



VOCATION STORY: Friar Alex Cymerman, OFM Conv.

[There were no Vocation Directors, no “Come and See” visits and a limited number of printed things one could call, “Franciscan Spirituality.” If you wanted to see Franciscan life lived, it would have to be in the Franciscans who lived among us. We saw it in our parish priests, in the Franciscan Sisters who taught us in school, and even in some of our Grandparents who were Third Order Franciscans. If they weren’t saints, they were works in progress.]

When I saw my pastor about going to Maryknoll to be a missionary to China, he told me that what I really wanted was to be a Franciscan and go to our new mission in Japan. I said, “no, no, no.” He said, “yes, yes, yes,” and gave me a partial scholarship to St. Francis High School. What was my option?

It was a boarding school where we saw Franciscan life lived by our teacher-priests and brothers. They were in our classrooms, they celebrated our daily Mass, heard our confessions, coached our teams, cheered us up when we were homesick, and gave us a kick when that was in order. There were work projects around the school, directed by the Friars, in which we helped. They were ordinary men doing extraordinary things. It was good to be with them. And there was that huge stained glass window in the chapel showing St. Francis receiving the Stigmata. It was the first thing we saw each morning and the last thing we saw at night. After graduation, 12 of our class of 36 joined the friars.

Our directors continued the tradition of educating us by good example and wise direction. Somehow, St. Francis became so real to us, as did his values, and his determination to rebuild the Church according to the wishes of Jesus Christ. We were told to always seek out a priest or brother who was an inspiration in a life of prayer, in wisdom, apostolic zeal, and in carrying the daily crosses which mark a disciple of Jesus. Doing that throughout our Franciscan life was a form of continuing formation. It was always a gift to find those virtues in our fellow-students, our formators and teachers, and in the “retired” Friars who lived among us.

I was fortunate in my ministries to follow Friars who were prayerful and zealous. I always thought it my task to come into a parish and make saints of the people. What I learned was that when I got to a parish, the saints were already there, thanks to the ministry of my predecessors.

As I look back on my sixty-two years of Franciscan life, I can say that it wasn’t always easy, but it was always good. The Province invited me to work in the ministry of the education of our youth, Formation, and parishes, too. Now, in retirement, I have the privilege of living at our Novitiate, seeing a new generation of Friars striving to continue and renew what my generation began. Thankfully, I have a place to live and a reason to live.

Everything that I have is because of my life in the Order. I am so grateful for that.

“I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart,
and glorify your name for ever;
for your love to me has been great.” (Psalm 86)

If you are interested in the Franciscan way of life, please contact Fr. Russell, our vocation director at vocations@olaprovince.com, www.franciscans.org, @conventuals1223 or 718-510-5822.