

The Best Priest I Ever Knew

By Austin Ruse



I may be something a bit rare in Catholic circles, both a convert and a revert. Between my conversion in 1985 and my reversion in 1993, I lived the life of a non-practicing orthodox Catholic. There really is such a thing; someone who for various reasons is not practicing but who does not question any aspects of the faith. You could say that in 1985 I wanted to be in the house but it was not until 1993 that I decided to clean up my room.

On a spring day in 1993, I decided now was the time. I went to confession and became a daily communicant. And I made two phone calls; one to Opus Dei, the other to Father John Perricone, a young priest of New Jersey then living and preaching in New York City.

I joke with my brothers in Opus Dei that I am still waiting for that call to be returned. Father Perricone responded almost immediately and I went into what was and remains the best course of spiritual direction I have ever encountered.

Father Perricone lived in a most remarkable place, a bee-hive of orthodoxy at St. Agnes Church near Grand Central Station, a commuter parish run under the benevolent hand of a man who should have been but never was Cardinal Archbishop of New York, Monsignor Eugene V. Clark.

In that house lived sometimes up to ten priests, each of whom were refugees in the spiritual flotsam of those days, each of whom could have been a pastoral jewel in any diocese.

There was Monsignor Florence Cohalan, then wheel-chair bound, nearly blind, read to by others, who knew more about Church history than anyone around. He was the resident historian for the archdiocese.

There was Father George Rutler, still fairly new to the Church, turning out books and sermons that could make your head spin.

Father William Shelly who used to run the actor's church, St. Malachy's, near Broadway, who knew Lucille Ball and others who came to him for Mass and confession. He used to hear confessions at 3 a.m. so the late-night theater crowd could attend the 4 a.m. Mass.

He was a man who gave everything away. If you knocked on his door at the rectory, he might open the door in a torn undershirt, behind him not much more furniture than a folding card table and a chair. He used to send me checks to help in my UN work, checks with funny amounts. I'd get notes like this: "Here's \$593.75. I just cashed a CD in and thought you could use it."

There was Father William Farrelly, a Holy Ghost Father who lived and ministered in Nigeria and Gambia for more than 15 years, often traveling by canoe to see his people. For years he was secretary to Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, before Lefebvre got cross-wise with the Vatican, something Father Farrelly always lamented.

There was Monsignor Clark himself, longtime friend of William F. Buckley. With Buckley and Neil McCaffrey, founder of the Conservative Book Club and much else, they formed a mighty triumvirate of conservatism and Catholicism in the heart of New York City. Clark served as secretary to two New York archbishops; created the office of communications in order to fight Monty Python's sacrilegious *Life of Brian*; and was repeatedly denied a bishop's hat because of his orthodoxy.

But it was John Perricone I fell in with and I have never known a better priest. Upon meeting me in that Spring of 1993, he put me on a spiritual regimen like I had never known or even heard about; morning offering, daily mass, daily rosary, morning prayer, angelus at noon and six, afternoon prayer, spiritual reading, examination of conscience at noon and bedtime, aspirations throughout the day, and mortifications, plenty of really good mortifications.

In direction, he bore in, gently pushed, gently cajoled, gently questioned. More than anything, he gave me things to do, sins to work on, virtues to develop. And he kept track, too.

He was a remarkable preacher, holding us spell-bound with eloquent discourses on Church history, the Gospels, events of the day. They say his preaching style, always dramatic, was influenced by Bishop Sheen, whom he held in the highest regard, and who preached from the same pulpit at St. Agnes.

He formed a study circle where each week we would do close order drills on the Baltimore Catechism and he taught us huge portions of the Summa Theologica. He taught our group, numbering at one time more than 20, aspects of the faith such as we had never been taught before. At the end of each evening class, we would stand and sing a lusty Salve Regina.

On the liturgy, there was no one better. The Tridentine Mass on Sunday mornings at St. Agnes was simply breathtaking. With Father's singing and preaching and the schola backing him up, you really thought this was a taste of Heaven. He was up for any "old" thing related to the liturgy. Once I spotted a boat-like candle in his rooms. He said it was a "bugia candle" used in the old Mass at certain times but no longer. I said, "Let's use it" and we did for years.

We formed a group called, with tongue firmly in cheek, the Torquemada Project, that would attend the lectures of Church progressives and make sure he or she only got tough questions from well-prepared orthodox Catholics.

Though very conservative in politics, he never followed those in traditionalist circles who came to hate this country, who decided that our founding was and remains antithetical to Catholicism.

Each year Father hosted a colloquium on aspects of the faith capped off with a traditional Latin Mass. One year, he planned one for St. Patrick's Cathedral. Walking up Park Avenue one day, I asked him if anyone was thinking about sending out press releases. As he was wont to do, he said, "Why don't you do that, Austin." And so I did and so my life changed.

My presses releases put that Mass on the front page of the New York Times two days in a row and guaranteed that the Mass, held on Mother's Day, became the occasion for what may be the largest crowd ever at the cathedral. More than 4,000 came. It was announced on the radio news and people dropped what they were doing and drove all night to get there. More than a dozen TV crews set up inside the cathedral that day.

Roger McCaffrey asked Father Perricone who handled PR for the event and so Roger, Neil McCaffrey's son, asked me to write for one of his magazines, the first time I ever got paid for the work I do now.

It was because of Father Perricone that I do this work. It is probably because of him that you are reading me today.

And it was Father who invited a young Canadian woman to breakfast one day after Mass. She told us she was in town looking to hire someone to run a new pro-life group at the UN. When she said that I nearly passed out. I had left the big time magazine business and was volunteering my time with Father Perricone, waiting and hoping for a way to combine my two great loves, my faith and my politics. I heard bells ringing and told her so. A few weeks later I was doing the job that I still do 18 years later.

Sadly, Monsignor Clark was moved to be Rector of St. Patrick's Cathedral. His replacement busted up the amazing house of priests on East 43rd Street in New York City. I drifted away from the Latin Mass movement and came to join Opus Dei, where I found that the daily norms of piety Father Perricone had given me were identical to those of St. Josemaria, someone Father admired deeply.

Father Perricone was called back to New Jersey where he works on a smaller stage than he had in New York City and a smaller one than he deserves.

I have no doubt, however, that he is peering into the souls of those who come to see him and they too, like me, have come to know him as the best priest they ever knew.



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