

SOCIAL MINISTRIES REFLECTION - USA

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Brief Biography

I was born the eldest of five children where I was “the religious one.” I went to Catholic schools most of my life. The College of the Holy Cross was my first introduction to the Jesuits. After two years of service in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, I worked for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I was almost 30 years old before I decided what I wanted to do with my life. My graduate degree is from Bryn Mawr College in social work. The Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus employed me for 21 years. Now I work in a ministry started by two Maryland Province Jesuits, but its focus is national, the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps. My husband, who isn’t Catholic, has spent 21 years of our marriage singing in the church choir with me. We have two very musical and generous children who regard many Jesuit as their uncles.

Reflections

My eyes were opened to the social apostolate in 1968. I still recall my high school service work at a low-income, African-American grade school. I was struck by how their school had far less resources than mine had had. Soon I was writing for the high school newspaper where I (and the other writers) focused on the injustices we saw inside and outside the school. It was the late 1960s, a time of heightened social consciousness in the USA.

I went off to college, my father’s alma mater, which had been all-male school until my class entered in 1972. The College of the Holy Cross (a Jesuit school) was replete with opportunities to learn about, and respond to, social injustices. Faculty administrators encouraged us. Their mentoring was a great gift. I was protesting injustices on and off campus. My

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particular passion was women's rights. I took every course that had the word "Women" in the title. For a couple years I raised funds for sheltering homeless women and children in the city. That eventually led to my becoming the first live-in staff member at the shelter, just after graduation.

In my senior year of college I was drawn to join the Jesuit Volunteer Corps: East (JVC). In JVC young people spend one year living simply and in community, fed by Ignatian Spirituality and working in a nonprofit organization. My first year in JVC was in Philadelphia where I did community organizing work primarily around housing issues. The combative and uncompromising style of the group I worked with was dispiriting, and I left to spend a second year in the JVC in another city, where I could address the structural issues keeping people poor. That placement was in the Social Ministries Office of the Maryland Province Jesuits.

What I loved about JVC in Philadelphia was our home. JVC's usually live in a house or apartment in a low-income community. My neighborhood was low-income, with many young Puerto Rican families that struggled with violence, drugs, crime, poverty and inferior schools. I felt like the predominant culture of our country was often in conflict with the values of the Puerto Rican families I knew. Many families practically disintegrated from the conflicts. After my JVC year in Baltimore, I returned to my former neighborhood in Philadelphia. I missed my friends who were my neighbors and fellow choir members at our local, multi-ethnic church. I ached to return to the community I missed so much.

My next four years in Philadelphia found me in a new job. I was a parish social minister, serving in a city parish that contained two housing projects as well as significant middle and upper class homes. I loved how my job addressed so many social needs. I worked with people in emergency situations (a lack of food or shelter), with homebound elderly people, and with amazingly generous volunteers. In fact, those volunteers and I created a cooperative food-buying club at the parish. We bought fresh fruits and vegetables in bulk, divided them up in accordance with the desires of the members. People of all economic backgrounds joined the club because the parish neighborhood lacked any markets with these fresh items. Each member was committed to working several hours every month, except for the homebound elderly people whose food was delivered to them by other club members.

I loved that job so much that when I tried to get interns to help with the parish's social ministries, my supervisor told me that I needed a master's

degree in social work to be a supervisor. So I applied to a graduate school, enrolled full-time in a master's program. I spent two years commuting to classes out in the suburbs (with a study focus on social policy and program development) while I stayed grounded by tutoring adults in a G.E.D. program at nights in my home neighborhood. (G.E.D. is "general equivalency degree" – akin to a high school diploma.)

The church in Philadelphia was not encouraging or enriching to lay people. My spiritual life was quite low. Perhaps that is one of the major reasons I decided to leave my favorite city and return to Baltimore after graduation. I was offered a job by the Province's Social Ministries Assistant in the Jesuit Province of Maryland, the same office where I had spent my JVC year in Baltimore. I felt two strong pulls drawing me to that position: the opportunity to address structural justice issues and the opportunity to deepen my own Ignatian spirituality by working closely with Jesuits. Two years into that job, I felt called to make the Annotation 19 retreat in order to more fully enter the spirituality of the people I worked with. Luckily I completed it just before the birth of my first child. (Afterwards would have been completely impossible.)

I spent a total of 18 years working on behalf of the social apostolate for the Maryland Province, followed by another 3 years doing fundraising for the Province. During that time, God blessed me with a wonderful husband, two children and numerous Jesuits who became my colleagues and friends.

My social ministries work was so varied: supporting Jesuits and laity doing direct social ministries; pressurizing USA corporations to act in a more socially responsible manner; making loans of Province monies to create housing, jobs or employment for poor people, both nationally and internationally; managing a summer family retreats program for urban families who would not otherwise have the opportunity to play and pray with one another; facilitating Jesuits and their lay colleagues to advocate for government legislation around justice issues. I loved going to work every day. Then in the 1990s my colleague, the Pastoral and International Assistant, took me with him on three different international trips where we visited both Maryland Jesuits and social ministries site in parts of Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil.

I will never forget one visit while in my province social ministries job. A group of social ministry representatives from USA provinces went to a Mexican border city, Juarez. There we saw **miles** of garbage dumps, where

people were living. Their “homes” were little more than metal lean-to’s. People survived from what they could scavenge in the dump. The place smelled awful (it was a dump, after all.) People looked hopeless and completely downtrodden. I was shocked and demoralized that we allow human beings to live like this. How can the economic policies of our world allow hundreds of millions of people to go hungry every day?

Somewhere in 1995 I was able to articulate a lacuna in my personal formation: I did not really know Ignatius of Loyola, which I desired to do. In 1996, the Provincial granted me a three-month sabbatical to study St. Ignatius and the early foundations of the Society of Jesus. In that time I read many books and made an 8-day retreat at the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth. That retreat brought about a reawakening of my spirit, such that I adopted the Examen as my primary way of prayer.

*Love in Deeds
of Service*

Skip ahead until 2002. God had been trying to get me to move on and I finally listened. The result was my new and current job, as executive director of the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps (ILVC). ILVC provides people age 50 and over the opportunity to serve materially poor people, to work for a more just society, and to reflect and pray in the Ignatian tradition. The mature, experienced, generous and wise people in ILVC find their eyes opened through their relationships with people living in poverty. I work to guide and strengthen the organization so that it grows where the Spirit is calling ILVC to serve.

I think ILVC is the ideal job for me. It provides service opportunities which facilitate spiritual growth. Though my work is only indirect with our members, it is their formation that gives me great joy. I witness their reverence for the dignity of each person. Our newsletter is entitled “Love in Deeds of Service,” an apt description of our unique and demanding program. We need to develop more connection to the structural justice aspects of these ministries and we will, in time.

When I left the Province’s employ, I questioned whether I had heard God correctly in my discernment. This is a hard job but I am so often filled with joy that I am reassured that God has me just where I am supposed to be. When I cannot see God, I have family, friends, co-workers and a spiritual director to help me recognize where the Spirit is.

My deepest consolations have always been the opportunities to be generous. To whom much is given, much is demanded.