

Excerpts from “Foibles of Father Joe”**by Connell J. Maguire****©2008 Chi Chi Press****A Winning Ticket**

Shortly after ordination, I was assigned to St. Mary of the Eternal parish in North Philadelphia. The church was built to serve Italian Catholics living between Erie Avenue and Girard Avenue, from Broad Street to the Schuylkill River, who wished to belong where their language and culture held sway. My interest in the Italian language occasioned my being stationed there.

The Italian enclave of 1,800 families was like a supersized family. Many were related and many more were paisans, originating in the same town in sunny Italy.

At that time there was an illegal numbers lottery all over Philadelphia. Prevention of the activity was very slack. You could see the numbers salesman making his rounds like the mailman or milkman. Our neighborhood was no exception.

I had a hard time becoming accustomed to the prevalent use of nicknames in the parish. One man was called Ape. His last name was Petrone. Just now, I realize I never did learn his proper name. He was a mountain of a man with the heart of a lamb and handsome. How was I to call and say, “May I speak to Ape, please?” Then I saw that he had emblazoned APE in large letters on his jacket and I felt at ease. Nicknames were not resented. A set of twins was known as the Weasel brothers, due to their wearing of thick-lensed glasses. One of them plays a part in the story I am about to tell.

An ex-boxer, Billy Trignani, known as Billy Day, was a volunteer in the parish, and he and I were good friends. He had heart trouble and died young. I, of course, celebrated his funeral Mass, at that time in Latin. I remember chuckling within as I saw many of his buddies sitting in the back of the church, near the door. It seemed as though they feared the church would close its jaws on them, and they were prepared to escape.

After Mass, when I went upstairs to our living quarters, the housekeeper asked me, “What number do you say in Church?”

“Number?” I asked.

“Yes, one of the Weasel brothers heard you say, I think it was something like 220.”

It hit me. He heard, “Ed cum spiritu tuo,” “and with your spirit.” His translation

differed. Not only did he play the number, he won.

Shortly after, I passed 21st and Toronto where there were always a few of the local lads hanging out. A Weasel brother was there and told me with enthusiasm about the number heard at Billy Day's funeral. I said, "You see? If you went to church, you would be lucky."

Some thirty years later I met the winner at a parish reunion. He was now a regular churchgoer. However, it would be too much of a stretch to say this was a case of the Lord writing straight with crooked lives.

The Kindly Hulk

The Navy Retraining Command in Norfolk had the mission of just that, retraining and restoring to duty men who had been court-martialed and were serving sentences. All had been reduced to the rank of a new recruit, even from as high as Major in the Marines.

A brawny Marine Corps Captain Deane ran the Reception phase of eight weeks, during which time they were segregated from the other prisoners. He explained to me that the attitudes developed in those weeks tended to perdure and have a positive effect. It was evident that he enjoyed his work and the good it did.

He was a Mustang, an officer who was promoted upward from an enlisted status and commissioned. He told me of a time when he was a Sergeant and had escorted a prisoner to confinement in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. En route he had to check in in Boston. There a Navy lieutenant gave him totally unjustified criticism and ordered him to do many unnecessary tasks. He was just using his authority to be mean to Sergeant Deane.

Time passed and the Sergeant, as mentioned, was commissioned and assigned to the Retraining Command. One day a prisoner appeared before him, reduced to Seaman Recruit. It was the Lieutenant, now a court-martialed prisoner. The Lieutenant knew very well that he had been abusive in Boston.

However, the bulky captain said, "This should be a lesson to you. You never know who you are treating mean. However, I am not going to treat you any differently (he said 'different') from any other prisoner." The Captain told me that he was instrumental in saving the man from a dishonorable discharge and sending him back to duty as a Second Class Petty Officer, which enabled him to earn a living for himself and his family.

The captain was not just a big man in body.

Father Gendron Needed Help

The Navy program of Character Education required us to give frequent lectures on ethical issues. We discussed the elements of a good marriage, alcohol and related problems, inter-personal relations and even religious influences. God is free in the service to enter the public forum, more so than in civilian life.

Lectures were included in the Navy and Marine training calendar, so there was no problem in having an audience. When classrooms were not available, there was always the theater, empty during the working day.

Father Tony Gendron was scheduled to give a lecture to the Marines. A Sergeant marched them in and had them sit up front in the middle aisle. He withdrew to the side. After all, he was not there to be trained by any of Chaplain Gendron's words of wisdom. He was, in this case, part of the training staff, a role, you will see, he took seriously.

After the lecture, Father Gendron indicated the troops were now in the Sergeant's charge, and the Sergeant moved in front of them. As Tony walked down the long aisle, he heard the Sergeant proclaim loudly, "You men heard the little priest. And what he told you is the truth. If you don't give a shit about God, God is not going to give a shit about you."

Patron Saint of the Loyal Opposition

While stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, at the Retraining Command, every fourth Sunday I headed home to Philadelphia and returned Monday night. I shudder to think of so much driving for a short visit, but I was young then. I celebrated a 7 a.m. Mass at the Retraining Command (a radio host called it the Restraining Command, a function it did fulfill). Then I had a Mass at the Benmorell Naval housing area at 9 a.m. In those days we could not have food or liquids before Mass, so I had breakfast on the ferry that crossed Chesapeake Bay in an hour and a half. There is a wonder of the world bridge and tunnel structure there now. From the ferry it was about a five-hour drive to Philadelphia. After dinner at home and visiting siblings

and their families, I drove back to Norfolk Monday evening. As I said, I was young.

My brother Danny was studying for the priesthood in Rome then. In the summer of 1955 my parents took a trip to Ireland and met Danny in County Donegal. I hitchhiked over on Navy planes to join them. Danny was scheduled to be ordained in December 1956.

On one of my visits home, early in 1956, I asked my Mother if they were going to Rome for Danny's ordination.

"Oh no. Where would we get the money?"

I answered with a chuckle. "You didn't have money before and you went to Ireland."

In a quick switch my Mother rejoined in Irish construction, "Talk to Dad, you." We hadn't noticed that Dad was within earshot. Over my head, as if I were not present, he stated firmly to Mam, "You had your trip. What do you want me to do? Sell the house? Then where would we be?"

Do you remember how, in a major war, communiqués were phrased by losing armies? "Our troops fought bravely and inflicted tremendous casualties on the enemy." And then adding that this took place at a town miles and miles back from where they were the day before. This has a bearing on our story.

Just one month after Dad's undeniably sensible outburst, I visited home again. The trip to Rome was so definite now that one would find it hard to believe it had ever been debatable. One thing was not definite. It would be nice to stop in Ireland on the way back and have the Irish relatives see the newly ordained priest. Dad announced firmly, "There will be no stopping in Ireland on the way back." Shades of an army in retreat.

But yes. There was stopping in Ireland on the way back. Not only that, but Dad enjoyed the trip to Rome and the stopping in Ireland wholeheartedly. He was the picture of peace and happiness.

Now isn't that a model of how the loyal opposition, the party out of power, should behave? Go all out for your point of view but revel in the reverse when it comes to pass.

Nobility

Father McMillan taught us in Chaplain School in 1952. He was a buddy of Father Connie Griffin, and recounted for us this story about his friend.

Chaplain Griffin was with the Marines in the Korean War. His clerk was a young enlisted Marine, probably of Corporal rank, named Caruso. Father Griffin learned that his battalion was going up to the front. He also knew that Caruso's wife was expecting back home. He had Caruso transferred from his staff so that Caruso

would stay behind. Before the Battalion moved up, he ran into Caruso, who broke down and cried because, as he saw it, Father Griffin had fired him. So the chaplain relented and they moved up together.

Chinese “volunteers” had entered the fray and Marine casualties were heavy. They were pounded by artillery day and night. During a bombardment, Caruso touched the container of Holy Communion Griffin carried and said, “He is with us.”

They were not there long when one day Caruso saw an enemy set up a machine gun close by. “Father look out!” he shouted. He shielded Father Griffin with his body. Immediately, he was stitched with machine gun holes across his body, dead on the spot. Father Griffin’s jaw was shot off.

After Father Griffin returned to the U.S. he heard that the Caruso baby was born. I do not know whether he was physically or emotionally blocked from going to baptize the child, but Caruso’s wife brought the child to him because that was what her husband would have wanted.

I do not know whether the Caruso baby was a boy or a girl. He or she should be over 50 now, somewhere in New England if the grown child stayed near his parents’ neighborhood. This I do know. People coddled and cuddled in luxurious living, selfishly indulging in sexual infidelity, claim the title of nobility. Their claim pales before the lineage of that Caruso child, offspring of a truly noble father.

