



Jesuit Profile

FR. RANDY ROCHE, SJ: AN EXERCISE IN FAITH AND LOVE

By Tracey Primrose

For the last 50 years, Fr. Randy Roche, SJ, has started every day the same way. He spends 10 minutes doing a series of breathing exercises and yoga poses. From the one-legged stork to the falling leaf and the spinal twist, Fr. Roche's well-practiced routine helps keep the remarkably youthful 84-year-old flexible and fit. His yoga practice is essential to his well-being, but these are not the exercises that keep him in balance.

Randall Roche, known to all as Randy, grew up with his five siblings in the St. Francis Wood section of San Francisco. When Randy was 7, his father left the family and started a new life. Although his dad continued to provide for his wife and children, there was sadness and even shame. It was hard to be different, particularly in the late 1940s.

A shy and self-conscious teenager, Randy followed his older brother to St. Ignatius High School. During his sophomore year, one of the young Jesuit scholastics could sense Randy's lack of confidence and asked him to get involved in an after-school paper drive. The Jesuit's care for Randy was validating. So was the kindness of Fr. Richard Spohn, SJ, a beloved science teacher. One day when Randy was making up a lab, Fr. Spohn asked a question that would

Fr. Randy Roche, SJ, demonstrates a yoga stretch in a video for the online retreat "Embodying Peace," produced by the Center for Ignatian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University.



Fr. Randy and his mother on his birthday, December 25, 1968

change the trajectory of a young man's life: "Have you ever thought of being a priest?" More than six decades later, Fr. Randy recalls the exhilaration of that moment. "Bing! It was like an arrow in my heart. I remember going home on the bus thinking, 'Are my feet on the ground?' It was what I really wanted, but I had never admitted it."

As a boy, he had shown tender care for his mother, making crowns of hand-picked flowers from their garden to adorn her statue of the Blessed Mother. As a teenager and with his sister and older brothers out of the house, he was a sometimes rebellious, unhappy kid, "not the model of a loving son." After he became a Jesuit, Fr. Randy came to realize the hurt he experienced because of his absent father and what it meant for his mother to raise six children on her own. Kathryn O'Brien Roche, he says, was "a saint."

He entered the Jesuits' Sacred Heart Novitiate in August of 1955, a few months after his high school graduation. In those days, novices were essentially cloistered and silent, so it was a welcome relief for Randy to get outside to support the novitiate's winemaking operation. Like all novices, he picked grapes. It was sweaty, exhausting work, but he enjoyed it. "I never had a job. I was proud that I was working, and we worked hard."

After six years of study, he was sent back to St. Ignatius High School for the regency period of his Jesuit formation. Still shy and lacking self-confidence, he was assigned to teach geometry to classes of 40 students while simultaneously serving as the head swim coach and the assistant JV football coach. Who cares that he had never played football—at least he could swim. Of those three years, he says, "Some people love high school teaching, and I was like 'get me out of here.'"

He studied theology at the now-shuttered Alma College and, in 1968, was ordained at St. Ignatius Church in San Francisco, just a few blocks from where he had first met the Jesuits in high school. During the liturgy, the new priests would bless family and friends waiting their turn at the Communion rail. Fr. Randy remembers his dad saying, "Son, you're dancing." The young priest, filled with joy and excitement, was a blur of kinetic energy.

A deepening interest in counseling led Fr. Randy to a master's program at San Diego State. He volunteered at the nearby University of San Diego, a Catholic school, where he gave retreats, said Mass and engaged in pastoral counseling. Something clicked with the college kids. "They were not looking for a father figure, they were looking for someone to listen and help them make decisions."



The Roche family in 1969

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Fr. Randy (front row, right) leads a retreat for a group of faculty and staff members at Loyola Marymount University.

In 1971, he became a campus minister at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. At the time, the campus ministry office was housed in a cramped space in the student union building, forcing Fr. Randy to do his pastoral counseling sessions in his room or outside on the lawn. When he took over as the office's director, many supported the construction of a proper office, but there was no funding. Fortunately, though, Fr. Randy's colleague, Sister Agnes Marie Schon, CSJ, was a sister of St. Joseph, and she quickly retrieved a St. Joseph medal from her order's Motherhouse. Although St. Joseph is the patron saint of home and family, many believe that he also dabbles in real estate transactions. Fr. Randy, Sister Agnes Marie and their colleagues buried the medal on the intended site for the new campus ministry office and conducted a prayer service. Almost immediately, the money came through, although they never did find the St. Joseph medal.

Fr. Randy has always loved the Spiritual Exercises. Composed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, the "Exercises" are a dynamic, imaginative process of prayer and meditation that can be done in many forms. St. Ignatius wanted individuals to engage the Exercises with an experienced guide, and for more than 50 years, Fr. Randy has been such a guide. He has shared the Exercises with countless individuals, helping them become more attentive to how God is working in their lives and more responsive to God's call.

For Fr. Randy, the Spiritual Exercises are the perfect way to work on his faith, while yoga is his preferred method for stretching his muscles. A fellow Jesuit introduced him to yoga for the first time in the 1960s, saying, "You need this." The friend took him outside and walked him through a series of poses that culminated with Fr. Randy standing

on his head. Turns out, he did need it. Fr. Randy, recalls, "I became calm, and it quieted my mind, so I could pray."

He stayed at Loyola Marymount University for 10 years and then served in various roles at Jesuit High School in Sacramento, Santa Clara University, the Jesuit novitiate and the Newman Center at the University of Hawaii. He returned to Loyola Marymount University in 2003 as the director of the Center for Ignatian Spirituality, which was founded in 2001 to bring the unique spirituality of the Society of Jesus to LMU's faculty and staff. In addition to coordinating the Center's regular programming, which includes in-person and online retreats for faculty and staff, Fr. Randy is there to guide "anyone interested in growing closer to God" through the Spiritual Exercises. He has directed people from many faith traditions, saying, "They don't have to believe in Jesus. God will do what God will do with any goodwill person who wants to go through this experience."

"The Exercises start at the beginning with healing life's hurts and getting to know Jesus," Fr. Randy says. "To see people come in brokenhearted because they've suffered a loss and then to see how the Exercises give them strength, that's what it is like when you open yourself up to God. I love this."

Early on, a spiritual director told Fr. Randy that "you do not know your own heart." But he added, "If you get to know Jesus, you'll be fine." Fr. Randy will be 85 on Christmas Day. While he is not standing on his head anymore, because of the Spiritual Exercises he has a relationship with Jesus, one he works on every day. ■

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