

Rev. Msgr. Daniel H. Mueggenborg

Brief Biographical Sketch

Although I was born in Okarche, Oklahoma on April 15, 1962, most of my faith formation took place at St. Francis Xavier Church in Stillwater. It was there, in 1970, that I received my First Communion and later the Sacrament of Confirmation. It is also at St. Francis Xavier where I learned to be an Altar Server and began to develop a desire to be close to the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacrifice of the Mass. Growing up in a Catholic grade school was an influential part of my faith development and continued a familiarity with the church as sacred space and the place of prayer. Pope Francis has encouraged the Church to establish a “culture of encounter” with Christ whereby people are actively placed in settings conducive to experiencing Jesus in their lives. For me, that culture of encounter started in grade school. I am grateful to the Precious Blood Sisters from Wichita who helped form me in the Catholic faith during those early years.

Having attended St. Francis Xavier grade school, I entered the public school system from sixth through twelfth grade. It was there that I developed an interest in music, languages, and the natural sciences. After several years of forced piano lessons and attempts at the trumpet, I finally found something I enjoyed: playing the tuba. The tuba is not exactly a versatile instrument but it did allow me to participate in a wide variety of fine arts including marching band and concert orchestra. The exposure to classical music inspired a deep love for the great liturgical musical tradition of the Church.

One of the great influences in my youth was the Boy Scouts of America. I participated in the Scouting program throughout my high school years and learned skills of leadership, self-sufficiency, teamwork, and perseverance. It also introduced me to a world of community service and civic responsibility that was otherwise absent from my faith and academic formation. In the spring of 1980 I received my Eagle Scout Award along with several of my closest friends.

Scouting was without doubt one of the most important experiences in my journey to priesthood. In addition to the previously mentioned skills and opportunities, it also fostered character growth and an aspiration toward ideals and virtue. It was in Scouting that I learned first hand about the value of Christian service and care for others.

It was the love of nature and the appreciation of outdoor beauty that prompted me to study Geology as a college major. I began studies at Oklahoma State University in the fall of 1980. The skills learned in Scouting would serve me well on the many fieldtrips we took as part of our Geology curriculum.

I found the study of the natural sciences to actually be a prayerful experience by which I could more deeply appreciate the methodology used in God's work of creation. This formal study was supplemented by reading Teilhard de Chardin's book *The Phenomenon of Man* which put the study of the sciences within the framework of Catholic Christian thought. Teilhard de Chardin's writings continued

One of the other values of these Geology trips is that they became an opportunity to witness the Catholic faith. As we drove thousands of miles to distant locations, there were hours of free time to discuss with friends a host of topics and faith was always one of them. I began to realize that discussions of faith were of greater interest than conversations of science. Those discussions, combined with the practice of praying the Divine Office, led to becoming the chief "Catholic Resource" for questions by classmates concerning the faith. This experience of openly discussing and defending the Catholic faith was an important turning point in my life of discipleship because it required me to learn more about my own faith in order to communicate it to others.

It was during my freshman year of college that the most significant turning point occurred in the vocational discernment process. Over the course of my later high school years, I had begun to reject and resist the idea of being a priest. That rejection was in full force during my freshman year at OSU as I intentionally closed myself to the possibility of a priestly vocation. In the early spring of 1981, I was asked to serve Mass for an aunt and uncle's anniversary celebration in Okarche. I reluctantly agreed to do so and it turned out to be one of the most pivotal decisions of my life. The priest who celebrated the Mass was Father Stanley Rother. I knew nothing of him, not even his name, prior to that Mass and yet was captivated by the deep spiritual presence that surrounded him. There was a spirit of profound peace and love and filled the room when he entered. I noticed that presence and it made an impact on me. He possessed the qualities of character that I desired most yet had not found in my secular pursuits of college life. As a result of that mass I began allowing myself to once again consider the possibility of becoming a priest. That desire continued to grow through the remainder of my college years.

It was a few months later that Father Rother was Martyred in the Mission of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. The witness of his radical commitment to Jesus Christ and his love for the people left a life-long impression on me. I will be forever grateful to him for that impact. To honor the influence he had on my journey to priesthood, I used his chalice to celebrate my first Mass as a priest on July 16, 1989.

As the idea of priesthood was growing, another important influence took place during my junior year of college. I had read about the opportunity to spend a week serving in the mission area of Appalachia. I decided that I needed to experience an extended time of Christian service to see if it was something that I was called to do as a priest. Glenmary Home Missionaries staff parishes in impoverished and mission areas of America and they offered a series of such service weeks to college students. It was the perfect match.

Meeting so many other Catholic students from across the country was a great experience. Everyone had the same desire to give of themselves in service to others. We divided into work groups and took on a different task each day for the people of the small town of Vanceburg, Kentucky. One day we visited a nursing home and talked with the residents. I had never visited a nursing home before and was very uncomfortable about it. I entered a room and carried on a conversation with a resident before hastily getting up to leave. As I was leaving, the resident turned and thanked me for taking time to talk with him. He had tears of gratitude in his eyes. I had no idea how such a small action of kindness could mean so much to someone else. I began to realize how easy it is to make a difference in someone else's life ... if we will just take the time and the risk of reaching out to them. It was humbling to realize the power of a single act of Christian charity.

The experience of working with Glenmary was a significant step in my vocational discernment. It was there that I met the poor for the first time and came to appreciate the inherent beauty and dignity of each human person. By the end of my college studies, I had served numerous weeks on "The Farm" with the Glenmary Home Missioners and even helped as a staff member for one summer.

What I gained from my time with Glenmary is a clear understanding of the joy of discipleship. I also realized that I could live a fulfilled life of service to others. Those weeks were a tremendous time of grace and growth. When I finally did start to actively pursue priesthood, I remember calling Glenmary and talking with one of their priests about the possibility of joining their society. His comment to me was insightful and accurate when he said, "Why join a society that serves in mission dioceses when you yourself are already in a mission diocese? You need to join Tulsa if you want to work in the missions."

In 1984 I graduated from college and began my application to the Diocese of Tulsa to become a seminarian. At first, I would only commit to one semester in the seminary but then Bishop Beltran convinced me to give it a full year. The final semester of college studies at O.S.U. was a great time to take all the courses I wish I had taken before but couldn't ever fit into my schedule. Flying, Scuba, and Life Guarding were three such courses. And, yes, I did receive college credit for each one.

In August of 1984 I packed my car and departed for Saint Meinrad School of Theology in southern Indiana. It was a great year of Pre-Theology studies and formation in prayer and discipleship. I am grateful to the Benedictine monks at Saint Meinrad for their apostolate of priestly formation. I have always looked back with great fondness on that year.

One of the most influential factors in my life as a priest was the assignment to pursue seminary studies at the Pontifical North American College in Vatican City. I am deeply grateful to then Bishop Beltran for this assignment. I arrived at the "NAC" in August of 1985. It was the first time I had ever left the United States. The

seminary building was on a twelve-acre section of land atop the Janiculum Hill and located about 200 yards from the Basilica of Saint Peter. It was here that I would experience the most profound life-changing growth in spirituality and priestly identity.

There is a spiritual connection one feels with the early Church of Rome when you live in the Eternal City. The presence of the Apostles Peter and Paul permeates the Christian air of that city. The closeness to the Holy Father fosters a deep loyalty and affection for him as a real pastor of souls. Yet despite all those attractions, studying in Rome was a very difficult and trying experience. At the same time, it was the most growth-filled chapter of my life. It was in Rome that I was drawn to the daily practice of spending an hour before the Blessed Sacrament. This “Holy Hour” became the necessary anchor of my life. During that time before the Lord in the Eucharist, I learned to place my trust in Him alone and rely on nothing other than His love. The experience of studying in Rome was so trying that I actually asked then Bishop Beltran to not send me back at the end of my second year. He listened to my request and encouraged me to return and to continue the path I had undertaken. I am grateful for his encouragement and for the many blessings that were received as a result of persevering in the face of a difficult challenge.

On an academic level, a watershed moment in my life was reached when I took a course from the renowned scripture scholar Father Raymond Brown, S.S. He was in Rome to teach as part of the visiting professor series at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The course he offered opened my eyes to read and understand the scriptures in a way that made them come alive. I became passionate about the scriptures after taking his course. As a result, I resolved to help other people experience the richness of the biblical texts. I am most grateful to Father Brown for his life of scholarly excellence and priestly ministry. It was also a privilege for me to serve as his assistant while he was in the process of writing, editing and publishing his book entitled, *Death of the Messiah*.

The experience of studying Biblical Theology has turned out to be one of the most important aspects of my priestly formation. This is especially true for a priest who serves in the Bible Belt because the scriptures are the common language of faith in ecumenical dialogue. It has been a wonderful experience to introduce other Catholics to the richness of the scriptures and open their eyes so as to understand the biblical origins of our faith.

On a spiritual level, a key development took place when Father George Aschenbrenner, S.J. became my Spiritual Director. For five years, I had the privilege of meeting with Fr. Aschenbrenner every two weeks to receive his counsel, guidance, and perspective on the spiritual life. He continues to be one of the most highly regarded spiritual authorities in the United States. He introduced me to a form of Jesuit spirituality known as the “Discernment of Spirits.” Now, twenty-five years later, I still remember sitting in his study and experiencing the sincerity and clarity with which he mapped his way through the otherwise complicated web of life

experience. I am grateful to Fr. Aschenbrenner for giving me a solid spiritual foundation that has served me well throughout my life as a seminarian and as a priest.

Other summers during seminary were spent immersed in various ministry assignments that left a significant impact on me as well. During the summer of 1987 I returned to the Diocese of Tulsa and was assigned to Hospital Ministry at Saint John Medical Center. For ten weeks I covered the intensive care units and cardiac wards. It was an intense experience of pastoral ministry that deeply affected my understanding of human suffering.

The final summer assignment during seminary formation was a bit out of the ordinary. I desired to learn more about the work of the Church in the missions of the Third World and so I arranged to spend the summer of 1988 with Maryknoll Missionaries on the edge of the Serengeti in the small village of Mugumu, Tanzania. What an incredible experience that was! Each week we had to go hunting for our food. Tanzania is one of the most under-developed countries in the world and it was an eye-opening experience to spend ten weeks living and working in such an environment.

When people ask me why the experience of Africa was so important in my formation as a priest, I explain that it was in Africa that I overcame the fear of failure. That is really true. No matter what I tried to do, it was better than nothing. What I have realized is that the fear of failure is a paralyzing and debilitating factor that prevents so much creative ministry from occurring. As a result of Africa, I am not afraid to try new things in ministry and I'm not afraid to learn from mistakes. That freedom is empowering.

One of the greater blessings of being in Tanzania was the opportunity to spend the summer with the local mission priest, Rev. Brian Barron, MM. He was a real example of missionary zeal, priestly commitment, and pastoral flexibility. In addition, he was a really fun guy! After serving in Africa and mastering Swahili, he now serves in China where he has mastered the local language and continues to host seminarians from the North American College for summer assignments.

At the end of the summer in Mugumu, Brian and I decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. It took us three and a half days to ascend the 19,340 foot peak and a mere one and a half days to descend it.

The summer of 1988 in Africa was a significant moment for me because it awakened within me a realization of the fundamental mission of the Church and the need to help the poor. Africa made a permanent impact in my life ... and I am forever grateful.

Perhaps the most significant spiritual and charitable influence during my seminary formation was the opportunity to work with the Missionaries of Charity in Rome.

What began as a one-hour per week commitment to serving dinners in a soup kitchen quickly grew into providing all-night staffing services, weekly drives to collect and deliver fruit and vegetables to their various ministries in the city, and caring for special needs of the sisters. There was something profoundly refreshing and healthy about working with the Missionaries of Charity and I would continue that work for four years. In many ways, it was the association with them and their ministries that kept the rest of my life in perspective and balance.

Three years after receiving Candidacy, Archbishop Quinn returned to Rome to ordain my class to the Diaconate in the Basilica of Saint Peter on April 6, 1989. This was only three months before my ordination to the priesthood. To be a deacon was the culmination of years of formation and study. As such, it was a defining moment in the journey to priesthood. There is something powerful about laying down your life for Christ at the tomb of an Apostle and Martyr. That awareness filled our minds as my classmates and I lay prostrate on the floor of the basilica.

The day after our Diaconate ordination Pope John Paul II invited my class along with our parents to the Apostolic Palace for an audience. I had not previously met the pope personally and it was a moment I will never forget to be able to introduce my parents to him as well.

The influence of Saint John Paul II on my life as a Catholic and as a priest cannot be overestimated. The Holy Father gave witness of what a courageous priest does when he creatively carries out his ministry in face of obstacles and oppression. His writings awakened the mind of the Church in a new and relevant way for work of evangelization. His witness of suffering and illness became the pulpit from which he preached his last and perhaps most moving homily to the world. It was a blessing to have the example and guidance of such a great man.

In May 2011, John Paul II was Beatified in Saint Peter's Square. More than one million people were in attendance at his Beatification Mass. I was honored to be part of that Mass along with many other priest friends who look up to John Paul II as the priest, prophet, and pope who formed and focused our vision of the Church.

On July 14, 1989 the most significant landmark in my life was reached when I was ordained a priest in Holy Family Cathedral. This is the moment I had been contemplating since childhood. Still, it was not so much the end of years of formation as it was the beginning of a new life.



Without doubt, one of the greatest blessings I experienced during my time in Rome both as a seminarian and as a priest was the opportunity to meet Mother Teresa of Calcutta, founder of the Missionaries of Charity. Although I had worked with her Sisters for years before being ordained, it wasn't until my post-ordination year of studies that I experienced some life-changing encounters with Mother Teresa herself.

The Missionaries of Charity had asked me to serve as a chaplain for their small convent at San Gregorio, which meant getting up at 5:00 am and going to celebrate Mass for them at 6:00 am. Isn't that what every student wants to do? On three occasions during that year, Mother Teresa was present at the Mass in the small convent chapel. On one of those occasions, she came to the sacristy after Mass and joined my classmate and me for breakfast. It was a remarkable experience to be in the presence of a woman who radiated the very presence of Christ. After breakfast she honored us by allowing a photo to be taken and then offered each of us a prayer card. I am forever grateful for that meeting and the chance to be in the presence of a living saint. The prayer card is now framed and hangs on the wall of my office.