

## Father Jenco Talks About Discerning a Vocation

Dana Mildebrath

*The subject of this article, Reverend Lawrence Martin Jenco, catapulted into international fame when he was held hostage by extremists in Lebanon during the 1980s. Following his release, Jenco spoke and wrote repeatedly about the necessity and power of forgiveness. Here he speaks about the roots of that forgiveness which so moved the world: his faith and his vocation to the priesthood. On July 19, 1996, Jenco succumbed to cancer.*

“From the time I was in second grade, I wanted to be a priest,” says Father Lawrence Martin Jenco. “As a child, I remember reading the lives of the saints. I was so impressed by Bernard of Clairveaux, I wanted to become a Trappist.” He didn’t become a Trappist, but he did become a priest, a member of a small religious community called the Friar Servants of Mary, Servites for short. He also became an unlikely media celebrity.

Father Jenco was thrust into the international spotlight on January 8, 1985, when, as director of Catholic Relief Services in Beirut, Lebanon, he was kidnapped and held hostage by terrorists for 19 months.

“I was in captivity for 564 days,” Father Jenco recalls. “My life is still caught up in hostages,” he says, waving his arm toward boxes of unanswered letters that cover his desk.

Today he is an associate pastor at the Church of Our Savior on the campus of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

On call altar boy

As a priest, Father Jenco has been sharing his faith for 30 years. He fondly remembers growing up in a poor, working-class neighborhood in Joliet, Illinois, amidst the early influences that shaped his vocation.

“We lived adjacent to our parish. Our home was so close to the church that on Sundays we had to keep the windows closed. Seven kids screaming and yelling make a lot of noise. We couldn’t play the piano or turn the radio on because you could hear it in the church. One day my morn was embarrassed. She was at Mass and heard one of us yell, ‘Ma, where’s my underwear?’ It rang through the whole church - she wanted to crawl out.”

Being so close to the church had other drawbacks. “I became an altar boy in third or fourth grade,” Father Jenco says. “If another altar boy didn’t show up, the pastor would call and say, ‘Is Larry up?’ I’d kind of resent that because my sister would say, ‘Sure he’s up,’ and I would not be up. So, many times my motive was not always the best for going to Mass, but I went. I always ended up getting called for novenas, benedictions,

things like that.”

One of the parish priests, a Carmelite named Father Francis, also had a big influence on little Larry Jenco. “Our parish was a combination church and school, and Father Francis worked 24 hours a day. He was one of the youngest Carmelites ever appointed a parish priest. I loved that man. Last year, when I went to see my nephew, who is a novice in the Carmelites, Father Francis was there. He’s still going strong - he’s an amazing man.”

“One evening in particular I remember coming downstairs, and I saw my father kneeling and praying by his bed,” Father Jenco continues. “I thought, ‘My father prays. That greatly touched me.’”

### Seminary Blues

Since he grew up in a Carmelite parish, Father Jenco decided to attend a Carmelite seminary. After graduating from his parish school (17th in a class of 17), he headed 500 miles from home to Niagara Falls, Canada. He was in the ninth grade. But it didn’t turn out like he’d hoped. “I was homesick. I saw the guys who had families nearby get visitors, and I thought, ‘Wait a minute, this is crazy. I can go to a seminary near home and my mom and dad can come visit me.’ I wanted care packages!”

So in his junior year he moved to St. Joseph’s (Servite) Seminary in Elgin, Illinois, just 30 miles from home. From St. Joseph’s Seminary, Father Jenco moved on to the Pontifical University in Rome where he was ordained on Easter Monday, 1959. He was the first man in his family ever to become a priest.

“I have been greatly nourished by religious life,” he says. “In the beginning I wanted to be a priest, but as I began to think about it, I joined the Servites to be a religious - to say yes, I wish to be obedient; yes, I wish to live a simple life: yes, I wish to live a life of purity. And I need support systems to do that.

“When we talk about religious life, we have to remember that it’s a vowed life. Religious life gives you a support system to live those vows - brothers and sisters to sustain and affirm you on your good and bad days, on your mountains and in your marketplaces. Religious community gives the support to help you on your pilgrimage.”

### Invitation in your heart

How can a young person begin to discern his or her vocation?

“There’s this invitation that goes on in your heart,” Father Jenco says. “When I took at the life of the Lord Jesus and his Messianic role, when he starts moving into his public life he meets people like you - the Peters, the James, the Johns, the Marthas, the Marys - and he says, ‘Follow me.’ I want young people to listen to that invitation.

“I think the important thrust is destiny. First of all, your destiny as a baptized person is that you’re to be one with the Lord Jesus. What does that mean? To accept the Messianic role in any situation. To look at-what Jesus was all about. Even as we die, we’ve got to respond to one question: When, Lord, did I see thee? We have to look at our lives and say, does my life reflect the ‘When’ question - no matter what I do?

“Young people have so many options today to fulfill their Gospel call. The Peace Corps, Vista, volunteer agencies. The sacrament of marriage is a marvelous way to minister to the church. So is the single life. I sometimes think it’s the movement of the Holy Spirit that we don’t have the great numbers of people moving into religious vocations that we once had. I like the idea that all of a sudden the door has opened up for the laity. I want to affirm the laity, the lay vocations.

“But the church needs brothers, sisters, and priests. If a student asked me to help discern a religious vocation, I’d ask, ‘What are you looking for? A community that sustains and affirms each other in prayer? Do you wish to be a cufflink person or a towel and basin person? Do you wish to minister to the rich and powerful or to the poor and downcast?’

“These are very important concepts. The priesthood can have all kind of ‘goodies’ attached to it. But when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he was present to a meal and he washed his brother’s feet. The towel and basin is a very important concept of entering into this church of ours.

“If someone was thinking about a religious vocation, I’d also say, ‘Come and see where we live, what we do. Spend some time with us. See us in our sinfulness and see us in our holiness. Come and live here - cook, wash clothes, realize that you don’t have a housekeeper. We’re not in a monastery any more. This is the monastery.’”

“Would you mind?”

When Father Jenco was ordained 30 years ago, he could never have foreseen the places his vocation would take him. “My life as a religious has been a little crazy in many ways,” he says. “My superiors used to ask me the question, ‘What would you like to do with your life, Marty?’ They felt that if you responded to that question, you’d be happier than if they assigned you to something that you weren’t happy with. So in the past, I would tell them what I wanted to do, but in the end, they’d always say, ‘That’s beautiful, Marty, but would you mind...?’”

Responding to “Would you mind?” has taken him to mission sites all over the world - Rome, India, Australia, Bangkok, the Yemen Arab Republic and Lebanon - and into faith-testing situations he could never have imagined.

Of his captivity in Lebanon, he says, “I remember being chained to a radiator in my first prison. I had the sense of being an animal, because I had no control of my life.

hey would feed me off the floor. I was telling God, 'Listen, I am not an animal. I am a person of worth, a person of dignity. I'm loved, I'm redeemed and I have a destiny.'"

To people who are seeking to discern their own vocation, Father Jenco has one reminder: "Going to Mass on Sunday is not an obligation - it's a love affair. That love affair takes you out on the streets. It takes you to the room that you share with your buddy, to share your kindness and your gentleness. There are all kinds of ways of carrying on a love affair with the world. When I say, 'Go, the Mass is ended,' that's just the beginning to go out and live the Paschal mystery."

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