



Eulogy & Poem for Fr. John J. McVean

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by Mickey Maguire
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"Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible." These words spoken by St. Francis became the blueprint for Fr. John McVean's life

Occasionally, I would tell John that he was a hero to me. He always bristled at that. He never saw himself that way. But to my way of thinking, anyone who saw the grievous deficiency in our society and who, against all odds, against the current, out of nothing, created a celebrated working model for restoring common sense and compassion to an otherwise beleaguered service delivery system in one of the world's largest cities, and restoring personhood to the disenfranchised, the overlooked, the broken, and unloved, anyone who could do that, is a hero.

But John McVean would fidget when I told him that. All he cared about was righting the wrong. He believed everyone deserved a place to live, nourishment, companionship, a community to belong to, and to be heard. The program he and Fr. Felice and Fr. Walters created provided one of the most essential qualities missing from so many tortured lives: stability – knowing that each day, help is available for any crisis large or small, and no matter the difficulties they may encounter, like, say, a four-month hospitalization, they would always have a home, and there will be people who care, waiting for their return.

On my first day at the job in 1986, Fr. John told me my job was to "hang out." Huh? Yes, just hang out in the front office as tenants come in during the morning. I had a difficult time with this. My work ethic told me otherwise. I should be busy, I need to be doing something. But all John wanted from me was to be there and look and listen. For weeks. In the afternoons, he wanted me to go into the charts and match personal histories to the faces I saw daily. And after a while, I learned everyone's name and the hardships they faced before coming to the St. Francis [Residences]. I saw what made them laugh, what made them uncomfortable, how they dealt with the pressures of maintaining a budget, their attitudes about mental health, and their role in this St. Francis community. I grew to admire their strength and courage and saw them less as victims and more as stalwart survivors. I learned something about the impact of listening and how I might fit in and be effective. The genius of the program is partly in its simplicity. So, when John told me to hang out, he was saying, "Be still. Watch the humanity of this thing unfold before your eyes. Then learn how to use your particular gifts to become a part of it."

He was proud of his ancestors, Julian, his middle namesake, who fought to preserve the union in the Civil War, and Captain Charles McVean of the 8th NY Cavalry, who fought many battles and sent poignant letters home, where they ultimately became treasured glimpses in the past for John. Charles was ultimately captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Georgia, where he died. John brought their resolve into his century in a war for civility and dignity. His tenaciousness would have made Julian and Captain Charles proud.

John, though it is not the first thing one thinks of, had a terrific sense of humor. His gruff barking comments were famous among us who loved him. Unlike the Archie Bunker character from Norman Lear's "All in the Family," who said hilarious and outrageous things but did not realize they were funny, John, for the most part, knew it would be seen as funny and played the curmudgeon role to the hilt. There was a black and white picture on display for many years at St. Francis [Residence] I, of a young John McVean and Mother Theresa. His history of grouchy comments caused me to speculate on how that event might have looked: "Who do you think you are? Mother Theresa?". He had tremendous ability to laugh at himself. Each year at our annual Christmas party, it was a tradition for me to toast and roast our beloved friars. Unless you were there, you cannot imagine the things I would say about them, and year after year, they would sit and laugh with everyone – and invited me to do it again, year after year. After one such close-to-the-bone monologue, I came into work the following Monday, and Fred Graves, the desk clerk and unofficial sheriff of the early days of Residence II, looked at me incredulously and said, "You still work here?".

In an article, Fr. Felice once said, "We are not social workers, we are here as Franciscans in an outreach ministry to the poorest of God's people."

It is this that gave this program its unique quality. And more importantly, the friars shared this with anyone who loved the work and the people. This program, in addition to ending the homelessness of countless individuals, gave so many of us who participated, a life that has purpose and meaning. Working for you, John, was one of the greatest joys of all our lives. For that, we are profoundly grateful.

I would like to close with a poem I wrote on the occasion of Fr. Felice's passing. Fr. McVean loved this poem so much. And it really is a poem for him, too. It is written from the point of view of the tenants of the St. Francis Residences, for it is the light in *their* eyes and warm smiles on *their* faces that are John McVean's real living legacy.

"Because of You"
(for Fr. John Felice and Fr. John McVean)

Faceless – on a street – I am unseen
Trying to tame the growling beast in my gut with a dirty pizza crust
Tossed off by someone who had their fill.
Got punched in a shelter, my plea unheard, bruise untreated
Back outside, wet, shivering, rocking back and forth
Ticking off the night like some cruel clock.
Brother, sister, family – long gone – are they...somewhere?
Will I see them? Ever?
Not living day to day – no –
It is moment to moment.
I do not speak to anyone, their words a threat, like a tossed bottle –
I shrink away – I am frightened...

But now, the gnawing in my belly has left
And now I can think of other things,
Because of you.

Because of you, I am dry when chill rains fall
And warm when winter bites hard and vicious.
No one punched me today, or any day since I landed here.
People hear me now, at the St. Francis, and listen as the namesake would. I am seen.
Just the other day something happened that I thought buried and gone –
My face, out of practice contorted into a long-lost smile, like a friend dearly missed
Returned now, promising to stay.

Because of you I have a yesterday that I can remember fondly
A now to surrender to without fear
And a tomorrow to look forward to with hope.
So, now I can think of all these things
Because of you.

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