

January 4, 2008

Vocations

Local religious reflect on answering God's call

by Compiled by Review Staff

Franciscan Brother Doug Collins was a late vocation to religious life, entering in 2000 at age 35. After college, the Cleveland native worked in business. In 1990 he moved to St. Louis, where he first volunteered and later joined the staff of Vincent House to assist those dealing with AIDS. He took simple vows in 2002 and made his solemn profession as a Franciscan in 2005. Brother Doug, 45, now does outreach ministry with the poor through Franciscan Connection, 2903 Cherokee St. The agency assists with utility aid and referrals.

I probably knew I was being called when I was in eighth grade, but I also knew I wanted to swim when I was in college, so I put it on the back burner until my last year in school. I just kept putting it off. But the more I thought about it, it was the only thing that seemed right. Praying about it, I just really found that this is where God is leading me.

I had grown up in a Franciscan parish, so I was well aware of the friars and their ministries. I asked myself, "Do I really want to spend the rest of my life doing that?" And the answer was yes. My volunteer work at Vincent House definitely influenced my vocation. I found I just enjoyed making a difference in people's lives more than making money.

For me, the calling to be a brother was very broad. I felt a calling to religious life, but not to the ordained life. During initial formation I did a lot of outreach with the poor. I really identified with and just really felt that was where God was leading me to.

I'm fortunate enough that by being a later vocation, I had in a sense got to know what I was giving up as far as the vows, and I have never had an ounce of regret in that.

Sister Carol Jean Dust served as religious education coordinator at All Saints School in St. Peters from 2000 until last month. This fall she was elected to a five-

year term on the General Leadership Council of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Rome, which she begins this month. She also has taught at the former Our Lady of Loretto Parish in Spanish Lake and Notre Dame High School in Lemay and was a teacher and administrator at a high school in Honduras.

At my grade school in Effingham, Ill., I was taught by School Sisters of Notre Dame. From first grade on there was something special about the example they gave. I just felt a real connection. It was their openness, their willingness always to be there for someone, their sharing of faith.

Plus, my parents were very much connected to the parish and the Church, very involved servicewise. Prayer was an important part of our family life. I always felt its importance in my life. So as I moved through grade school, with both the sisters' and my family's example, I started hearing that call. I became friends with some of the sisters and helped out with different things.

We could come to St. Louis to our motherhouse for high school in what was called the aspirature then (1965). I talked to one of the sisters and my parents and said I wanted to be a sister. I graduated from Notre Dame High School and then entered the postulancy. The call just kept deepening for me throughout those years.

When we make a good decision about anything we gather all the information. To make a life-choice decision, it's important to look at all the possibilities. In that spirit of prayer and openness to God, we say, "Here I am, where do you want me?"

Marianist Brother James Eppy is a math teacher at Chaminade College Preparatory School. He also has been a soccer coach, groundskeeper, mentor and coordinator of the tutorial service of the math honor society. He has served at Chaminade 24 of his 26 years of religious life. He has bachelor's degrees in math and French from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, studied at the Alliance Francais in Paris and has a master's in French from St. Louis University.

I went to Vianney High School. That's where I met the Marianists. I had a number of the brothers who were my teachers, and I wanted to be like them. I was attracted to a vocation in the Church. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a priest, but after I met them I knew that's what I wanted to do.

I had always wanted to be a teacher. I found in the vocation a blend of the two

things — working for the Church and also doing something I felt I could contribute to. I went to the novitiate when I was 20 years old, after having been to college for a year, then took vows. And I've been a teacher ever since.

There are a lot of misconceptions about what the (religious) life is like. Don't be afraid to give it a try. A lot of people would be happy in it. Our culture puts a lot of emphasis on things like money and success.

It gives somewhat shallow answers to what makes us happy. I think people would be surprised if they gave it a try.

Sister Joan Calver, a member of the Redemptoristines, has lived in the order's monastery in Liguori since 1960. Among her nearly 50 years of service to the Church, she spent several years in the Philippines helping to begin a new Redemptoristine monastery. She is also a member of the Review's editorial board.

There is a wonderful mystery in a religious vocation. In my case I have no idea how my family took it for granted that I would be a nun. My sister told me that as long as she could remember I assured everyone that I was going to be a nun. I did not know where this conviction came from.

More than 50 years later I believe that it came from the Lord. My part was to say with the young Samuel, "Yes, Lord, here I am for you called me" (Samuel 3:8).

We had no Catholic school in our town of Maynooth, Ontario, Canada, so my parents sent us to nuns' boarding schools, my sister to one in Montreal and me to another Ontario. I had no previous contact with other women religious, so I planned to enter the sisters who ran the school I was attending — the Gray Nuns of the Immaculate Conception.

However, a Redemptorist priest who was a family friend came each year to spend his vacation with my family.

Father spoke frequently of the Contemplative Order of Redemptoristines who recently had opened a new monastery, adding: "They are our Sisters." I was not interested — as yet.

As we were returning from Mass one Sunday, my mother suggested we stop to buy some ice cream for dinner. Later she told me, "Father put something in your

missal while you were gone. It was a holy card of Mother Mary Celeste Crostarosa, the first Redemptorestine, and a prayer leaflet: "My prayer for you. The seed had been sown."

More mysteries — I wanted to enter the Gray Nuns; I did not want to be a contemplative, yet I knew with certainty that the Lord was calling me to be a Redemptorestine.

After a few tearful struggles I entered the Redemptorestines at age 18. I thank God, for he used a Redemptorist and a quart of ice cream to draw me into the vocation he wanted for me. His choice is always the best.

Brother Kent Connolly, FSC, is a Christian Brother serving at La Salle Retreat Center in Glencoe.

School was something I didn't look forward as to as a young man until going to the high school run by the Christian Brothers, West Catholic in Philadelphia.

In those days there were lots of Brothers in the school of various ages teaching, coaching and moderating extra-curricular activities. I admired these down-to-earth men who so professionally taught their classes and in many ways looked out for the welfare of their students.

So much so did I admire them that I wanted to be one of them. So after graduation in 1960, I entered the Christian Brothers in the Midwest, at that time, the St. Louis District. After completing my academic training I was sent to my first assignment in Guatemala, serving many years in that trouble-filled country. From there in 1980 it was on to the West Indies, to the beautiful islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to teach in the Brothers' school and serve the local diocese with the formation of adults and parish catechists.

In 1994, I returned to the States after many rewarding years overseas to help at La Salle Retreat Center in Glencoe, where I am at present. It hardly seems that I have been a Christian Brother, that long but I am thankful to the dedicated Brothers I knew as a young high school student and since then to the many I have known and lived with over these many years.

Sister Mary Elizabeth Brungardt, CP, entered the Passionist Nuns monastery in Ellisville in 1995 at age 27 after earning a master's in human resource development and working as a college recruiter for two years. She made her final

vows in 2003. Like her fellow cloistered nuns, prayer is her main ministry. The native of Victoria, Kan., for several years worked in her order's altar bread department before recently being placed in charge of monastery meals.

I was in the fifth grade. There was this old Sister I knew. She wore the full habit. I remember how everything she wore was worn, but that was what attracted me. I thought then if I ever was going to be nun, I wanted to be like that.

I had always wanted to be a wife and mother. Later I began thinking of a career in business. In college, I went to a Marian peace conference. It was a vocation awareness weekend, and all these people were telling vocation stories. That's when it became a real strong calling for me. Which brings me back to the habit thing.

I did a little research. I found Sisters with habits, but they were mainly cloistered, and I never even imagined cloistered life. I was just pretty overwhelmed. But I knew Jesus wanted me some place, so I just asked him. I was praying on the way home from work, and I was crying, asking Jesus to show me. I got home, and my mom hands me Our Sunday Visitor to read. The paper was folded, and when I opened it, there's this little vocation ad from the Passionist Nuns — the only ad there. You know when God strikes you with something. So I knew. I wrote, and the superior wrote back. I came to visit, and I knew after that week.

Trust Jesus. He loves us so much, and he's such a gentle and sweet heart, that there's nothing to fear at all. He knows what we want and like. He's the best spouse in the world, in the universe, I guess.

Brother Timothy Combs, OP, is attending Aquinas Institute of Theology. He will take solemn vows next spring and hopes to be ordained a priest of the Dominican order in 2010. The eldest of four children and a Kansas City, Mo., native, the 27-year-old attended Truman State University before transferring to Conception Seminary in Conception, Mo., after his junior year. He entered the Dominicans in Denver.

The family Rosary, which was a regular event in our house, introduced me to the beauty of prayer. Once prayer became a significant feature of my life, I found myself impelled to talk to people about the Gospel.

As Paul said, "We believe, therefore we speak." Thoughts of vocation first came in high school, but I resisted. When a woman from my parish told me, "I'm going

to pray you into the priesthood," I knew my fate was sealed.

As I got older, I became dangerously allured by worldly distractions. The priesthood sounded boring to me; or at least, that was my excuse. Thankfully, the Lord intervened. In my junior year of college I casually glanced through a vocation pamphlet, and suddenly God showed me that the life of a priest was far more beautiful than anything I could come up with on my own. When I found out that there was a religious order dedicated entirely to the mission of evangelization — the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) — I knew where I was supposed to be. ‘Boring’ is now the last word that I would use to describe this life. If you give yourself to it without reserve, it is an adventure beyond imagining.

The key insight that guided my discernment is that holy desires come from God. When God calls, he does so by appealing to our deepest freedom. Thus, if I discover within myself a deep desire to be of service in a way that is approved by the Church, this is a sign that a "call" has been issued. The desire at the core of every vocation is a personalized form of the universal call to holiness.

Each of our vocations is what awakens within us the desire to become a saint. Someone who is discerning should ask him/herself: "What kind of a person am I when I habitually say ‘yes’ to God?" This should provide a good clue.

Sister Maria Christi Greve is a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation, a teaching order headquartered in Nashville, Tenn. Sister Maria Christi is the principal of St. Joseph School in Cottleville. She was welcomed to the parish in mid August, along with three co-religious who are now teachers at the school.

As a child, I remember wondering why someone would become a sister, but I never considered it for myself. I always thought I would get married and have a family. During college, I met someone who was considering vocation to religious life. Once I began thinking about it, I simply prayed to know God’s will and remained open to Him.

Throughout college and subsequent teaching I continued to remain open.

As a young adult, I had many opportunities. I enjoyed college, dating, and being a young single adult, but I also longed for something more. Things that were supposed to be great fun always left me a little dissatisfied. God took care of me

during this time. I had wonderful friends and met some very good people who helped me.

About two years after college, I decided I needed to be serious about my discernment. I believed that it was possible that God was really calling me to be a religious.

Working and teaching daily with the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation, I was attracted to their life, spirituality and apostolate. I entered the novitiate after teaching with them for two years. I remember the time of my discernment as a blessed time, in which God drew me to himself with many special graces.

As a religious sister, professed now for 12 years, I am blessed with a growing love for my vocation. I am humbled and honored to be a consecrated religious in the Church today. I am honored to be a member of my community and to represent the Church through the outward witness of our life in community and in the apostolate. I am humbled by the many ways God uses me to share his Love with others.

From discernment to commitment, I have found God to be ever faithful to his promises. It is a great joy to be his and to be a witness to his love in the world today.

Brother Cassian Koenemann made his simple vows as a Benedictine brother on Jan. 6, 2007. He currently is assistant vocations director, assistant infirmarian and website administrator for St. Louis Abbey in Creve Coeur.

Brother Cassian also teaches economics to seniors at St. Louis Priory School and is taking courses in philosophy at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary as part of his prerequisites for future theological studies for the priesthood.

My parents were wholly devoted to me and my sister, and so I had great examples of parental love and caring for others early in my life. My parents sacrificed to send us to Catholic schools, and I had many great Catholic teachers and friends at St. Catherine Laboure in Sappington, Christ Prince of Peace in Manchester, and most especially St. Louis Priory School.

Going to school and the parish at St. Louis Abbey had a profound effect on my life in many ways, and that is to the great credit of many people. The monks here

have given me a witness that I would love to give to the next generation. Also, the way of life of St. Louis Abbey, with its times for Mass, chant, personal prayer, Lectio Divina (divine reading) and work in the school or parish resonates with me.

I would not, however, realize that call completely until later in life. Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., was my first experience outside of a Catholic culture.

That and subsequent experiences as a business consultant in Washington, D.C., made me appreciate how special it was to have grown up in the faith and St. Louis. Those years forced me to think through my faith and appreciate all that Jesus has done for me. Those years also woke me from a sleep that had considered 10 years of theology classes and many Sunday Masses sufficient.

I realized that a living faith required lifelong prayer, study and charitable action. Over time I started to read the Bible and the saints, go to daily Mass, go to reconciliation and pray the Rosary. A great transformation occurred, and I became enamored with Jesus. I realized that he wanted to give himself entirely to me, and that such a gift could bring joy and hope to any situation. So doing God's will became all that mattered, and that eventually led me to accept the great grace of a monastic vocation to St. Louis Abbey. I would encourage young men to learn about the way of life, the vocation stories, and the favorite books of the Benedictines at www.stlouisabbey.org.

Sister Eileen O'Keeffe has served as the mission integration coordinator at Incarnate Word Academy in Bel-Nor since 2005. For more than 30 years as a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, she has served as a social worker, school counselor, teacher and therapist. Sister Eileen has worked with young people who have emotional and behavioral problems and who have been abused, in hospice with terminally ill patients and young adults with developmental disabilities.

I was blessed to be raised by wonderful parents, who taught by example that serving God and others was a natural part of life. When I was in the fourth grade at Most Blessed Sacrament School in North St. Louis, I liked my teacher, Sister Catherine Marie, of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, and I thought it would be fun to be a sister.

However, by fifth grade I had changed my mind and had decided I would

become a nurse. As a sophomore at Incarnate Word Academy, I met this same sister and told her my career plan. She smiled and said sisters could also be nurses. This got me thinking again about being a sister. As I graduated from IWA in 1959, I knew God's invitation to consider religious life was still in my heart. So I broke the news to my parents, who were supportive but sad to see their firstborn go to San Antonio, Texas, where the sisters' motherhouse was.

Since then, my life has been full of many gifts, mainly in the thousands of people I have met through my ministry.

Another group of people who have been precious to me have been the children, adolescents, adults and families with whom I have worked in social services for more than 30 years. They have taught me valuable life lessons — how to get up each morning with a smile, not having any idea what the day may bring, how to hold your head up high and keep going, regardless of the hurdles, how to forgive and to be forgiven, and countless other lessons.