

The Lone Leaf and the Great Priest

By Peter McFadden

Have you ever seen a leaf blowing in the wind? Did you pause to listen to what it had to say?

This is a story, a true story, of a beautiful Saturday afternoon in April, ten years ago. As I remember it, it was the first nice Saturday of the Spring, the kind of Saturday you wait all Winter for.

On that day, I had only one thought in mind as I looked out from my apartment window: breath in that fresh air.

At the time, I was a spokesman at the Arms Control Agency in the State Department and had come to love our Capitol's Mall with its beautiful monuments to Lincoln and Washington, its acres of green grass, and its reflecting pool.

So, I hopped in my car for the short drive from my Virginia home to Washington, filled with anticipation for the simple joy a stroll on the Mall would provide.

On the way, though, I noticed a single leaf. It grabbed my attention because it was blowing along the side of the road at the same speed I was driving my car. At the very moment I focused my eyes on it, this lone leaf blew straight up in the air, and I thought to myself...

Go to confession.

Now, I am a Catholic, and I have always been one, but going to confession on a beautiful Saturday afternoon, particularly a lovely afternoon I had been waiting a long time for, is not my usual thing. In fact, I have never been so inspired before or since. But, at that moment, I looked at my watch and realized I could make confession, if I headed to the nearest church, so I turned and made my way for it.

It was even more peculiar for me to seek out a priest that day as it was a particularly good time in my life and there was little weighing on my conscience. I had made ample time each day for prayer and my job allowed me to work for values in which I believed. I felt quite good about myself.

But, as I remember it, I had come to the end of what might be called a "cycle" in my life and was preparing for a new phase. One "project" had been completed and another was on its way.

So, as I drew near to the church, I thought to myself it was not a bad time to see a priest, to get a "spiritual tune-up," an assessment of where I had been, where I was, and where I wanted to go.

I have great respect for priests. While we all know, or have heard of, bad priests, I maintain there is no one greater than a good priest.

Who can be wiser than a priest who has dedicated his life to ministering to hundreds of souls? Who can be more understanding than a priest who has patiently, over a lifetime, listened to the many faithful who have opened their hearts to him?

That Saturday afternoon, when I entered the church, the Cathedral of St. Thomas More, it was empty, except for a truly great priest, Monsignor John O'Connell, who I found in the confessional when I entered for a face-to-face talk.

I had never met Monsignor O'Connell before, but we established an immediate rapport. He was a big, quietly jovial Irishman, 65 years of age, who was, in the memorable words of his colleague Fr. Tuck Grinnell, the "very soul of kindness to people," and I found him to be so.

The Monsignor was renowned for his love for the Mass and the "fastidiousness" with which he prepared for it. His reverence for the Holy Sacrifice was a reverence he paid also to those who happened to enter his life.

What has been beautifully called "the gentleness" of Christ on the Cross was a gentleness the Monsignor seemed to have fully understood and made his own. It was a gentleness he shared with others.

I luxuriated in his presence. We had a great conversation, perhaps the best conversation I ever had in my life. We talked for some time, as there was no one else waiting, and I felt his peace slowly find its way into me. My life never felt so sharply focused.

I had made a resolution not long before that I would always remember to thank priests who had done something for me, so as our conversation neared its end, I thanked the Monsignor for the talk and for his time.

I thanked him, also, just for being there. I told him it was reassuring for us Catholics to know, as we went about our daily lives, that there were always priests available we could talk with if we needed to. The Monsignor was pleased to hear this and he nodded he understood.

I went on. I told him, "You priests do a good job." He grew even happier.

At that moment, I thought to get up and leave, but something held me back, and I stopped to tell the Monsignor one last thing. I looked him straight in the eye, and said, "You should know you have lived your life well."

He responded with the deepest smile I have ever seen on any man's face and said, "I know."

As I left the confessional that day, neither of us knew that the Monsignor would celebrate his beloved Mass the following Sunday for the last time.

On my next visit to the cathedral, shortly after, I was quite stunned to read in the bulletin a thank you to all those who had contributed flowers to his funeral.

Monsignor O'Connell had gone to bed Sunday night, April 30th, and had died, suddenly and peacefully, in his sleep.

Today, ten years later, Monsignor O'Connell's remains can be found at Fairfax Memorial Park in Virginia. His soul? I'll bet, like the wind that carried that leaf, it went straight up to heaven.