

Steps On My Journey

By Msgr. Jim White

To paraphrase an often used maxim, any long journey begins with the first step. For me, however, there were many steps involved. While many may look at the occurrences in their life as a series of coincidences, I prefer to look at these events through the eyes of faith as part of a greater plan - God's plan. After all, the great feast of the Birth of Christ which we have just celebrated could simply be a series of coincidental happenings but through the eyes of faith, it all comes together as part of a greater plan. Were the Virgin Mary's experiences simply coincidence or did she "ponder all of these things in her heart" to see God's will?"

The first of these many steps began in Rock Hill. Living in a segregated south during the 50's, separated by skin color and poverty, was simply a way of life. Having begun my schooling in the all black Emmett Scott School, I came in contact with a group of "white" and "holy" men known as the Oratorians who established a church, parish center and residence across from the school. My family was very devoted to the local Methodist church and as such, this "strange" new religious group was not known to us. As it happened, however, this group of men attracted many of the local children and teenagers to their youth center which became known popularly as "the Catholic." Through what might have been seen as a "coincidence" but through hindsight as part of God's plan, my curiosity got the best of me, eventually leading me to grow close to such "giants" as **Father Timothy Sullivan, Father Henry Tevlin and Brother David Boone**. These names became commonplace in the black community and they earned our respect, love and confidence. For most of us in the black community the only contact with any white person was as employers, as those who lived in the nicer homes or as those privileged to sit up front at the counter in the local eateries. Eventually with the consent of the family, my brothers, sisters and I were accepted into the Catholic faith, so impressed were we with these men who showed us such great respect.

A big step was made in September of 1955 which was to change the direction of my life forever. As the first to make such a daring move in the state of South Carolina, the Oratorian Community made the decision to integrate the all white Catholic school on the other side of the city. Four of us were chosen to make this life altering change. Was this a coincidence or was there some other inspiration to make such a bold and drastic move? Depending on hindsight yet again, God's grace was much in evidence. Against all odds and racial demonstrations, a small number of black students from Emmett Scott School were accepted into St. Anne's School on Saluda Street. This was the beginning of a new way of life for me. Perhaps God chose these men and the original lay teachers and the Immaculate Heart Sisters in the school to lead me to a possible religious vocation. My admiration for the Oratorian community grew at each step. Looking back I can see the seed being planted to make an eventual life commitment, first as an Irish Christian Brother and ultimately to be ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of New York. Had I stayed in

Rock Hill, I am sure I would be counted among those who are Oratorians but the Lord's ways are not always our ways.

Having moved with my family to New York City in 1959, I continued to maintain my relationship with the Oratorians and more specifically with **Fr. Henry Tevlin**, now deceased. With his encouragement I was accepted into the novitiate of the Christian Brothers in upstate New York in 1966 and taught for almost ten years in various high schools in New York and New England. My priesthood calling culminated in 1983, being ordained in St. Patrick's Cathedral. All of this may be seen as simply a set of events but again, we cannot deny the hand of God.

As a priest I have been blessed with many very satisfying priesthood assignments. After a first assignment in Staten Island, NY, I was asked to take on the assignments as the "dreaded" dean of discipline in Cardinal Hayes High School, the high school from which I had graduated in the Bronx. This assignment, overseeing the discipline of twelve hundred boys, while difficult, allowed me to help in the formation of young inner-city teenagers. After four years in high school work I was asked to become the assistant master of ceremonies in St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York. Asked to take yet another step on the journey, I traveled again to assume the pastorate of a parish in upstate New York for five years. During my duties in Saint Mary's Parish in Newburgh, NY, I was bestowed by Cardinal O'Connor with the title of "Monsignor." I eventually returned to formation work. This time it was not high school work, but as the rector for priesthood candidates for the New York Archdiocese of the St. John Neumann College Seminary. The journey did not end there for I was asked at this juncture by the late Cardinal John O'Connor to leave the seminary work after a few years and become his personal priest secretary and his master of ceremonies.

The Lord works in strange and mysterious ways and lest we lose our way, we depend on our faith in God to help us step in the right direction. Today, as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in the Bronx, I am blessed with a loyal and faith-filled congregation in the church. That which began with many small steps has escalated into a long, arduous yet rewarding vocation journey. Were all of these experiences merely coincidences of life? I dare say not. I must believe that the Lord gave the seed to the Community of the Oratory to be planted and nurtured. They were the ones who sowed the seed and provided sustenance for my long journey of many steps.

My prayer is that the work begun by St. Philip Neri and continued in the Rock Hill Oratory will continue in this New Year and in the future to provide workers for the Lord and his Church, both clerical and lay.