

Reflecting on a life dedicated to mission

Interview conducted and transcribed by Guy Vaccaro, Ph.D.,
Executive Director of Development, Chicago Province

Fr. Jim Heiar, SVD lives at the Retirement Residence in Techny, Illinois. Here, he shares his memories about formation, serving in cross-cultural ministries and his work in the Development Office at DWC.

Early life

I was born about 30 miles south of Dubuque, Iowa and went to high school nearby in Bellevue. After my sophomore year, I felt a calling, not just to the priesthood or religious life, but in particular to the missionary way of life. Where did that come from? It is hard to say. There was Bro. Wayne Till, SVD and Bro. Larry Kieffer, SVD who were from the Bellevue school ahead of me. They may have had some influence on me.

I found that my high school years went quickly, and it was soon time to make up my mind about going to the seminary. I enjoyed having a partner for the prom my junior and senior year, and I knew there would be no prom in the seminary!

After more reflection and prayer, I decided to seek entrance into the Society of the Divine Word. They directed me to the Society's gentlemen who met with young men considering a vocation. Eventually, I got to see our campus in Techny, Illinois. One of my uncles drove us out from Iowa. I sought entrance and was told to report to Miramar in Massachusetts for college in 1962.

Formation

When it was time to leave, I came to Techny and picked up the bus, which was taking candidates like myself to Miramar. I recall driving through the state of Indiana. I was feeling very homesick. I thought to myself, well, if I turn around and walk home from here, I could make it in 30 days! Nonetheless, I kept going to Miramar.

It took time to adjust to the East Coast, to the whole group of young men and to the studies at the college level. But I persisted, and got good grades the first semester, so I just kept it up. After two years of college at Miramar, I went to Conesus, New York for a year of Novitiate. That was an entrance into the SVD way of life in the sense of learning prayers, wearing the religious habit, a lot of softball, a lot of gulley climbing and a lot of outdoor life when we could manage it.

While in Novitiate, we learned that we would resume college in Epworth, not Miramar. I picked out English and American literature as my preferred majors. Of course, there would be philosophy and theology as well, and some other subjects.

We got off the bus and I was back home again in Iowa. It was a new building at the time. It was nice to be able to get home every once in a while. One of the things I loved to do was to go raccoon hunting. On Friday nights, I would take one of the guys and we'd go for supper somewhere. Then we would join my uncles in hiking around the hills of eastern Iowa. We enjoyed it.

In other months, we would go fishing. I remember one time that the guys had to make a choice. They could either go to Techny and attend an ordination ceremony or stay in Iowa and go fishing. Two of them decided to go fishing. One of them was from Brazil. When it came time to go fishing, we arrived at the river, and he turned around and said to me, "Is this the Mississippi River?" I said, "Yes." He almost kissed the water. He was so thrilled because he had heard all about the Mississippi River when he was back home in Brazil the same way we have heard about the Amazon River here.

After graduating from college, I completed my years of theology at Techny and our new Theologate at Catholic Theological Union on the South Side of Chicago. At the end of Theologate in 1970, I remember going home for vacation. I think I spent 10 days sitting in the lazy chair and looking at the wall and doing nothing else. My brain had been fried! There was no alternative but to let it rest for a while.



Ordination arrived quickly on December 19, 1970. Following that was a period of pastoral care with supervision at St. Elizabeth's Parish on the South Side of Chicago. From there, I went to East Troy, Wisconsin to teach in the seminary for one year.

Missionary service

I had been determined from the outset to serve in the Philippines, but that was preceded by a desire on the part of my superiors to send me to other places. Once you get a theology degree, they are jumping all over you! I was asked to go to the seminary in Papua New Guinea where they needed someone to teach theology. I turned them down and said, "No, I want to go to the Philippines."

Then, about a month before leaving for the Philippines, I was given a chance to walk around the seminary grounds with Fr. John Musinski, SVD, our Superior General. He wanted me to go to Ghana to teach in the regional seminary there. I kept thinking I wanted to go to the Philippines. Besides, I did not have any pastoral experience behind me to warrant my teaching theology with some pastoral sense. I said, "No, Fr. Musinski, I think I'll continue to seek to go to the Philippines, in particular to Divine Word University there." We had a good school there and eight or 10 SVDs were living together. I wanted to start out in that kind of setting.

I was finally given the assignment and when I arrived in the Philippines, I landed on a morning in which a typhoon had just hit the city. There was water everywhere. Trucks and buses were turned over. I took my suit and coat off real fast because it was hot! I had arrived August 17, 1973 and it was good to be in there. That led to 12 years of being in the Philippines teaching theology and literature and so forth.

They were the happiest days of my life.

After the Philippines, I returned to the States and taught at East Troy for another year. Afterwards, I was asked by Bro. Leonard Bauer, SVD to consider coming to Epworth to do development work. I said yes because I wanted to work in some form of communications. I thought that would be a good way to start. I

loved to visit people. I ended up attending a lot of wakes in the area. I wrote up my visits so anybody who would have the position after me would have something to go on.

I started in development at Epworth in 1992 and continued there for 24 years until 2016. Development work is long term. It means getting to know people and getting to know where the resources are. That all takes time.

Actually, I consider myself to still be in development today in the sense of having an interest in what's going on out there, and getting regular updates from Mark Singsank, the Associate Director.