

(This article was published in *Word Wind*, the Newsletter of the SVD Alumni Association in the Spring of 2007.)

SVD Spirituality

**Looking Back and Giving Thanks**

By Emmerich Koller (Austria 1958-60/Miramar '62/Conesus '65/Girard '66)

Until just a few years ago, I had a recurring nightmare in which I was making a mad dash to the chapel at Techny, always by way of the choir loft, only to discover upon looking down to the sanctuary that the ordination ceremony had already started and I had once again missed my chance of being ordained. Forty years ago this past summer, I made a difficult decision: I left the seminary after eight very good years with the SVD because my dream of becoming a missionary priest was ambushed by the weakness of the flesh and sundry concerns, both real and imagined. My troubled dreams were periodic reminders that my subconscious still hadn't adjusted to the change and that the Society's imprint on my heart and soul was deep and lasting.

Now in the autumn of my life, with my steps from one task to the next less hurried, I like to reflect on the events and experiences that have shaped me. There is no escaping the fact that my seminary years had a profound impact on me, tying me to the SVD like some sort of tertiary. The reasons for such a pull are no mystery. First, the Society took me in when I was only sixteen; she embraced me, and became my second family. My classmates became my brothers; the psalmist's words "*Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum*"—"How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"—expressed my heartfelt sentiments toward them. Leaving them was difficult. Second, I owe the Society my excellent academic training, which provided me with a solid foundation for a successful post-seminary teaching career. Third, the spiritual formation pointed me in the right direction for a meaningful life based on solid Christian principles.

My spiritual transformation began with the first *Salve Regina* in Sankt Rupert's chapel, culminated with the profession of my second temporary vows, and found its most intense expression in the thirty-day retreat with Father Musinsky. That retreat, which stood out for the profligacy with which time was allotted to it, for its spiritual intensity and for its single-minded purpose, was a prime example of the Society's serious efforts forty some years ago to inculcate solid Christian values in all of her charges, whether temporary or permanent.

After the rarified atmosphere of the seminary, those values were sorely tested in the crucible of marriage and professional life. Loving my fellow seminarians was a lot easier than loving a selfish coworker or an insensitive boss. As a novice, I actually thought perfection was an attainable goal. Now I know that, at best, such a lofty endeavor will amount to the ever pathetic fumbling of a well-intentioned but weak human being. I arrived at the seminary as a sixteen-year-old fearing God's punishment; soon I learned of a loving and merciful God but remained skeptical; as a parent, I became certain that my

God was indeed a loving God because I myself couldn't stop loving my obnoxious teenage sons. Over four decades, I faced many challenges and my expectations became more realistic, my faith more refined. But nothing, not even the confusion after Vatican II or the shameful scandals of recent years, could budge the core message inculcated so solidly by the SVD.

Many of those good men who in the name of the Society did the rough-hewing and the fine chiseling on me from Miramar to Techny now rest peacefully with their departed confreres in Techny's cemetery. Because I am a long-time resident of nearby Winnetka, I visit them often. I usually walk past each of the many stone crosses that mark their graves. I know most of the names but only about forty of them would recognize mine. All of them had distinguished themselves as religious priests or brothers, missionaries, counselors, teachers, or just great human beings. They fought the good fight, accomplished much in their lives, and have gone on to their eternal reward. Although all would deserve a mighty monument, only modest stone crosses give testimony to their former earthly existence and excellence. I usually slow down when passing an illustrious name and stop altogether at the graves of those who had a direct influence on my education and spiritual formation. Each of my visits ends with a slight twinge of regret that I would not have a spot next to them. For what they had accomplished in their lives, I feel admiration and respect; for what they had done for me personally, undying gratitude.