

Father Jerry Bleem, O.F.M.

I was born to farmers in rural southern Illinois outside the small town of Ellis Grove. In those days, my mother would have been called a "homemaker" but her organizational skills kept the farm (and the family) on schedule. If you milk cows as we did, you need a regulated life since the cows want to see you twice a day--no exceptions. Twice-daily milkings also mean you stay close to home. Additionally, we raised pigs and chicken and the typical Midwestern grains of wheat, corn and soybeans along with hay for the cattle. Both of my parents only had the opportunity to attend grade school. My mother's desire for further education made it a priority for myself and my five siblings. [I have one brother and four sisters.] My father was always tinkering, fixing and making things; I credit him with my creative impulses.

Church was a regular part of my family's life. I attended our parish's grade school and then the local public high school in Sparta. At that point, I was thinking about priesthood but it certainly wasn't a very developed idea. After talking to the vocation director for the Belleville Diocese, I entered Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Quincy, Illinois, which just happened to be run by Franciscans. By the end of my undergraduate study, my vocational search was directed to religious life, namely Franciscan life. My understanding of my own vocation had grown with the help of the friars I met in Quincy and my great-aunt who was an Adorer of the Blood of Christ, the same community who taught me in grade school.

After college, I entered the novitiate of the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart. [Novitiate is the first year of one's life as a member of a religious community.] At the end of that year, I took my first vows as a Franciscan. I spent the next year interning in a parish in Indianapolis. After that I began graduate studies at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood where I earned a Master of Divinity degree, the professional training associated with ordained ministry. During that 4 year program, I professed final, life-long, vows as a Franciscan. On 5 June 1982, I was ordained a priest.

I served as the chaplain of Hales Franciscan High School on the southside of Chicago and as the parochial vicar at St. Thomas Parish, in Memphis, Tennessee. Then I moved to St. Paschal Friary, Oak Brook, where I helped out at various parishes while serving as a liturgical consultant for parishes and religious communities. [My divinity degree included a specialization in liturgy.] During this time I also did design work in clay and fabrics [vestments, hangings, altar vessels, etc.] and presented workshops on art and environment for worship.

When I was in my mid-30's, my life was slowed down by a ruptured disc in my lower back which required two surgeries; the inactivity associated with recovery gave me time to think about the artistic dimension of my vocation. With the support of my religious community, I applied and was accepted into the M.F.A. program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

My life became a balancing act after I finished my art degree: I wanted to maintain an exhibition schedule while being faithful to my Franciscan community life. To continue to develop as an artist, I needed to find studio time as well as do the ministry that my province entrusted to me. This juggling has been my life for the last 20 plus years. I have served as a vocation director [a friar who helps those thinking about becoming Franciscan to judge their suitability and understand God's call], a part of the staff of St. Peter's Church in Chicago's Loop, and a supply minister for various parishes and religious institutions. I have also been a part of the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies since 2000.

In June of 2011, during the triennial chapter of my Franciscan province, I was elected to the six-member council which advises the provincial minister (or superior) of the Sacred Heart Province. Also that year I was asked to be the director of the residential program that prepares men interested in becoming friars to enter the novitiate; this "postulancy" program brought me to St. John the Baptist Friary in Joliet. I worked one year with Fr. Dennis Schafer, O.F.M., before he moved to Wisconsin in the summer of 2012 to serve on our novitiate staff. It was also in 2012 when I began to offer weekend help--as my schedule allowed--here at Holy Spirit Catholic Community.

I continue to teach one class each semester at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. For the past 8 years I have been writing a monthly column that looks at the intersection of art and faith for *U. S. Catholic* magazine. I exhibit my artistic work as time allows. Last June, I was re-elected to the provincial council of the Sacred Heart Province for another 3 year term. I'm currently finishing my term as the local superior of the friary in Joliet; I hope to be relieved of that responsibility this fall. I've been coming to Holy Spirit for about two years now; this is a community that takes its prayer life seriously and graciously laughs at my bad jokes. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to preside and preach here.