to be a sufficient motivator. Back then, syphilis was as deadly and as feared as AIDS is today.

For these three men of the 16th century, like college students in our time, the friends they

chose to hang around with had crucial consequences in their lives. Fortunately for Xavier and Faber, they chose to room with Ignatius, and that made all the difference in their lives. Rather than go onto ordinary, forgettable careers and lives after college, they ended up co-founding the Society of Jesus with Ignatius. These three, along with their other companions, were leaders in the counter-reformation of the Catholic Church – altering the course of history.

The dapper, athletic, personable Xavier, rather than going on to a middle class career, ended up evangelizing much of India and Japan, becoming the patron of missionaries. Faber ended up being the foremost giver of the Spiritual Exercises, helping many encounter God in profound ways.

Who are your friends? What do they stand for? What kind of a friend are you? Where is your life going? Is it being led by God? **E**

# Fear and the vocational discernment process

Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ

DIRECTOR OF VOCATIONS – WISCONSIN PROVINCE



In a previous column I discussed “False Fears: How the Evil Spirit Can Undermine God’s Call.” Later, in presenting this topic to a group of college students, an astute undergraduate raised some thought-provoking questions. He wondered:

- Are all fears bad?
- Aren’t some fears in the vocational discernment process legitimate?
- How do you distinguish between legitimate fears and false fears?

I am now in my seventh year in vocation ministry, which gives me the privilege of helping people in their vocational discernment process regarding religious life, priesthood, and marriage. I believe this student raised some important questions that deserve a thoughtful response.

Fear is a natural part of the vocational discernment process, and it is not necessarily bad. However, dealing with fear is tricky, and the discernor will find it helpful to engage in astute discernment of spirits with assistance from a skilled spiritual director to avoid getting sidetracked by false fears.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his rules for the discernment of spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises*, offers this advice:

“When we are intent upon living a good life and seeking to pursue the lead of God in our life, the ... evil spirit proposes to us all the problems and difficulties in living a good life. The evil one attempts to rouse a false sadness for things which will be missed, to instigate an anxiety about persevering when we are so weak, and to suggest innumerable roadblocks in walking the way of the Lord.

And so the evil spirit uses discouragement and deception to deter us from growing in the Christ-life. ... The evil spirit will subtly arouse dissatisfaction with our own efforts, will raise up doubts and anxieties about God’s love or our own response. ...

“The good spirit, however, strengthens and encourages, consoles and inspires, establishes a peace and sometimes moves to a firm resolve. To lead a good life gives delight and joy, and no obstacle seems to be so formidable that it cannot be faced and overcome with God’s grace. The good spirit thereby continues an upright person’s progress in responding to God’s continuing invitation. ... The good spirit tends to give support, encouragement, and oftentimes even a certain delight in all our endeavors.” (From *The Spiritual Exercises – A Contemporary Reading* by David Fleming, SJ, paragraphs 315 and 329).

While these observations by St. Ignatius are accurate, they cannot be applied in a simplistic black and white manner. It’s not true that fear and sadness always come only from the evil spirit. However, what is true is that the evil spirit can play on even our healthy fears, questions, doubts, and sadness and subtly use them to lead us away from recognizing and whole-heartedly responding to God’s will for us.

How do we distinguish when these fears, doubts, questions, and sadness are unhealthy and from the evil spirit and when they are not? For one, we can understand that fear of making a bad choice about how to live our one and only life can be healthy if we don’t let it paralyze us.

Fear can raise important questions that the discernor needs to grapple with – questions such as:

- Am I really being called to religious life?
- Is God actually calling me to a life of celibacy, poverty, and obedience?
- Or rather does my desire for a family express God’s authentic call to me?
- Could I be healthy and happy as a celibate?

While these are all valid, natural questions, they tend to raise the kind of fear that can leave us confused and perhaps even make us feel sad. A discernor might experience healthy anticipatory grieving that can be part of the experience of opting to forego the possibility of starting a new family sometime in the future by committing to religious life now. This temporary sadness can raise additional questions, fears, and doubts.

So we must then ask, when are these fears, questions, and doubts positive and even helpful and when are they not? When should they, on the one hand, be actively engaged as healthy questions that need to be dealt with and when, on the other hand, should they be countered as a ploy of the evil spirit?

Here, too, St. Ignatius’ guidelines for the discernment of spirits are helpful. In paragraphs 331-333 of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius tells us to look at where an inner movement is coming from and where it is leading us. If doubts lead us to address important questions or recognize deeper desires, they are from the good spirit. However, if entertaining these questions consistently leaves us feeling sad, confused, anxious, and paralyzed, we can assume they are not from the good spirit. Some examples will help.

Let’s say the discernor has felt joy and consolation over a fairly long period of time, but in approaching the actual making of a vocational decision, suffers the kind of reluctance or “cold feet” that leaves him or her mired in doubts, fears, sadness, and confusion that lead nowhere. I have found a good litmus test is this: If what the discernor is feeling leads nowhere other than to feel stuck and paralyzed, chances are the evil spirit is at work. If, on the other hand, what the discernor is feeling directs him or her to grapple with important questions and issues that need to be dealt with and may perhaps point to deeper desires, then the good spirit is at the source.

So, if we’re feeling hopelessly stuck in confusion, doubt, fear and sadness after


## Novitiate to host spring 'Come and See'

The annual spring Come and See Weekend for all inquirers interested in learning more about Jesuit life and training will shift to a new site and be held this year for the first time at the Jesuit Novitiate in St. Paul from March 31-April 2.

"This is a very exciting change. In the past we have held this event in Chicago with great success," says Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ, Wisconsin Province vocations director. "This year inquirers will spend the weekend with first-year novices, see first-hand how they live, and hear their vocation stories and experiences of Jesuit life in this, their first

stage of training to be Jesuit priests and Brothers."

The weekend will begin with Mass at 5 p.m. Friday, March 31 and end with lunch on Sunday.

"In between we will share meals, socialize, pray together, celebrate the Eucharist, and engage in a wide range of discussions pertaining to vocations and the discernment process," Fr. Sazama says. 

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a significant period of what Ignatius refers to as "consolation," (that is, peace, joy, a sense of rightness and having found God in the contemplated decision), then these fears and doubts are clearly not from the good spirit because they are not leading the discerner toward a good place. No school of spirituality would say "Follow your fears"!

On the other hand, if in paying attention to these fears, doubts, and confusion the discerner is led to deal with important unresolved questions and issues, then that is a good thing.

I have encountered discerners who, after a period of consolation about their desire to enter our community, still had some questions and did not feel ready to apply when the time arrived. Commonly they harbored healthy fears and doubts centering on issues of sexuality and intimacy that needed to be addressed before a good decision could be made.

I can think of other discerners I've helped who experienced real doubts in the middle of working on their application materials and eventually discovered they were being called by God to live their life as a Catholic layman or woman rather than as a religious. This is a good example of a healthy doubt pointing to a deeper desire – a case where doubt is from the good spirit.

Sometimes just the opposite occurs when, in the course of the vocational discernment process, discerners in a romantic relationship experience questions, doubts, and confusion that help them

discover that their true call from God is religious life or priesthood rather than marriage.


In summary, questions, fears, and doubts in the vocational discernment process can be positive in two instances:

- When they point to unresolved issues that the discerner needs to deal with before making a good decision.
- When they lead the discerner to realize that his or her deepest desire is other than the contemplated decision – for example, lay life rather than religious life or vice versa.

On the other hand, these questions, doubts, and fears are negative if they only serve to lead the person to feel stuck, anxious, sad and confused, and block the person from making a good, prayerful decision. In this latter case,

the discerner must recognize these doubts and confusion as "desolation" from the evil spirit leading them away from God's will. Recognized as such, they can, and must, be countered rather than indulged in order to arrive at a healthy decision.

Clearly, engaging in a good vocational discernment process can be a tricky, often challenging business that can include periods of confusion, doubt, and uncertainty. Dealing with the questions that inevitably come up requires skillful discernment

of spirits. That is one reason that daily personal prayer, frequent mass attendance, and regular spiritual direction are essential components of the decision-making process – especially in the final, often more subtle stages. 

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## UP COMING EVENTS

FEB. 17-20

**DISCERNMENT RETREAT** at the Jesuit Retreat House near Denver, Colorado. This retreat, which takes place at our retreat house in the beautiful foothills of the Rocky Mountains, is on the long Presidents' Day Weekend. It starts on Friday afternoon and ends with lunch on Monday. This is a silent prayer retreat on which you will have daily conversations with a young Jesuit in training. The retreat will include some presentations on Jesuit life. Because this is a busy ski weekend in the Denver area, airline reservations need to be made early.

MAR. 31 - APR. 2

### SPRING COME AND SEE WEEKEND

at the Jesuit Novitiate in St. Paul, Minnesota. This weekend is for all inquirers who are interested in learning more about Jesuit life and training. You'll spend the weekend with the first year novices in St. Paul, who will share their vocation stories and experiences of Jesuit life and formation. The novitiate is the first stage of Jesuit training. We'll begin with Mass at 5 p.m. on Friday and end with lunch on Sunday.

JUNE 9

### JESUIT ORDINATIONS at 7:30 p.m.

at St. John's Parish on Creighton University's campus in Omaha. There will be a simple meal beforehand and a reception after. You are also welcome to attend their First Masses on Saturday. Please let us know if you need a place to stay overnight.

*There is no charge for these events, and we are happy to help with travel costs to and from these events if needed. Please contact Fr. Sazama, SJ.*

  
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VOCATIONS

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