

My Testimony

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Shawn and Traudl Byrne

One night I dreamt I was a runner in a marathon race. There were all kinds of challenges, and sometimes mishaps, on the way. I had to run through water. Sometimes I went astray and had to retrace my steps. There were holes in the path that I could fall into. At times the way was slippery. Occasionally the path became barely wide enough for one person to pass through. Once, amazingly, I skidded and was swept high in the air. How could I return to "terra firma" without being smashed? I did plummet to earth, but in some way I didn't understand, I was not injured and I continued onwards, running, feeling good. I saw others being seduced from the race.

In my dream I did not get to the end of the marathon, but I understood that what matters is the quality of the effort. I could reach the goal if I was tireless in my effort.

The second of seven children, I grew up in the Republic of Ireland in the '40s and '50s, a quiet time and a quiet place. In 1963, after seven years of boring study of long-dead philosophy and theology, I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest for the archdiocese of Dublin. My purpose was to save souls. Since I was a child, my intention was to be a missionary in Africa and ride a horse or a motor bike in its jungle paths as I brought baptism, faith and education to its lost millions. However, as providence would have it, I ended up in Dublin. Later, as European missionaries began to outlive their usefulness, I was glad of this.

I settled down enthusiastically in my first mission to teach religion in high school. I began in the orthodox way, but over the years, as I became more aware of the nature of the challenge, I developed new understanding and techniques. I found that religion is a tricky thing to teach, especially as a compulsory subject. Most teenagers are not enthusiastic for it and see it as a limitator rather than a liberator in their lives. As they would sometimes say, "If everybody was good, life would be awful boring."

Meantime, I tackled and overcame one of the great terrors of my life. To stand up before an audience and speak was something that made my heart pound so fast that I thought I would collapse. However, I forced myself to stand up at debates and discussions and to speak out when I wanted, as well as give the sermons I had to give. Bit by bit, to my great relief, the terror subsided and I could do the previously almost impossible: speak impromptu, more or less coherently and calmly. That victory became a sign of hope for me. I felt that, if I could surmount that fear and develop that ability, I could do anything life required of me.

In the early summer of 1970 I visited New York. I was dazzled by its hustle and bustle, its towering buildings, its teeming millions, its variety of races, religions and colors of skin. Its heavy energy astounded me and its highways with their endless lines of cars amazed me. I was dizzy. In the streets were muggers and drug addicts. The air seemed full of planes and helicopters. The atmosphere vibrated with excitement, energy and violence.

Through working for a few weeks as a hospital chaplain, I became aware of how formal and empty religion had become for many apparent believers. I returned to Dublin in something of a daze. It seemed to have shrunk from a city to something not much more than a quiet town surrounded by green fields. I was awakening to the fact that there were worlds different from the one I knew.

Waiting for me on my arrival home was a letter containing news which was, for me, one of the first clear indications that there were forces operating beyond ones we see. I had been appointed head chaplain to Mountjoy prison, the main prison in Ireland. This was something I had not expected, but it fulfilled exactly what I desired, without my knowing precisely what it was that I desired. I had come to the conclusion that, in the classroom, I was removed from real life, from the situations where people were being formed and deformed, and I had developed a desire to be nearer to the places where people were really hurting. Nothing could fulfill that aspiration more than chaplaincy work in prison.

It was a challenge, but I was enthusiastic. It was a lonely position, not being a member of either the wardens or of the prisoners. If I leaned toward the prisoners, the staff didn't trust me; and if I leaned toward the workers, the prisoners didn't trust me. I didn't understand all of the forces that were operating. Neither did I understand, until years later when I heard the Principle section on spirit world, why I felt so crushed and oppressed within prison. The chaplain was expected to be a friend to the prisoners and to attend to their spiritual needs, and also to help their families if possible.

I soon came to realize some things: (1) The prisoners were, with almost no exception, the products of bad homes and deprived environments; (2) they were being made worse by their prison experience; (3) imprisonment signified society's rejection; (4) society shared responsibility for their being deprived; (5) very little constructive help was given in prison; (6) the chaplain was used to give a veneer of respectability to what I came to see as an iniquitous system; (7) the church was on the side of the oppressing society and system.

I felt the need to express my understanding and to bear a more direct witness to the church's concern for the poor (who were always the ones to be imprisoned). So, I sold my car, bought a bicycle, found two rooms in the city's worst slum where people were dumped who had been evicted from their places, and went to live in Benburb Street. Being a priest had its advantages in Ireland. It ensured my protection there. No one would hurt me, and no one ever did. I stayed there a year, while I continued as chaplain in the prison. Alone, I was able to do very little for the people. All I could do was visit them. Life in Benburb Street had its lighter side, too, and I often felt that for color and drama it would be hard to find it better. By the end of my first year there, some other priests moved in with me and the city provided us with a four-room house. We were moving up the ladder. But, for me, the scene was shifting.

Back in prison, things had been polarizing. For two years I had spoken with the authorities about the bad conditions. Things remained the same. With the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland came a spinoff of a rising prison population in the South and consequent overcrowding. Finally, I threw caution to the wind and went public, in the sense of speaking, writing and appearing on television -- and promptly found myself locked, not in, but out, of prison. The lockout continued for two months, and then my archdiocese assigned me to be an assistant pastor in a comfortable suburban parish. Thus I went to Kilmacud.

During those latter years I had been introduced to mountain and rock climbing by my brother-in-law. I developed something of a passion for these hardy, exhilarating and occasionally hair-raising activities. Although I did them just for fun, as I would later come to see fundraising, I think they were among the most educational experiences of my life. The mountains around Ireland often saw me there. I have the most grateful memories of those adventures.

In or around this time (the early 1970s), I spent three weeks touring Catholic missions in Kenya. That was an adventurous and fascinating trip. Again, my eyes were opened. I could see that, in terms of providing clinics, schools and churches, a lot of effort was being made by the Catholic Church. But, I also came to feel that the Church in Africa was of a pre-fabricated European design which did not spring out of the hearts of the people.

During all of these years I was also involved in organizations and activities designed to update the Church, adapt it to people's needs, make it more relevant, meaningful and attractive. The ongoing terrorism in Northern Ireland, although not directly affecting us in the South -- was a sign to me, that it was essentially a power struggle, that Christians were too locked into denominationalism to have sufficient power to give a strong Christian witness. I was perturbed and got involved in some mild

religious activities bearing on the Northern problem, but I didn't know quite what to do and so, in effect, I did nothing. It was around this time that I involved myself in the charismatic prayer movement. I found it very refreshing. Once a week about five hundred people of different denominations would meet to pray, sing and prophesy together. It was a breakthrough. It helped my prayer life, stimulated a more personal relationship with God and Jesus, enabled me to be a member, for the first time, of a real Christian community, and eased the painful loneliness of all those years.

It was also a forum for a very natural and genuine ecumenism which was much more attractive to me than the once-a-year, highly-staged, official and public ecumenical gesture. I am grateful for these experiences and friends, even though I can now see the drawbacks. At the least, all of my experiences and involvements were preventing me from settling down into the life-destroying atrophy of priestliness. I wasn't too sure of my direction, but I was kicking enough to stay alive. The funny thing was that in some ways I was (and you might notice, am) very priestly, but inside there was someone who wanted pretty desperately to be a true disciple.

I was also becoming more concerned about the weakness of Christianity's presence in the world. I had by now come to realize that even though the Catholic Church was the true one, the other churches still had something to say and do and we must all pull together for the sake of the world. I was inspired by the pure passion for discipleship expressed in the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and by the great vision of Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote of how mankind and God would one day embrace in a bond of eternal love and that its preparation was already in progress through the evolutionary thrust of creation and history. I believed it, but it all seemed so far off. I had no real idea of the Last Days. The Biblical language seemed very farfetched. The Vatican Council had come and gone, most churches were trying to renew themselves, priests were resigning and getting married at an alarming rate, nuns seemed to be fleeing out of convents. Meanwhile, the world seemed to get more and more confused and unstable. What was going on? What was the meaning of these things? What was an appropriate response?

In the parish, meanwhile, with my reforming zeal, I had managed again to get myself in trouble. I did not always act wisely or lovingly. I tried to stimulate my very conservative pastor and the other two assistants to develop the wonderful goodness already there in our 9,000 parishioners. With an eye to the future, I felt, devout as they were, that personal faith and commitment had to be deepened. But the other priests felt that things were okay and that we should simply keep them that way. After all, practically everyone came to Mass on Sundays.

By now I became aware that religion was limiting people rather than liberating them and that I, as a priest, was willy-nilly, an agent of limitation. This was something very painful for me. I tried to move the people. I took some new initiatives in the direction of helping people and couples to personalize their faith. I felt trapped, felt that the church was trapped. On the surface, religion seemed in fairly good shape in Ireland, but I was perturbed about the future in Ireland and around the world.

In late 1973 I underwent a short but sharp personal crisis. I felt that being a priest prevented me becoming a true disciple. The crisis came to a head when a seminarian's accusation made me acutely aware of the dilemma. For the first time in my life I spent a night in prayer in a park under a tree. I came to the conclusion that, in my case, priesthood and discipleship were not compatible.

Therefore, I chose discipleship and rejected priesthood. I would enter the monastery at once or disappear into the countryside and spend my time in prayer and simple labor. My decision made, I returned home and wrote letters to my parents and close friends, informing them of my decision. I would leave the very next day as soon as it was light.

But (so much for heroics) as dawn broke, I realized that, if this was from the Lord, I ought to be doing it with joy. And I was not joyful. I was very sad. Therefore, I would wait. If the Lord wanted me to leave the priesthood, he would make it clear. Meanwhile, I would work harder. This second decision made, I tore up the letters and went happily back to work. After this, I took several new initiatives in my pastoral work.

Some months later, on a rainy day in 1974 happened one of the more bizarre events of my life. Most of my parishioners were pretty well-to-do. But there was one quarter where people were poor. Through this area the City Council planned to build a badly needed highway. One day the bulldozers moved in and began to tear up what had become the children's playing field.

Although this was the original plan, the children had not been given alternate playing space. Something had to be done quickly or we would have nothing left to negotiate with. Therefore, at 10 am, when the more devout were waiting in the church for me to offer Mass for them, I was at the other end of the parish in the rain and muddy field, with a score or two of women and children who should have been in school, throwing a picket line in front of the devouring bulldozers. We stopped them, too. The work came to a halt and the residents had the opportunity to bargain for another playing field. As I say, it was bizarre and did not sit well with the devout and more traditional.

Within a week of that, in April 1974, happened an even more bizarre event, which must have finally justified many in their opinion of me. I was asked to visit a girl who had joined an off-beat group called the "Unified Family," and who was selling flowers on the street instead of studying social science in college. Her parents would like to see her. I thought they had a point.

It was obvious the group was unorthodox because they were not Catholic. But I was impressed by their dedication and broad vision. I wished I had Christians like that (wished I was as good myself). On the other hand, they might influence my young people since they lived nearby. Either way, I'd better find out what made them tick. I wanted to find out from the members themselves. I didn't want propaganda in the form of lectures.

But the only way I could get to talk with the members was by first listening to a lecture. I was taught the "Principle of Creation." I thought I knew it already. A few days later, I tried again to speak with the members. This time I was lectured on the "Origin of Sin:" A bit weird. I was determined to find out from members what really made them tick. It couldn't be what I was hearing, couldn't be that heavy theology I had seen in a dull-looking black book. So I went back a third time and heard "The Mission of the Messiah." That pulled me up short. I realized that Jesus should not have been crucified. If so, the consequences must be far-reaching. I returned to hear a lecture on history. Finally history made sense. And they were hinting that the Lord was on the earth now. I guessed who it was they meant.

This was a headful -- something I had never expected. I had gone fishing for sprats and caught a whale that was pulling me into very deep water. I was stuck one way or the other. If it was wrong, it was very evil and I would fight it. If right, it answered all my questions, exceeded all my hopes and I would give it my full support. I went to England to study it for a week. I tried to be critical, to resist. But I felt like man trying to keep out the tide. It came in on every side. It was hopeless. I was surrounded -- happily; and surrendered gratefully. It was more than I ever imagined. But it couldn't be more in time. We needed it. And it was just like God, I felt, to offer us such a total solution.

I returned to Ireland and told my bishop and pastor. My friends and family had already heard. Consternation erupted. The next few days were the most confused and painful in my life. I was bombarded on both sides: by the Unified Family, by my physical family, friends, priests and parishioners, some of whom loved me and grieved deeply for me. For me, I think it would have been easier to die. In the end, I wanted to be alone. I got a chance to get away from the pressure by going on a pilgrimage to Israel. I was impressed there only by the confusion in religion. I returned through England, joined the Unification Church there and to this day have not seen Ireland again.

Within a few days, friends or friends of friends were coming to look for me. I joined a mobile fundraising team. No one could locate me on that. Spiritually and physically, this was a difficult time. It was quite a wrench from the settled life of a priest to a nomadic life selling flowers, pamphlets and candies on the streets of England, and sleeping in a converted furniture truck at night. My emotional connection with Jesus was a special problem. I used to think that I might be betraying him, that I might be a latter day Judas. To be suddenly disengaged from what had been a lifelong involvement with the Catholic Church was also a disorienting and painful experience. We had no time to study on our team. All I knew was that when I had studied the Principle, I had been sure it was true. I clung to that memory as to a pinpoint of light at the end of a tunnel. Gradually, I stabilized. After seven weeks of fundraising, renewed efforts were being made to contact me. I came to America for 100 days training and here I have remained ever since.

I remember vividly the awe I felt as I looked on Father and Mother. He was the one history had been waiting for since time began and here he was before my eyes, within touching distance. (I got a chance to shake his hand but I was disappointed because he showed little interest in me.) I would gaze on him or "drink him in:" Sometimes I would weep with gratitude and joy. How could it happen that I could be his disciple? Sometimes I would weep with grief, for now I had become sensitive to my sinfulness in a way I had never been before. At times I would weep for the world because of its pathetic state. This was new. I used never to weep. But now my heart was touched and I began to feel [spiritual] life stirring in me that I thought had been almost dead.

I was willing to do anything. In between graduating from 100 day training and before starting systematic work with churches, I decided to give myself a new challenge and experience. One day in January 1975 I left Belvedere, where I was living, with a Divine Principle book in one pocket, a Bible in another, and a map in hand -- and that was it. No money, no razor, no pen -- nothing.

By night, a few hours later, I had them all, and a lot more besides, including a carpeted room, color TV, private bath, phone -- the lot. I certainly never had it so good since joining the church. What was happening? I had decided to witness for 40 days to ministers. I would rely for support on donations from those to whom I witnessed. (At the time I thought I ought not to fundraise.) During these 40 days I first experienced the bitterness of being constantly rejected. I traveled through the towns between Belvedere

and Boston. Usually I stayed in YMCAs.

When I didn't have money, I went to the Salvation Army shelter. Sometimes I spent nights in common rooms with drunks. When I couldn't stay in the "Y" and I'd had my quota of the Salvation Army, I did best of all. One night I tried to stay in a sitting room at Yale, but I had to get out. At midnight, with nowhere to go, I stopped a police car on the street. I'd hoped they would lock me up for the night but no luck. I tried the hospital but they wouldn't let me stay in their waiting room. However, one of the nurses was going off duty. She was a minister's wife. She took me home and I stayed there two nights, even though they didn't like "Moonies." Since then, I have found that I can face any situation.

The Interfaith Department was established and I became one of its earliest members. At first I was shocked by the hostility and blindness of ministers. Most of our initial momentum came during the Yankee Stadium and Washington Monument campaigns. During those periods some ministers became friends who are still with us and who became the foundation stones for our later Interfaith work. We had little success in having ministers accept the Principle but there were ministers, mostly blacks, at the end of 1976 who were willing to work with us. With them, we established the National Council for the Church and Social Action, Inc. as a vehicle for ecumenical social action. We have branches now in New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC and expect to have many more across the country by the end of 1980.

In February 1977, Heavenly Father came roaring into my life again. The word was out that there would soon be a blessing. It was to be for older people and I was included. I flew out to Los Angeles to lecture at a workshop for ministers and parents. When I arrived there a message awaited me to return at once for the matching. I flew right back. My spirit was upright. I would gratefully accept anyone that Father gave me. The rush-hour traffic from Kennedy Airport to Belvedere moved very slowly. I was serene, except for one thing: perhaps the matching would be over by the time I got to Belvedere and there would be no one left for me. I needn't have worried. Not long after the matching started, Father paired me with Traudl Bachmann, who had been with me studying and working with ministers since the first day I came to America. There was no hesitation in my voice when we bowed and I said, "Father, we accept."

Everybody applauded. But my heart soared. It was as if the whole world were made new, as if I was born again. Joy flowed in my heart like music. When I caught the plane next morning for Los Angeles -- mission is mission, after all -- I hardly needed wings to carry me across the plains and high above the craggy Rockies. I'm not sure if I was coherent at that workshop, but I was certainly inspired. Need I say that I hurried back to New York after the workshop? Among 74 couples, Traudl and I were blessed on Feb. 21, 1977 Our separation period ended forty days later.

We now have one son, David, who is almost two years old. I think I can never forget the wonder of waiting for him or the drama and sacredness of his birth. The Blessing seems to add a whole new dimension of feeling to life. It's as if everything takes on a more vibrant color. Traudl and I have had our struggles and challenges, for in the Blessing fallen nature is challenged more deeply than ever before. We've also had periods of sheer joy. These periods are reinforced even more when we have our son with us, especially in the out-of-doors. There it feels as if, indeed, nature tiptoes close and enhances us, and we feel welcomed, protected and one with all things, people and God. I value these periods all the more because several months ago, at Father's request, we placed our son in the Children's Center and Traudl went to CARP with other wives.

In the past few months I have moved away from direct involvement in social action organization, except insofar as it is involved in home church. That side of Interfaith's mission is in capable hands. I have begun to specialize in education communication. In line with Father's repeated emphasis on Christianity and communism as well as youth, I have developed a counterproposal to communism suitable to delivery in churches, and I have begun now to actively seek opportunities to speak in churches. This, plus home church, mass media and the development of printed and audio-visual materials, is the direction in which my future lies. I stand on the threshold of a major new venture.

These are some of the events of my life. There are many others that I have not mentioned, both bad and good. Like most people, I have had bad experiences, repeated indemnity courses due to failure to resolve problems, had Cain-Abel problems (our stock in trade), personal miseries and failures. But my overriding experience has been that, as long as I move forward, I have always found Heavenly Father waiting ahead of me to open an unsuspected door to unexpected opportunities. Looking backwards and forwards, as I now stand at something like the midpoint of my years, the goal is still far off. All I can say is that I have been running hard in the marathon of life. I have skidded sometimes, gone astray at others, crashed at times, as if I would be smashed, yet somehow lived, endured deserts and barren places, plunged through swamps. But I am running, more joyfully, gratefully and hopefully than ever. I am not tired but gather energy as I run. I shall keep on running to the end.