

Robert and Marie Fehribach

HIStory

Born in Detroit, I am the oldest of seven children. Dad labored in an automobile factory all his life, putting each us through twelve years of parochial school education. Mom probably laid the seeds of my vocation, often attending daily Mass and erecting a Marian shrine for the family rosary during the months of May and October.

My entire high school education extended throughout World War II. Entry into the military was compulsory at age eighteen, and I entered the service shortly before that age. At that time I was too immature to realize the nature of war, and I, like others, engaged very willingly in learning the art of warfare. Fortunately, the conflict ended before I had to use my training to kill—the purpose of any military operation.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred while I was serving in the military. Like most Americans, I thought that the slaughter of 250,000 people (which included American prisoners-of-war) was done to hasten the end of the conflict. It was quite a shock to discover years later that Japan was at that very moment seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of face. Japan was already on the verge of collapse when we dropped the bombs to intimidate the Soviets by the power of this new horrific weapon.

About a year after my discharge from active military service I decided to enter the seminary to begin my preparation for the priesthood. Seminaries were bursting at the seams in 1947, and my freshman college class included a good number of ex-GIs like myself. Many events of my days in the seminary are recorded in the writings of one of my colleagues, Bill Kienzle, who wrote twenty-four novels, beginning with *The Rosary Murders*.

Then as now, the Church had a sexual fixation. I recall two admonitions of our spiritual director. We were emphatically warned against ‘particular friendships’-- read, homosexuality—which if it did exist, I was completely oblivious to it. Intuitively many of us ignored that warning and formed deep and lasting friendships. Of course, the other taboo was women. Avoid them at all costs or lose your vocation!

Our school of theology, staffed by the religious order of Sulpicians, was located in a rural setting, away from the real world in which we would spend the rest of our lives. The Sulpician priests permitted no radios, TVs or newspapers. Our main source of contact with the rest of the world was the sport page of the newspaper tacked onto the bulletin board. Sulpicianism filled us with high spiritual principles which we accepted as absolute and unchangeable. The cassock and Roman collar, which was mandatory except when engaging in sports and, yes, of course, showering, created the mind set that we were different, a people set apart—a clerical caste.

Reflecting now on my early formation, I am not surprised by the conclusion of the American Catholic bishops' study over thirty years ago. They authorized a five-part study of the priesthood in the U.S., costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. It included a very thorough sociological and psychological study of the U.S. priesthood. At one end of the spectrum were maldeveloped priests (about 7-8%). 65% were described as underdeveloped. (A person in this category would be psychologically developed only to the point of adolescence.) The rest were developing (13-14%) or fully developed (7-8%).

As a result of the enforced isolation, the rigid indoctrination and the formulation of an unhealthy self concept of being "special", I realize now that I was probably in the largest category in the above study. Sad to say, my ministry as a priest was likely affected by this disability.

Most of our theology textbooks were in Latin, and the rector taught his moral theology course in that language. Many seminarians like myself purchased a copy of Jone, a moral theology book written in English; however, its section on the sixth commandment was in Latin—naturally.

Proud to say, among my confreres in theology was a rough-and-tumble hockey player, Tom Gumbleton, who at age 38 became a bishop and went on to become the conscience of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops—or tried to anyway. Another colleague was Eddie Szoka, now a Cardinal and the financial wizard in the Vatican.

Although I often had doubts about my vocation during my college days, I became surer during theology as the day of ordination approached. Among the steps toward ordination at that time was one called the subdiaconate. It was at this time that we had to cast the die for celibacy. Needless to say, a number of seminarians dropped out prior to this decision. As I reflect back, I do think that mandatory celibacy is bad not only because it lowers the number of potential priests but also because the theological message it gives to both priests and laity is that somehow you sully yourself by engaging in sex. I did not realize then that healthy people are sexually active people. Our sexuality is normal. The question becomes, "Why does the Church make priests behave as if they're not healthy or normal?"

At any rate, I took the step of subdiaconate, and one year later I was one of the thirty ordained to the priesthood at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit by Cardinal Mooney on June 4, 1955. I believed that I was now ontologically different, no longer just a baptized "lay man". I was asked to be a leader of people of whose way of life in the secular world I knew practically nothing.

Because there was a plethora of priests at the time of my ordination, I could look forward to a long apprenticeship of twenty-five years as an assistant to a pastor. In my first assignment I was one of five priests in the parish. It did not take me long to discover that one the perils of celibacy is that priests sometimes turn to alcohol for comfort. Of the six pastors under whom I served, three were alcoholics.

During the war in Vietnam I became an opponent of that conflict, often speaking publicly against it. Over the years I have participated in many peaceful marches, and have been involved in peace activities with Pax Christi, Peace Action and Veterans for Peace.

In 1970 I was offered the position of pastor of an inner-city parish in Detroit. Needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity. Our Lady of the Rosary was a small parish in which I was able to know personally most of the parishioners. Within the parish boundaries was a large university, the world headquarters of General Motors and over forty adult foster care homes for the mentally ill. To help in the outreach of meeting the needs of this diverse population, Sister Marie Szelak was added to the staff. Little did I realize at the time that she would eventually become my wife.

The decision to leave in 1976 was not easy to make. Nearly thirty of my fifty years had been dedicated to the priesthood and its preparation. My life had been focused on one thing – ministry. But leave I did, and I have never looked back with regret.

Since my life had been focused on ministry, I decided to continue that vocation by becoming a social worker. After my graduation with a master's degree in social work, Marie and I were married. Until my retirement in 1993 I was employed as a psychiatric social worker for the mentally impaired.

I have been a member of Corpus for over twenty years. I am particularly grateful to two fellow members, Anthony Padovano and Bill Manseau. To the former I owe the insight I gained by attending his lectures at Call to Action and elsewhere. To the latter I owe the help I received in obtaining the IRS Code Section 107 tax deduction for retired clergys' housing allowance for the nonclerical priests of the Detroit archdiocese. I have shared this information with nonclerical priests of other dioceses.

In the twenty-seven years since I left the active priesthood I have maintained close contact with both active and nonclerical priests. Fortunately, my relationship with active priests has not changed over the years. Would I ever go back if celibacy were eliminated? No, emphatically no. It's the system that would keep me away as much as the celibacy. I grieve about the way that I, and others like me, have been treated by the church we served faithfully over the years --- the church we still love, the church that is unable or unwilling to return our love.

As a result of the laicization process we have had ministries taken from us that rightfully belong to all the baptized. We are forbidden to teach in Catholic institutions, not allowed to participate in parish catechetical programs and prohibited from any kind of ministry connected with the Eucharistic celebration. As a result of the laicization process, we have become less than lay persons. What joy it could bring to the whole Christian community if we were restored to that equality in Christ that belongs to all the disciples of Jesus!

HERstory
Marie Fehribach

The drumbeat leads us on, rhythmic and solemn. We are about 100 women, with a scattering of men, all of us dressed in black. We are called Women in Black, part of a large international movement. We march silently. Our intention is peace. We simply want to declare our opposition to the war mentality by revealing its catastrophic outcomes. You will find us each month, marching in different parts of the Detroit metropolitan area, on bitterly cold days as well as warm sunny days.

I try to make as many of the silent marches that I can. I've made some of the big noisy ones as well—New York and Chicago. I am indeed most blessed to have found so many kindred spirits with whom I can join to help heal the world of the curse of arms and violence.

The topic of how we came to think and act the way we do is a common topic of conversation among our peace and justice friends. We were not always committed to making the world a better place in this particular way. But perhaps Darwinian evolution is more than biological.

In listening to a recent National Public Radio interview of author John Le Carre', I was struck by his citing his childhood as the rich mine from which he drew the wealth of his stories. He indicated that he imprinting of childhood experiences serves us for better or for worse as the source of our creativity. I would say that was entirely true for my attraction to peace and justice issues, as well as my strong religious interest.

As the youngest of eight children of Ukrainian Eastern Rite Catholic immigrants, I was provided with an ample supply of future creative material. My parents transferred their agricultural roots to American soil in the early part of the last century. We were raised on fresh fruits and vegetables, daily eggs and weekly wonderful chicken dinners, all home grown. Although basically illiterate, my parents knew that education for their children was the only way out of their own backbreaking work of factory life.

Their spirituality and religious practice grew out of the rich mystical tradition of the saints of Eastern Christianity—St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory Nazienzen. Of course as a child, and even later as an adult, I can't say that I always appreciated the quality of mystery in our liturgies. Our myriad holydays obviously predated the Christian faith which later incorporated them. They were very concrete and beautiful, mostly connected to the earth, including with the holyday such things as the blessing of fruits, flowers, water, Easter foods and the home itself. Our major Advent and Lenten fasts meant a limited diet, eating only the direct fruits of the earth, with all animal products forbidden.

Our pastors were always married. Their wives and children were a part of the parish family. As a child, I can remember thinking that someday I would like to marry a priest. Yes, John Le Carre' was so right. Out of this childhood history my own interests and vocation were to develop. The mystical tradition of the Eastern rite led me early on to love the works of Thomas Merton and later the Indian Jesuit Anthony DeMello and the

Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. My early connection to the earth that my parents loved so much later convinced me of the basic tenet of Zen Buddhism that we are merely diverse reflections of the oneness of all being.

My following one of my older sisters into the Sisters of St. Basil the Great was a natural choice. My seventeen years there were mainly happy ones, with a major disappointment arriving with my sister's decision to be not only a saint, but an ascetic, depriving herself of all or most enjoyment, especially that of the company of her "baby sister". She cited to me the example of the detachment of St. Therese and her own biological sisters at Carmel. She decided, a few years after my arrival, to enter the cloistered branch of the Order. Her convicted asceticism resulted in a painful rejection of me when I decided to leave the order. Thankfully we have since been reconciled, and she and I can support and appreciate each other's calling now.

The new world of pastoral ministry which I entered after fourteen years of teaching was a cultural shock. With my new position, I physically moved out of a suburb and into the heart of the neighborhood which I served in the inner city of Detroit. I had vicariously experienced that world in my years of study and teaching English in high school. The real world was scarier and yet more exciting than I could ever have imagined. Fortunately, at that time, the archdiocese of Detroit was one of the most progressive in the country, and everyone in pastoral ministry was offered much training in the field. The teachings of Vatican II were revered, and its implementation in every aspect of parish life was normal and expected. It was during this time that I met Bob Fehribach, pastor of Our Lady of the Rosary church. We became fast friends and co-idealists in this venture of building the Church and the Kingdom.

I could see that as much as I was enjoying my new position, financially I could not survive on the limited salary it offered me, and so I moved on to more education and several new positions, first as the director of social services for a large local charitable foundation where I remained for twenty years, and then to other social work opportunities. But the friendship with Bob that had begun in those heady days of the early seventies was to continue, building continuously on our common interest in making a better world. In 1977 we married.

A popular poster at the time portrayed a couple, holding hands and gazing outward toward some object or objective in the distance. The inscription under the picture said something to the effect that love was not gazing adoringly into each other's eyes but looking outward together toward the world. I like to think that this ideal summarized our love and our friendship from the very beginning. We have committed our lives together these last 33 years since we first met to myriad projects, trying to make our world, in the words of one of our dear Catholic Worker priest friends, more like heaven and less like hell. That orientation has made for one great ongoing adventure!