

JOURNAL OF MY SOUL: FINDING FREEDOM

CHAPTER 2

THE FRANCISCAN MONASTERY IN BREŠKE, TUZLA, BOSNIA

One fateful summer spent in a Franciscan monastery in the village of Breške near Tuzla, would set me on a course for the rest of my life. I don't know how my parents were able to afford to send me to my aunt, but they did. There are those situations in life when you do not remember how things happened, you just remember that they did. I was there, in Breške. I can't imagine that I was on vacation. Perhaps the chores I was given made me useful enough for the priests and nuns to keep me around. I was under the direct care and supervision of my aunt, Sister Kristina, who was probably one of the main nuns there.

That summer was extremely hot. I was given a bed in a corner of the hallway. There was a picture of Pope Pius XII on the wall above my head. I often wondered about that pope before I went to sleep. I felt uneasy to sleep with his picture above me, but I didn't know why. My unease no doubt came from being away from my home, my mom and dad, and my siblings. I was in a foreign environment, in a strange hallway, below the cold and merciless face of that strict religious authority figure, staring down at me as I tried to fall asleep.

Every night before bedtime, I was ordered to pray a rosary. But I did not know how to pray it and so I did not pray.

Back at home, almost every night, my father would lead us all in endless prayer before dinner. Sometimes it took him an awfully long time to finish. We would sit on the dirt floor, staring at the freshly baked corn bread cooling in front of us, as the words "give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses" were endlessly repeated and ringing in our ears. We had to repeat them back. We were very hungry, staring at the pattern of cracks on the surface of the bread. We were not thinking about the Lord's Prayer, or our so-called "trespasses," but rather wishing the prayer would finally end so we could sink our

fingers and our teeth into that hot, steaming, fresh, “daily” cornbread. It was warm, soft, and tasty when freshly baked. We sometimes wondered what we would get to eat with it. My brothers didn’t mind a piece of bacon with it, but since I did not like bacon, I was often worried about what I was going to end up having.

After a few days, the cornbread gradually became as hard as a rock. Still, it was a good bread. It did not have time to spoil because it would be eaten up. Our mother would make it with just corn flour and water. She didn’t even use salt.

We did not throw bread away; food was never thrown away. But we tried to use it all up before it got too hard or moldy. It would end up in animal feed if it got too old or spoiled.

For whatever reason, there was a period when all we ate was cornbread. There was no wheat bread. We kids dreamed of freshly baked, crispy, golden-brown wheat bread, but we had to settle for cornbread for a long time. I don’t know for sure if this was because cornbread was cheaper and easier to make; perhaps our parents just liked cornbread more than wheat bread. Regardless, food was very scarce at the time and having home-baked of any kind was essential.

We were often given watered-down milk or yogurt to soften up our bread. We rarely had much more than that to eat. Milk and cornbread were staples in our household.

My mother would often send me to the store. On the way home, I would buy a piece of wheat bread and eat it. I never told her that I was buying bread, but she probably noticed that the change I gave her was not what it should be. Still, she never said anything.

Prayer for prayer’s sake was another matter. Aunt Kristina explained to me that I was supposed to say ten “Our Father’s” and “Hail Mary’s” or other prayers, but I was not eager to follow her instructions. Reciting one prayer ten times in a row was too much for me. I couldn’t understand why I had to repeat it so many times. It felt like one time should be enough. It was also embarrassing and scary for me to admit that I didn’t

know all the words. I was not interested in learning them either. I did not see any benefit in praying, and it did not occupy my thoughts.

The easiest way out of the situation was for me to claim that I knew the words, and that I would pray on my own before bed. To be honest, I did *try* to pray. I was not totally dismissive and disrespectful of God and prayer. I was not a rebel. I just didn't try as hard as I was told. I felt that what I was doing was sufficient. My aunt would often ask me the next day if I had prayed, and I always said that I had. But, in truth, I was unable to concentrate and stay on task. I could not totally believe in prayer, so I would either just give up or allow my thoughts to wander as I fell asleep.

That summer, I was able to combine some playtime with the daily chores I performed to earn my keep. On Sundays, I had to go to church. I still remember the crowd of sweaty bodies in traditional Bosnian garb, intoning familiar hymns in their harsh voices.

Sundays were also about the big pile of money in the collection basket. It would fill up with a mixture of paper money and coins, which would be counted at the office table by church ushers after mass. The poor people in the congregation were cautious with their offerings and kept paper money for themselves. So the big pile on the table consisted mostly of coins, with paper bank notes sticking out.

One day, a Dominican missionary priest came to the monastery. He was scouting for a Dominican seminary in the town of Bol on the island of Brač (pron. Bratch). It was located off the Dalmatian coast, in what is now Croatia. My aunt, the nun, and the head priest who was the Guardian at the Franciscan monastery, invited me to speak with the visiting missionary. They asked me if I wanted to attend the seminary and go to the school in Bol. I said yes without hesitation. I had no idea what it meant for me, but that decision changed my life. The Franciscan priests were jealous. The Dominicans had come in and asked me if I wanted to go, and I had said yes. The Franciscans acted all surprised that I had not told them I wanted to be a priest. They claimed that, if they had known, they would have arranged for me to enroll in one of the Franciscan

seminaries in Bosnia. They made me feel a little guilty, even though it was not my idea to be a priest in the first place. But I could hardly be held responsible for accepting the invitation. I wanted an experience of living away from home. The whole adventure sounded like fun. I couldn't possibly understand what becoming a priest implied.

I don't think it ever occurred to them that becoming a priest was not something a young boy can decide. They knew what it meant. Why would they want to guilt me into making that kind of life-changing decision? I was just a kid, what did I know? It's like they were taking advantage of my innocence to lure me into commitment I was not ready to make. How could anyone expect a young boy to know what he wanted at such a young age?

I have little recollection of what happened at the Franciscan monastery afterwards. I only remember that when the summer was over, I went home and told my mother about joining the Dominican Seminary in Bol.

When I asked for her approval, she gave it on the spot! Not only did she approve, she revealed to me that she had offered me to God Himself during the time when I was so ill as a little boy. She had bargained with God: If He healed me, I would enter His service. Now, she could make good on her promise. But she had always wanted to offer me to God anyway, regardless of the "bargain" she claimed to have struck. It was a matter of pride for her to offer her child to the priesthood. She felt she was doing something good for God. That was the reason she gave me the name Juro, the same name as her brother, the priest.

My dad had no say in the matter, but he agreed completely. They believed strongly that it would be good for me to be a priest. Because I was just a kid, I hadn't even a thought about entering the priesthood, I just wanted to go to the seminary. Both my parents misunderstood me, maybe even deliberately. They treated my decision seriously. If they noticed any reluctance in me to fully commit, they still hoped that I would join the priesthood in the end. In order not to miss the chance to go, I went along with their decision. I

would deal with any fallout later, when I was older. I wanted to see what it felt like to be in a seminary first. I had my doubts, but I was afraid to tell my mother my true feelings. Had I said I had no plans to become a priest, I would have been denied the experience. After all, they couldn't really afford it. They were only willing to make the necessary sacrifice because I had agreed to enter the priesthood.

I didn't know if my mother had a right to offer my service to the priesthood. I did not question her intentions; I felt obligated to respect her desire for me to devote my life to God. She was so proud of it. My lack of resistance did not mean I agreed with her. Part of me knew that I was too young to decide. I went along with it, but delayed my final decision as long as possible. That's how I was able to enjoy my experience in the seminary for as long as I did.

I was consumed by the idea of going far away from home and experiencing something new. I knew nothing of Bol, but in my mind's eye I imagined the streets of the nearby seaside city of Split awash in rain. Split was the city in Croatia where we would sail to Brač island, where Bol was located. It must have been raining in Teslić at the time, or perhaps it was a sort of premonition, a metaphor for the tears to come, a warning that the choice I was making would scar my heart forever.

Of course, being a child, I had no inkling of what was to come and had no way of anticipating the effect my decision would have on everyone in my orbit and my relationship with them.

None of us knew how deeply it would impact our entire family. My siblings didn't know they wouldn't have enough food to eat or clothes to wear because of all the resources spent on me. My father didn't know that he would continue to be the last person in the household to eat something good and delicious or clothe himself in something nice and not mended or torn, or even have a pair of decent socks on his feet rather than having to wrap them in some rags as he often would in winter. He would continue to be the last person to be recognized as one worth having anything personal, valuable, or substantial. My sister did not know how her

own ambitions would be impacted, nor that she would never graduate from college because of all the family resources spent on me.

My brother Jozo also suffered because he didn't get the parental attention he deserved as the oldest male sibling. He was left to himself, to wander around aimlessly from town to town just being a "rascal." He neglected his education and struggled in school. He lived his life the way he thought he should while desperately seeking some sense of freedom and entertainment. At the same time, in his constant quest to just do what he wanted, he missed out on good opportunities.

Interestingly, my younger brother Anto *did* notice that I was getting the lion's share of my parents' attention and that there was a lot of unfairness in the household. Lots of hope, prayer, and expectation were placed on my shoulders, while nothing was expected of him. I guess it didn't sit well.

As for my parents, well they finally had something to be proud of and could boast about to their neighbors. They talked about it constantly. They probably even thought it would help them with their own redemption and secure their place in heaven. That's just a guess; I cannot verify it.

My grandparents, uncles, and aunts saw it as a continuation of a family tradition, since my mother's brother was already a Franciscan priest.

My decision to go to the seminary also gave my friends from school something new to tease me about, something unpopular in a communist society. It hurt my soul to the core. The young kids from the neighborhood would often yell out, "I would never want to be a priest!" Then they would run inside, so I wouldn't see them.

And my neighbors finally had something to gossip about among themselves. They wondered how in the world my parents could possibly afford to send me to a seminary. "They just want to get rid of him!" they would say.

Many lives around me were affected by my decision. For their part, my parents had never heard of the Dominicans before. They were puzzled that the Dominican priests had snow white robes, unlike the well-known black or brown robes of the Franciscans. They had no idea, and neither did I, that Dominicans considered themselves the best, the smartest, the most educated, the most devoted, the “cream of the crop”, the most faithful, the holiest of all the orders, and the worthiest of God’s mercy. Basically, they were just the best!

Another unexpected consequence was the shame I felt for choosing to go. I didn’t think that anyone outside my family would ever find out that I had decided to enter seminary school. It was not my idea to announce it to the neighborhood. At most I wanted them to think I was just going to the seminary to study. My parents, however, were so proud that one of their children was going to study to become a priest, they spoke about it as if it was *a fait-accomplis*.

I did not want to talk about my “plans” for the priesthood, but I was constantly interrogated about them. I felt obligated to answer in the vaguest of terms, because I thought I should put on a positive exterior and keep my doubts to myself. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents or the rest of my family too soon. I thought there was plenty of time and that I would find out soon enough what I wanted to do with my life. I certainly did not want to jeopardize my chances of going to Bol.

After my mother announced to the world that I was joining the order of Dominicans, there was no turning back. In her eyes, I could no longer change my mind and come home. My request to go to the Dominican Seminary was conveniently understood by my parents as a promise to God to become a priest. They wanted it more than I did.

I stayed positive and pushed forward, keeping my mind on my future experience in Bol. I clenched my teeth, ignored the shame, and took it like a man. But deep down inside, I knew I didn’t want to be a priest and couldn’t imagine what could happen to change my mind.

My heart was no longer in it. Instead, it beat a little faster at the thought that, at some point in the future, I would finally have to be true to myself. The more my extended family pushed the issue, the less interested I was in joining the priesthood. I couldn't tell them yet. I had to wait, have my new experience, and move forward. I just wanted to be in Bol.

The acceptance letter that my parents received from the Dominican seminary included a list of the clothes and supplies I was expected to bring with me. It would cost them a considerable sum. My mother had to embroider the number 81 on all my clothes to ensure that they would find their way back to me from the seminary laundry.