



Feed your spirit



Jennifer Tomshack says men and women religious have shaped her life, and her family's life, profoundly.

Why I value religious life

BY JENNIFER TOMSHACK

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FATHER PAUL DOESN'T KNOW IT, but he changed my life. I doubt he even remembers me—we only had a few encounters nearly three decades ago. But I am reminded of him every day—his signature is on the diploma that hangs above my desk where I have enjoyed a 25-year career in media and publishing.

I suspect Father Paul is like many religious priests, sisters, and brothers who do not know the magnitude of the impact they have on countless people by simply going about the day-to-day of religious life. Father Paul, a Vincentian who served for many years as a top administrator at DePaul University in Chicago, didn't do anything remarkable for me, but his small,

ordinary acts of welcome and generosity made my family and me think he was God-sent.

We met by chance when I was wandering around DePaul's Lincoln Park campus in the spring of 1989, during my junior year of high school, with my parents and four-year-old brother. We didn't know anything about the school, or even Chicago for that matter. I wanted to go to college there very much, mostly because I wanted to move to the big exciting city—which was what my parents were hesitant about. We're small-town people from Michigan—not far from Chicago, but it might as well have been another universe. As the oldest child, it was always my role to break new ground with my parents and overcome their concerns. Father Paul helped me do that.

My dad spotted him walking down the sidewalk and asked him for directions. We told him about my interest in DePaul and that we were checking it out. He offered to give us a tour. He spent the whole afternoon with us, took me inside the dorm where I would later live, showed me the offices of the school newspaper I would later run, and brought me to the church where I would later become an active parishioner long after graduation. I'm sure he had something else he had to do that day, but enthusiastically sharing his love of DePaul and helping a bunch of strangers trumped other obligations. I knew at the end of the tour when he handed my parents his business card, revealing for the first time just who he was at the school and saying “call any time,” that my parents finally felt comfortable with what I wanted to do. His Vincentian spirit of humble, grateful service and caring clinched it for me.

Of course, a layperson could have done the same thing for us that Father Paul did. But what he exhibited was a commitment that many religious have to a “ministry of presence.” The way they live their lives—not just approach their official jobs—is ministry. Someone on an airplane needs to talk; they listen. They run to the grocery store to buy food for the community dinner; they also pick up milk for a nearby shut-in. To them, moving through the world is all about ministry, and therefore, every brush with another person is an opportunity for ministry. It's a whole lifestyle—one that matters a great deal to all those to whom they minister in even the smallest ways. Religious garb can be part of a ministry of presence: it makes identity clear. The way Father Paul was dressed was an invitation to reach out to him. My dad might not have stopped him on the sidewalk otherwise. His collar signaled he was someone perhaps more likely than others to help.

Father Paul wasn't the first or last religious to impact my life. Like many Gen-Xers, I've known fewer women and men religious than those of previous generations, but I have had different religious orders in my life from the very beginning to the present. I value religious life because it has intersected with my journey in many key moments and enriched me to an extent I myself may not even be fully aware.

My encounters with religious life started when I was baptized—by a Holy Cross priest at the magnificent Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. My dad was attending Notre Dame at the time. He likes to lovingly joke that the reason I was always a good student is because I went to college first—with him. Since my mom worked days and my dad nights, he took care of me during the day—which meant I went to class with him when necessary. Apparently, I was a good-natured baby who rarely fussed, but still, it would have been entirely understandable for a professor to not permit children in class. But none of my dad's profs—many, if not most, of them Holy Cross priests and brothers—minded. None even commented on my presence and so lent their silent support to a young guy trying to juggle a lot of demands at once. Their understanding enabled him to finish his education and take care of his new family. Again, there are plenty of lay professors who would have and have done the same, but with a charisma of “educating in the faith,” these men of Holy Cross exemplified their charge to develop the mind, cultivate the heart, and unite with others as family, and taught by example—certainly to me and my dad and anyone who shared the same classrooms with us.

Role models and leadership coaches

The first religious order I remember is the Sisters of St. Joseph, who taught me in elementary school. The sister who was the principal was the first woman I saw in a professional leadership role. I've been blessed with many women mentors in my career, but to see at such a young age a woman running an important organization—and keeping so many unruly underlings under control!—made a big early impression on me. This role model showed me that if I wanted to, I could do the same. Unfortunately, there still aren't as many opportunities for girls to see women in leadership roles as there should be—and every single one counts! For me, another was the sister who was my gym teacher and sports coach, who taught me how to actually be a leader myself. (Later

in high school, I was captain of the varsity basketball team). I saw firsthand that sisters are uniquely qualified to be “leadership coaches” because their spirituality and lifestyle have always been women-led. It’s natural that sisters by virtue of being sisters bring out leadership in young women. And not just tough compete-and-succeed leadership—although I learned that in healthy measure from them as well (you should see me take down a rebound!)—but also and more important, leadership that is collaborative and focused on the common good.

In high school I was taught by Marianist brothers: for freshman religion—a year of Old Testament—and sophomore religion—a year of New Testament. Boy, do I know my Bible! They were effective in their teaching because so much of their life is poured into Scripture—studying it and praying with it. Of course, there’s tremendous lay commitment to Scripture study as well, and there are many excellent lay teachers of it, but religious life by its tradition and nature allows for a singular passion and dedication to the Bible.

Then came DePaul, four of the best years of my life. I only had a few Vincentians teach me there, but the Vincentian charism of concern for the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—imbues the university, in my experience. Perhaps that’s why DePaul students have often been ranked “happiest” by the Princeton Review. It was where I learned my writing craft and where, despite a lot of youthful questioning about religion, my faith deepened, as a result of simply being in a very positive, nurturing, supportive environment. If this was Catholicism, I thought, I wanted more of it—there’s something about attracting bees with honey. That’s not to say DePaul didn’t challenge me—it opened my eyes to a world much more diverse in every way than the one I came from, and that taught me a lot about empathy and compassion.

My first job after college was for another religious order—the Claretians—for whom I was an editor on *U.S. Catholic* magazine. I honed my editorial skills and also took my understanding of Catholicism to another level, particularly learning about Catholic social teaching, an area in which the Claretians, with their missionary charism, have set quite an example. Social justice electrified me, as it does many young people, and it instilled in me a commitment to avid, life-long volunteerism for a variety of causes. As anyone in ministry knows, those who serve gain as much as those who are served, and I

am grateful for that gift. While the zeal for social justice is shared and also led by laity in today’s church, it is truly part-and-parcel of religious life. Find a Catholic committed to social justice and I’ll bet a sister, priest, or brother was a major influence in that regard. Most apostolic charisms have a social justice dimension, which makes it part of the DNA of religious life. Social justice is, and has been for centuries, what many entire religious orders are all about. It’s in their prayer, it’s in their ministries, it’s part of the vision put forth by their founders.

The virtues of religious life permeate the organizations that religious women and men have created, even now that there are fewer religious in them. Lay people predominantly ran and led the schools and workplaces where I have encountered religious, creating communities that include both but that are informed by religious life—communities that have greatly enhanced my life.

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The ripple effect

And here I am now, an editor for the National Religious Vocation Conference’s *VISION Vocation Guide*, which helps those discerning a call to religious life. In this position, I’ve learned so much about so many more communities and the wonderful diversity of charisms—a beautiful, multifaceted prism that has informed my faith.

Father Paul and I only crossed paths a handful of times during my tenure at DePaul: when my parents came to visit and stopped by his office to thank him and when I interviewed him for articles I was writing for the *DePaulia* newspaper. I’m certain there are plenty more like me whose lives he affected for the better, without him fully knowing it.

Small acts add up, and then they ripple out. With the exception of a two-year stint working at a newspaper in St. Louis, I’ve lived my entire adult life in Chicago. My brother, who was with me that day I met Father Paul, also went to DePaul. My sister moved to Chicago, launched a career improving city government, and started her family here. My parents eventually got a home in Chicago, too, to be near all their kids. So, Father Paul, by encouraging me to go to DePaul, shaped the lives of everyone in my family in a big way by coalescing us in an amazing place that’s become a part of us, and I hope, we of it. After all, none of us know exactly the purpose of what we do, only that it serves God’s purpose. ■