

# THE CARDINAL O'CONNOR I KNEW

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It was Sunday, October 3, 1993, and I had been on the job for just three months. That afternoon, I went for a walk in midtown Manhattan and stumbled upon a street fair. The hot sausage was great and so was the beer. Then I heard some music coming from 5th Avenue, so I walked up the block to see what was going on. It was the Polish American parade, a great event.

I was standing on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral when I spotted Joe Zwilling, the archdiocesan spokesman. I asked him if he was the one who wrote the column for Cardinal O'Connor in the current edition of *Catholic New York*; he said no, the cardinal wrote it. I was taken aback because I had never met the cardinal and the article was about a victory we had just scored against the Metropolitan Transit Authority: we pressured the MTA to remove a blasphemous poster from the sides of city buses. And the cardinal loved it.

Joe asked if I wanted to meet him. "Now"? After all, I was wearing bermuda shorts and a T-shirt. Joe insisted it was okay. I was then escorted down the steps of the cathedral to meet him. He was greeting leaders of the various parade units as they passed by when Joe told him I was there. He walked away from the parade, greeted me kindly and offered his sincere congratulations on the MTA victory. I was stunned.

The next time I met the cardinal it was on a Friday in December at about 5:00 p.m. After a brief exchange, he asked what he could do for me. "Nothing," I said. He turned to his attorney, Eileen White, and said that he could count on two hands the number of times this had happened to him in the past ten years as New York's archbishop. After about ten minutes of conversation, he asked again what he could do for me.

“Your Eminence, as I said before—nothing. I’ve come here to inherit your problems.” Then, in an incredulous voice, he said, “You want to inherit my problems”?

Maybe that’s why we got along so well. I just couldn’t bear the thought of asking him for some special favor. It must also be said that he never once tried to use his leverage to get me to do anything. But he did go out of his way for me: he moved the Catholic League’s office to the top floor, adjacent to his suite. More important, when he learned we needed more space and were planning to move out of the building, he offered a slice of his own office just to keep us in the Catholic Center. (Because we’re at the breaking point again, we may have to move out soon.)

Anyone who knew Cardinal O’Connor came to appreciate his kindness, his intellect and his great sense of humor. That is why it pains me to read the drivel that his critics put forward. “He kicked gay people out of a parish and threatened excommunication for public leaders who backed abortion.” This is the kind of nonsense that the *New York Times* sought fit to print. That it was said by a high school student at one of New York’s top Catholic schools, Regis, is all the more troubling. One wonders what else is being taught at Regis these days.

Here’s what an AP reporter had to say: “Sometimes O’Connor put his foot in his mouth. He once compared aborted fetuses to victims of the Holocaust, and characterized the Holocaust as Judaism’s ‘gift’ to the world.” Well, lady, the killing of a million and a half innocent babies each year is a Holocaust, and no one owns a monopoly on that word.

And, yes, the Holocaust was a gift that Judaism gave us. If reporters took as much time trying to understand what O’Connor called the Church’s “theology of suffering” as they do trying to understand the customs of aborigines off the coast of South America, they wouldn’t make such stupid charges.

Then there was the editorial in the *New York Times* the day after he died. It was noted that the cardinal “passionately opposed abortion, birth control, homosexuality, the ordination of women and even baseball on Good Friday.” Yet “he balanced them with a plea for those in need, even when the needy were at odds with his strong Catholic message.” In the eyes of the *Times*, these positions are irreconcilable and in need of “balancing.” They just don’t get it.

And leave it to Jimmy Breslin, a New York has-been if there ever was one. The day after the burial the saloon journalist screamed how anti-woman the Church is. Now it might matter a little if he still had Catholic credentials.

In fairness to the media, almost all the reporting was respectful, and this was particularly true of television. I was certainly grateful for the many opportunities afforded to me to discuss the cardinal’s legacy.

Cardinal O’Connor was the de facto leader of the Catholic Church in America. The response from Hispanics and Jews, in particular, demonstrate how widely he was loved. That he loved the Catholic League is beyond dispute, and that we loved him is also indisputable. May he rest in peace.