

# SEEDS – RICHARD ROHR, ofm Founder\*, New Jerusalem

(\*Or as Richard says, “I didn’t found New Jerusalem, it found me.”)



Seeds: 1971-72

## The Birth of New Jerusalem Community (Transcribed from his Sunday, Nov. 7, 2021 remarks)

Richard: My first assignment was Roger Bacon High School where I taught sophomores two subjects, Scriptures and sexuality. It made me so popular that the next year they asked me to take over the TEC program (Teens Encounter Christ), the youth retreats. Whenever you talk on sexuality, you get popular. And so, the first boy’s retreat, men’s retreat now I should say, was scheduled for November 6-8, 1971. We’re right there now, 50 years later, at the Friary on Colerain Avenue. It also happened to have been my Novitiate house. That’s why I call the place my Holy Hill. At any rate, a lot of the high schools, not all of them, had a requirement that you attend a Catholic retreat before you graduate. Now this particular one was mostly boys from Roger Bacon and Moeller. Joe (Metz), you can step in and correct me anytime. You know I’m in early-stage dementia, so (chuckling) if I repeat myself or don’t say it right, make sure Joe is unmuted. Is he?

Joe Metz: I unmuted myself, Richard. No one from Moeller was on that retreat.

Richard: Oh, you just talked about them so much, that’s right?

Joe Metz: I was the first Moeller guy.

Richard: So, it was just Roger Bacon. Oh. Okay. And you could tell they were there under duress. They weren’t too excited about what I was saying. I’m sure it was too much. We went through the first evening and the second day. And on the second evening, Saturday evening, the last night, as it were, They were all sitting on the floor in a circle and I was standing in front of them and I gave a sermon. And as I remember, it was not too extraordinary; on The Prodigal Son. As I neared the end of the sermon, these macho jocks. I think only one is here on the screen today, Pete Dunphy.

Can you show Pete? There he is! Well, you’ve aged a little, Pete (chuckles). So, as I neared the end of my sermon, these homophobic jocks began to put their arms around one another. Some of them were weeping, and no one was more surprised than I. Then soon, the weeping turned into singing. And not just singing, but polyphonic singing, as I remember. And it was quite beautiful. But then when I tried to listen for the words, there were no understandable words. My God. This is what I had always heard in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it was called the gift of tongues. Now I know I didn’t teach ‘em that. I didn’t even have the gift at that point. And they went on and on. And like the bad priest that I was, I broke in and said, “Okay boys, I’m going to go over across the hall and put the pizza in the oven and when you’re done (chuckle). . . I probably said it with a kind of One-ish critique – when you’re done with this emotionalism . . . come on over and we’ll serve the pizza.”

Well, needless to say, they never came. And I went back maybe an hour later and opened the back doors of Holy Family Friary and saw one of the most wonderful and surprising things of my life. Many of these boys still singing, a capella, but in unknown languages. Many were crowded around the high altar, there at Saint Anthony’s. I just fell in the back pew in disbelief. “What is happening? What is happening?” I got sleepy after a while. They just kept going. They seemed to have endless energy. Lo and behold, you know Catholics just don’t raise their hands, but they were even doing that. I didn’t

teach them any of it. So, I went to bed. And went to bed with a little concern. I knew Father Cleatus was going to have the early morning Mass. I said, "Oh my God, if those boys are still there . . . he wasn't known for a lot of social finesse, let me put it that way. Sure enough, he came in early. He with his foot just moved the boys away from the altar and went ahead saying Mass. And they woke up all around him, at least those who were still there.

That night, 50 years ago last night, is called the Birth Moment of New Jerusalem because after that, nothing stopped. It just kept going. Many of you who are on the screen today came in early '72. Joe, you came in December, right?

Joe Metz: Yes.

Richard: And the LaSalle boys came next. I'll stop talking! Let's hand it over to someone else. Forgive my dementia. You gave it to me (chuckles), I'm sure. (And now there's young Joe. He had a ponytail which my mother just loved!)