

Magazine profile details life of 'saintly' priest

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In July, 1988, I did a column on a *New Yorker* article by Paul Wilkes entitled, "Parish Priest." It was a profile of a middle-aged priest, Father Joseph Greer, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in suburban Natick, Mass.

Wilkes had written to the Archdiocese of Boston asking to be put in contact with any priests who were suffering from a life-threatening illness and faced imminent death.

His idea was to do a documentary film and book on a parish priest as he lived his last days — along the lines of George Bernard Shaw's classic, *The Diary of a Country Priest*.

Wilkes wanted to witness for himself how the priest's parishioners dealt with their pastor's progressive weakness and

how the priest himself was able to draw from his own reservoir of spirituality in the face of certain death.

Father Greer had been suggested to the author because of the priest's bout with blood cancer (a multiple myeloma in which the plasma cells in the bone marrow grow in an abnormal manner and reproduce at a very high rate, displacing healthy cells, leaving the bones weakened, destroying the normal resistance to disease and producing tremendous fatigue).

The first fruits of the author's labors were published in the *New Yorker* piece. The harvest now comes in the form of a recently published book entitled, *In Mysterious Ways: The Death and Life of a Parish Priest* (Random House, 1990).

Part One of the book covers much of the same ground as the *New Yorker* article. It describes the situation at St. Patrick's

when Father Greer was first assigned there as pastor in 1984. The parish was badly in need of repair, both materially and spiritually.

The story of how Father Greer undertook the process of renewal is vividly recounted. The more striking story, however, was Father Greer's own, as a middle-aged priest, prepared for ministry in a pre-Vatican II Church but expected to serve just as effectively — and as effortlessly — in a vastly changed postconciliar church.

To be sure, there is something of the "day-in-the-life-of" genre about the original *New Yorker* profile and the first part of the book. As such, it would make instructive reading for all those Catholics and non-Catholics who have ever been tempted to ask, "Just what do priests do all day anyway?"



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

But there is more to the book than that. Paul Wilkes somehow penetrates through to the personal and priestly core of his remarkable subject.

Father Greer comes across as a profoundly committed Christian and a non-nonsense, yet sensitive and compassionate human being. He is a man obviously tempered by the experience of having had to face his own physical and spiritual weaknesses.

The nature and extent of the physical weakness is detailed (in almost too clinical detail) in Part Two of the book, which takes up where the original *New Yorker* article left off.

Father Greer acknowledges that he had been typical of many in his generation of clergy: quick to judge, sure that the church had supplied them with all the answers and satisfied that priestly ordination somehow immunized them against spiritual harm.

His experience with the weakness of the flesh, spiritually as well as physically, brought him to realize, more profoundly than ever before in his life, that "the true sign of the Church is forgiveness, not making wounds deeper."

He adopted a more understanding and compassionate attitude toward the marginalized: priests who had resigned from the priesthood to marry, victims of broken marriages, those dying of AIDS. "God is kinder than man is to himself," he mused.

In his first homily upon returning from the grueling ordeal of a marrow transplant, Father Greer reminded the 500-600 people gathered in the pews that "The Gospel is all about love. We can love in the easiest, most straightforward way just by not being critical of each other. Everyone needs support ... You. Me. It's what makes it possible for all of us to go on ..."

"God loves us — with no questions asked," he concluded. "Why are we so stingy with our love and ready with our criticism of others? We're all guilty, my friends, all of us."

If Joe Greer is a saint — and he'd be horrified to hear that said of him — then there are many other saints like him, inside and outside the priesthood. One doesn't have to have had multiple myeloma to qualify.

Saints are ordinary people doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way, i.e., with persistence, with generosity, with humility, and always with a readiness to understand, forgive, and support others — to make it possible for them "to go on," as Father Greer put it.

You bet there's a vocations crisis in the church. There aren't enough Joe Greers to go around; and there are even fewer like him coming up from behind.

"Prayer and fasting alone won't change that situation," I wrote in that column of some three years ago. "Only change itself will — change that many continue to resist."

That still applies today.

Pilate uses excuses to bury his guilty conscience

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"If you had listened to me, none of this would have happened!" Pilate's wife snapped. When her husband continued to sit there holding his head in his hands, she continued, "I sent you a message about this man's innocence, why did you condemn Jesus to death? Is this Roman justice?"

"It was the will of the people," Pilate stammered. "I am not responsible. My hands are clean."

It was true Pilate had stood there on the platform for all to see and washed his hands of the entire matter. But try as he might, Pilate could not rid his mind of the events of the past few days.

The chief priests and the Pharisees were jealous of the considerable popularity of Jesus. So they sought a way to get rid of him. For his part, Pilate had no choice. Jesus had proclaimed himself a king. Pilate had even asked Jesus about this charge



when he was brought before him. What had Jesus said? "My kingdom is not of this world."

It was the fault of these Jews. Pilate gave them a chance to release Jesus. As was the custom, in honor of their Passover, one prisoner could be set free. But the crowd had chosen Barabbas. What could he have done?

Claudia was interrogating him again. "Pilate, I asked you a question. How do you explain the three hours of darkness or the earthquake? This Jesus must have been a holy man."

Pilate, who normally would have rushed to defend himself, was surprisingly silent. After the mob had called for the crucifixion

of Jesus, Pilate's own soldiers had mocked the prisoner.

They had dressed Jesus in a purple robe and placed a staff in his hand and a crown of thorns on his head. Then they had spit on him and struck him as they derided Jesus. "Hail, King of the Jews!"

Jesus had proclaimed himself a king. He was guilty of treason against the state. Pilate had no other choice but to allow the punishment to be carried out. They had written this charge, "King of the Jews" on the sign they had placed over his head on the cross.

"Claudia, you are one to speak of justice! If King Herod decided that I was not capable of dealing with these Jews, he might well have removed me as governor of Judea. How would you like to give up all of the privileges that you enjoy?" he said.

"There are some who say that this Jesus was the Son of God," Claudia continued. "He was known as a miracle worker throughout the region."

"Then why couldn't Jesus save himself?" Pilate muttered as he finally stood up. "I am a fair and decent man. Did I not release the body to Joseph of Arimathea for burial?"

"That's hardly compensation for allowing the death of an innocent man," Claudia said.

With that final condemnation still hanging in the air, Pilate stomped from the room, nearly upsetting a servant who had come with a message for him.

"Excuse me, governor," the servant told Pilate. "Some of the chief priests have come here to see you."

"What do they want now?" Pilate shouted.

"They have requested a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb of Jesus," he replied. "They are afraid the dead man's disciples will come and steal his body so that they can claim he rose from the dead."

"I washed my hands of this whole business already! I am an innocent man!" Pilate said.

In the end, Pilate assigned several soldiers to guard the tomb of Jesus. He ordered everyone, including his wife, to never speak of the matter again.

Scripture reference: Matthew, Chapters 27:11-66.

Meditation: We are responsible for both our actions and our lack of actions.

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