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Martin Hegarty, 'bishop' to resigned priests, dies at 83

Robert McClory | Oct. 11, 2011

Marty Hegarty and his wife, Carole. (Robert McClory)

"I left priesthood on the first Saturday morning in June, 1988, having just presided at my last Eucharist. I moved out of the rectory in a frantic headlong rage, dragging my belongings to a basement apartment on 35th and Seeley.

"I'll never forget grasping the doorknob of my underground residence and thinking, 'What have I done to myself?' I had either been training to be a priest or was a priest for 20 of my 34 years. I was jobless, damn near penniless, my Rolodex was wrecked (this being the time before Blackberry). I had one black suit that smelled like incense and not a clue about what to do with my life?.

"So I did what everybody in my situation did. I went to see Marty Hegarty. He read me like the Sunday Trib. He knew all my sections: good priest, scared young adult, in love, consumed with guilt, rectory spoiled, clueless, but possessing a pulse.

"And then Marty told me that he wouldn't find a job for me but that he would help me find the confidence to find a job for myself. He told me that my natural talents would help me be a terrific employee. He said I would? have to start at the bottom, and work my way up. He said that I would not get the perfect job right away, but I should start with something, with anything that would pay my bills, and take things from there. The conversation lasted maybe an hour. Never has someone been so right about so many things in so short a time. When I left Marty, I could see more ? I could manage through to something new, something equally of God, something essential."

This excerpt from a tribute by John Horan was echoed by many last October when Martin "Marty" Hegarty and his longtime collaborator Jim Wilbur were honored during a festive dinner at a Chicago-area restaurant, celebrating their 40 years in a unique, creative ministry. Their work: assisting Catholic priests transitioning out of the clerical state into lay life. No one has kept score, but it is generally estimated that Hegarty and his associates helped more than 3,000 former priests from across the country, as well as former nuns and even some Protestant ministers, who were on their own and in need of confidence and guidance. Hegarty's analysis of Horan proved accurate. Horan is currently the president of an innovative and highly successful charter high

school on Chicago's low-income, problem-troubled West Side.

Hegarty died Oct. 7. He was 83.

He had been in hospice care at his home for several weeks after sustaining a serious head injury in a fall in late August.

There was something about Hegarty that made him a natural for this special ministry. He was an extroverted Irishman from Chicago's West Side with a quick wit, occasionally a quick temper and a fierce loyalty to the Catholic Church and Notre Dame football. He was a delightful raconteur who knew all the old stories about pastors who built enormous churches, filled enormous schools and had enormous egos. He knew the priests who manned these institutions, knew their dedication, their eccentricities, their achievements and failures. To the end of his days, he attended virtually every priest's funeral in the archdiocese.

"He was always so caring and courageous and generous," Wilbur said. "He wore his heart on his sleeve, and he could break into tears dealing with people who were hurting."

Beyond all this, Hegarty was a born connector, nurturing relationships with dozens of friends, contacts and acquaintances, and never reluctant to ask a favor on behalf of a resigned priest.

"It's like he had a Rolodex mind," said Father Bill Kenneally, who was Hegarty's pastor for 25 years at St. Gertrude Parish on Chicago's North Side. "And he'd do anything to help ? meet you at the airport, give you a quick course on resume writing, tell you how to handle a job interview. He was a model of the connector persona."

Yet despite his work for those leaving formal ministry, Hegarty never despaired of the church or its future. He remained an outspoken advocate for social justice and the kind of progressive Catholicism for which Chicago was known in the middle of the 20th century.

"We used to tell Marty he was our de facto bishop," said Tom Ventura, a former Chicago pastor who worked with Hegarty. "In many ways, he filled the void that was left after Cardinal (Joseph) Bernardin died."

Ventura saw him too as a leader "of the church in exile, a church that sustains the spirit of Vatican II during the cold winter of discontent in the Catholic community."

Martin Hegarty was ordained a priest in 1954, served as an associate at several parishes and became a member of the archdiocesan mission band, which provided missions and retreats for parishes the Chicago area. He left the active priesthood in 1969 and married Carole Rath, who would be his wife and supporter for the remaining 42 years of his life. She said he never tired of the phone calls and visits, the coming and going of resigned priests, "and he absolutely refused to take a dime for his services."

When he went into business as an employment consultant in the secular world, Hegarty was struck by the outreach of Katie Murphy, who worked for the Catholic Action Office in Chicago and had been personally helping resigned priests find their way. She was overloaded, since the sheer number of departing priests was staggering in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hegarty spoke of the need with his friend Jim Wilbur, ordained in 1956, who had recently resigned from the clerical rolls. A fortuitous, permanent alliance was formed.

Wilbur, soft-spoken and personable with an exceptional knack for detail, had been compiling contact information on Chicago priests exiting ministry for some time.

"I was always a list-keeper," he said. "I did it here, I think, out of pastoral concern for the guys who were

coming out."

He located about 260 former Chicago priests and was discovering more and more from other dioceses and religious orders living in the Chicago area. As word spread, Hegarty found himself working long days and nights as an unending stream of inquirers sought his expertise.

As years passed, a handful of other resigned priests began to help, and a loosely constructed organization called WEORC (Old English for work) was born.

Wilbur and Hegarty saw the benefits of publishing a directory of the gathered information to enable job seekers to contact others already working in areas of their interest. The first WEORC directory with about 300 names was published in 1972; the second in 1975; and a third with almost 4,000 names and contact information in 1979.

Friends of Hegarty as well as Tom and Judy Jolie, owners of the Hensley Printing Co., have donated all publishing and postage costs for WEORC publications for many years. A quarterly WEORC newsletter updates the network with job successes and needs for about 20 years, and more recently has taken on sensitive issues in the Catholic Church as well.

Hegarty and Wilbur personally approached Cardinal Bernardin in 1987 and suggested, in the name of Catholic social justice teaching, that it was time for resigned priests who had long served the archdiocese to receive a pension.

At first stunned, the cardinal soon agreed and assisted in working out the details. Those who have served 20 years or more are now eligible for a monthly pension, regardless of their clerical status. Three weeks before his death in 1996, Bernardin told Hegarty in a short letter, "While I have told others this, I have not directly told you, namely, that I have a great respect for you. I am very grateful for all you have done for our priests."

Hegarty's outreach through WEORC also included annual retreats for resigned priests, occasional letters of support to active clergy and a convocation on social justice at DePaul University.

In recent years, the efforts of WEORC have been in the hands of a team of younger resigned priests. Meanwhile, Hegarty's personal efforts included full responsibility for a weekly Mass at a satellite of St. Gertrude's in a girls' high school. For more than 30 years, he took pride in doing everything from opening the doors, training and scheduling readers and singers to assigning priest presiders.

"I told him, For practical purposes you're the pastor over there," Kenneally said. "And he really was up to the end."

John Horan's full tribute can be found here [1].

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[1] http://weorc.blogspot.com/2011/01/marty-hegarty-40th-anniversary-of-weorc.html