

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Monsignor and Me

I can still remember my first meeting with him, after I had been accepted into the diaconate program. It was the fall of 2002. I sat across from him in his second-floor office and he leaned over that massive desk. “Now, Greg,” he said, “if there is anything you want to do, absolutely *anything*, just ask me and if it’s possible, we’ll do it. I don’t want to say no.”

And so it began. For the next five years, Msgr. Joe Funaro was more than my pastor; he was also my mentor during formation, as I studied to become a deacon. In simple terms, that meant his job was to evaluate me, manage me, challenge me, scold me and, in every way possible, help me to grow. And he did. Following up on what transpired during our first meeting, he was good to his word. He found opportunities for me to become involved in a wide variety of activities and ministries—most notably, the column you’re reading right now.

“A View from the Pew” happened almost by accident. Not long after I began my studies, during one of our monthly meetings together, he mentioned that he wanted to publish some spiritual reflections in the bulletin. He suggested to me, “Maybe you could interview the priests and write something based on what they say.”

I replied, “Yeah. We could do that. Or, you know, maybe I could just do it myself.” His eyes widened. He hadn’t thought of that. (Until that moment, frankly, neither had I.) “Okay,” he said. “Why don’t you try that?”

And this column, “A View from the Pew,” was born.

He was like that. He believed anything was worth a try, and anything was possible because, as he told us again and again, “nothing is impossible with God.”

I know that credo was tested again and again during the last years of his life, when his body began to fail him. I think very often he managed to prevail against impossible circumstances by sheer force of his personality—and force of will. Certainly, that gave him the energy to keep going, to keep running this parish and making his way to the altar day after day, week after week, to celebrate Mass even when his body was fighting his every effort.

During my formation, despite his limitations, he attended every one of the major milestones on my journey—candidacy, Rite of Lector, Rite of Acolyte—and after five sometimes challenging and difficult years, for both him and me, he was there on May 19, 2007, as I knelt before the bishop and received the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The following day, we had the Mass of Thanksgiving here at the parish. By that time, the crippling neuropathy had advanced to the point where he almost never processed down the long aisle of the church. But that morning, he said he wanted to do it. And he insisted on something else. “Deacon,” he said, nodding to my wife as we lined up for the procession, “this morning, I think, Siobhain should walk beside you.” She was lector for the Mass and would be in the procession anyway.

And so it was that on that particular morning, for the first time in my life, I carried the Book of the Gospels into church for the Mass. And for that one Mass, my wife walked at my side. And Msgr. Funaro walked behind us every step of the way.

I know it was difficult for him. But he wanted to make that effort for me—a gesture of support, and brotherhood, and love. Symbolically, in that procession, I was taking my place in the clergy. Msgr. Funaro wanted to take his place there as well.

It’s hard to believe that now he’s gone.

Often I’ve found myself asking, only half-facetiously: WWJD? *What would Joe do?*

And I realize that answering that question may be one way to keep his legacy alive, and lead me to a deeper appreciation of what it means to be—as Msgr. Joe Funaro assuredly was—a faithful servant of the people of God.

God be with you, Joe Funaro.

And thank you, monsignor, for helping make me the deacon I am today.

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