

How I Didn't Become a Priest

by
Bill Batkay

As with most big decisions in my life, such as going to graduate school and getting married, I decided to become a priest more or less on a whim. Raised as a good son the Church, I spent my grade and high school years in Catholic schools. So I was programmed to think of the priesthood as a noble way of life for a bright young boy. Thus, when a priest from the Maryknoll missionary order came to talk at my high school early in my senior year in 1961, I was receptive ground.

I've long since forgotten the name of the visiting priest, but I remember that he as relatively young, relatively handsome, and very persuasive. By the end of his hour-long talk, I'd made my decision: I would go to the Maryknoll College Seminary in Glen Ellen, Illinois, to start my preparation to become a missionary priest in some exotic but benighted backwater in Africa or Latin America. At that time, Fidel Castro had just embarked on his effort to make Cuba into a Communist state, and with this in mind a waggish classmate urged me in his inscription in my yearbook to "kill a Commie for Christ."

I don't remember the exact series of steps that followed my decision, beyond informing my friends and my parents that I'd decided to study to become priest. Presumably I submitted an application of some sort and met with some representative of the order to discuss the process. I evidently impressed the order's recruiters sufficiently for him to arrange for my parents and me to travel to Queens over the Christmas break to meet with the family of a boy who

was already study at the College in Illinois, as well of course as with the boy himself. I was nervously excited at this opportunity- both anxious to make a good impression and uncertain about what I was letting myself in for.

I was not reassured when, soon after our arrival at the boy's house, he looked me up and down admiringly and rather too gleefully announced that, with my 6 foot plus size, I would be a great addition to intramural football. My hear sank: not only did I dislike sports in general, I reserved a particular loathing for football. Things were not looking good, even before my brief seminary career was launched.

How I Didn't Become a Priest: Part II

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I got over or, more likely, simply suppressed my unease at the notion of having to play football at the Maryknoll College seminary. I then accepted an invitation to visit the main seminary in Ossining, New York, where I and my father would spend most of a pleasant spring day touring the grounds and having a chance to talk with a "real" seminarian. I don't remember much about either the drive from northern New Jersey where we lived to the seminary, which took a good hour. Nor do I remember much from the tour of the grounds there, not even whether we were served lunch. I can recall, however, being impressed, even over-awed, by the large neo-Gothic buildings, with their dark, vaguely mysterious and silent, interiors.

One other memory of that day is still with me, of a walk my father and I took with our seminarian guide, a blond "all-American type from Ohio, toward the end of our visit. It was the custom at the Ossining institution for the priests and seminarians to recite the rosary at around five every afternoon while strolling in small groups along the tree-bordered paths around the main building. My father and I were invited to join our guide as we walked slowly in the midst of other groups quietly murmuring our prayers, which were a wonderfully contemplative and soothing way to end the day.

When we'd finished our rosary and were walking back to the reception center to say our formal farewells, I chatted somewhat self-consciously with the young man who'd been our guide, about what

his experience at the college had been like, what he found most significant about his time in the seminary, and the like. At some point this fellow remarked on the amazing smorgasbord of students he's encountered at the Illinois college. They came, it transpired, from literally all over the country, bringing with them wildly different ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds.

What had most surprised him, our guide reported, marveling, was that, until he arrived at the college, he'd assumed that everyone talked "general American," like him. It took him some time, he continued, to get used to the accents of people from, say, the New York area, like my father and me.

Wait, I thought to myself. **I** have an accent?!

Until that moment I'd always believed that **I** spoke was "general American," and that the people from far outside New York, as from Ohio, for example, were the ones who talked oddly. What was I letting myself in for? It wasn't enough that I might be expected to play football, a distasteful prospect in itself. It seemed now that I was going to be thrown among people who would think, mistakenly, to be sure, that I spoke with an accent. I was going to be spending my four college years and beyond with, for all practical purposes, a bunch of foreigners. What the hell?

As we drove away from Ossining, my father naturally wanted to talk about what I thought of our visit and my talk with the young seminarian. I couldn't bring myself to give him anything but the usual platitudes. I certainly couldn't admit that I was having

second, third and fourth thoughts about my decision to enter the seminary. Not because I was caught up in imagining the rigors of the missionary life in the jungle somewhere, or the demands of celibacy. (I was, after all, an inexperienced virgin, like good Catholic boys were expected to be.)

No. What had me mentally agitated was the sentiment that I was going to be spending the next several years with young men who, although Americans like me, might regard **me** as the guy who "talked funny."

Once again, things were not looking good.

How I Didn't Become a Priest—III (Working Title)

"Bill, help your father get the suitcases out of the trunk," my mother commanded. "Okay," I replied. "Where should I put them?" "Just put them next to the car. They'll tell us where to take them after," Mom instructed. I did as I was told.

And so we'd arrived, my parents, my younger brother, Jon, and I, after a short-ish drive from some town in Ohio where we'd spent the night. The Maryknoll College seminary sat at the top of a long gentle rise on the flatland of northern Illinois just west of Chicago, near Cicero. The property had once been a golf course, with a few of the holes and greens still visible. It had once belonged to a Catholic family that, it was whispered, had Mafia connections. The family then donated the land to Maryknoll in what I supposed had been a stab at securing forgiveness for their crimes.

We'd parked on a broad graveled plaza in front of the main seminary building, an unadorned three-storied rectangular brick edifice with a modest neo-Gothic stone entrance in the middle of the facade. Anxious as I was, I wasn't particularly impressed. The plaza, as expected, was jammed with cars, luggage, families of newly-arrived and returning seminarians. The hubbub of confusion was typical of the return of college students to their campuses to this day.

Inside the building, the entrance hall no less cacophonous. "Just where is this dormitory we're supposed to take his stuff to," asked a skittishly nervous mother. "June, what happened to Timmy's small suitcase," a father whined. I can't begin to describe the

sundry squabbles of the hordes of young siblings of the seminarians that seemed to be milling everywhere. Eventually, my parents, brother and I found our way to the dormitories on the third floor, one for us newbies on one side of a hallway, another one for the upper-classmen. After a time, we got my clothes hung up or folded neatly in a metal wardrobe against the wall at the head of the Army cot-like bed. Miscellaneous stuff—extra sheets and pillowcases; two blankets; classroom supplies; pre-purchased Maryknoll prayer book and hymnal (of which more later); heavier winter clothing—was less-carefully crammed into a foot-locker at the bottom of the cot. This was my personal space for the first year of my seminary adventure.

How I Didn't Become a Priest—Dinner Time (Working Title)

by
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The temporary anxiety attending my arrival at the Maryknoll Seminary in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, passed quickly, only to be succeeded within a month by a permanent anxiety centered on dinner time.

In its protocols, the seminary resembled both the Army and a boarding school. Freshmen like me slept in unadorned barracks-like dormitories on an upper floor of the main building. Dozens of single cots lined up on the long sides of large rectangular rooms. Metal wardrobes stood against the wall at the head of the beds; trunks like those used at summer camp were at the foot of the beds. All students had meals together during the week in a mess-hall-like dining hall the length of one wing of the building, in the basement. Plain rectangular metal tables, laid with white tablecloths and each seating ten people, lined the long walls, with smaller tables set aside for those few priests who were assigned to supervise our dinner-time on any given day.

We students started arriving in the dining hall, called a refectory, a few minutes before six. Encouraged to sit at a different table with different people each day, upper- and lowerclassmen democratically, if not always easily, mingled at each table. After grace, at a signal from one of the priests, one boy at each table was assigned to get platters and bowls of food from multi-tiered carts rolled out from the kitchen and placed in the long aisle down the center of the room.

Therein lay one major source of my anxiety. Food, hot and cold, was always plentiful, including lots of dessert. Yet I soon learned that not every platter and bowl held *exactly* the same food, some clearly more desirable than others to particular table-mates. Being assigned to bring the food from the carts was therefore a fraught exercise for me.

Tom likes the end cut of the meat loaf, I'd think to myself, and Rich always wants the string beans not the carrots. And that picky senior on the end-what was his name?-wants lots of extra gravy and the ranch salad dressing. Uh, oh, looks like George from the next table is going to get to the cart before me and he knows how to use his elbows. What do I do? The challenge was to get to the food without unseemly haste, which was a major no-no.

A second source of dinnertime anxiety for me was a particular junior I'll call Ben, with whom I periodically shared a table. He scared the daylights out of me with his demands. *Batkay*, he might say one day, *don't you know how to set a water pitcher on the table so you don't spill it? Or, geez, could you be more careful where you put the gravy boat down? You spilled some if that gravy on my napkin.* Whatever may have been the reality, I was convinced that Ben had it in for me, but I had no idea why.

Finally, the dinner period held a third source of anxiousness. At the end of the meal, one of the priests would read a short list of names of students who had committed some serious infraction of the rules of the place that day. He concluded with the stern order, *To*

the pits!, pointing to the dish room. This held several sinks, and the *bete-noire* of us students, the industrial dish-washing machine that took up the center of the room. The students whose names had been called were sentenced to pots-and-pans-cleaning duty, including running the dish machine, a hellish job and one of the most loathed that we were regularly expected on to perform. Although I had been from my early youth a good rule-obeying son of the Church, almost pitifully eager to please the authority figures, one never knew if one had nevertheless slipped up. I didn't relax until the list of names was read and I joined my table-mates filing out of the refectory to our evening free time.

Oh, yeah, one other thing: all of the maneuvering, order-giving, and criticism-leveling was carried out in total silence or very *sotto-voce*. More on this central aspect of seminary life later.