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A priest who loved freedom

Ida Gazzola - a personal testimony

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When I first met Fr Joe around the age of 14, I had no idea of the profound impact he would have on my life. My mom met Fr Joe at the monthly recollections for women. She recalls wondering if he had some inside information about her since everything he talked about at the recollections seemed tailored for her individual situation. The other ladies

were saying the same thing. Father would greet each of them with his warm, sincere smile and soon everyone equally felt that he was their friend. Years later, one of my friends confided to me that she could tell that Father loved her. This startled me at first since she had only met him a handful of times.

Reflecting on this, I saw that she was right. He loved with the love of Our Lord and this was apparent to those who met him.

Over the years, he joined my family for many dinners. First, when I was in high school and then eventually in my own house after I married. In my childhood home, I could tell that my dad really enjoyed both the conversation and the red wine they shared. Father Joe knew something about everything and one grasped instinctively that he was intelligent, wise and kind. My brother was young at the time, but he remembers

that Father would always listen to him speak with full attention.

One summer evening, Father was over for dinner and the phone rang. My mom came back to the table in tears. A young woman, whom both she and Father knew, had collapsed as she was giving a class and died. Father was quiet for a moment, then he told us, “God is a loving gardener who picks his flowers when they are at their most beautiful.”

Early in our marriage, my husband and I invited Father over for dinner. On one occasion, Father was to come over, have dinner and then we would all go see my dad's choir concert. (Father came many years in a row to my dad's concerts.) The Pope changed our dinner to a day of fasting. Father said that our ‘fasting meal’ of soup with pasta was fine. It was a stormy day and Father came directly to our house after a week-

long trip to Montreal. Father arrived wet and exhausted, hardly keeping his eyes open. Could we make him a cup of coffee? We were all out.

Maybe just a coke then? Or chocolate? We had neither. We felt really bad and my husband was about to go to the store, but Father wouldn't let him. It must have been difficult, but he was cheerful all night.

Father would joke that the shoulder pads in his black suit jacket were really made of sponges in order to soak up the tears of those who came to him in their difficult moments. He put up with more than tears from me. In my questioning phase of young adulthood, he patiently answered my queries on subjects such as reincarnation and other pantheistic ideas. Then, the turning point came for me when I went on my first retreat. One of the talks was about spiritual direction. It made so

much sense that I went immediately to Fr Joe and asked if he would be my spiritual director. For quite a while, our sessions consisted of me pelting him with every question that crossed my mind (“Why did Mary Magdalene have 7 demons?”) Then one day I asked him a question about something in my interior life that I was struggling with. I jumped as he slapped the table and said something akin to “Finally!” He had been patiently waiting for me to ‘get it.’ He had been waiting for me to find my own path in the very individual spiritual life that we all have. He was very big on individual freedom. When I was in my late teens, my mom had begged me to go to a retreat. I avoided her, but she kept asking. Would I go for just one night? No? How about just for a few hours on Sunday? Fine. Once at the retreat, I found a bed and fell asleep. Fr Joe told my mom, “We want volunteers, not prisoners!”

Father Joe became good friends with my husband. As he did for other couples, we did an in-depth marriage prep in which we read various church documents and discussed the contents with him. He encouraged us, over and over, to love each other's defects, provided they weren't sinful. Father officiated our marriage and was there for us in every aspect of our married life. His prayers sustained us in many difficulties. He rejoiced with us on our 20th wedding anniversary and gave us his blessing. Most of all, through his friendship, teaching and administration of the sacraments, Fr Joe enabled us to choose for ourselves the path of following Jesus.

Just as Fr Joe gave all his attention to my brother when he was speaking, so he paid all his attention to Our Lord when celebrating Mass or during Benediction. He had a reverence that made others want to

pray more deeply. This would have been impressive if one hadn't known Father personally. But knowing him as a person (with his gentle strength, humour, kindness and intelligence) combined with seeing his profound piety, allowed those around him to understand more deeply something of what it takes to be a saint.

Ida Gazzola, married mother of 7

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