

Fr. Cuddy: Columnist 'huckster' and friend



By Rob Cullivan

Q.: Who has been described as "the most annoying, exasperating, carping, nagging person I have ever run across."?

A.: Father Paul J. Cuddy.

Q.: Who has been described as "as one of the real priests of the diocese, (who) knows what's non-essential and what touches the heart."

A.: Father Paul J. Cuddy.

Both descriptions, offered by John Dash, religion columnist at the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* and former news editor of the *Courier-Journal*, capture the personality of the priest who admits some might consider him "harsh and a mossback," but who is well-aware of his numerous admirers in the diocese. Indeed, his friends might say that while Father Cuddy will always let you know where he stands, he'll always stand by you, regardless of differences of opinion.

Opinion is the lifeblood of the retired priest, who celebrated his 80th birthday this past September. His regular *Courier-Journal* column, "On the Right Side," is Father Cuddy's primary vehicle for promoting and defending traditional Catholic practices against a perceived attack of liberalism that has no appreciation for such devotions as the rosary and veneration of the saints.

One of Father Cuddy's September columns refuted an earlier argument by Father Richard P. McBrien, whose "Essays in Theology" column appears on the same page as Father Cuddy's. In his column, Father McBrien had described Mother Angelica of the Eternal Word Television Network as "an old-fashioned pre-Vatican II nun with the personality of an old-fashioned, pre-Vatican II rectory housekeeper."

"Why does Father McBrien assume everything pre-Vatican II was bad?" Father Cuddy wrote. "And let's bless the housekeepers, pre- and post-Vatican II!"

Despite his defense of the pre-Vatican II Church, Father Cuddy insists that he likes many of the changes the council wrought, most notably the increased involvement of the laity in the Church. One involved member of the laity was the left-leaning Dash, who clearly remembers his first meeting with Father Cuddy in the early 1970s. Dash's politics may have given the priest second thoughts about his desire for an active laity.

A self-described "long-haired promoter of pacifism," Dash knew he was in for trouble when the conservative priest let him know what he thought of the peace button Dash was wearing. "The session lasted about an hour," Dash recalled. "Granted, he was about as kindly as an IRS agent on the scent of a tax shirker, but by the end of it we were friends."

Father Cuddy remembers the meeting as being more amiable than Dash's description, but the priest admitted that he favored just about everything the pacifist was against. Today, they are still at opposite ends of the political mainstream, but both insist they are great friends.

Another of Father Cuddy's recent columns praised St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Auburn for its Eucharistic devotional practices and for its religious wares stand. Father Cuddy firmly believes in the importance of devotions and believes that Catholics are the richer for having access to them. "We're Catholics, not just Christians," Father Cuddy says. "Catholic Christians have the Mass, the rosary -- all kinds of wonderful things."

Some of the most wonderful things are the saints, and every Catholic can profit by learning about their lives, according to Father Cuddy, who often mentions Father Bruce Ritter of New York City's Covenant House and Mother Teresa of Calcutta as examples of saints living today.

"We're impelled to do good things by good example," he said. "That's why I'm so strong for the lives of the saints." Father Cuddy said he was inspired by the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, whose "consistent dedication to Our Lord ... and his loyalty to the Holy See" have served as a model for Father Cuddy's own priesthood.

Loyola's loyalty to the pope may have rubbed off on Father Cuddy's personality. Deacon Leo Kester — who worked with the priest at Webster's Holy Trinity Parish while Father Cuddy served there as priest-in-residence from 1973 to October of this year — recalled that one day, when Father Cuddy was praying in the church sanctuary, a sister brought her class over from the parish school into the church. When she asked the students if they knew who the Holy Father was, one child responded "Father Cuddy."

When he's not busy being mistaken for the pope, Father Cuddy zealously espouses Catholic literature. He recently wrote that he sends 40 subscriptions to the *Catholic Digest* to his various nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grand-nephews each Christmas. Friends of the priest all noted his enthusiasm to use the printed word on behalf of the word of God. Deacon Kester said the priest called himself "a huckster" at promoting literature.

Jack Burke, Father Cuddy's barber for 15 years in Webster, placed many of the priest's pamphlets and books in the shop. "He would always bring some literature -- the life of Tom Dooley, or Mother Teresa," Burke remarked.

Some of the places Father Cuddy leaves literature are the bedsides of hospital patients. The priest considers himself good at visiting the sick, and advised Deacon Lester to leave a memento of each visit — a rosary, a parish bulletin or a statuette — when the deacon makes his own hospital visits. The deacon recalled several conversations over coffee with Father Cuddy, who never missed a chance to plug the value of statuettes of the saints. The self-styled holy huckster was a convincing salesman. "I wound up giving 70 of (the statuettes) to my children and grandchildren," the deacon confessed.

But Father Cuddy doesn't peddle devotions simply to keep the religious-article warehouses empty. It's all part of his particular knack for relaying the Gospel in concrete, practical terms. "I'm not abstract personally," Father Cuddy noted, a statement borne out by Burke's recollections of the priest's sermons. "He would bring something in that happened on the bus depot or at the train station," Burke said. "You'd feel relaxed, kind of at home with it."

The priest's friendliness made others feel equally at home in the Webster barber shop, Burke said. "He didn't talk religion too often," Burke reminisced. "He spoke to all of the people, regardless of what religion they were, or what color."

Father Cuddy's friendliness often expresses itself through written correspondence. He estimates that he writes to 500 people in a year, not to mention the numerous readers to whom he responds in his column. Author Graham Greene and actor Alec Guinness have been among his pen pals, and one of Father Cuddy's current correspondents is the U.S. Postmaster General. The priest would like the Postal Service to replace a current Christmas stamp showing the Blessed Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus with one depicting the Nativity itself. He rests his case on the fact that Christmas celebrates Christ's birth, not his growing years.

Christ's birthplace in the Holy Land is just one of the many places Father Cuddy has visited throughout several years of traveling. His delight in others served him well as a tour guide for groups traveling to the Middle East, Ireland, Europe and other far-flung spots. Over the years, he has built a dedicated following of fellow pilgrims, many of whom have repeatedly journeyed with the priest.

Milford Voorhees directed the Wylder Travel Agency in Rochester for more than 28 years until 1982. In the late 1960s, he began setting up numerous tours with Father Cuddy as tour leader. The gregarious priest proved to be as financially profitable to the travel agency as he was spiritually profitable to his fellow travelers.

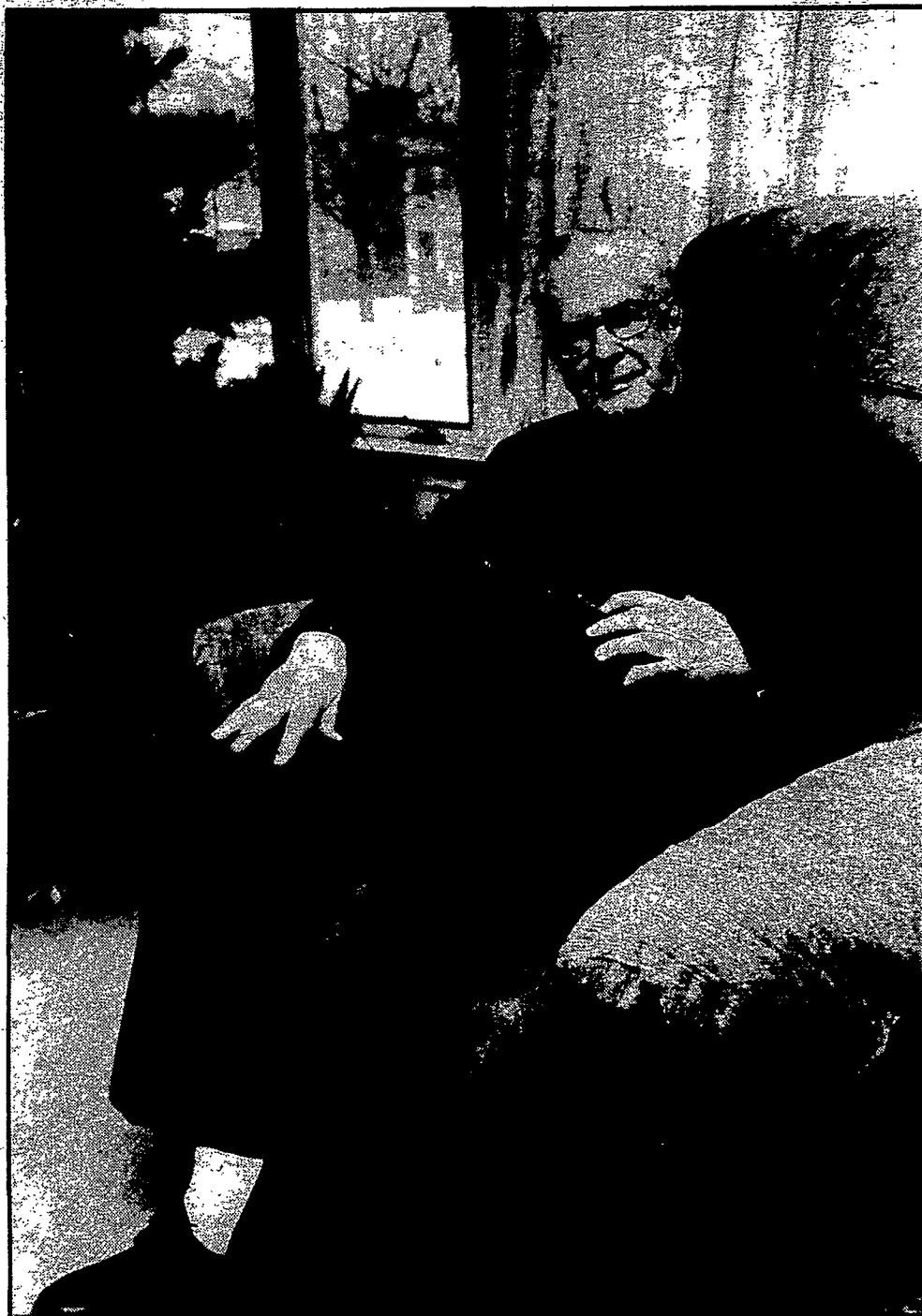
"He was a tremendous drawing card," Voorhees remarked. "I know of no groups that ever got along as well as those that Father led." Voorhees noted that one family traveled on five consecutive tours with Father Cuddy, and a devoted woman from the Southern Tier so enjoyed each tour that "when she came back, she'd send a deposit on the next trip even though she didn't know where he was going."

Voorhees attributed the priest's success to his personality. "When Father started out, he had no experience in travel as a tour conductor, (yet) he had that ability to get along with everybody." Father Cuddy alleviated the fears of otherwise wary travelers, Voorhees said. "Most who traveled were beyond middle age. I doubt many of them would have traveled if it weren't for Father. They figured if they went with Father, they couldn't get hurt," he joked.

Making sure no one gets hurt may be considered the cornerstone of Father Cuddy's philosophy. "I'm strong for promoting things that are going to build people up, not tear them down," the priest said. Scandals in the Church, for example, don't worry him. "There have always been weaknesses in the Church, as you find from the Acts of the Apostles."

Misunderstandings that plague the Church are best dealt with by a soft answer, he said. "I remember one poor woman who said, 'I got sick

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Linda Dow Hayes, Courier-Journal

Early this fall, 80-year-old Father Paul J. Cuddy moved from his longtime residence in Webster to St. Alphonsus Parish in Auburn, where he stays active by writing on a daily basis and visiting the sick.

A Gift to the Community

For our annual Christmas keepsake edition, the staff of the *Courier-Journal* presents a look at various gifts members of the diocesan community offer to each other at Christmas and throughout the year — including the elaborate iconography of Melkite Father Mark Melone, whose beautiful Marian icon is depicted in our cover photo by C-J photographer Linda Dow Hayes. The article on Father Melone and the other profiles in this edition focus on individuals who in ways big and small, dramatic and subtle have a Christlike impact on the diocese and the world at large.

We hope that you and your family will enjoy learning about these special people through the pages of this edition, which is our gift to you. Merry Christmas to all!



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