

# Jesuit, credited with laity's rise, heralds God's love, justice

By [Ed Langlois](#)

'It gets better all the time,' he says. 'I think we grow into our identity if we're faithful.'

This son of a Montana smeltermen has significantly influenced consecrated life and the church as a whole. A pioneer in collaboration between religious and laity, he also advanced social justice as a focus for Catholics in the 1970s and '80s. In the 1990s, he became a missionary in Africa, highlighting the plight of Sudanese refugees long before the media took notice.

To many he's a prophet, to some a gadfly. Much of his energy has come from an ability to live in the moment, not too anxious about the past, not too fearful of the future. It helps him discern God's will. So for now, he is content to serve as pastor of a small parish on the Pacific - St. Mary by the Sea.

'I like the people and they like me alright,' says the 79-year-old pastor, brewing tea for a guest. 'I feel my purpose as a priest is to communicate Jesus' love. We hallow the name of God by loving the life we live. It's not about rules and regulations. It's about finding joy.'

Born in 1929 in Anaconda, Mont. - copper country and land of the Irish immigrant - his father and English-born mother were not pious. John Morris organized laborers and criticized the church for failing to do

more for working men. Violet Morris, a convert from Anglicanism, did not hope for a priest son.

Young Jack, for his part, fell deeply in love with a girl. At the same time, after college, he yearned for adventure and felt a spiritual nudge.

'I thought, if God can create a woman, he must be worth getting to know,' Father Morris says. 'If you like the product, get to know the manufacturer.'

He entered the Jesuit novitiate in Sheridan at age 22, despite his father's contention that he'd be wasting his life. He admired the 'horizons' of the large intellectual order and saw himself following the bold missionary lead of men like St. Francis Xavier.

He took on religious life scrupulously those first years, getting an ulcer and chronic headaches for his excessive zeal. One day he realized that God did not want him to be a champion rule follower, but to be true to what he was created to be. That relaxed him.

During his formation - generally about 10 years for Jesuits - he was assigned to teach for several terms at Copper Valley School for native tribes, located between Anchorage and Fairbanks. He noticed that graduates of Jesuit schools like Gonzaga University and other Catholic institutions had begun heading to Alaska to teach on the frontier.

He saw the young people not only as useful, but as answering the universal call of the laity. This was the late 1950s; Vatican II was still a good five years off.

'There was something happening in the church,' he explains.

The local bishop asked the young seminarian to give shape to the volunteer phenomenon. There was no budget, and not much of a plan at first.

He named it the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and it broke ground in lay ecclesial ministry. The organization's four values emerged: social justice, community, simple living and prayer.

'I was running this thing out of my back pocket,' he says. He began visiting Catholic colleges and Newman Centers in the Northwest, handing out brochures, showing slides and using his Irish wit to persuade recruits. It worked.

Placements soon spread beyond Alaska. The Jesuit Native American mission at Omak, Wash., had 31 Jesuit Volunteers one year.

By some counts, there are now more than 200 Catholic-based volunteer programs, most associated with a religious community. It all got running with the Jesuit Volunteers.

'It is the age of the laity,' Father Morris says. 'We are realizing together that the key sacrament is not the ordination of men to the

priesthood, but our baptism. We are all ordained to bring about the kingdom of God.'

Father Morris simultaneously led a move to start ordaining native Alaskan men as deacons, telling fellow Jesuits that they needed to 'hand the church over.'

By the 1970s, he held posts leading Jesuit social ministries and was serving at parishes in Seattle. With other clergy, he protested nuclear buildup and was twice arrested at a Puget Sound submarine base.

His social justice masterpiece came out of the blue. In the early 1980s, a period with its own high tensions in the Middle East, the idea simply came to him -Walk to Bethlehem for peace. And he did it, along with two other priests, a Jesuit brother and a dozen laypeople.

For more than 7,000 miles across the United States and Europe, the band of peacemakers spoke out in churches and campgrounds - places where they also slept and received gushes of hospitality.

The walkers started in Seattle on Good Friday 1982, trekked on average 17 miles per day, and made it to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, 1983. All who started finished. The media, including the New York Times, paid heed to the group and its amiable priest-leader.

In the mid 1980s, after an attempt to start a peace farm in western Washington failed, Father Morris did parish and retreat work. He even studied under the Mennonites, whose commitment to non-violence he admired.

Then he turned 65. Reading Scripture, he kept running across the passage - 'Jesus emptied himself.' At the age at which many sit back, he pursued a childhood dream to serve as a missionary in Africa.

He was given a post at a refugee camp in northern Uganda. He served Sudanese fleeing their war-stricken homeland and led retreats in the Ugandan capital.

'The suffering is grinding, but people have joy in their hearts,' he recalls. 'They would say that God loves them and I would ask how they know. They would all tell me, 'Because I'm alive.'"

Many Oregon Catholics sent support. For example, pancake breakfasts at St. Joseph Church in Cloverdale raised funds, as did cinnamon roll sales at St. Francis in Portland.

'I've been impressed at how Father Jack is so full of faith,' the Cloverdale pastor, Jesuit Father Bill Hausmann, told the Sentinel in 1999. 'He sees God in the people.'

Hit hard by malaria, Father Morris returned to the United States, where he wrote and promoted Jesuit vocations. In 2003, he accepted the job at St. Mary by the Sea.

He cooks and cleans for himself, but accepts an occasional haircut from a parishioner. Each day, he reads from a book of saints and heroes of peace and justice.

In liturgy, he preaches God's love and leaves ample moments of silence. In a recent homily, he told worshipers that being holy means doing good and 'from inside you, creating beauty.'

In the church bulletin, he makes spiritual points in a serial dramatic dialogue featuring talking seabirds.

He also ruffles a few feathers.

That's what a prophet should do, says JoAnn Critelli, longtime secretary at Star of the Sea. 'Father Jack has a wonderful and colorful way of delivering his message that God loves us, that we are connected with all of creation, that we are not in charge, and all is well,' Critelli says.

Lately, the priest was glad to see the Vatican denounce the Iraq war, but disheartened that U.S. church leaders did not take up the call.

Jeanne Haster, executive director of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, calls Father Morris 'a mentor for all of us' who 'carries a lot of the spirit of the Corps.'

Each year, about 300 of the volunteers serve in the United States and abroad. A 50th anniversary celebration for the JVC is set for June 24 at St. Ignatius Parish in Portland.

'Jack has always dreamed big and then he finds a way to make it happen,' says Charlene Collora, who has known the priest for 40

years. 'What is most striking is that his faith just permeates his being. He is so authentic. What you see is what you get.'

Collora, pastoral coordinator of Our Lady of Mount Virgin Parish in south Seattle, says Father Morris helped her stay in the church when most of her friends were leaving.

In a way that combines comfort and challenge, he helped her see that 'faith is going out and doing good.' She has served in the church ever since.

Now, in her ministry, Collora often asks herself, 'What would Jack do?'