

FaithLife Stories: Sam Osirim

Sam Osirim and his wife, Mary, are long time OMC parishioners. Their adult daughters, Yvonne and Gabrielle, both had their First Communion here and Yvonne was married at OMC. Sam is a retired consultant to the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries. Mary is a professor at Bryn Mawr College and is currently the Provost there.

“I was born in Nigeria and I was the oldest of six kids. My father was Catholic and my mother was Protestant but I don’t think they got married in the church. However, we all went to Catholic schools, which meant we all went to mass on Sundays partly because it was a school requirement.

“I didn’t think too much about my Catholic faith until I went to high school, where I had several Jesuit teachers. One of them, Reverend O’Conor, had great impact on me. He would challenge you without you knowing it was a challenge. Self-esteem was a big part of what he challenged us to develop, and this was also a big part of my dad’s philosophy. Reverend O’Conor would say, ‘I want you to be comfortable with yourself but not arrogant.’

“My father passed away in my second year of secondary school. Because I was the oldest, the family resources went to ‘take care of Sam,’ and my mother made it a priority to support my education. Education was important to both of my parents and all of us did well academically. We were nudged and encouraged, but never really pressured, to excel academically and it worked.

“The Nigerian educational system, then was based on the British system since Nigeria was a former British colony. After secondary school, you were required to attend a two-year post-high school program to obtain an Advanced/A-level diploma in the Arts or Sciences in order to qualify for university admission. For this program, I attended a non-denominational boarding school that was established by the federal government specifically to draw students from all over Nigeria. It was a very selective school and students were chosen based on entrance examination results and direct personal interviews with one or more Principals. Not surprisingly, every student aspired to greater academic achievement, and in fact, 100% of my classmates went on to colleges and universities, mostly in Nigeria, the UK and the U.S.

“While at this boarding school, I continued to practice my Catholic faith serving as president of the Catholic Student Body as well as the Young Christian Society, which was a Catholic youth organization. As part of my leadership responsibilities, I arranged for a Catholic priest to come to the school and say mass on Sundays as well as provide counselling to students.

“After graduating, I went to study economics and psychology at Harvard on a Harvard University scholarship for foreign students. Even as an undergraduate, there was something about the way I had always practiced my faith growing up that being in a different country made no difference to me. Specifically, nothing at Harvard challenged my faith – not any new ideas, classes or people with whom I interacted. That remains part of who I am today. The Church scandals were not obvious to me and not highly publicized then as they are today. However, I still have faith that this and other issues and challenges facing the Church and the flock will be resolved. In my mind, these too shall pass and they have not caused me to consider not going to church anymore, at least for now.

“I have a personal relationship with my God. I talk to my God. I plead with my God. I have conversations with my God. That has always been a part of me. When I was young, the idea of the eucharist as the body and blood of Christ really hit me along with the feeling that we are in a holy place at mass. This is partly because of stories we were told in Catholic grade schools and because some of my close friends in secondary school were Altar Boys.

“My wife, Mary, was a fellow classmate of mine at Harvard but we didn’t start dating until we were both at the London School of Economics after Harvard. She is an important factor in my faith – I believe she is more Catholic than I am! For instance, because of her Catholic upbringing, Mary believes that if you’re very late for mass, you shouldn’t go to communion. I try to convince her that the Church is a different place now, that things have changed, but she claims that’s because I had a more liberal Catholic upbringing. Sometimes I’m successful in convincing her, but most of the time, I just keep the peace.

“Finally, I should add that this has been our second coming to OMC for my family. After moved here from the Boston area, we rented a place in Chestnut Hill and registered as parishioners. A few years, we bought a house in Blue Bell and became members of St. Helena’s parish. Then we moved to Lafayette Hill and decided to come back to OMC. We’ve been to other parishes since moving to the Philadelphia area where we were the only people of color. But at no time at OMC did I see any evidence that people treated us differently. In fact, it’s good to see OMC becoming more diverse, more inclusive and welcoming.”