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# James Martin, SJ

*In the Company of Jesus*

Jon M. Sweeney



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*For my parents,  
Mark and Janet Sweeney*



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# Prologue

Those who knew James Martin as a child and teenager in the suburbs of Philadelphia would never have imagined he would become a Jesuit and a priest. A success, yes, but a religious one? They might have envisioned their imaginative, fun-loving, thoughtful, but not-too-serious friend growing up to become a television, media, and film personality. He was articulate and winsome from an early age. But one of the two or three most recognized priests in the United States? Not a chance. They certainly would not have been able to see a future in which their Jim became a lightning rod for “traditionalist” Roman Catholics who viewed themselves at odds with the Holy See in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Yet the ways that God invites people to “become who they are,” to quote the title of one of Jim’s books, are sometimes hard to imagine. This happens in a variety of ways: sometimes through a series of seeming coincidences, sometimes through longings and desires that are hard to understand, sometimes through a chance conversation with a friend. For Jim, the course of his vocation from a somewhat dreamy child to an extroverted adolescent to a hardworking corporate executive and finally to a Jesuit priest came mainly through a book that he chanced upon after seeing a television show. But that’s too simplistic an explanation.

In truth, the seeds of his vocation and his later accomplishments can be seen all throughout his life, a life that many people are now coming to know and one that this book invites you to discover.

## Basic Chronology

- 1960 Born in Philadelphia, December 29. Family lives in an apartment in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Later that year, they move to Plymouth Meeting, a suburb of Philadelphia, where Martin resides for seventeen years, attending elementary school, junior high school, and high school there.
- 1978 Graduates Plymouth-Whitemarsh High School. In August, at the age of seventeen, enrolls at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.
- 1982 Graduates college. Moves to an apartment in Manhattan and begins working for General Electric in Midtown. Moves two years later to Queens and then, in 1986, to Stamford, Connecticut, with GE Capital. Promoted to Specialist-Corporate Financial Management Development, he stays at GE until summer 1988.
- 1986 His parents separate. He begins to consider the direction of his life and then a religious vocation.
- 1988 August 15, accepted into the Society of Jesus. Thirteen days later, enters Arrupe House, the Jesuit novitiate in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Fall, works

in a hospital for seriously ill patients in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

- 1989 February, sent to Kingston, Jamaica, as a Jesuit novice, to work among the poor with the Missionaries of Charity at Our Lady Queen of Peace hospice. June, completes the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius at Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester, Massachusetts.
- 1990 August, pronounces First Vows (poverty, chastity, and obedience) at the completion of his novitiate. Moves to Arrupe House at Loyola University Chicago for two years of philosophy studies, the second stage of his Jesuit formation. Works with street-gang members and homeless men and women. Begins writing.
- 1992 Early August, arrives in Nairobi, Kenya, on Jesuit mission for his regency. Works with the Jesuit Refugee Service/East Africa for two years, helping refugees start small businesses. Publishes his first article in *National Jesuit News*, in December, and begins to desire authorship.
- 1993 March–May, writes *In Good Company*, a memoir about working at GE and joining the Jesuits while in Kenya sick with mononucleosis. A memoir article first appears in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, his college alumni magazine; the book wouldn't be published until 2000. August, cofounds the Mikono Centre, a shop marketing refugee handicrafts in Nairobi.
- 1995 Briefly moves to America House, New York City, to complete his regency, then to Cambridge, Massa-

chusetts, to begin theology studies at Weston Jesuit School of Theology.

- 1997 May, first book published: *How Can I Find God? The Famous and the Not-So-Famous Consider the Quintessential Question*.
- 1998 Ordained a deacon. After completing theology studies, missioned to work at *America* magazine, New York City, where he remains to this day. Also works for one year as a deacon at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in New York.
- 1999 June 12, ordained a priest in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and celebrates First Mass, at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in New York City. January, *This Our Exile*, about his work with East African refugees, published.
- 2000 *In Good Company* published, and Martin receives early taste of national publicity.
- 2006 *My Life with the Saints*, another spiritual memoir, published March 1. It becomes his first bestseller, with sales of fifty thousand copies in the first twenty-two months; one hundred thousand in forty-eight months.
- 2007–
- 2008 Summers, completes his tertianship, the final stage of Jesuit formation; makes the Spiritual Exercises for the second time at the tertianship program in Culver City, California.
- 2009 November 1, pronounces his Final Vows at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, New York City, on the

- Feast of All Saints, ten years after being ordained a priest, and twenty-one years after entering the Jesuits.
- 2010 March 28, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* hits the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. The *Times* editors describe it: “A priest explains the easily applied traditional wisdom that Jesuits use to help other people in their daily lives.”
- 2011 First pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as part of research for his next book.
- 2014 *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* published in March, becomes a *New York Times* Best Seller.
- 2015 A first novel, *The Abbey: A Story of Discovery*, published in October. It began as a dream.
- 2017 The first edition of *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* leads him into a maelstrom of both praise and backlash from fellow Catholics that lasts several years.
- 2019 Continues to give frequent talks on the importance of welcoming LGBT Catholics—“the most marginalized people in the Church today.” Finishes *Learning to Pray*.
- 2020 Working on a book about Lazarus. Continues to work at America Media.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Plymouth Meeting, Wharton, General Electric

The house Jimmy Martin grew up in, at 107 Kings Road in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, looks as ordinary as any suburban dwelling on a quiet neighborhood street. Its 1,600 square feet, split-level, three bedrooms, one-and-a-half baths, were built in the late 1950s. Situated on a small lot with neighbors on either side, it remained unchanged throughout young Jim's life. His mother would not sell it until 2012.

Jim was born at Hahnemann Hospital in Philadelphia on December 29, 1960. His only sibling, Carolyn, was born three years later. Jim was named for his father, who was married to Eleanor, Jim's mom. Both parents were Philadelphia natives.

James Sr. worked in marketing for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals in Radnor, Pennsylvania, and then for Rorer Pharmaceuticals. In his fifties, he lost his job and for years struggled in less satisfying work. Eleanor was both a homemaker and a substitute French teacher in Jim's school district. Before

## 2 *James Martin, SJ*

marrying James, she had worked in downtown Philadelphia as a secretary and translator.

Jim's dad was hardworking and taciturn. He had lost both his parents at an early age (first his father, then mother), and Jim sometimes wondered if James had a more difficult time as a parent as a result of this. But James was a typical 1960s father by most accounts; responsibility, hard work at the office, and breadwinning were his primary intentions. He also was often away on lengthy business trips, with both national and international travel.

Jim's dad was also a storyteller and loved a good joke, at times laughing so hard he'd have trouble catching his breath. He was a devout Philadelphia sports fan. One of Jim's childhood memories has the family attending a performance at the old Academy of Music in Philadelphia, home of the Philadelphia Orchestra. A World Series or Stanley Cup game was happening at the time, and his father was determined not to miss it, so he had earphones connected to a transistor radio while at the concert. During a quiet orchestral moment James leapt from his seat and yelled "Score!"<sup>1</sup>

Jim's mother was, like her husband, an intelligent, humorous, and well-read college graduate (his father went to the University of Pennsylvania, his mother to what is now Arcadia College in nearby Glenside). She maintained a nurturing environment at home, with, as Jim remembers, a sense of order and calm in the house. Both Jim and Carolyn were expected to work hard, do chores (for Jim that included mowing lawns and taking out the trash), and try their hardest to succeed in life.

Both of Jim's parents were supportive and encouraging, particularly relating to school.

In the late twentieth century, Jim's hometown was known mainly as the United States home of the Swedish, multinational retailer IKEA. The company opened its first store at the Plymouth Meeting Mall in 1985. Plymouth Meeting was also known by road signs seen by the millions of drivers who each year passed where the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-276), Interstate 476 (what locals call the "Blue Route"), West Germantown Pike, and Plymouth Road converge. Many ramps, toll booths, exits, and overpasses are located in tiny Plymouth Meeting, which was originally settled in 1686 and in the most recent census was home to a little more than six thousand souls.

The Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, founded the town, naming it for Plymouth, on the south coast of England, in Devon. The "Meeting" following "Plymouth" refers to the Quaker congregation, services, and building that were founded there. The original name of the village was in fact Plymouth Meeting House, according to local histories.<sup>2</sup>

Jim didn't attend the Plymouth Meeting Friends School in his neighborhood, just down the street. His parents sent him to the public school, Plymouth Consolidated, for kindergarten and then to Ridge Park Elementary, when Jim started first grade. He was only four when he started kindergarten, his birthday being in December. Plymouth Consolidated was a mile from home, and Jim would walk with his mother to school but often made the return trip on his own. From first grade on, he walked or rode his bike each day. These are the quiet signals that Jim grew up in a safe place, in an era simpler than our own.

Years later, at *America* magazine, he would reflect on the historic Quaker building he often passed in his neighborhood:

4 *James Martin, SJ*

To a young boy, the meetinghouse was just another building that had always been there. Yet something about it attracted me. In the cool fall afternoons, I liked to play with friends in the spacious playground of the school run by the Quakers. The late afternoon sun, filtered through the leaves of the immense trees, dappled the cement playground. They had a tire swing there, and you could also play in the stables and pretend that you were fighting the British troops.<sup>3</sup>

But as a child he never stepped foot inside.

\* \* \*

Like his parents, he was an avid reader and has vivid memories of anticipating each year's Scholastic Book Fair in his elementary school. A subscriber to *Jack and Jill* magazine, he even submitted a poem that was accepted and published in March 1969 and marks his first instance in print. Jim was eight.

“Spring”

Spring is fun,  
I see the sun;  
The flowers grow,  
No more snow.  
The birds sing—  
I feel like a king!

The journey to and from school became a time of introspection and prayer, even in a boy who wasn't particularly pious. Jim still remembers, “Nerves about a spelling quiz would prompt a Hail Mary. . . . If I was worried about a Little

League tryout or a big solo in band practice, I would pray *many* Hail Marys.”<sup>4</sup> Other days, he’d walk home with his friend Carol. She was from a Presbyterian family, and Jimmy (that’s what she and everyone else, including his family, called him as a boy) would later attend her Christmas Eve services and even participate in her church’s active youth group.

As elementary school and junior high school progressed, he was often found at the mall with his friends, playing street hockey, or reading. A favorite author during those years was Jean Shepherd, author of many stories of growing up in Indiana during the Great Depression. His best-known story is “Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid,” later adapted into the hit movie, *A Christmas Story*. Like Ralphie, the boy in the movie, Jim felt perfectly at home where he lived, in a safe place, among many friends, with parents who cared for him. Still, his family was not the kind that many people would expect would one day produce a Jesuit priest.

“I did not come from a very religious family, at least not the kind that considers themselves ‘blessed’ if a son decides to become a priest,” he later wrote in one of his memoirs.<sup>5</sup>

But he still learned, as a child, to meet God in mystical moments. He tells of the most pivotal of these in *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, as a time when he stopped his bike on a familiar road near home one spring day.

It was a typical meadow in the suburbs, but he suddenly saw it bursting with life: flowers in bloom, grasshoppers jumping. He was alone but realized then that there was so much more. He remembers being ten or eleven at the time. “I felt an overwhelming happiness. I felt so happy to be alive. And I felt a fantastic longing: to both possess and be a part of what was around me. I can still see myself standing in this meadow.”<sup>6</sup> Since writing that account, Jim has said, “Sometimes when I pray I return there.”<sup>7</sup>

He worked hard in high school, earning excellent grades, doing well on standardized tests, involved in many extracurriculars. By the end of junior year, he was at the top of his class and president of the student government at Plymouth-Whitemarsh High School. In his senior year, he was copy editor of the yearbook and played Hugo Peabody (the part played by Bobby Rydell in the 1963 film) in the school's production of *Bye Bye Birdie*. He was also spending each summer working more than one job to earn the money he would need to attend a good college (mowing lawns, washing dishes, waiting tables, working as a movie theater usher, caddying at a local golf course, and working on a factory assembly line). He applied to and was accepted at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, just forty minutes from home.

\* \* \*

Jim enrolled, in August 1978, at seventeen, at Penn's Wharton School of Business. He quickly fell in love with Penn: living his freshman year in the Quadrangle, working on the school's humor magazine, and maintaining a large circle of friends, among whom he was quickly known as the witty "lapsed Catholic."

He often frequented the pubs near Penn's campus. Just a month into the start of freshman year he was at one of them, Doc Watson's, getting drunk on the night that Pope John Paul I died in his bed. Jim's roommate, Brad, turning on the radio, told Jim the news after they'd staggered back to their dorm room. "Don't you feel bad you told those jokes!" Brad said, tongue-in-cheek, referring to irreverent jokes he made about Jesus at the bar that evening.

When Jim was ordained several years later, one of his other friends from school asked him, "Do the Jesuits know

about those jokes you told at Doc Watson's?!"<sup>8</sup> He would regret the cynicism of those years and the deprecatory way he had approached his faith.

After his first year at his Ivy League university, Jim still had "only a ten-year-old's understanding of Catholicism." And he wasn't curious about other religious traditions. He said, "I was a distinctly uncurious person. It's hard to overestimate how little I thought about real religion." Yet he would, like a typically overconfident young man, argue with an agnostic friend about matters of faith; he remembers that this "served largely to inoculate me against any sort of real relationship with God"—at least, for a time.<sup>9</sup>

The beginning of his sophomore year, the man elected to replace John Paul I, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, became Pope John Paul II and visited Philadelphia. This was an exciting moment for Jim and his family. "I remember exactly where I was standing: facing the Art Museum, just to the left of the big fountain at Logan Square, over which had been built an immense white altar," he remembers. "I was right next to—really close enough to touch—one of the two colossal Civil War memorial columns on the Ben Franklin Parkway."<sup>10</sup> The day was October 3, 1979, and a million-plus crowd of people was there to see JP II celebrate Mass.

The following day, Jim was interested enough in the Holy Father to rush to Children's Hospital, next to Penn's campus, to see him again.

"It remains one of my most vivid memories of my time in college: Pope John Paul, young and vigorous at 59, in his white cassock, smiling and greeting a row of sick children, many in wheelchairs. I was only about 20 feet away. When he bent down and placed his hands on one young child's head, some of the nurses started to weep. So did I," he later wrote.<sup>11</sup> The desultory Catholic couldn't have been

too uninterested in religious matters or too cynical about his church.

He remained a happy college student—studying hard, thinking about his future in the corporate world, smoking marijuana. He also played practical jokes on friends and spent long hours laughing and goofing around both on and off campus. On one occasion, while living in a coed dorm on campus, a friend of Jim's got revenge for a previous practical joke by stealing Jim's clothes while Jim was in the shower and then notifying everyone on the floor to line up and wait for him to have to walk naked back down the long hall to his room, which he did. Studying hard despite his time at Doc Watson's, he was a finance major with an emphasis on accounting.

But then college was suddenly marked by tragedy. Jim writes about it briefly in *In Good Company*. This happened his junior year:

On Memorial Day, a few weeks after the semester had ended, a good friend and former roommate, Brad, was killed in an automobile accident along with the girlfriend of another friend. Both were twenty years old.

It rocked him. He'd been roommates with Brad Almeda since freshman year, when they shared a room. Sophomore year, it was the two of them plus two other guys; junior year, they all shared a big house off campus with several other friends. In fact, their house on Spruce Street became known for putting on massive themed parties that held hundreds of student guests.

That Memorial Day weekend of 1981, Brad and Michael, another friend from the house, Brad's girlfriend Suzy, and Michael's girlfriend Mindy were all driving in upstate New

York when their car overturned, rolling several times. Brad and Mindy were killed instantly.

“I was just paralyzed with sadness,” Jim recalls.<sup>12</sup> Brad, who had just graduated (a year early) and had his whole, promising life ahead of him, was suddenly gone.

*In Good Company* recounts Jim’s feelings a few days later, in Washington, DC, at the funeral:

During the service, listening to the minister talk about God’s love and mercy, I made the decision not to go to church any longer. I decided quickly and clearly. As far as I could see, there could be no rational explanation for a loving God who could do something like this. So why bother with the charade of religion?<sup>13</sup>

That summer was a dark season for Jim. That autumn, returning for his senior year, he had a pivotal conversation with another friend, Jacque Braman, the one person in Jim’s group of friends whom everyone regarded as a “fundamentalist.” She was, in fact, an evangelical Protestant.

Standing outside the Quad one day after class, Jacque listened carefully to Jim’s anger toward God, as Jim still seethed over Brad’s death, and responded, “Well, I’ve been praying to God and thanking him for Brad’s life.”<sup>14</sup> This was revelatory for Jim. Later that year, he returned to church, with a deeper understanding of what a relationship with God might be about. Jim told me recently:

After Brad’s death, I stayed away from the church for several months, maybe even a year. Jacque’s question was a huge challenge to me, and a great grace as well, because until then I saw God as someone who either answered your prayers or rejected them. And Brad’s death seemed like the ultimate rejection. I was intensely angry, and perhaps some

of it was a childish anger, as in “Who are you, God, to do this to me?” But most of it was a deep sadness over what I saw as something God had done to all of us. It seemed not only pointless but cruel. Eventually, my Catholic upbringing kicked in and I returned to Mass, mainly because I was afraid God would punish me if I didn’t. It took me several more years to come to grips with Brad’s death. And it wasn’t until I entered the Jesuits that I could see God in a more positive and more personal light—someone who was interested in each of us, not simply an arbitrary cosmic ruler.<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

Jim’s interests in college also extended to culture and to art. He had always been interested in art, drawing pen-and-ink sketches and painting watercolors from an early age. His artistic interests were further encouraged when he was appointed the art editor for the university’s humor magazine, *Punch Bowl*. “James J. Martin” the masthead read.

He was responsible for selecting art for the magazine (a job he’d reprise years later at *America*) and drawing much of it himself. Humor was the aim, in the form of culture criticism, occasional news, and satirical takes on university life. For example, in the April 1982 issue there appeared a full-page reproduction of a faux *New Yorker* magazine cover depicting a lovely and clean Attica State Prison cell complete with corner bathroom sink, hanging spider plant, and bars on one wall. The Attica Prison riot had taken place a decade earlier, in September 1971, and after more than forty people died, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller initiated necessary changes to the prison system. Media reports had been focusing on the tenth anniversary of the riot just then, in early 1982. That cartoon has a small “J.M.” in the bottom right-hand corner.

His humor did not turn often to sarcasm—which is almost de rigueur for university students of any decade and era—except for a few pictorial jabs at the Catholic Church in *Punch Bowl*. For example, he was no great fan of comedian and talk show host David Letterman while in college. “You are never sure if Mr. Letterman’s tone is supposed to be ‘ironic’ or just mocking,” he remembered later in the pages of *America*—while praising in contrast a new show hosted by comedian Rosie O’Donnell, whose “fun . . . is at no one’s expense.”<sup>16</sup>

\* \* \*

Graduating with solid grades at Penn, with a bachelor’s degree in economics (BS Econ) with a concentration in finance, Jim was prepared to work for one of the big firms—a large corporation, a financial-center bank or stock brokerage. After interviews in suburban Boston and Winston-Salem, and offers from firms in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, he took a job at General Electric and began work in their highly competitive corporate training program, at the GE building at Fifty-First Street and Lexington Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

As a boy, he hadn’t imagined working for a big company. In fact, he felt he never really understood what his father did, working in “business.”

Jim once asked his dad at dinner, “What do you do all day?” and James said, “Well, let’s see. I go to meetings, write letters and make phone calls.” Jim laughed because it sounded like his dad was doing nothing much at all. But when Jim came home for Thanksgiving one year, soon after starting work at GE, his dad asked, “What do you do at work?” and Jim replied, “Just what you did: go to meetings, write letters and answer phone calls!”<sup>17</sup>

The position at GE was a coveted one for a Wharton grad. Jim's finance and accounting expertise had landed him, first, the internship in the Financial Management Program and then a position in International Finance and Accounting. He would soon move from there to Human Resources with the GE Capital division in Stamford, Connecticut, during a time of tremendous growth for that division of the company. There, he excelled. He was too good a communicator to be stuck in financial management.

One of his supervisors remembers employee Jim as "self-confident without being cocky," "smart—he knew a lot about a lot of things," "quick-witted," and "funny—he was good at smiling and liked to laugh." Also, "he could have a sharp edge. He did not suffer fools gladly, and used his quick mind and sharp wit to impressive effect. His sense of humor could be both cutting and biting."<sup>18</sup>

From New York and later Connecticut, Jim could see his family frequently, taking the train to Philadelphia for all the major holidays and on occasional weekends to catch up with friends. While visiting, he would stay at the family home in Plymouth Meeting. Jim was on the fast track, with an executive position, influence, and authority, living in suburban Connecticut, fulfilling the expectations his parents and friends had for him and that his fine education and hard work had earned him. He was wealthy, young, but also, he found, depressed.

And there were instances, during his time in New York, when he was asked to falsify accounting reports and do other things that made him morally uncomfortable. Eventually, he began to wonder how long he would, or could, do what he was doing for a living. He began to realize that he was no longer happy.

One evening late in 1986, Jim returned home from work late, feeling tired, and turned on the television. A PBS docu-

mentary on the life of Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton was on: *Merton: A Film Biography*, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn.

Jim had never heard of Merton but was quickly rapt, listening to the story of his life. He heard about Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, education at Cambridge and Columbia, fathering a child out of wedlock that he then never even saw, living dissolutely, and then seeking life's meaning and ultimately finding that meaning behind the iron gates of a monastery in Kentucky. Jim suddenly had the overwhelming feeling that Merton's way of life was better than his own.

That late evening experience before the television also prompted Jim to see his life as a kind of pilgrimage; his life had importance beyond friendships, earnings, and achievement.

Years later, when he wrote his first memoir describing the events of his entering religious life, he would write that his work was "for anyone interested in finding God in their life and anyone interested in a personal spiritual journey. And that's a journey that everybody ends up taking."<sup>19</sup>

The short documentary had a profound effect on his own life. A few weeks after watching the film and reading Merton's autobiography, Jim began to imagine a religious vocation for himself. Was it possible? Did it make any sense at all? He spoke with his parish priest in Stamford, who suggested he talk with either the vocations director of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia or the Jesuits. Why the Jesuits? The parish priest was a part-time teacher at Fairfield Prep, a Jesuit high school not far from Stamford. A good student, Jim researched the differences. He considered becoming a diocesan priest, because it might be better for his family: he'd still live close by, rooted in a diocese, rather than travel from

place to place in Jesuit formation, which, he was learning, could be extensive.

But, then, the Society of Jesus began to exert a stronger appeal, and after he approached the Jesuits on a visit to nearby Fairfield University, he came away with more materials to read.

Then, Jim went back to work at General Electric—for two more years.

He once wrote about those intervening years, explaining to his mother in a letter:

Despite my putting it off and putting it off, the idea kept returning to me. And every time it came back, it was a little bit stronger. I don't know what could be a better example of the Holy Spirit moving you towards a decision. Eventually, I concluded that a life as a religious would be perfect for me, *the* way for me to live my life and do what I felt I needed to accomplish.<sup>20</sup>

Back at GE, he was increasingly disillusioned, looking for something more meaningful, and the stress in his life began to give him stomach pains. His disillusionment led him to seek out a psychologist, with whom he discussed his situation. He recently explained to me:

In those months, I felt an almost irresistible pull to entering a monastery or doing something more “religious.” And I was also growing more dissatisfied with my job day by day. As the stress mounted at work (which brought on a variety of stress-related illnesses) there was this one oasis of calm, which came through reading books by Thomas Merton and C.S. Lewis. So initially it seemed somewhat escapist. Like a place where I could—well, “retreat” is the word that comes to mind. At the same time, I was seeing a psychologist who was helping me understand the reasons

behind my continuing on in a job that I didn't like. So all these forces were working together: a push away from GE, a pull towards religious life and a deepening understanding of some psychological drives (mainly the desire to "go along and get along" and never disappoint anyone). It was one question that a psychiatrist asked, "What would you do if you could do anything you wanted to do?" that unlocked everything for me. It just exploded my whole world.<sup>21</sup>

When he finally contacted the Jesuit vocations director again, in the spring of 1988, he spoke this time in a tone of urgency, asking to be received right away. Suddenly, he felt ready. The vocations director, following protocol, explained how the application process had passed for the coming fall but that Jim could be considered for the following year.

As any good corporate executive would, Jim persisted. He also prayed. A few weeks later, he was grateful to receive another phone call, two weeks after the urgent one, saying he was invited to make a retreat. The retreat, stretching over eight days at Campion Renewal Center, outside of Boston, was another transformative moment: the first time that he had felt a sense that God was inviting him into a "personal relationship," as Jesuits often say.

Following the retreat, the vocations director drove Jim to a Jesuit Ordination Mass at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, an experience that Jim has said "overwhelmed him."

On August 15, 1988, only a few weeks after completing the long Jesuit application process, he received a phone call telling him that he had been accepted to enter the novitiate. He was learning for the first time how God moves through our desires—an understanding that would deepen in the years to come.

When, in 2018, he talked of “Seven things I wish I’d known at your age” in a commencement address at Loyola University New Orleans, Jim advised the graduates:

Your deepest desires are God’s desires for you. That’s how God calls you. Speaking to you through your desires—what moves you, what attracts you, what you’re interested in, what gets you up in the morning—is God’s way of calling you. So, try not to pay attention to people who say it’s all about money or success or impressing people. I’ve been there and it’s a dead end. The better path is one that encourages you to listen to where God is speaking to you.<sup>22</sup>