



buddhist scholar and law school chaplain

by Sonya Bice, 1L

Eight years into retirement, Father Richard Sherburne, S.J., is still going to work every day. Sherburne's office these days is the student lounge in the basement of the Law School. His office hours coincide with the busiest times of the day, when the lounge is filled with the chatter of students, the drone of the TV, the clicking of laptop keyboards, and the occasional ding of a microwave.

Dressed in gray slacks, sensible black shoes, and a cardigan, the unassuming Sherburne brings to mind the gentle Mr. Rogers. One might not immediately guess that he is a priest, much less an erudite scholar of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, who has met and corresponded with Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama and traveled widely in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet.

Sherburne is chaplain of the Law School, although he sometimes confides, dryly, that he doesn't know exactly what a law school chaplain does, or how, exactly, a doctorate in Buddhist studies prepares one to do it.

Professor Janine Geske, who sought his appointment while serving as interim Dean of the Law School, had an idea of what she wanted when she decided to revive the longstanding tradition of having a chaplain.

"The Jesuit identity of Marquette and Marquette Law School is an important aspect of our legal education," she says. "I wanted someone who would mix well with students, who was a good listener, somebody who's not dogmatic."

She had not yet met Sherburne and could not have known how accurately she was describing him. But her

experience working with him has only confirmed her opinion that his low-key, Buddhist-influenced, and nondoctrinaire approach makes him the right person for the job.

“He loves being here. There’s an energy in his work here,” Geske says. “I think he really does epitomize the Marquette Law School Ignatian mission.”

Professor Alan Madry agrees. “Besides being available to students, he comes to faculty meetings, to faculty colloquia and workshops, and is a very important part of the faculty reading group,” Madry says. “When Dick first arrived, he made a point of seeking out faculty and inviting each of us to lunch. He’s really become an important part of the law school community.”

Milwaukee born and bred

At an Ignatian retreat for alumni that Geske organizes annually at a Wisconsin retreat center, Sherburne was seated at the table with other attendees when one of the nuns approached the table, looking in vain for someone wearing a clerical collar. When Geske pointed her to Sherburne, dressed in his St. Robert’s sweatshirt, the nun asked whether she should prepare the chapel for Mass.

“He said, ‘I prefer giving coffee table Masses,’” Geske relates. “And so that’s what we did. Our Mass was over a coffee table in the lounge. It’s so typical of him.”

Born and raised in Shorewood by devoutly Roman Catholic parents, Sherburne attended parochial schools all his life, graduating from Marquette University High School in 1944. (The class recently gathered for its 60th high school reunion.)

He went to sign up for the Marines but was turned away because he had two brothers already serving. He looked into joining the Canadian forces and almost pulled it off—until he tried to obtain the requisite parental permission. It was only then that he considered the priesthood.

“I wanted to get into some kind of uniform,” he says, half-joking about his reasons for joining the Jesuits. “At 17, what do you know?”

His decision was influenced by his admiration of the young seminarians who had taught him Latin and Greek at Marquette High. And there was his devout French-Canadian mother, who, when it came to her youngest son, was understandably more enthusiastic about a career in the church than a career in the military.

“I’m sure a lot of it had to do with my mother, who I knew would be delighted,” he laughs. “She was convinced I’d be pope someday.”

So he went to St. Louis University to begin his studies in the classics, philosophy, and theology.

Back to Milwaukee, and then beyond

It was a case of chicken pox that kept Sherburne from shipping out to the Caribbean in 1950 to teach the classics in the Jesuit schools in British Honduras (now known as Belize). He had completed his philosophy studies and was slated to travel south with a group.

“I was left sitting behind in a tub of epsom salts and someone else took my place,” he recalls. “I was very disappointed.”

So instead of the Caribbean, his destination was slightly less exotic locales: rural Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

After completing bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the classics, and after his theology studies and ordination at Gesu Parish in 1956, Sherburne wound up his Jesuit training in Decatur, Illinois. Then he learned he would be moved again.

“To my great surprise, I was assigned to Marquette,” he says, noting that priests were usually placed far from their hometowns. “That sort of thing did not happen in those days.”

At Marquette, Sherburne taught classics, advised foreign students, and even served a three-year stint as dean of students. His work during that time with foreign students, many of them educated at Jesuit schools abroad, sparked an interest in Asian culture and religions. *The Early Jesuit Travelers in Central Asia*, a book given to him by Father George Ganss, fanned the flames.

So in 1968 he left Marquette to embark on what would be a distinguished thirty-year career in Asian and Buddhist studies. “And that,” he says, “was a whole new life.”

He spent a year with Canadian Jesuits in Darjeeling, India, an experience he now recalls as the happiest of his Jesuit life. He earned a second master’s degree and a doctorate at the University of Washington, studying twice weekly with Buddhist monks. For two decades, he taught in the religious studies department at Seattle University, retiring in 1996.

Sherburne’s published works range from Latin teaching texts to biographies of Jesuits in seventeenth-century Tibet. He has also produced a series of teaching videos on Asian religions.

The culmination of his scholarly work is a 300-page annotated translation of a Tibetan holy text by Atisha, an eleventh-century teacher revered by Tibetan Buddhists. The Dalai Lama, with whom Sherburne has met in the United States and in India, wrote in the foreword, “The translation of the text into English here by the noted Christian scholar Richard Sherburne, S.J., illustrates cooperation between religions that enhances mutual understanding and draws the world together in recognition of the common goal of bettering humankind.”

Back to Milwaukee, again

Following his retirement in 1996, Sherburne reluctantly left the Northwest, where, on Vancouver Island, he had for years found solitude in a cabin he had built by hand. He returned to Milwaukee yet again to be near his family. (One sister joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame and taught English at Mount Mary College; other siblings went into nursing, teaching, architecture, and engineering.)

Like many newly retired people, he looked forward to travel. Unlike most, Sherburne immediately set out on a punishing six-week journey through Mongolia, China, Tibet, Cambodia, and Java. Travel had been a passion since his first trip abroad in 1961, when he spent a summer at the American Academy in Rome as a Fulbright scholar. He has spent time in India, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan on several occasions, most recently in 2000.

Since Sherburne became the Law School’s chaplain in 2002, weekdays find him at Sensenbrenner Hall, where he spends several hours a day among the students, usually around the noon break and again before the evening classes.

His day begins early. He typically rises at 4 a.m. and spends a couple of hours e-mailing family, colleagues, and friends in far-flung places: Cameroon, Singapore, Calcutta. Around 6 a.m., wearing a gray St. Robert’s sweatshirt, he heads out for a meditative walk, sipping a cup of black coffee and smoking a cigarette. As he walks across the quiet campus, he greets the other early risers—the grounds staff, security guards, and runners. His morning stroll is timed to end when the *New York Times* lands on the steps of the Jesuit Residence. He reads the *Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* before breakfast.

Sherburne says that he prefers reading newspapers to watch-

ing television news. This is in the interest, he suggests, of “avoiding spontaneous combustion”; a fierce pacifism and sense of outrage in the face of social injustice have intensified as he has gotten older. Sherburne suggests that it is unclear whether that is because there is more injustice or because he just has less patience.

Nancy Gettelman has been a friend of Sherburne’s since they worked together at Marquette in the 1960s. She and her late husband, Tom, and their daughter traveled in Asia with Sherburne on several occasions. She and Sherburne collaborated on a five-volume video series, one of which, “Bhutan: Himalayan Cultural Diary,” won a bronze Telly in 1994 in the national video and film production competition. She speaks warmly of Sherburne, who she says “would have made a good psychiatrist.”

“He’s very kind and sensitive, not because you’re supposed to be as a priest, but because that’s who he is,” she says.

She pauses.

“At the same time, he also has very strong opinions, so if he doesn’t like something, he’s not *necessarily* sensitive.”

A reminder of the Jesuit ethic

Whether talking with students in the lounge, meeting alumni at social functions, or having lunch with faculty members, Sherburne sees the chaplain’s presence as a visible reminder of the Jesuit ethic of the school.

“I do feel it’s worthwhile just being there,” he says. “They’re already on the right track; they have a sense of public service. I couldn’t improve on that. People who are motivated from a sense of public service, whatever religious tradition they come from, that is encouraged here.”

And others agree.

“Dick’s presence at the Law School represents what to me is the great and noble Jesuit spirit and the Jesuit intellectual tradition,” Madry says. “You’re not going to find a more intellectually vital, dynamic, interested, and interesting person than Dick.

“That’s one of the most wonderful things he contributes here—just having someone among us with his spiritual and intellectual stature and having him available to faculty and students. It enriches the school for all of us.” •