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Despite popularity, Jesuit priest, author puts religious life first

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin, 51, is undoubtedly one of the most popular, most respected contemporary Catholic authors. His award-winning books, numerous magazine articles, blogs and personal presentations invest him with an aura of omnipresence. In the event, however, that there may be some on this planet who haven't yet discovered him, this seems a good place to reach out to them.

***Sr. Camille:* Let's begin with an ordinary question. What was your childhood like and where did you spend it?**

Martin: Well, I had both an ordinary childhood and a happy one. I grew up in Plymouth Meeting, a small suburb outside of Philadelphia. These days, when I look back on my childhood, it seems almost magical, or at least something from "The Brady Bunch." My parents provided a stable, happy home for my younger sister and me, and we had lots of friends in our neighborhood. I walked or rode my bike to elementary school and played in the woods near our house. And I loved school -- all the way from kindergarten to high school. Looking back, I can see so many blessings from those days.

A few days ago, in fact, a friend sent me via Facebook a color snapshot of my friends and me playing during recess. There were five or six of us fifth-graders building a human pyramid, and I had a huge smile on my face. What an amazing thing to see! It reminded me once again of the way God blesses us all throughout our lives and how easy it is to forget these blessings. And, by the way, for those who condemn Facebook, that's an example of how it led to a real grace in my life.

Did you have role models?

At that time, not really. I respected and loved my parents, but I didn't have any sports heroes or fictional heroes I wanted to emulate. I had a Tom Seaver scrapbook but I never figured that I'd play for the Mets. And since I was living in Philly -- and not New York -- if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have admitted it.

What were your career goals?

As a boy, I wanted to be an architect. I used to spend hours drawing houses and buildings. For a while, I drew for our junior high newspaper, and later for my college humor magazine. I laughed when I found out that Thomas Merton -- who was my role model later on -- had done the same.

What led you to the Jesuits?

Good question! In the end, I decided to study business at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business and took a job at General Electric in New York City after graduation. I thought that going to Wharton would land me a good job, and it did. The problem was that the business world was a terrible fit for me, and I ended up being pretty miserable.

One night, in my fourth year at GE, I caught the tail-end of a TV documentary called "Merton: A Film Biography." That hit me like a lightning bolt -- here was something that I wanted to do. Of course I knew *zero* about religious life or the priesthood, but Merton's way of life seemed a lot more attractive than what I was doing.

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At the time I was living in Stamford, Conn. So I asked my parish priest about vocations and he said, "You should talk to the diocesan seminary, and you might as well contact the Jesuits up the road at Fairfield University." Of course, I had no clue what a Jesuit was. But once I met the Jesuits, they just seemed "right" for me.

What lessons beyond academics enriched your formation?

There are, I think, two levels of formation. There is the visible level: the studies, the work one does in our ministries and apostolates, the communities in which one lives. Then there's the invisible level, where God is forming you as through prayer and experience into the person God wants you to be. And I think I learned as much on the invisible level as the visible level.

Many of us can recognize some life-changing encounter or experience. Are there any that stand out in your experience?

The most important experience in my Jesuit life, besides the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, was the time I spent working in East Africa. After philosophy studies and before theology, Jesuits work full-time in a Jesuit ministry. My superiors sent me to work with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Nairobi, Kenya, where I spent two years with East African refugees, helping them start small businesses. It was the certainly best job I've ever had, and by far the most enjoyable. Interestingly, it put to use all those business skills I thought I'd left behind in Wharton and GE. God writes straight with crooked lines, as they say.

Essentially, we offered start-up grants to all sorts of refugee businesses. And these were people from all over East Africa: Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia. We had lots of women, for example, with a

small sewing "business," which usually consisted of their working over a Singer sewing machine in their shacks in the slums. And we sponsored men carving sculptures; other refugee groups ran a chicken farm, a bakery, a restaurant, a bookbindery, even a dairy farm. In time, we opened up a shop on the edge of slum in Nairobi that marketed their wares. I just loved that work. And I wrote about it in my very first book, *This Our Exile*. As a result, by the way, I know more than most Jesuits about sewing machines and chickens.

I often think that when I get to heaven and God asks me what I did, I won't say, "I wrote this book or that book"; I'll say, "I worked in Kenya."

A few months ago, your column in *America* eulogizing the late Jesuit Fr. Vincent T. O'Keefe recalled with fondness his friendship with Pedro Arrupe, a former superior general of the order. What attracted you to these outstanding Jesuits?

Vinnie was someone I knew mainly as the superior of my community in New York. And I admired him not just for his storied past in the Society of Jesus (as the No. 2 man to the superior general), but for something simpler: his hospitality to guests and strangers. He was probably the most hospitable man I ever knew.

As for Father Arrupe, he's one of my great heroes. Often he's called the "Second Founder" of the Jesuits, since he guided the Society of Jesus during the period following the Second Vatican Council and, among other achievements, turned us more toward work with the poor. A great man -- a saint really.

In the far distant future, what would you like your legacy to be?

My legacy? If after my death, people say, "He was a kind person and a good Christian," I'll be happy. If they read some of my books, I'll be happy, too. But I hope I won't be too worried about that in heaven!

When did you realize that your writing was both a gift and ministry?

Early on in Nairobi, I interviewed a remarkable Somali refugee who turned out to be a philosophy professor, which upended my narrow stereotypes about refugees. So I sent to *America* a straightforward interview, with no context, and they, not surprisingly, rejected it. Then I wrote back, "What's wrong with it?" One editor politely told me what was wrong: It was too flat, simply the transcript of an interview. So I gave it more context and sent it back. It was rejected; I asked again; and they answered again. Finally, I paired the story of the Somali refugee with a visit I made to a refugee camp in Kenya (that is, two journeys: his and mine, in tandem) and it was accepted. When it was published, I was happy to have been able to share both stories. It was a wonderful moment, and started me thinking about writing more.

Who first encouraged you in this area?

After I returned from Kenya, Jesuit Fr. George Hunt, the editor of *America* at the time, offered me (through my provincial, of course) a job. He was a very kind and generous editor.

Would you share some of what assures you that your work helps others?

I'm lucky that during speeches and retreats, people will come up and express their thanks to me. But when you're writing, you're never 100 percent sure it will help others or if it's just something that's of interest only to you.

But I hope that if it does help others, it's because I'm honest about my struggles in life and about my

reliance on God. The authors I like best -- Merton, Henri Nouwen, Kathleen Norris --are honest about their own faith journeys, and so I try to be as well. I also try to leaven things with some humor. There's no reason for spirituality to be deadly serious.

With so many thousands purchasing your books and attending your lectures, what keeps you anchored in reasonable humility?

That's easy: life! It also doesn't take much effort to be humble when you live in a religious community and work in an office. In the first venue, I'm a Jesuit like anyone else, and I live with a great many impressive individuals -- former university presidents, former provincials, editors, writers, teachers, theologians and high school presidents, so my work isn't seen as more or less important than anyone else's in the community, and that's true. Community is the great equalizer. Plus, not everyone in my community follows the particular kind of work I do. So, for example, if I'm on "The Colbert Report," they may not see it at all. All of that keeps you humble -- like it or not.

In the second venue -- work -- I participate in meetings and so on and pitch in, so that keeps one humble. Plus, I'm a human being, so I'm well aware of my own faults, limitations and plain old sinfulness. And I have a body so I get sick from time to time; I have a mind so I worry; and I have feelings so they get hurt. So humility is not that hard.

Where do you go for spiritual nourishment?

Well, prayer first. I pray in the morning (mainly on the readings of the day) and in the evening (my "examen," or review of the day.) If I miss either one for some reason, I feel uncentered and ungrounded. The Mass, of course, is also important. Then my annual retreats, which is where I really get recharged and feel the most connected to God.

You are known for your ability to network with others in the literary world and to encourage lesser writers. How does that fit in with your mission?

Well, I wouldn't say "lesser," maybe "newer"! It's great to be able to encourage new writers, especially young Jesuits. It's one of the most enjoyable things about my life now. And it fits in with my mission, which is a ministry of the word, to help encourage others to find their voices and to help their voices be heard.

What is your favorite scripture passage?

Great question! I go back and forth between a few. First, the Annunciation from the Gospel of Luke because Mary's conversation with the Angel Gabriel so perfectly encapsulates the spiritual life: God takes the initiative; we question; God reassures us; we say yes; and then God brings something new to life. Second, the Rejection in Nazareth, also in Luke, where Jesus is booted out of the synagogue in Nazareth. Even though Jesus probably anticipated the responses of the townspeople, he preaches the Good News anyway: It's a striking sign of his freedom from the need to be liked or approved of, which I struggle with. And then the Raising of Lazarus, which is beautiful on so many levels. Finally, pretty much all of the Resurrection appearances. And since visiting the Holy Land last year on a pilgrimage (as part of a book on Jesus I'm writing), I'm now completely besotted with any reading that takes place around the Sea of Galilee.

Does any particular passage make a difference in your life?

For me, the Resurrection is the central message of our faith. It means that suffering is not the last word;

that there is no death without some kind of new life; and that love is stronger than hatred, and hope stronger than despair. The Resurrection is the heart of my spiritual life.

What is your image of God?

In the past, I prayed mainly to God the Creator, but for the last few years, I've been praying more to Jesus, so my image of God has shifted a bit -- from the First Person to the Second Person. When I pray, I often think of Jesus and me sitting outside of his carpentry workshop in Nazareth, on a stone wall or across a wooden table, either talking with him or simply being in his presence. Since I went to the Holy Land, though, I've had my "own" images replaced by images of, say, the Sea of Galilee. So I spend a lot of time there now in prayer. It's fun to "go back," in a sense.

You are priest, author and preacher. Is some element more important than the others?

First, I'm a Christian! Then I'm a Catholic. Then a Jesuit. Then a priest, for priesthood in religious order flows from your vowed life. Then a preacher, which is part of my priesthood, and of course my Christian life more broadly. Only then an author. Remember: If my superiors told me to stop writing, I'd have to. So my ministry flows from my religious life. I'm not an author who is a Jesuit. I'm a Jesuit who happens to be an author -- at least as long as my superiors say so!

How does Christianity challenge you?

To be a loving person. To be kind. To forgive. Those are all very challenging. Especially forgiveness. By the way, everyone needs to check out Sr. Camille's CDs, "Stories of Forgiveness"! (See, I like to plug my friends' great work.)

Is there anything in Catholicism you would change?

About the faith, no. About the church, yes. The sexual abuse crisis is still something that needs attention, as we saw recently in that terrible case in Kansas City, Mo. We still need to focus attention on sexual abuse, in terms of preventing it from happening again, continuing to help the victims and their families, doing real penance and changing the clerical culture that gave rise to it. I still see signs that that culture is still in place.

Also, I'd like to see the church speak more compassionately to groups who feel that they are on the margins. So, for example, we could speak a word of comfort to people like divorced and remarried Catholics, gays and lesbians, and so on. Some of these groups feel completely cut off from the church, and I think Jesus would go out to them specifically. And not just to say, "You're wrong," but to love them.

I'd also like to stop the vilification I see in too many places in our church. You know, I do a lot of social media ministry -- on our blog at *America*, on my public Facebook page, on Twitter, on YouTube -- and the amount of venom spewed in the blogosphere and on the Web is astonishing. Few things are so "desolating," to use an Ignatian word, as trying to respond to people who seem to think that they've got all the answers, and who are more Catholic than the pope. So I'd like to change that somehow.

Finally, I'd like to see the church in this country spend more time speaking explicitly about the Gospel. I know that sounds odd, but lately, Catholic church leaders have been spending most of their time talking about overtly political issues. As Jerry Seinfeld would say, "Not that there's anything wrong with that." But I'd love to see the church speak about more basic things: Love, forgiveness, mercy. And Jesus. We need to speak about Jesus more than we do now.

What causes you joy?

Funny enough, I just published a whole book on that -- *Between Heaven and Mirth* -- that focuses on the importance of joy in the spiritual life. But in my own life, I'll say this: On a theological level, the Resurrection gives me joy. On a more everyday level, being able to write and preach about Jesus gives me a huge, huge amount of joy. Currently I'm writing a book about Jesus, and I could do that all day and all night. I love reading about him and thinking about him and writing about him. One of my Jesuit friends said, "Well, thank God! You're in his Society after all."

How do you relax?

A few months ago, I might have said, "I don't!" But lately I've been cutting back a bit on my travel and speaking engagements, and it's been great. I was getting too close to burned out. So now I can say: having dinner with close friends, seeing my family (especially my two nephews, who are 14 and 7, who always make me laugh), and, I know this is disappointing to those who imagine Jesuits as always poring over some manuscript in ancient Greek, but watching TV. I was a huge fan, for example, of "Downton Abbey" and "Political Animals." And to disappoint people even more, my favorite veg-out shows are inane ones on things like aliens, the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. I know, terrible, right? I doubt Karl Rahner was watching "MonsterQuest" in his spare time.

What would you say to someone considering religious life today?

To trust that God is leading you through your deepest desires. There's still a bit of confusion these days about what it means to have a "vocation." People expect to have a vision, or hear voices, or to know with 100 percent certitude where to go. But often it's a simple attraction to a way of life. So if there is an order that someone feels called to, check it out, talk to the vocation director, go on a retreat, visit the house and get to know its members. It's not as if you're in this alone: God is leading you.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

No, but I'm glad you asked me to participate. It's a real honor! Thanks, Sister Camille.

And thank you for all your writings, especially *My Life with the Saints* and *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*.

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