

# COLUMNISTS

## Wink and quick action absolved train bearer

Recently, on the feast of St. Therese of Lisieux, millions of Catholics renewed their devotion to the "Little Flower," perhaps the most popular of modern saints.

I took a different, albeit related, tack and renewed my devotion to the Bishop Patrick Ahern, retired auxiliary of New York. Bishop Ahern is the country's foremost promoter of devotion to the Little Flower. I remember him as the man who rescued me from ignominy at the most embarrassing public moment in my life.

The site of this near-debacle was the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in my native Baltimore; the occasion was the investiture of Thomas Pangborn (an ancient Marylander who had given tens of millions of dollars to charity) with the style and dignity of a "Papal Count."

Most Catholics know that the church honors distinguished men and women with membership in various orders of knighthood, such as the Order of St. Gregory the Great or the Equestrian Order of St. Sylvester. But in those gaudier days, before the post-Vatican II reform of the papal honors system, the really superior Catholic gentry could be raised to the heights of the papal nobility. Pangborn's extraordinary generosity to the church qualified him for this



the catholic difference

By GEORGE WEIGEL

rare distinction and prelates from near and far gathered for his investiture. Two were to take prominent roles in the proceedings: Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, the apostolic delegate, and Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York.

The rector, Msgr. Thomas Whelan, being an old family friend, my brother (age 11) and I (age 13) were given the plum assignment of carrying the trains of these two worthies during the processions to and from the cathedral. I was entrusted with the cardinal's cappa magna (great cape) — several dozen feet of watered silk.

As the day of the ceremony approached, I noted the size of this dramatic bit of vesture and wondered uneasily whether I had not bitten off, so to speak, more than I could chew. But the natural boldness of youth (and, I admit,

a boyish desire to meet the famous Spellman) won the battle for my psyche. Prior to the ceremony, waiting in the rectory, I asked the cardinal's secretary — a big, friendly Irishman named Msgr. Pat Ahern — how, precisely, one conducted oneself as train bearer to His Eminence. Simple enough, replied Msgr. Ahern. You hold the train off the floor during the procession, "putting it behind the cardinal when he takes his place at the throne." This seemed straightforward, and off we went.

As we entered the narthex (the vestibule at the main entrance), though, a nasty puzzle asserted itself. What exactly did Msgr. Ahern mean by "putting it behind the cardinal"? I spent several frantic minutes pondering this conundrum, while the colossal procession moved at a stately pace up the 250-foot-long center aisle of the packed cathedral.

Halfway to the sanctuary, inspiration struck: I should fold the cardinal's cappa magna like a Boy Scout folded the flag, and place it on the cathedra (bishop's throne) as a kind of supplementary seat cushion for the eminent posterior.

The desperation in my thinking will be evident; the notion of a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church sitting on his cappa magna in the manner of a Green

Beret sitting on his parachute pack does not commend itself to calmer reflection. But I thought my solution a neat one and put it into effect. The procession completed, Cardinal Spellman stood at the cathedra and, like a good Scout, I carefully folded his watered silks into a triangle, which I reverently placed on his seat.


A nanosecond later I noticed my mentor, Msgr. Ahern, standing nearby. He was ashen, and looked as if he didn't know whether to scream in dismay or burst into hysterical laughter. I wilted. Not only had I made a hash of things in front of 2,000 people; worse yet, my brother had correctly draped the apostolic delegate's train behind him on his throne.

The Great Ahern then entered my private pantheon. With silken discretion, he took advantage of the post-processional sanctuary bustle to unfold and re-drape the cardinal's train, without any fuss and with few in attendance being any the wiser. To make things even better, he gave me a big wink as he quietly resumed his place in the choir stalls. Few sacramental absolutions ever felt so cleansing.

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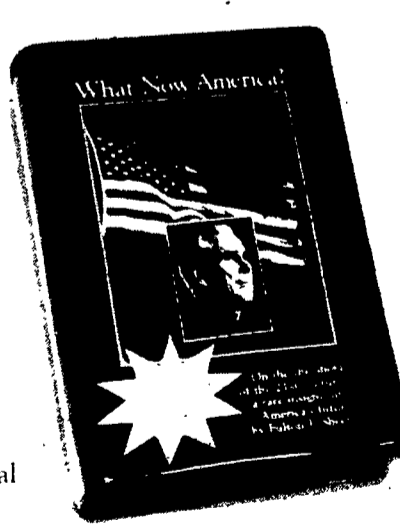
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