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*Bethlehem Community's Winter Faith Journey*



In January of 1995 Bethlehem Community of Vancouver, Washington had jumped off the edge of the world, as far as most of our friends were concerned. Two years before we--all 24 of us--had entered the Catholic Church. We were just then starting a desktop publishing business (apostolate) with neither experience nor much capital, but with faith. The object was to reprint worthy books for children and youth.

To earn our daily bread we had also begun a telephone-answering service for Ignatius Press. By now we needed funds for our next book. That's when we decided to sell our home (the "Ark") for the capital, the faith decision which would soon launch us on a journey into the unknown. Our hope had been to move closer to Mt Angel Abbey in Oregon where we were becoming Benedictine Oblates. But no property there had worked out.

Events sped up. Our Ark was sold and we had set ourselves a deadline of January 1 to be out. By Christmas we were packed and ready: with no place to go. Our friend, Fr. Talbott, S.J., had urged us, "Go *East*." Biting our nails and assuming there would be a roof over our heads--somewhere-- we took a step of faith and rented a moving van.

Just after Christmas another friend, John Kippley of Couple to Couple League in Cincinnati called to see if we'd yet found a new home. "No," we said, "but we're renting a truck on Saturday, whether we have a place or not."

"What!" and then, "Have you ever thought of Cincinnati?"

"At this point," we replied, "we'd be willing to go anywhere." Our mental picture had been a move within the range of a few hundred miles, but within that week we decided to accept John Kippley's invitation to Cincinnati--which he'd backed up with temporary housing, some possible locations to settle in, and provisions for storage. Almost immediately Jack Sharpe and Davin Carlson set off to Cincinnati in a van heavy laden with books, shelves and other furniture. "Worst case scenario," John Kippley remarked when, upon the men's arrival in Cincinnati he stared into the tightly packed interior of the van. But he kindly opened his new warehouse for our storage.

In drizzling rain on January 11 we--in three more rental moving trucks and our two cars (delivery van and a large Ford van)--rolled out of Vancouver once and for all. By the hand of

Providence our five-day winter journey across half the continent was unbelievably mild, dry, and easy. We picnicked outdoors twice. January storms closed in behind us in Idaho and Wyoming just as we made our passage; a fantasy of ice-frosted trees and fields transformed Nebraska into a wonderland. Dining out and motel stops were a novelty for the children--especially that truck stop with the fabulous piles of pancakes! What should have been grueling was like a vacation (at least for some!).

In Cincinnati the Kippleys gave us abundant help. We unloaded our vans under dry, spring-like skies to three living quarters separated by miles of busy city streets and hills. Living "community," stretched three ways, would prove exceedingly trying on time, tempers, and resources. But just after the last truck was unloaded, our story had taken an unexpected twist. Fr. Joseph Fessio, our Ignatius Press employer, phoned us: "Don't unpack yet--I may have a place for you. I've been talking to Bishop Sullivan's office, of the Diocese of Fargo, North Dakota. He's interested in your coming to his diocese and is looking for a place for you." Well! Exhausted moving van un-loaders like us weren't keen on the idea of packing the stuff all in again! And was it being suggested we'd overshot our mark by 1050 miles?! It looked as wild as a joke. Still... the reality of a positively warm and beckoning bishop of Fargo soon began to trump any vague stereotypes we had of North Dakota. The doors in Cincinnati to a permanent location that met our needs weren't opening. Bishop

Sullivan expected to see the Sharpes next Friday. "Do you believe in Providence?" we had been asked in our call with his office. "There's a former convent up north in the small town of Warsaw that we've just looked into and it's available."

The Sharpes, borrowing a car, drove 950 miles northwest to Fargo. They met with Bishop Sullivan and then were driven, with him, the 102 miles north to the town of Warsaw. Stanley Stanislawski and Hilary Feltman, the local trustees, received them. The old convent-school, run for 50 years (1921-71) by the Sisters of the Resurrection, had sat idle, but heated, for over 20 years. However, the last few *unheated* winters had caused severe damage. To restore it would be beyond our resources. But Bishop Sullivan saw the task as a joint project between us and the diocese--if we wanted to live there.

We did. Our second "exodus" occurred in waves over a six-week period. The first two waves enabled families, home school, and the telephone-answering business to settle into place. We wouldn't live in the convent for some time, but the unused Church rectory had been offered us by the St. Stanislaus parish. In the final wave Sandy Rasmussen and little Helen, born in Cincinnati, were flown in, April 3 in a snowstorm, and driven by Jim to their new home.

What a lot of good but far from easy or comfortable events filled these crucial days. Counting on our heavenly Father, we had found shepherding--through the Church, through friends like the Kippleys, Fr. Fessio, and most especially Bishop Sullivan. Bishop Sullivan saw us as an asset to the diocese, as a self-supporting Catholic community whose work would make us (in a low-key way) an educational addition to the diocese. In November of 1995, finishing our novitiate as Oblates of Mt Angel Abbey of Oregon, our Benedictine flavor took root in this new, unexpected location.

The thought that it was God who brought us here, cutting a path before us, continues to give us a profound peace. In the years ahead we would work like beavers renovating our newfound home (which shifted to Bathgate in 1999, to the former School for the Blind). Our publishing apostolate flourished and work on religious education materials began. We have deepened in our Catholic identity and in Benedictine stability and spirituality. Through challenges and struggles God prods our faith to keep growing. He often mixes his grace, we notice, with a divine sense of humor--just as he did at the start of our journey here, when our migration zigzagged us east, then north and west to the exact right spot, where we are now rooted well into the prairie.