

Reminiscing a Departed Shepherd

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The Diocese of Madison lost her shepherd on Saturday night, and I lost a very good friend. I've known Bishop Morlino for just over 40 years, and I was his Chancellor, both in Helena and Madison, for roughly 14 of those years. I honestly think I know him better than anybody.

I met him at Moreau Seminary at the University of Notre Dame in August of 1977. I was new to the place, and he walked over to introduce himself. "Hi, I don't think we've met. I'm Father Bob Morlino. I'm a Jesuit priest, and I head the diocesan formation program." ...the cherub face, the constant smile... I stood up and took his hand, looked him in the eyes and said, "I'm Kevin Phelan, I'm a candidate for Holy Cross, and I don't like Jesuits very much." He laughed loudly, and I thought, "Thank God, at least someone in this place will get my sense of humor."

Over the years I made him laugh a lot, and he did the same for me. I made him laugh on purpose, and he made me laugh because he was one of the funniest guys I've ever met. A lot of times he just didn't know it.

Another old friend of his, Ed Carey of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, reminds me too often that he knew the Bishop before me. Ed was also a Candidate for Holy Cross the year before I got there. As an accounting major in college, Ed found himself in need, along with a few other new seminarians, of a crash course in philosophy. The rector told them to seek out the Jesuit on the 4th floor as their guide. Ed and the guys approached Fr. Morlino and asked for help. The way Ed tells it, Morlino immediately took a yellow legal pad and wrote out a list of 25 or so books, with the instructions to read one book per week, and then on Tuesday nights he would discuss it with them as a group. Ed insists that he read every book. I had a similar experience the next year. I certainly needed help with Aquinas. Fr. Morlino must have kept the list, because when I asked him for help, he had it handy. The same instructions: read a book a week and we'll discuss it. I looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. He said, "You're not going to read all these, are you?" "No." I felt no need to lie. He took the list back and said "Fine, just come up on Tuesday nights and I'll talk you through them." It was a good plan.

I've heard rumblings over the years that the Bishop was mean to his priests. As a chancery insider, I can tell you that the charge simply isn't true. He loved the priesthood with everything he had in him. That's why at the height of the abuse scandal he was able to ordain over 40 men. Those men saw his love for the priesthood, and wanted to share that with him. It's why he brought in the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest, and it's why they came. Madison wasn't on their original list. They saw the Bishop as a man worthy of their love for the priesthood, and so they came, and they stayed. I know of many priests in the Diocese who are beholden to the Bishop, but those are their stories to tell, not mine. But I can assure you, the guy was all about the priesthood.

I've heard people say that the bishop was arrogant. Well, if I'm being completely honest (I always was with him, so I might as well be with you), he could come off as arrogant from time to time. He was extremely smart and extremely well educated. But the truth of what some called arrogance was really more frustration. You see, for the life of him he couldn't understand how people expected him to be anything more or less than a Catholic bishop. He was a teacher of the Catholic faith because he firmly believed that it was handed down from Christ to His apostles, and from those apostles to him. He didn't change the faith because it wasn't his to change. The faith belongs to Christ, the message is from Christ. Morlino knew he was just the messenger. That doesn't sound so arrogant, does it? He wasn't a man of his time, he was a man of eternity and unapologetically so. I can assure you, he was all about the faith.

I can tell you about the night before his ordination to the episcopacy. I had a front row seat (literally). The guests had all gone, and we were sharing a night cap before the big day. There were only two bedrooms in the Bishop's house, so I was the only one there. He started crying. Honestly, I'm uncomfortable with displays of emotion, but the longer I was with him, the better I did. Trying to read his mind, I told him that I was certain his dad, his mom, and of course his granny were all looking down from heaven with big smiles on their faces. He called me an idiot. "Well then why the hell are you crying," I fired back? He replied, "You were in the chapel with me today. You knelt there while the Nuncio administered the oath. Did you not understand the words?!" "THEY WERE IN LATIN. OF COURSE I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THEM!" He actually thought that was funny, and it broke some of the tension, but he turned serious again as he explained that the oath basically obliges him, at the risk of losing his soul, to teach the Catholic faith, the true Catholic faith, and only the Catholic faith. For those offended by him for not being more negotiable in interpreting the faith, I can assure you that he firmly believed that if he couldn't save his own soul, he probably wouldn't be all that helpful with anyone else's. I can assure you, the guy was all about the salvation of souls.

I have a million stories of the bishop. In the next week or so, I'll be with his friends both old and new. There is no family; he was the last in his line; there will be no more. I'll close by saying something that is terrible theology and will probably surprise you. I don't believe that Bishop Morlino is in heaven. He would often joke that when he got to the pearly gates, good St. Peter would hand him the keys to Purgatory and point the way, telling him to turn off the lights and lock the door when he left. But I don't think the Bishop is in Purgatory either. As I mentioned, I think I know him better than anybody, and my best guess is that he's exactly where he wants to be - standing before the gates of Hell, with his promise cross in one hand and sacred scriptures in the other, shouting the Gospel into the darkness with all the formidable strength of his younger days; in the hopes that he can get just one more lost, lonely, and beleaguered sinner to turn around, look into the face of the Risen Lord and say "YES." I think I mentioned that he was all about saving souls; and I knew him better than anybody.