

“A Bite on the Conscience”

Kevin Spinale, SJ '96

KEVIN SPINALE, SJ '96 has a way about him that reminds you of a priest from an old movie. He's Pat O'Brien in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, Bing Crosby in *The Bells of St. Mary's*, or Karl Malden in *On the Waterfront* – the kind of priest who might teach you how to throw a left hook or a perfect spiral. But Spinale, who four years ago began his journey to becoming a Jesuit priest, also has an unmistakable scholarly, even *jesuitical* bent. Though Spinale maintains the youthful bulk of his football and rugby playing days at BC High and Holy Cross, he slips easily into a thoughtful disquisition on the Gospel of Matthew or the finer points of Heidegger or Habermas.

Spinale's decision to become a Jesuit came slowly, without a Damascene moment. “I didn't fall off a horse or anything,” he said. “I had no desire to do this in high school or college.”

Born in Arlington, MA, Spinale came to BC High without much enthusiasm for school or church. “It was quite intimidating to take the train each day to Dorchester and attend classes with 1,100 guys from all over the Boston area,” he said.

But intimidation soon gave way to engagement. “I was truly blessed to have some spectacular teachers, men and women who generously gave of themselves to their students,” Spinale said. “I was fortunate to learn from **Robert Peloquin, Dan Shea '57** (two years in a row), **Paul Moynahan, Bill Burke '52, Brian Donaher '55, Barbara O'Brien-Miller, John Lynch '70, Pete Skipper, Nick Argento, Fr. Kelly, Mary Potamis...** BC High transformed me into a deliberate and competitive student.”

Spinale graduated from BC High and attended the College of the Holy Cross, where he majored in classics and played rugby. Still, he did not feel called to the priestly vocation in general or the Jesuits in particular. “I was not particularly devout at that time in my life,” Spinale said. “I'd go to

10 p.m. mass on Sundays to kind of keep my finger tips in as a practicing Catholic.”

After college, Spinale joined the Peace Corps and spent two years teaching English to students in the remote Carpathian Mountains in Romania. The experience was an eye-opening one, he said. “It was a wonderful two years that was enriched by unique and faithful friends.” When he returned to the United States, Spinale became a Peace Corps Fellow at Columbia University Teachers College, teaching full-time at a public school in Brooklyn, NY, while working on his master's degree in education. “For two years,” he recalled, “I slept little and worked much.”

It was during those years in Romania and New York that the idea of the religious life – of joining the Jesuits – first took hold of him.

“I'd find myself by myself,” Spinale said of his time in Romania and New York. “You get to do a lot of thinking, and something started to bite on my conscience or get me to think about what God is.”

In particular, Spinale's mind fixed on the memory of a small chapel in the Carpathians. “I used to go there, not so much to pray, but to think – to watch the afternoon light move across the south



windows,” Spinale recalled. “I gained great consolation from a crude triptych that served as the backdrop for the main altar. It depicted Jesus at his baptism. The expression on his face was utterly human: uncertain and anxious as he listened to his Father identify the relationship that defined him. It was a supreme consolation to commiserate with an anxious Jesus.”

Spinale also became fascinated with the crucifixion and the image of the cross of Christ. “Something about the event of the crucifixion, about what was expressed in the death of Christ wouldn’t leave me alone,” he said. “In the Gospel of Matthew, when folks go by when Jesus is on the cross, they shake their fists at him and say, ‘You could heal people, get down off the cross.’ But if Jesus the person ever did that, it would overwhelm us. It would be forcing us into the realization that God is all-powerful instead of all-loving. That to me is what the priesthood is about – getting on your knees and helping people as best you can. It’s not about power.”

Still unsure of what path to take, Spinale wrote to Rev. John Brooks, SJ, the former president of

Holy Cross and a friend and mentor from his college days.

“I told him, ‘I’ve got this sort of subtle biting thing on my conscience,’” Spinale said. “He wrote back, ‘I thought you would ask me about that six years ago.’”

Describing that moment more than five years later, there is still palpable relief in Spinale’s voice. The principal barrier of entry to his vocation, it seems, was admitting that vocation to himself.

“It took some time to tell my family and friends,” he remembered. “I anticipated a negative reaction from most everyone, especially after the abuse scandals of recent years. I was nervous about what people would think of me – what was wrong with him that he would consider religious life? To my surprise, most people took pride in my decision.”

Although Spinale’s decision to become a Jesuit came long after he left BC High – and although there were few Jesuits still teaching at the school when he was a student there – he counts his experience there as formative to his person and his calling.

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“The lay teachers at BC High give their lives to helping kids learn and live a more meaningful life,” he said. “I still remember many of my teachers...and all of them were just good people. They had families, they were selfless teachers, they were honest and gave themselves totally to the school. That sense stuck with me as far as committing myself to service for the rest of my life.”

Now, five years after he entered the order, Spinale is working on his master’s in philosophy at the University of Chicago – this after two years of studying Greek, philosophy, and theology at the University of Toronto and Regis College, and a year working at his alma mater as a teacher in BC High’s Math department. “There is an austerity and poverty to the toil of academic life, but I find it a deeply consoling experience,” he said.

When Spinale finishes his studies, he will go to work in what the order calls an Apostolate for two or three years – an assignment that will likely bring Spinale back into the classroom. After that comes three years of preparation for ordination. It is a long road, but one that Spinale seems to savor.

“When I entered five years ago I had no idea what to expect,” he said. “Throughout my life, I’ve lucked out with friends, and here I have three wonderful friends from Novitiate. As a group we’re pretty young in the society and we all live in communities that are older, so it can be filled with solitude...But there’s plenty of work to do.”

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