



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Fr. Michael On His Call

I never would have thought that having been born in Davenport, Iowa, (the only person in my family not born in upstate New York) I would return to the Midwest and the Mississippi River in mid-life. God works in strange, wondrous ways and this strangeness has pervaded my life.

I was born in 1950 into a Catholic family, which took faith and education quite seriously. In high school I entered the diocesan minor seminary, having perceived a call to give myself to God's work in thanks for all the gifts He had given me. During the course of the 1960's, my involvement in civil rights and anti-war projects focused my understanding of God's work for me as the pursuit of justice and peace. Consequently I entered the seminary of a religious order whose work was entirely in the African American communities of this country. I completed their novitiate and began studies at Howard University in Washington, DC.

Then the strangeness began. I suppose it was due to a combination of the turbulent social and post-Vatican II theological times and my natural intellectual growth. At any rate, I began to experience a crisis of faith and confidence, questioning the whole religious structure in which I was raised and educated, and my own ability to make a difference in the world. Whatever answers or responses I received to my questions were not good enough for me, so I determined to find the answers myself.

Consequently I left the seminary program, but I stayed on at Howard University. Within a very short time, I converted to Islam, the most recent faith in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There I found convincing answers to almost all of my questions, a simplicity of life and faith, a strong community and a deep appreciation of prayer. Paradoxically, Islam dealt with the mystery of the Incarnation by denying it, but I discovered that I was not comfortable, not convinced by that answer either, so I resolved to put this matter "on a shelf" and let time deal with it. At any rate, I had been most impressed by the witness of Malcolm X and the metanoia experienced by many African American converts. I entered Islam with all the fervor and enthusiasm typical of a convert. I studied Arabic, changed my name and became active in several Muslim organizations.

Leaving the seminary confronted me with a new problem...how to make a living. I always wondered how I could help the poor with problems, since I had never really had one myself. I accidentally fell into the hotel business, in which I advanced over the next 25 years working in Washington, Baltimore, New York City and Miami. Ultimately I was a regional manager over 5 hotels in the state of Maryland, and I was making a good living. In this business career I faced many problems and challenges and learned how to meet them (not without a lot of pain and mistakes, mind you.) Above all I learned how to devote myself to a common



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corporate cause and be subject to authority, important lessons for monastic life.

Because hotels never close and because I moved often, I gradually gave up my formal connections with the Muslim community. However, I continued to pray and believe, and I continued to read and study. Ultimately I began to read the great Sufi writers of the Muslim mystical tradition, and this was the turning point in my return to the Church.

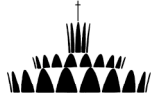
I remember discovering the Christian mystical tradition and writers in my first year in college; my response was ...this is it! It is contemplation or nothing for me. Later, within Islam, Al Ghazzali, Attar, al-Hallaj, al-Arabi, Rumi and others put together for me the spiritual, mystical logic of the Incarnation. (Attar's "Conference of the Birds" was especially meaningful, since I had 25 large parrots as pets.) Finally, on a long drive home to be with my family for Christmas, traveling through the wintry landscape of the mountains of Pennsylvania, while listening to Christmas carols, the question came to me out of the blue, quite clearly, concisely and insistently ... "What do you believe about Jesus Christ?"

The question discomfited me, but I couldn't avoid answering it. I confessed that I really believed Jesus Christ to be God, the son of God. As soon as I admitted that, I knew I had to return to the Church, and so I did. I joined and became very active in my neighborhood parish, ultimately becoming Director of Religious Education.

Shortly after coming back to the Church, the nagging idea of a vocation returned. Since I had fallen into the hotel business by accident, I always said I would continue in it until I discovered what I really wanted to do when I grew up. Was this some kind of answer? Was it a genuine call? After I got tired of the nagging, I began to explore this with my pastor and former classmates, now priests. Through prayer and discernment, the call appeared to be real, and so I began to explore the real possibilities of a religious vocation.

I read the Rule of St. Benedict to see if it was absurdly medieval. Monastic life itself appealed to me because it is radical, lived in a real community, and deeply rooted in prayer (still looking for that mystical union!) I was impressed by the Rule's simplicity and wisdom, so I began enquiring of monasteries. Most didn't want someone in their mid forties, worldly and set in his ways.

St. Louis Abbey, however, was enthusiastically welcoming and willing to take a chance on a long shot. I had no idea if I could teach in a rigorous, academic high school. My process of adjustment was not easy for me (and probably was not for my brothers here either.) This process never stops, actually. That is the meaning of our vow of *Conversatio Morum*, the continuous, ever deepening transformation of one's life according to the monastic way of Saint Benedict. It's full of surprises.



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I drum into the minds of my students “We are formed by what we do.” You can read and study, but it is the real living of the monastic life and the prayer that forms you, changes you. It did me. I look back on my life and I can’t believe it. How did all that sturm and drang, love and pain, lead me here? Muslims say “masha’llah” – It is God’s will. Strange indeed.

The strangeness, the excitement, the surprises, the challenges and the opportunity for growth never stop. As much as I may think I teach the boys in our school, it is they who teach me...to be a better monk, to be patient, to keep learning myself and to accept the good in what is ever new, to recognize and accept Jesus Christ in persons I’ve never met before, and to let go of what I’ve become attached to each year when graduation comes. Only one thing matters – God, and God is love. St. Louis Abbey is a truly loving place.

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