
Column

Stuck in rectory with a curmudgeon and a bishop's ghost

By TIM UNSWORTH

Rocco Facchini practically bleeds Chianti Classico. He is as rich as the wine and as generous as a plate of linguini carbonara.

He spent 12 years in seminary preparing for the Chicago archdiocese, an institution not known for its great love of Italian candidates. It's likely that there were only 20 Italian-American priests in the entire archdiocese. Because Rocco was a lovable guy, his passage through the ecclesiastical lockstep system was relatively painless.

Rocco's parents came to Chicago from central Italy near Rome. His mother was a devout soul who was honored to have a son in the priesthood. She knew nothing of haunted rectories.

Rocco asked for an Italian posting but ended up in a mixed and deteriorating parish because the pastor there wanted a curate and knew that he had a better chance of getting one if he asked for an Italian that others didn't want.

Before Vatican II, Chicago clergy had to be Irish, Polish or German. The rest were considered the shakings of the bag. But the shrewd pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish wanted someone to work the Tuesday night bingo game and figured correctly that he'd do better if he told the archbishop that Italians were moving in. They weren't, of course. That is how Rocco was assigned to work with one of the worst pastors in the vast archdiocese.

As he rode the bus to his first assignment at what was even then known as "the haunted rectory," Rocco wondered what would be tougher: working with a disgruntled, calcified pastor or living with the gentle ghost of a previous one. Could he endure a functioning agnostic who padlocked the refrigerator, allowed one helping to the curate and fed the rest to his dog, and who had a relationship with his housekeeper that would have given a canonist the vapors? Or should he somehow

befriend one of the early pastors who had become a bishop, and who had died in 1927, still longing for his old parish?

Peter J. Muldoon -- a perfect name for an Irish-American poltergeist -- was that early pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish. Almost from his ordination day, he was in the fast lane -- a talented, pastoral narrowback (Irish-American) who was rapidly catching up with the FBI (foreign-born Irish) greenhorn clergy. His archbishop, Patrick A. Feehan, was FBI, but he insisted on the introduction and development of American-born clergy.

Muldoon knew how to cultivate a growing complex population at St. Charles. He worked well with the steam heat Irish (called such because they lived in rented, steam-heated flats as opposed to homes.) In 1901, Feehan named Peter Muldoon his auxiliary bishop and moved him into the archbishop's mansion facing Lincoln Park. The appointment didn't sit well with some of the priests who had come from across the pond and who imagined that they would run the American church until hell froze over.

An oddball country priest, an FBI named Jeremiah Crowley, took a particular dislike to Peter Muldoon, in part because Crowley had "scarlet fever" and Muldoon had sailed past him. Crowley joined with two city pastors and vilified Muldoon, dirtying him up with untrue stories that never went away. Crowley later wrote several books attacking poor Muldoon. Crowley eventually quit the priesthood and the church and died at a county hospital in 1922, far removed from the church and bishop's hat he had sought.

In 1908, Muldoon was appointed the founding bishop of Rockford, Ill. It's likely that he might have succeeded to Chicago, but the gossip had weakened his image. He remained in Rockford until his death in 1927. Bishop Muldoon had always wanted to be buried at St. Charles Borromeo, just behind the altar in the church he had built. However, most bishops are buried in their dioceses. So, Muldoon rests in Rockford.

He asked that his episcopal ring be sent to St. Charles Borromeo. The ring never made it to the parish. It mysteriously disappeared. For decades people said that Muldoon haunted the parish in search of his ring.

Rocco's pastor had raised bingo to the level of a sacrament. Within his first week, the idealistic young priest discovered that his primary apostolate was to serve as a pit boss for the Tuesday night bingo. Seminary ideals had been reduced to peddling bingo cards while his pastor chanted the letters and numbers like the litany of the saints -- and skimmed a few bucks from each game.

Rocco had barely settled in his curate's quarters when he was startled by intermittent manifestations. There were noises, slammed doors, barking dogs, moving furniture, radios suddenly turning on, darkened rooms lit,

walls turning hot and cold. Often, the sweet smell of lilacs permeated the rectory and the sanctuary. Even the burglar alarm hidden behind a hallway clock would somehow ring.

Largely because it was a neighborhood defined by crime that had increased since prohibition times, Rocco kept the door to his quarters locked. Yet he often returned to his room to find the door open. Rocco found himself talking to Muldoon. "I'm your friend, Peter," he would whisper behind his locked door. "Just talk to me." But when he opened the door of his quarters, he found the corridors quiet and in good order.

One day a priest friend came to visit. While he waited for Rocco, he noticed a quiet priest at work in the rectory office. When Rocco arrived and later pointed to Muldoon's picture, the priest shouted: "That's him! That's the priest I saw!" There was, in fact, a portrait of Muldoon hanging in a heavy frame that was bolted to the wall in the corridor. One day, Rocco and the pastor found the portrait on the floor. "He's out to get me!" the pastor wailed. A few years later, the pastor wangled another pastorate and escaped Muldoon's spirit.

Curates came and went at Charles Borromeo. One was a brilliant scholar who worked at the chancery. Another became a bishop. But most were simply good journeymen priests, one of whom said to Muldoon: "Don't [mess] with me, Muldoon or I'll kill ya!"

Rocco survived in this clerical gulag for four years. In 1960, he persuaded the bishop to assign him to a genuinely Italian parish. Seven years later, St. Charles Borromeo was closed. Church, convent, school and rectory were sold and razed to make room for a medical center.

After 15 years, Rocco resigned from active ministry and became a property manager for a large real estate firm. He married Della, and the couple raised two sons, both of whom have collaborated on Rocco's book (*Muldoon: A True Chicago Ghost Story: The Untold Tales of a Haunted Rectory*), which is to be published next year by Lake Claremont Press, Chicago. Rocco Facchini waited 40 years to write it all down.

Rocco's haunted rectory is one more proof of the divinity of the church. No other branch of the Christian church could survive such lunacy. Thirty-five years after the parish was leveled, senior clergy gather in other rectories and talk about Muldoon. The Scrooge-like pastor left town, and Rocco became a loving husband and father, still as faithful to his church as a parish usher. Bingo is no longer a sacrament, and for 14 years the cardinal archbishop of Chicago was Joseph Bernardin, an Italian-American.

God, it's a great church!

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