

THREE-TIME PROVINCIAL LOOKS BACK

Interview, editing, and photos by Guy Vaccaro

My name is Fr. Ray Lennon. I was born in Philadelphia in 1936 and I am the second oldest of eight children. I first learned about the Divine Word Missionaries at a vocational weekend at my Catholic high school.

I wrote a letter to them, but never received a response. One Sunday night, I returned home from the movies and as I was walking up to my front porch, I saw a priest sitting in my living room. I immediately felt a guilt complex. Did I do something wrong in school? I tried to enter quietly through the door on the side of the house, but as I was going up the stairs, my mother called to me. She said that a priest from the Divine Word Missionaries was there to see me. He asked me, "Did you ever think about becoming a priest?" I said, "Well, it crossed my mind. I think it crosses everyone's mind." He said, "I'll come back after Christmas and we'll talk."

After he left, my siblings started laughing. "You become a priest! That would be the last thing!" The next night we were having dinner and the doorbell rang. My sister got up and answered it. She said, "It's the same priest who was here last night." I thought, "What's he want?" He said, "The director at the high school seminary in Bordentown, New Jersey said if you're really interested, you should come now. You can finish high school with us." I said, "Okay I'll try it."

After finishing high school, novitiate, juniorate, and philosophy, I was assigned to Brazil. I really didn't like it at first. It was all so strange, but then I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the language and the people. I completed four years of theology there and I was never homesick.

After my ordination, I was sent to China, and while there, I became interested in the Trappists. I visited their abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts and it was wonderful. One day we were taking a barn down and I had the only real mystical experience I have ever had in my life. I literally heard God say, "Listen. Get back to your own group. This is not where you belong!" It was so powerful, that I literally dropped my hammer, and took off my apron. I went back to Brazil and spent five more happy years there.

At one point, a group of parishioners came to me and said, "We're going to lose the property we have for a church because we were given the land on the condition that we build a community center or a church on it." I went to the archdiocese and asked the vicar general if he would come out and meet with us. He did, but he told us, "We can't help you at all. If you do decide to go ahead with it, you do it on your own." The parishioners asked me, "Would you help?" I said, "I'll do what I can with the seminarians." We had to do it clandestinely because we couldn't get all the papers approved. Every Saturday and Sunday that we were free, the seminarians and I would work with the people mixing cement. I was the one who went around to the brick, cement, and steel factories. The workers said I had

to go because they would trust me when it came time to arrange for the payment. In the church, we had simple, little stained glass windows. One of the parishioners made the statue of our patron, St. Andrew. A politician came to us and said he was going to donate the benches. We told him he could donate them, but only if they were made in the area. Everything came from the area. We worked on it for one year. It was unbelievable.



Fr. Ray Lennon

The final step before completion was to turn on the lights. The problem was, we had no electricity in that area. I was told I had to go to city hall. I went there and asked, "Could you turn on the electricity in this area?" I pointed to the spot on their map where our newly built chapel was now standing. He looked at it and said, "But there's nothing there." I said, "We're building a church." He said, "Father, what you need to do is bring in all your plans. We will approve them and then we will accompany you through the process." I said, "But there is a problem." He said, "What's that?" "It is already built," I told him. He said, "I can't believe it." I told him we would have lost the property if we had not built it, so we had no choice.

He said, "I'm going out there right now." He went out and it was amazing. He had a lot of expectations regarding proper construction, but the people who built it were brick layers and steel workers, and they knew what they were doing. They had built it correctly. In the end, and much to our relief, he decided to approve the project. That was perhaps the most exciting thing I have ever done in my life! We built a clandestine church and I was responsible for it. I mean it was illegal, and everything about how we went about it was wrong. They could have put me in prison!

After Brazil, I went on to serve as Principal at Bordentown for seven years, Provincial in the Eastern Province for one term and Provincial in the Chicago Province for two terms. I served in Canada for three years, as Rector in Washington for six years, Rector in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi for three years, Rector at Bordentown for nine years, a sabbatical in Ireland, and Rector at Bordentown for three more years. During that time, I had cancer twice, so I decided it was time to retire, which I did in 2018. That pretty much sums up my life. I bounced all over the world doing strange things, but I enjoyed it.