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Father Hollywood

Joe Ferullo | May. 26, 2009 NCR Today

Here in Los Angeles, they call Ken Deasy ?Father Hollywood.? Partly because he is an entertaining and motivating preacher, and partly because Ken is perhaps best known as a consultant and writer for the hit movie ?Bruce Almighty.? But mostly because Ken doesn?t take himself too seriously, and laughs at the ?Hollywood? moniker along with everyone else.

I just call him ?Ken.? This is a big deal for me ? I always address priests as ?Father,? no matter how long I?ve known them. My mother and all the adults around me drilled this into me as I was growing up. It may also have something to do with people in ?the helping professions.? I don?t call my family physician ?Mark? ? he?s ?Dr. Braunstein.? And the principal of my kids? school is ?Mr. Galla,? not Tony. (Both men are much younger than I am ?but let?s not go there right now.)

There?s always that wall with the people we approach for help, who see us and our families at our most vulnerable. In order for both sides of the equation to deal with that, a protective shield of ?professionalism? slides up, which allows them to dispense with bad news and straight talk. But we never get to know each other as people.

Except for Ken. He does his best work with the force-field turned off ? in his sermons and retreats, he dares the folks in the pews to see him as a human being, by relating the Gospel to his own life challenges. And he?s had more than his share: a troubled and abusive home life as a child; his own struggles with the choices he made because of that upbringing; an intense and focused search for peace of mind.

Ken is a guest celebrant at my parish and often leads Lenten retreats at the church and school. Three years ago, he stopped showing up suddenly, and rumors were flying that he?d left the priesthood, finally, after decades of struggle. This turned about to be sort-of-true: Ken showed up a few months later, during a week?s vacation from his new job. With the support of Cardinal Roger Mahony, he?d left the archdiocese and took a job as a bus driver on the island of Maui in Hawaii. He loaded tourists? luggage on and off, and shuttled people from resorts to airports and back again. The physical work, he said, cleared his head. Best of all, nobody knew the man hauling their baggage was a priest ? or even vaguely entertained the notion. They related to him simply as a human being, with all the pluses and minuses those words conjure up.

Ken wound up coming back to the priesthood ? more strongly than ever, more sure of his choice. But the one thing he continues to struggle with is the way people interact priests; he battles every day to remove the protective shield and experience meaningful relationships with the folks who come to church. This is how Ken himself puts it:

?This is why I NEVER wear my collar on the plane?This is why I never admit to being a priest while boiling away in a hot tub where strangers who have also gathered to be poached. I don?t want to be stuck answering questions about religion in the manner of a lawyer discussing law. Who cares about Limbo? Who cares if Jesus had brothers or sisters?... You want to talk about sexuality, intimacy and their relation to living a truly compassionate life? Let?s go! You want to talk about forgiveness in a condemning world? Let?s go! You want

to talk about how the heck someone who makes minimum wage can afford a $700-a-month, one-bedroom apartment for a family of five, and still be happy with life? Let?s go! ?It?s called talking out of experience, not doctrine.?

That passage comes from Ken?s new book ? It is a startling and revealing look at one man?s life as a priest, and his overwhelming desire to connect more deeply, more human-ly, with the faithful. You can find out about the book at www.kendeasy.com. You can also view there a profile of Ken that recently aired on Los Angeles television.

And don?t miss the photo of Ken from the cover of his book: the smiling guy, with an open, accessible expression. The guy not wearing his collar.

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