

VERBUM SPEI AND DIOCESE OF BOISE: A PERFECT FIT

By Gene Fadness
Editor

Fraternity Verbum Spei (Word of Hope) started in Mexico in 2012 and established a second house in 2016 in Luxembourg. Later, a third house was formed in Cuba after Pope John Paul II's visit to the island nation. Now, the Order has a fourth house in Boise: its first house in North America and first in an English-speaking country.

The five brothers who have come here, three of whom are also priests, will be living for the time being in the Treinen House behind the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in downtown Boise.

Speaking to the *Idaho Catholic Register* about a week after their arrival, Father Dominic Faure, the prior, said he and the brothers are impressed with the warmth and the enthusiasm in which they have been received. "It is nice to be welcomed into a place that is so perfectly ready to receive us."

When Father Dominic, as he prefers to be called, says the Diocese of Boise is "perfectly ready to receive us," he was choosing his words deliberately to emphasize the confluence of events that brought them here and the perfect fit between what the brothers will be doing and the needs of the Diocese.

Father Dominic, one of about 30 brothers who belong to Verbum Spei, led a parish mission in Ontario, Ore., last year. At the end of his stay, Roger and Gayle Batt, members of St. Bernard Parish in Jordan Valley, Ore., gave Father Dominic a ride to the Boise airport. The priest casually mentioned that Verbum Spei was looking to possibly establish a house of formation in an English-speaking country.

It didn't take long for Gayle Batt to call Christian Welp, director of special projects for the Diocese of Boise, to inquire: Why not Idaho?

Welp contacted Father Dominic, who later came to Boise and met with Welp for breakfast. At that meeting, Welp asked Father Dominic to define the charism – the gifts, mission and specialties – of the order. Father Dominic cited three: spiritual direction for priests, ministry to young people, and leading retreats. From that breakfast meeting, Welp and Father Dominic went directly to meet with Bishop Peter Christensen. Soon after that meeting started, Father Dominic asked Bishop Peter what was needed most in the Diocese. To which Bishop Peter replied: spiritual direction for priests, ministry to young people and people to lead retreats.

The die was cast.

After those initial meetings with Father Dominic, Bishop Peter and Welp wanted to know more about Verbum Spei. They traveled to Saltillo, Mexico, where the brothers operate three missions in the poorest districts on the outskirts of town: a soup kitchen, a center for children and a chapel for Mass and retreats.

Less than 24 hours before the start of the annual Chrism Mass, Father Dominic, with four brothers in tow, arrived in Boise. Their approximate 35 hours of travel did not dissuade them from attending the Chrism Mass where they were introduced by Bishop Peter: Father Dominic from France, Father Ewald Johiannes from the Netherlands, Father Juan Elias from Mexico, Brother Jonathan Kilkelly from New Zealand, and Brother Isaiah Viotte from France.

Father Dominic leads retreats and parish missions all over the world, including 15 years in India. While there, an Albanian nun named Mother Teresa heard Father Dominic, then a deacon, preach. She was so impressed that Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa of Calcutta, asked Father Dominic to oversee the spiritual formation of the new contemplative order of her sisters, and, eventually, all the Missionaries of Charity Sisters.

Father Dominic was raised in Paris, attending Catholic schools, including his pre-college years at Jesuit secondary school. He completed his undergraduate studies at a university in France and received a master's degree in chemical engineering from Purdue University in 1978. He spent the next five years helping to build chemical plants in Africa before he returned to France as part of that country's compulsory military draft. He was sent to Japan for two years. After military service, he spent five more years as a chemical engineer in Africa before returning to France to get his master's in business administration and work for Citibank.



Enjoying a moment following the Chrism Mass are, from left, Father Ewald Johannes, Father Juan Elias, Bishop Peter Christensen, Father Dominic Faure, Father Mariusz Majewski, Brother Isaiah Viotte and Brother Jonathan Kilkelly. (Courtesy photo/Christian Welp)

"Then I worked for God."

Father Dominic's call to the religious life came later in life than most, but there was no mistaking the call for him. "It was a clear sense from God; there was no doubt." (Plus, he joked, "I was tired of traveling, but that didn't work out so well." His call to the religious life has only intensified his travel schedule.)

He entered seminary in 1982 with the Brothers of St. John, a French congregation founded in 1975. His first assignment as a priest was to Laredo, Texas. He was then sent to establish new priories for the Brothers of St. John in the Philippines and then, near Peoria, Illinois.

His next assignment was to southwest India, where he served for 15 years in a predominantly Hindu area. While in India, he conducted retreats, including to Saint Teresa of Calcutta's Missionaries of Charity. He also was a chaplain at a university there, and ministered to HIV patients.

Mother Teresa attended his first retreat. Father Dominic recalls Saint Teresa as "extremely demanding," but with a good sense of humor. "She was strong and meek at the same time," he said. "She was very strict, but a beautiful soul, obviously. Her sisters loved her."

Father Dominic traveled back and forth from India -- working for the Sisters of Charity -- to New Zealand, where he taught theology and philosophy to students at Catholic Discipleship College. The college is for Catholic students who want to spend their "gap" year – the year between secondary school and university – to immerse themselves in the Catholic faith. The nine-month experience includes personal studies, pilgrimages and retreats.

It was during this time that Father Dominic joined Verbum Spei. He was attracted to Verbum Spei because its communities were more autonomous and less centralized than many orders and more at the service of the local church. For example, when a brother becomes part of Verbum Spei he is often, at some point, sent back to his native country in order to assist the local church.

The other brothers who are part of the Boise house include:

Father Ewald Johannes. A native of the Netherlands, Father Ewald joined the Emmanuel Community as a young man. The Emmanuel Community started in the mid-1970s as a prayer group affiliated with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. His life in that community led to his decision to become a religious order priest. "I needed the formation of the Emmanuel Community to make it (the call) concrete," he said. He started seminary by studying philosophy in Belgium and then theology in the diocese in Holland in which he was ordained. Ordained in 2007, he stayed in Holland for 10 years and then spent one year with an Emmanuel Community parish in Brussels. In 2016, he joined Verbum Spei.

"The fraternal life with Verbum Spei is more

intense than what I had lived," he said. He loves the Order's "search for the truth and its philosophy of life." His younger sister is also a religious order Sister, now in Italy, but is anticipating returning to Africa where she has been serving the Church.

Father Juan Elias. Father Dominic calls Father Juan Elias, ordained last July, Verbum Spei's "baby priest." Father Juan Elias attended public schools in Saltillo, Mexico, where Verbum Spei has a presence. But it was the Missionaries of the Servants of the Word who had a large impact on Father Juan Elias' life.

When he wasn't working in a factory, Father Juan Elias volunteered to work with the missionaries in parishes and missions. "When I was with the missionaries, I felt very close to God and decided I wanted to serve." Father Juan Elias' first year of seminary was in Monterey, Mexico, and then with the Brothers of St. John in France for the next seven years. He was ordained in Saltillo and, in addition to his native tongue, speaks fluent French.

Brother Isaiah Viotte. Born in France, Brother Isaiah studied business in France and then at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles where he participated in a one-year MBA exchange program. He did not complete his MBA, choosing instead a career in photography, which took him to New York City where for five years he was a still-life photographer.

"I became a photographer, looking for the light," he said, and discovered a light of a different sort while volunteering in his spare time with the Missionaries for Charity. That volunteer work fostered his vocation. He joined the Brothers of St. John in 1995 and was first sent to Laredo, Texas; then, Peoria, Illinois; then, Monterey, Mexico; and, finally, Saltillo, where he joined Verbum Spei in 2013.

His ongoing "search for light" became a different art form after he joined a religious order. He now creates stained glass windows. "It is now sacred art, a purification of what was secular art to now something that adorns the Lord's house."

Brother Jonathan Kilkelly. Joining Verbum Spei at the end of 2016, Brother Jonathan is the order's newest member in Boise. He was raised in Rotorua, in the center of New Zealand's north island. He attended Catholic primary school and was home schooled during his high school years. He spent his gap year at Catholic Discipleship College where he met Father Dominic. After completing his studies at CDC, he worked for six months and then went to World Youth Day in Poland in 2016. By the end of that year, he had joined Verbum Spei. He eventually will go to Saltillo, Mexico, where he will begin seminary.

The brothers will spend their initial weeks in Boise helping at the Cathedral and with the students at the Catholic Student Center at Boise State and at Bishop Kelly High School. "From there, providence will lead," Father Dominic said.