



(l-r) Father Dixon, Father John, and Father Paul

The Call of a Religious Priest

The Somascan Fathers of Pine Haven speak about their community and work

By GARY M. BOUCHARD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW LOMANNO

Chances are you have never heard of the Somascan Fathers. So quietly have they done their work since coming to New Hampshire from Italy over 50 years ago that few people are aware of the remarkable work that they accomplish, and even fewer people appreciate the charism of their founding saint and his call to heal young people, a call that his followers still carry on today.

The Somascan Fathers take their name from a small village at the foot of the Alps in northern Italy where their founder, Saint Jerome Emiliani, died in 1537 after devoting his life to ministering to needy young people. Saint Jerome Emiliani is the patron saint of orphans and needy youth, and during his lifetime he formed the Company of the Servants of the Poor, which would eventually become the Congregation of the Somascan Fathers.

In the 1950s, when the Somascan Fathers were seeking to minister beyond Latin countries, their headquarters happened to be right across a parking lot from San Anselmo Seminary in Rome, where the Abbot Primate of the Benedictines resides. The Somascans inquired of their Benedictine neighbors whether there were any houses of Benedictines in the United States who might be willing to host them while they established their ministry. Thus it was that the Somascan Fathers came to stay at Saint Anselm Abbey in 1962, and then by September of 1963 opened Pine Haven Boys Center in Allenstown, New Hampshire.

Pine Haven is a residential school that serves boys ages 6-12 who are struggling with behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic problems. In more recent years Pine Haven has increasingly directed its ministry towards the treatment of sexually abused children. The Center is staffed by 40 professionals who provide around the clock care for up to 20 children and adolescents.

The story of the Somascan Fathers and their mission at Pine Haven in New Hampshire offers a chance to appreciate the distinctive life to which men and women religious commit themselves when they take vows in a religious order. In the case of the three priests who serve at Pine Haven, each says he knew when he entered formation to become a Somascan Father that he would spend his life working with children who were in great need of some kind. Father John Vitali came to Allenstown in 1982 from Milan. His superior was looking for someone to



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go to Pine Haven, Father John recalls. “I volunteered to come here. I was the director of a program in Italy and I believe that what happens in the U.S. would take place in Europe about five or ten years later. So, here I can see the future problems and the future answers and help my community back in Italy prepare.”

Father Paul Riva has been at Pine Haven since 1995 and is the Director of the center. His pride in the work is evident as he takes his guest on a tour of the facilities. He and Father John agree that the work they undertake daily, the struggles they see in the children and the challenges they face in helping them to have “a different kind of experience” than the ones that have brought them to Pine Haven can be exhausting. They recall a recent visit from a former student who asked them, “Why are you still working with troubled children after all these years?” “If I did not do it because it was my religious vocation,” Father Paul says, “I don’t think I could do it.”

The men have learned not to expect any immediate results and to know that the best that they can do with

residents, whose typical stay is about eleven months, is to sow seeds of trust. To keep their strength and balance they begin each morning with meditation, prayer, and Mass. At 8:00 the residents are awakened and the work day will not stop until evening, when they again join in prayer. The support they enjoy within their small community is vital to their work. “We have an expression,” says Father John, “We go down one at a time, but never everyone at once.”

Two years ago Father Dixon joined the work at Pine Haven, having come from India where he had entered formation in the Somascan Fathers as a teenager and become accustomed to working with orphaned and drastically poor children on the streets of his native country. But the kind of verbal and physical violence sometimes directed at the teachers and supervisors at Pine Haven was something for which he was quite unprepared. “I found a different population here. It was a shocking experience and I had to come to realize that these are the children who needed help the most. They are in fear and far from being able to build a trusting relationship.”

Younger than his two confreres, Father Dixon emphasizes their guidance and support that has helped him to grow in his work, and like them he acknowledges that without his religious vocation shared with his fellow priests this work would not be possible. As it is, he says with an infectious smile, “I am very happy.”

The Church of the 16th century was facing the upheaval of the Protestant Reformation when Jerome Emiliani began to attend to the orphans and marginalized people of his native Venice. Today the simplicity of his Gospel actions and his determination to bring to the needy the love and Paternity of God still lives far from the streets of Venice and Milan, among a small and quiet Company of the Servants of the Poor in New Hampshire, who face the challenges of their work knowing that they are descendants of the family of faith that their patron founded nearly five centuries ago.