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Father Oprah and my friend Steve

Joe Ferullo | May. 15, 2009 NCR Today

The "Father Oprah" story has big buzz here in Los Angeles. But only because anything with the name "Oprah" in it attracts attention around here -- television execs lift their eyes up from Neilsen ratings charts, power lunches at Beverly Hills bistros stop cold, and valets on Rodeo Drive throw limos in neutral while everyone checks his Blackberry for updates.

But not me. The Father Oprah story reminds me of my high school friend Steve.

Quick recap -- 40-year old Fr. Alberto Cutie of Miami, known as "Father Oprah" for his advice-giving appearances on local television and radio, was removed last week from his post as pastor of a local parish after a Spanish-language newspaper printed photos of him on the beach with a woman he says he loves. Fr. Cutie now tells reporters [1] he is considering leaving the priesthood to build a life with her.

He's kind of like Steve in that way. Steve and Erik and I were best friends in high school. (Jesuit. All boys. New York.) We each had our dreams: I wanted to be a journalist, Erik wanted to write plays, and Steve always simply wanted to help people. Early on, he felt the tug of the priesthood, but had that common high-school-boys problem: he liked girls.

He pushed down one part of his dream. In college, Steve met a great woman. They got married shortly after graduation and -- good Catholics that they were -- started having a family several minutes after that. Steve went to work for non-profits and he got a graduate degree in how to help workers form employee-owned companies. He just wanted to help people.

And all that was good -- but it wasn't enough. When we were both around 35 years old, I got a call from Steve. He'd made a decision -- it seems he still wanted to help people through God. That dream he'd silenced years before just would not stay quiet. So he did what any married man with four kids would do -- the left the Catholic Church, enrolled in a theological seminary, and became a Presbyterian. He's been a minister ever since.

In the intervening years, Steve founded a Christian school in his hometown, and helped orphans from Romania start new lives in America. He's lived his dream. So have Erik and I -- Erik is a playwright and dean of a prestigious university drama department. I spent years as a journalist for network news. But, for whatever sacrifices we made to pursue our passions, neither Erik nor I had to fundamentally change who we were to get there. Only Steve had to do that, and it never seemed right to me. Nor to him -- to this day, he'd love to be a Catholic priest, if only he could be a husband and father, too.

In south Florida, a Miami Herald poll [2] shows 78 percent of Miami Catholics still have a high opinion of Fr. Cutie, even after the "scandal." Eighty-one percent believe priests and nuns should be allowed to marry. Count my friend Steve among those voices. Count mine too.

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