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## **A priest who spoke to the heart**

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At a particular time in my life I was deeply searching for more, though more “what” I didn’t quite know.

I had heard about a monthly recollection in Vancouver but I was skeptical. One day, a dear friend said

to me, “Barbara, I know a very holy priest and I think you would like him.” That phrase “a very holy priest” caught my attention.

I attended the next recollection and listened, fascinated, to this “very holy priest.” I was moved to my very core. Two things spoke to my heart, and to my heart alone (I knew it!): our own particular circumstances are the place where we will find the means to our sanctification, and second, anything else is mystical wishful thinking. Soon after I asked Father Joseph Soria, fondly known as Father Joe, to be my spiritual director. I have never looked back.

Our lives are made up of tiny details and major events. I think now of a mixture of both. Father Joe knew each one of us so well. I never had to explain myself; he knew what I was fumbling to say, and I knew he understood me.

He spoke to the place in my heart that only I knew. He held me to account in the gentlest way, as only a father who loves you could dare to do.

After my many repeated lapses, he would say, “Barb, I think we have talked about this before.” The way he used my nickname, the way he spoke, would make me smile – and I would try a lot harder.

He was so refined, had such great dignity, yet he was so reachable. He fit right into everyone’s family life. He loved having dinner with friends; he told jokes for the grandchildren (and the adults); he became a beloved part of many boisterous families.

One winter evening he came to Crestwell Centre (the Opus Dei centre for women in Vancouver) wearing a black wool coat and a white scarf. All the ladies were making a fuss over

him: “Father Joe, you look so handsome, I love your coat and scarf.” He said, “This is 25 years old, I had it for Montreal winters.”

Another evening at Crestwell we were gathered upstairs singing Christmas carols. On his way out he stopped to greet a couple who were doing a little dance. Father joined in and danced with them. It was so out of character yet so authentic.

Finally he broke free and went downstairs to give a meditation. I never saw him wear that coat again! Whenever we would compliment him or thank him excessively, he would tell us firmly, “If you don’t stop, I will leave right now,” and we knew he meant it.

One year my daughter came to a retreat with her toddler son. He would stand in front of a mirrored door talking to himself. Father Joe came up behind him and talked to

him in the mirror. Years later when Father was sick, my grandson as a teenager had the privilege of taking Father's meal to him in his room.

During the last illness of my husband I received a phone call from Father Joe asking if I wanted him to come and visit. I was very surprised! I knew how incredibly busy he was and how many people he looked after, but of course I said yes and he came right away.

After that first visit he came often, watching over us, each time giving me helpful advice on caring for my husband and particularly in administering his medications.

One night when it seemed the end was in sight I called Father, asking him to come. Upon entering the room, he knelt down and said "absolvo", making the Sign of the Cross over John. He kept vigil with me and the family till 1:30 a.m.

Through his kind and loving friendship in those difficult times a close relative who was helping me with John's care found her lost faith and is grateful to this day.

Recently my daughter and I had the good fortune to visit Father. Though he couldn't speak, he gave us the most beautiful smile. For all the people he touched in special and particular ways, there are thousands of stories waiting to be told. Mine are minuscule, but I am honoured to be able to give others a glimpse into the life of a "very holy priest."

Father Joe, thank you and may you rest in peace.

Barbara Stuart lives in North Vancouver.

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