

Dr. William Marra
Herald of the Great King
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My memories of Dr. William Marra will always be associated with Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Church on Baldwin Avenue in our hometown of Jersey City, New Jersey.

A city perhaps best known at the time for its large Irish and Italian population, and the Hague-Kenny Democrat political machine which was so important in national affairs, Jersey City's most famous Roman Catholic residents in the 1940s were the English publishers and apologists, Frank and Maisie Sheed. Not that I ever saw Bill assisting at Holy Mass in what was then the Irish parish of our youth, just several blocks away from Journal Square where the couple made their home in Maisie Ward Sheed's final years. In fact, I wasn't even to meet Bill until decades later. The remarkable books of Frank and Maisie Sheed were also to be a late discovery, after other writers and speakers like Marra, Frederick Wilhelmsen, L. Brent Bozell, Thomas Molnar, and Warren H. Carroll had helped enlighten me on the true value of what remained of Catholic culture in post-World War II America.

Bill was probably a daily communicant as a young man. While my most vivid recollection of the Eucharistic celebration at Saint Joseph's was the semester at nearby Dickinson High School when I promised God I would "go to Mass" every day if he would let me pass algebra, which I was hopelessly confused about. In the event I, of course, failed algebra. But as I now realize, the Lord as he always does in his perfect generosity accepted my little, selfish proposition about daily Mass and rewarded me many years later with what is infinitely more precious—the gift of faith!

Bill was a good deal older than I, and without a doubt his Roman Catholic faith was already showing that rock-like quality that would enable him to develop into one of America's great defenders of orthodoxy in the years following Vatican II. I was going to Mass in those days to please my dearest mother. I even attended Saint Joseph's Parochial School for a short time in the sixth grade, probably at the same time Bill was a freshman at Regis High

School in New York City, having just graduated from the same school on Baldwin Avenue run by the Sisters of Charity.

Dr. Marra went on to earn an engineering degree at the University of Detroit, then a Ph.D. in philosophy at Fordham, where he studied under Dr. Dietrich von Hildebrand. I only lasted a semester at Saint Joseph's School. In class I had my knuckles rapped so often by the good sisters, or so it seemed, that all else having failed I finally prevailed upon my mother to have me transferred to Public School 6. From there it was on to schools in Jersey City, Munich (my father was a career U.S. Army officer stationed there,) and Ann Arundel County, Maryland.

At The Citadel, Rutgers, and Penn State I continued my formal education, earning a Ph.D. in history in 1965. But our Lord, truth and love himself, whom Dr. Marra had served from his youth, was still no real part of my life. In fact, as one of my science professors at The Citadel noticed and duly warned me about, I was on my way to becoming something of a free-thinker. I now often wonder how I could have been so stupid and insolent as to read Voltaire during compulsory Mass on Sundays. Or later at Rutgers, where I transferred after my plebe year and thought of myself as a philosopher consumed with the love of knowledge and truth, I could have failed to even once in the four years that I was a student to answer the invitation of our Lord, Truth Incarnate, to enter into his divine life in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar at Saint Peter's Roman Catholic Church on the edge of the campus.

Bill lived on Baldwin Avenue, opposite Saint Joseph's Church, where after him I was to be confirmed in 1949. He literally grew up in the presence of the Son of God, our Savior. Bill's parish church and mine in the '40s was directly across from where he lived, so that our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament, reserved in the tabernacle, was an intimate part of his daily life. To watch Dr. Marra pray the Stations of the Cross, as I did in a small Massachusetts church several years ago, was to be struck by the fact that this man had a deep awareness of His Lord's passion and death and an abiding sense of Christ's presence among us. For almost thirty-four years now I myself have lived opposite the altar of another St. Joseph's Church, in New Paltz, New York, and have had the infinite privilege of being daily summoned to his altar by the "Lord of lords, and King of kings" (Revelation, xvii, 14; xix, 16). Bill's example, of how he glorified God with the spiritual riches given to him, is both a warning and inspiration. "When much has been given a man, much will be required of him. More will be asked of a man to whom more has been entrusted" (Luke, 13, 48-49).

When Bill and I learned that we both came from Jersey City, and that he had lived on Baldwin Avenue and I nearby, it wasn't long before we were both delighted to discover that he had lived next door to my Aunt Genevieve, and that he had known her family well. He had to know her son, my cousin

William, who served in the U.S. Army and was killed in World War II. A good friend, whom I still keep in touch with after all these years, lived a couple of doors down from Bill in those days: Marcel Koster, also a parishioner of St. Joseph's remembers Bill and his brother well.

On Sundays, sad to say not having the vaguest idea of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, I would join other boys from the apartment complex on Palisades Avenue where I lived in putting in the collection basket those silver-looking pennies that were in circulation during and after the war, keeping the dimes our mothers had given us for church to buy candy and other treats at Hoffman's Ice Cream Parlor on Newark Avenue. It was a childlike deception, and I'm sure the King of the Universe understood it that way. In this case too, I think Bill in his wisdom would be the first to agree that no matter what our confused motives and humble offerings, the Lord, the searcher of hearts, unfailingly returns "good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over" (Luke 6, 38). And he certainly has to me.

I discovered Bill Marra many years later in the '70s, after another saintly friend and admirer of Bill, Lyman Stebbins, and Jim Likoudis introduced me to Catholics United for the Faith. A fellow parishioner and member of our Knights of Columbus Council, Cletus Schiller, lent me copies of *The Wanderer*, CUF's *Laywitness*, and *Triumph Magazine* where I read about Dr. Marra's indefatigable travels around the country and Canada promoting Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

I met Bill for the first time when he came up to New Paltz, New York and he, Cletus, and I went over to Poughkeepsie to hear the Fordham professor of philosophy speak to the Mid-Hudson CUF Chapter on the dangers of pragmatism and instrumentalism in education. Seldom had I heard anyone speak with such conviction and fervor, integrating truths of the faith and philosophy in a masterly way. It was my first experience listening to a real Catholic thinker who made no mealy-mouthed apologies for what he believed. It was a privilege for me to join Bill as a speaker about a decade later at the Koneaszy Catholic Youth Rendezvous in Southfield, Massachusetts.

Bill's teaching and heroic life in the faith, his Athanasian orthodoxy with CUF and The Roman Forum, somehow, I now realize, was fashioned at the altar of the Great King who promised to be with us and who even now reigns in his court at Saint Joseph's on Baldwin Avenue in Jersey City and in every other church that remains faithful to Rome. I was confirmed in that same church in May 1949, taking the confirmation name of Raphael. Italian-born Mother Veronica, OFM, of the Ringwood Franciscan Sisters, for whom my Uncle Raphael worked at their Mount Alvernia Convent, presented me with a Bible on the occasion. "You're a Soldier of Christ? Good for you! Just bet you're proud and happy too!" mother wrote in the Douay version of Holy Scripture I have before me. Bill's example was to be for me and millions of

others a model of what it means to be a "Soldier of Christ." Bill's witness helped lead me to other doctors of the church in our day, men and women whom I am blessed to count as mentors and friends, men and women like Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, L. Brent Bozell, Warren H. Carroll of Christendom College, Alice von Hildebrand, James Likoudis, Robert Herrera, and Thomas Molnar and John Rao of The Roman Forum and the Dietrich von Hildebrand Institute.

Several years ago, another herald of the Great King from Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Jersey City came into our lives. What a grace it was to discover, as Bill and I did, that the brilliant young Italian-American sociologist and co-founder of the orthodox Society of Catholic Social Scientists, Dr. Joseph A. Varacalli, had lived a stone's throw from Bill's house on Baldwin Avenue and my family's apartment. Founding Editor-in-Chief of the Society's *Catholic Social Science Review*, which publishes only articles in the social sciences faithful to the Magisterium, Joe too was strengthened in his Roman Catholicism by Dr. Marra's lay witness over the years.

Dr. Varacalli, it turns out, lived in the '70s on Magnolia Avenue, just around the corner from St. Joseph's. While he was completing his doctoral dissertation at Rutgers and teaching sociology at the university's Newark campus, he recently told me he had what he describes as a "reconversion experience" before the altar crucifix at the church. The light from the cross at St. Joseph's was blinding for an instant, and Joe fell to his knees in contrition for his lukewarm faith. It happened on the occasion of a young girl's confirmation, when she and her family asked Joe to be her godfather. And so Dr. Varacalli's lay apostolate, like Bill Marra's and mine--and countless others who remain known only to the great King of the Universe--began at the altar of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in an obscure corner of Jersey City.

Like most Italian-Americans, Bill Marra possessed in his very soul that Franciscan spirituality that loves and celebrates God's creation. How appropriate it is that his major published work should be on hope! He grew up a few blocks away from "Little Italy" in downtown Jersey City where *la festa*, the great sanctus of the southern Italians, lit up the black urban night sky every summer with fireworks proclaiming the credo of an immigrant people and their devotion to the Mother of God. No wonder Dr. Marra was a leader in the movement to recognize Mary formally as Co-Redemptrix, together with her divine Son, the Eternal Yes! I have written about "People of the Festa" like Bill Marra and their incarnational realism elsewhere, in the anthology *The Saints in Italian-American Life: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry* (Forum Italicum, Center for Italian Studies, Stony Brook, State University of New York, 1999), a book coedited by Dr. Varacalli, myself, and others. The last talk I heard given by Dr. Marra was, significantly enough, on The Creation, and it was at Franciscan University of Steubenville. The fact is that Bill's life and work is a testimony

to the indestructibility of the Father's creation in Jesus Christ, a Franciscan canticle of creation, "breaking into song, singing praise" (Psalms 98, I, 2-4).

When I think of my friend Bill Marra, I think inevitably of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini and Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, missionaries to their fellow Italians who had come to America as immigrants and workers. They, like Bill, were dedicated to helping Italians and others discover and preserve the sacramental, spiritual, and cultural fullness of Christianity in a hostile Protestant environment. As Bill showed us, the struggle is not over.

On April 24, 1999, at the State University of New York, New Paltz, Italian-American fraternal organizations sponsored an academic conference on "Mother Cabrini, Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, and Italian Immigration." One of the sessions was a panel on "The Saints in Italian-American Life," the title of our new book. I dedicated my paper and the conference to Bill Marra.

Another Roman Catholic philosopher has perhaps said it best. "The Christian," writes Dr. Josef Pieper, who could have been writing about Bill Marra, Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, L. Brent Bozell, Warren H. Carroll, Alice von Hildebrand, Thomas Molnar, Fr. Vincent Micelli, S.J., James Likoudis, and all the Yea-Sayers of our day, "is convinced that no destructive action, no matter how thoroughgoing, even if it is fervently celebrated as a gruesome 'antifestival,' can ever corrode the substance of creation." (*In Tune with the World, a Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1963, 1973], pp. 19, 14-25, 64-65 *et passim*).

In the "antifestival" of modern times, no witness could be more precious. *Athanasius contra mundum*.

