

One Good Priest Can Make A Difference

Father John Galea: Loves God, the Church and the Knights

BY RON MITCHELL

I walked into his rectory as a wayward youth in the early 1970s. Drugs, sex and rock & roll were taking their toll, and I ran out of places to go. When the door opened, a short man with a black mustache and dark eyes said, "Come on in. I feel like I already know you. A lot of people in town are worried about you."

After several hours of talking, crying and listening, I thought it was time for confession. "You've already gone to confession," Father John Galea said. "God forgives and loves you."

Then he invited me to Mass. "Come celebrate with Jesus!"

Father Galea's passion for Jesus Christ inspired the congregation. His loud voice and wild eyes made day-dreaming impossible.

He organized weekend retreats for teens. By Sunday evening our eyes glowed with the Spirit, and we loved every human being. Although life became business as usual a few months later, the memory of that unconditional love endured.

After 40 years in the priesthood, Father Galea retired from official duties at the age of 75. Recently I visited him to thank him for the positive effect he had in my life. He counseled me through several rough years, and I credit him with pulling me out of a self-destructive lifestyle. Many others with similar stories visited Father throughout the years, but he refused to take credit for changing our lives. He told the story of Jesus being cheered by the crowd while he rode on the back of a jackass through Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. "The cheers weren't for the jackass," he said.

Stacks of paper, books and dirty dishes cluttered his modest house. One photo showed him and his mother shaking hands with the pope in the Vatican. Another featured Father Galea decorated with honors as "Knight of the Year" on the 100th anniversary of Immaculate Heart of Mary Council 472 in Steubenville, Ohio.

"I joined the Knights in 1946," he said. "I owe my vocation to the Knights, and woke up to all the good they do when I took my Third Degree. They keep our orphanage operating, and support many school sports programs. In addition to countless hours of community service and fund-raising events, the Knights even help seminarians in need. I was especially honored with the award because it's for a Knight, not specifically a priest."

Baci Carpico served as Ohio state deputy (1995-97)

and vice supreme master (1997-2001) during Father Galea's terms as state chaplain and provincial friar. "I remember distinctly Father John serving many functions and Fourth Degree exemplifications," Carpico said. "His homilies and remarks were outstanding. What a pleasure to be associated with a priest who truly loves God, the Church and the Knights. He remains active to this day."

"My favorite thing about being a priest is saying Mass," Father Galea said. "I approach it like it is my first, last and only one. Jesus is present in Mass, and at that particular time I become another Christ. I advise married couples to approach each other in the same manner, as if it's their first, last and only time together."

"What irritates me the most about being a priest is when people don't follow my advice and they fall apart," he added. "If they would take my advice they would be fine. I don't like to hear confessions either, but am awed by how they transpire into total honesty." He stared at me in silence for a few minutes, never breaking eye contact. "Contemplation is the height of prayer and I reached it three times in my life, being with God that is. I felt like a

child at each encounter. Once I asked Jesus to show me his Father. His Father sat on a throne and put his arms around me. I became total love, momentarily. I played with his beard and was reminded of my grandfather. That's the most memorable event I've ever had in my life."

Despite "retirement," Father John conducts weekend retreats, traveling to any parish that invites him and covers his travel expenses. He also has a prison ministry.

When my visit with Father Galea was over, we got ready to leave. On our way out of the door, a short, dirty young man with a swollen eye stopped by the porch and asked, "Are you leaving?"

"I'm on my way to say Mass," Father Galea said. "Are you alright, Jack?"

"I just got out of jail and need some smokes. Spot me?" the young man said.

Father John rolled his eyes and handed him \$5, saying, "I suppose it doesn't matter to you that this is my last \$5."

"I'm good for it," Jack said. ■

Ron Mitchell is an Arizona-based freelance writer. His work has appeared in *Arizona Highways* and other publications.



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