A Different Kind of Calling: Law School Alumni and Religious Life

by Alison Coppelman

This is the first in a planned series of pieces about Law School alumni who work in professions less frequently pursued by our graduates. If you have a suggestion for a piece in the series, please email m-ferziger@uchicago.edu.

On May 23, 2007, nearly thirty Law School alumni gathered to honor one of their fellow classmates on one of the most momentous occasions of his life. Although it was an interest in the law that had first brought them together more than ten years earlier, the cause for this celebration was, surprisingly, not related to the world of law at all. On that spring day, with so many of his friends from Chicago present, Father Joseph Pius Pietrzyk, O.P., a 1997 graduate of the Law School, was ordained as a priest in the Catholic Church. There are actually several Chicago alumni who have experienced a religious calling after graduation. For Father Pius, attending the Law School turned out to be a very important step in his path toward joining the priesthood. "At Chicago I met a lot of people who were very serious about their religious beliefs, which made a strong impression on me and inspired me to revisit my own faith," Father Pius said. After graduating from the Law School, he went on to work as an associate at Sidley Austin in Chicago, where he served as counsel on a case involving GE that led him to Milwaukee. It was there, in a new city where he knew few people, that Father Pius experienced a further resurgence in his faith: "I spent a great deal of my free time in prayer, examining where I was in my own faith and with my vocation. Soon I realized that God was calling me to do something else." Returning to Chicago in 2000, he entered a religious community on the west side of the city, an experience he recalls fondly, before pursuing his religious studies at Holy Apostles College & Seminary in Connecticut. Father Pius was drawn to the Dominican Order in particular because of its dedication to rigorous study and the life of the mind. While he would eventually like to pursue his doctorate and teach at a seminary school, his next step will bring him to Zanesville, Ohio, where he will become the parochial vicar of St. Thomas Aquinas Church this fall. Father Pius anticipates that his legal experience will serve him well in this new role, for "as a lawyer, you become comfortable with thinking on your feet, with understanding a subject so well that you can speak about it without notes."

Reverend James B. Pratt, a 1989 graduate of the Law School, similarly found his experience as a lawyer to be of great relevance and value in his religious life. Like Father Pius, Reverend Pratt also worked as an attorney after graduation, for a mid-sized law firm in Boston. During this time he was active with his local parish, singing in the choir and serving as scout master, and soon it dawned on him that the work he was doing with his church in the evenings and on weekends was far more fulfilling than his work as a lawyer. Reverend Pratt went on to attend Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was one of three lawyers in his first-year class of twenty-five students. "Seminary was a cakewalk compared to the Law School," he exclaimed, noting that Chicago's analytical rigor and focus on critical thinking prepared him well for his religious training. Indeed, he describes his work leading two Bible study groups as one of the most gratifying aspects of his role as Rector of the Parish of Cow Head in Newfoundland, Canada, a position he has held for six years. "Seeing the light bulbs go off, watching such learning happening, and witnessing people putting what they've learned into practice in their daily lives is very rewarding," he said.

Of the dozen or so Law School alumni currently active in religious life, many worked as attorneys before following a religious calling. Brother André Petty, '98, known to his classmates as Neil, was a corporate tax attorney with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom and also with Sachnoff & Weaver before realizing that his true calling was of a religious
nature. He can still recall the exact moment he realized a legal career was not for him. “I woke up that morning and knew that this was not what I was supposed to be doing with my life,” he remembered. “Fortunately I had saved enough during my years working for law firms that I could quit my job and take about eighteen months to redirect my life.” For several years, Brother André had been attending a Presbyterian church in Chicago, but he felt a strong pull toward Catholicism. As he explored the Catholic faith, he found himself drawn specifically to the Franciscan Order, with its tradition of scholarship and dedication to service in the community. Indeed, as a brother with Sacred Heart Friary in Chicago, he has been able to pursue his greatest passions: helping others and rigorous study. “My work with the elderly and the sick, as a chaplain intern at Northwestern Hospital, is unbelievably rewarding,” he stated. He is also hoping to continue his studies in classical languages and literatures; he holds an M.A. in this subject from the U of C, and is currently investigating the possibility of completing his Ph.D. studies at the University.

Throughout history, the connections between religion and the law have been many and varied, as the Reverend John Johnson, ’69, observed: “So much of the theory of law, and the origins of the law, reside in the Old Testament. And so many of the great thinkers throughout history—Aquinas, Pascal, Descartes—were theologians.” Reverend Johnson actually did not practice law after leaving Chicago, choosing to enter the business world instead. He describes himself as a “left-brained minister,” one who earned a law degree because of his political aspirations, started his own company that integrated his love of physics and engineering, and who jokingly says he came to be a Presbyterian minister by accident—though it was, in all seriousness, by conviction. Somehow he ended up on the mailing list for the U of C’s Divinity School, and in 1995 he participated in one of the School’s academic conferences that tapped into his lifelong religious stirring. He went on to attend the McCormick Theological Seminary in Hyde Park, and this October will mark the tenth anniversary of his ordination as a minister in the Presbyterian Church. Though he has recently retired from his position as pastor of Highlands Presbyterian Church in La Grange, Illinois, he remains actively committed to the church and to his religious calling and is currently working on two books.

Like Reverend Johnson, Elizabeth Dickey, ’91, will seek ordination within the Presbyterian Church upon graduating from the McCormick Theological Seminary, where she is currently pursuing her Master’s in Divinity degree. Ms. Dickey was working for the Cook County Public Defender’s Office in Chicago when she was commissioned by her home church to serve as a Stephen
Minister, an individual trained to listen to people in the midst of a crisis. This experience inspired her to pursue the ministry full time; her work with the Public Defender’s Office also had an impact on her decision. Indeed, it was a desire to help others and to be a voice for the oppressed that inspired Ms. Dickey to attend law school in the first place. “I claimed one Bible verse as a motto,” she recalled. “Proverbs 31:8–9 says, ‘Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and the needy.’” Though she is not certain yet what she is specifically being called to do, whether it is teaching or pastoral work, Ms. Dickey will continue to help those in greatest need.

The Reverend Doctor Jay K. Longacre also experienced a call to action within the community and the world at large. An avid long-distance runner, Reverend Longacre, ’59, had competed in marathons and scaled mountains around the world. In 1981, during a run around the Annapurnas, he and his son faced a life-and-death situation. “For seven hours, I prayed fervently for God to save us; and, if He would, I would turn my life over to Him. He did and I did,” he stated. Reverend Longacre went on to earn his M.Div. degree and an M.S. in social work and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church. While in the midst of his studies to earn a licentiate in systematic theology he discovered he was Catholic; during a visit to India in 1992, he met Mother Teresa for the first time, and it was through her counsel, and that of a priest friend, that Reverend Longacre realized that he, as a married Protestant minister, could stay married and become a priest. He was ordained on June 15, 2002, in the new cathedral in the Diocese of Rajkot in Gujarat in India and has gone on to do vital and rewarding work in India and many other countries. “I am president of a small 501(c)(3) tax-exempt foundation,” he explained, “and my wife Barbara and I have educated about 200 children in India, Nepal, Guatemala, and Sri Lanka. We have helped people start small businesses and helped develop new schools and a few libraries. We have financed a volunteer pharmacy and first-aid center and many other such projects.”

The call to religious duty is a deeply personal one, and no two paths are the same. For some alumni, the calling came later in life; for others, it came earlier. Yet the work of Law School alumni active in religious life involves a shared dedication to service, to critical thought, and to the community. And while the connection between a legal education and a religious calling may not be apparent at first glance, it is one that many alumni, from Father Pius to Reverend Pratt to Brother André, are quick to point out. As Reverend Longacre noted, “I believe that the Law School taught me to work with a great intensity for long hours and in the face of adversity.” A sentiment no doubt shared by the majority of Law School alumni, wherever their paths may have led them.

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Father Pius at mass following his ordination, wearing a white chasuble, the liturgical garment of the priest.