PROJECT MUSE®

The Magisterium

Ed Rutkowski

Prairie Schooner, Volume 77, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 103-114 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.2003.0027>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/41668>

Ed Rutkowski

The Magisterium

At first, all we knew about Father Parlante was that he was Italian and his health was poor. We were sophomores. When we got to class we saw he was young and his hair was blacker than his shirts, but his skin was waxy and made him look sick. He coughed a lot. Sometimes he winced and put his hand to his ribs, and because of this the girls in class fell in love with him. They loved him so much they couldn't answer any of his questions. The first week, when he asked Arlene McNerney what was the basis of the law of the Roman Catholic Church, she shook her head like a deaf mute. It was still summer and her bra straps showed through her white blouse. She shifted her legs under her skirt. In warm weather the girls wore light blue skirts that were supposed to come down to their knees. One day the year before I'd taken Arlene out into the woods behind the school and got my hands on the hem of that skirt before she stopped me, and I stood there in the trees with the taste of her tongue in my mouth and that coarse cloth turning damp in my palms. Father Parlante gave Arlene a clue about the song from *Fiddler on the Roof* but she just kept shaking her head. His eyes scanned the rest of us. It was my mother's favorite movie but I didn't raise my hand.

"Tradition!" he said, like a magician saying Ta-da! "It is tradition which is the foundation of all our rites and laws. It is tradition which the Holy Father consults before he decrees in his wisdom what we should believe."

That whole week he asked questions about holy days and the apostles, the seven sacraments and the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins. He told us about the law of contradiction: you cannot be truly sorry for a sin if you want to commit it again. He paced in front of the class with his hands behind his back and told us we should be ashamed how little we knew about our own religion. Then he started asking questions about things none of us should

have been expected to know, like what color vestments the priests wore on certain feast days, what were the stages leading to canonization. I knew some of the answers, but I never talked unless he asked me, and then I said I didn't know. I didn't want anyone to think I was religious like Jerry Kantner, who said half-hour penances and talked all the time about entering the seminary.

When he grew up, Jerry Kantner became a cop. He never went to the seminary. People in our town who'd known he wanted to be a priest acted as if he'd settled for the next best thing.

Father Parlante gave us a list of one hundred questions about the Catholic church, questions like *What is infallibility?* and *What is continence?* There were questions about saints, popes, the Church Fathers, even songs sung at mass. *How can we tell that "Amazing Grace" is a Protestant hymn?* We had to write one-paragraph answers for each question and turn them in by the middle of October. He told us we needed to spend a lot of time in our township libraries since the school library wasn't good enough. "You do not want to wait until October to get started," he said.

I didn't wait. I had my father drive me to the library one night during the second week of school. "Sounds like busy work to me," he said when I told him what I needed to do there. I was in the back seat of our station wagon. He and my mother were dressed for dinner, and the car smelled like cologne and fabric softener. At a red light my father turned around and lifted his sunglasses to show me his eyes, something he did to let me know he was sincere. My father liked to think of himself as a straight talker, the kind of father my friends wished they had. "Mark, do what you need to do," he said, "but remember, you don't have to take it to heart."

"Derek, stop it," my mother said. "You'll get him in trouble."

"Didn't I just tell him to do what they asked?"

"You're giving him a bad attitude. Christ, they'd throw him out of school if they knew what an atheist his father was."

"First, I'm not an atheist. Secondly, I want him to make up his own mind, when he's old enough to think things through. And that's a good attitude. This Parlante sounds like he's all doctrine and no heart." The light had changed and the car behind us honked. We lurched forward. "They've got him all day and I want to make sure he has a balanced perspective."

They were the priests and nuns and teachers of Bishop McNamara High School. My father had grown up Catholic and gone to Catholic schools, but once he was out he stopped attending mass,

and for that his parents had kicked him out of the house. He pretended that things were fine between him and my grandparents, but even then I could tell that he'd never quite forgiven them. He liked to say that the last time he'd been in a church was the day he married my mother. But he sent me to Catholic school because he agreed with my mother that I'd get a better education and have a better chance of going to college. Most of my religion teachers had been laity, which made my father more inclined to trust them. My mother, a convert, took me to mass every Sunday and to confession one Saturday a month. When I turned eighteen, she said, I could stop going if I wanted to. I knew my father would be disappointed if I didn't.

They dropped me off at the library door, saying they'd pick me up at 7:30. That gave me an hour and a half, enough time, I thought, to get thirty or forty questions done. The air conditioner was on so high the women in circulation were wearing sweaters. In the reference section I searched for *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, but almost half the volumes were missing. I walked around looking for people from my class. At a round table by the Xerox machine I found Arlene and a dozen thick green books. One of them was open in front of her and she was writing on a piece of loose-leaf on top of it. I walked up to her and said hello.

She looked up and said, "Hey." She was wearing perfume, a heavy floral scent. Perfume wasn't allowed at school.

"Mind if I sit down?" I said. I picked up one of the books and read the spine. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 13, POL-RAB. "I need to look at some of these."

"Go ahead," she said.

I sat across from her and flipped through the book, pretending to read. I had my sheet of questions nearby and every time I looked at that I stole a glance at Arlene. Her long straight dark hair had pooled on one page of the book she was reading. She liked to tilt her head to one side so she could hide the acne on her right cheek.

We belonged to the same parish. In grade school we'd been casual friends, but she hadn't said much to me since that day in the woods a year ago when she'd let me feel her breasts through her blouse. She had pushed me hard enough to knock me down and run off. I'd seen her a few times over the summer, at the pool and the corner store, but never alone. Now, in the library, I couldn't stand the silence.

"Can I see what you have for Heroic Virtue?" I said.

She stopped writing and ruffled through her papers, then slid

a sheet across to me. One side was covered with purple ink. Under Heroic Virtue she had written, "Heroic Virtue is the practice of the cardinal and theological virtues in such manner and degree as to be extraordinary both in motive and perseverance. It is essential to prove heroic virtue on the part of one who is to be beatified or canonized."

"Where did you find this?"

She held up a thick book with a tan cover. The Catholic Dictionary.

"So you're just copying out of the books?"

"I changed some of the words."

"I don't think that's what he wants us to do."

"Well, what does he want us to do then?"

"I don't know." I held up my questions and read over them. *What is the Introit? What is Casuistry?* "I can't even say some of these." She smiled. It seemed like she was waiting for me to say something else, and when I didn't she started writing again. I hoped she couldn't see how frantically I was trying to think of something to talk about. Helplessly I turned the pages of the volume in my lap, closed it, took another one from the pile. In The Book of Saints I saw there were three pages of saints who had the name Mark, but there was no Arlene.

"Did you know there's no Saint Arlene?"

She stared at me as if I'd called her a name. "So?"

"I just thought it was interesting. There's a whole bunch of Marks."

She sighed and stood up, capping her pen, and said, "I have to go." She gathered her papers and put them in her schoolbag and pushed her chair in so hard the table shook. Then she slung her bag over one shoulder and walked off.

We had Father Parlante's class in fifth period, about 12:30. Most of us had already eaten lunch, and he liked to blame that fact for making us timid and quiet. But we weren't sleepy. We sat rigidly in our desks. Even though he moved and spoke very slowly, everything he did or said somehow seemed urgent. He spent a good part of each class coughing, and sometimes we couldn't make out what he was saying. We also weren't sure what he was going to talk about from one day to the next. We had bought textbooks but he hadn't assigned any pages to read in them. Mostly he just talked to us about things that he seemed to think were more important than what he was supposed to teach us.

One day he came in and wrote the words "mortal sin" on the blackboard. He pronounced them "mordal seen." Every religion class I'd ever taken got around to mortal sin eventually. If we died with mortal sin on our souls, we would go to hell. We'd always been told that only truly terrible things like murder and adultery were considered mortal sins, but now Father Parlante listed three requirements for mortal sin that I'm sure none of us had heard before. He counted them off with the fingers of his right hand:

"A sin is mortal if: You know it is wrong. You think about it. You do it anyway."

He stood there with his hand raised and stared at us. He seemed to be accusing us of having sinned mortally within the hour. "There are people who say how difficult it is to commit mortal sin. That God's love is so great He excludes us from it only very rarely. Do not listen to these people." He crossed his arms in front of his chest and began pacing slowly, the legs of his crisp black pants scratching together. "It is dangerous to listen to them. God's love is great, yes. But do not be fooled. Scripture makes clear that any sin, if deliberate, keeps us from God's love and the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit." He stopped, drew a hankie from his shirt pocket, and coughed into it for what seemed like several minutes. Then he crumpled the handkerchief and returned it to his pocket. He started pacing again, pressing his hand to his side. Even lies, he said, could be mortal sins if we knew what we were doing when we told them. I tried to count the number of times I'd lied to my parents in the past month, the times I'd copied someone's homework for algebra or biology lab. Then I looked at Arlene. She was staring at her desk where her hands lay folded. Both of us could have been sent to hell for that day in the woods, but I had already confessed and I was sure Arlene had also. Then I remembered that I'd told my confessor I had committed "impure thoughts." I wondered if this covered what we'd done, or if it was itself a lie.

I was thinking about what hell was like, what might happen to me before my next confession to send me there, when Father Parlante said, "Hell means the total absence of God. You have seen these pictures of hell with flames. The souls burning. Hell is not like this. It is worse. We have these pictures because they are the worst thing we can imagine."

My mother didn't believe my father when he said he wasn't an atheist. "Close enough," she would say, then bang the oven door

closed or take some dishes out to the kitchen. They tried not to talk about religion in front of me; in fact they rarely argued about anything, and my mother didn't seem bothered by my father staying home on Sundays. And as far as I could tell, my father never tried to persuade her to stop going to mass. But they had been hearing about Father Parlante from the parents of other boys in my class, and one night they called me out to the kitchen to ask about him. I knew they'd been arguing because my father was leaning against the counter with his arms crossed. He was a machinist and spent a lot of time on his feet at work, and he would have been sitting at the table with my mother if he wasn't agitated.

"Mark," she said, angling her arm on the table so she could prop her head with her hand, "I've been on the phone with Mrs. Lorenz, you know, Tommy's mom? She says he's been complaining about your religion teacher. She thinks he's giving too much homework and –"

"What does he talk about in class?" my father said suddenly. My mother glared at him. "Does he say you're all going to hell if you don't listen to him?"

"No," I said. "He didn't even talk about hell today."

"Does he usually talk about hell?" my father said.

"Derek, it's a Catholic school," my mother said. "What's the matter with you? He's got to talk about hell sometime."

"He doesn't have to be scaring kids, making them think every time they do something they want to do they're damning themselves. These kids aren't children anymore."

"Why did you send me to Catholic school if you don't want them to teach me about being Catholic?" I was hoping he wouldn't call my bluff, hoping he wouldn't say I was right and he was pulling me out and sending me to public school. I had too many friends at Bishop McNamara. He looked at my mother.

"Sounds like a fair question," my mother said.

My father grimaced and scratched the back of his head. "Mark," he said. "Being Catholic shouldn't mean you're thinking about hell all the time."

"I know that."

He told me he'd had priests like Father Parlante in his high school, and they had ruined religion for him. He said he respected my mother's faith, and he would respect mine if I continued to be Catholic when I left school. And he thought Catholic school was the best place for me right now. The discipline, he said. An atmosphere more conducive to learning. He knew I'd figure things

out eventually and I'd do what was best for me, and that's all he wanted.

But later that night he stopped me at the door. I was going to meet some friends at the water towers, where Greg Lewis had promised to bring a six pack from his father's cellar. My mother was in the bathroom, and he walked up to me as if he was going to sneak out of the house with me.

"One more thing about that Parlante, and I won't say anything more about it," he said. He was quiet for a few seconds, as if he was still working out what he wanted to tell me. When he spoke his voice was low. "Just don't let him scare you," he said.

By the end of September Father Parlante was hardly pacing anymore. When he did he walked very slowly, like an old man. He would drop his chalk and Arlene or another girl would retrieve it for him. If it was Arlene I'd lean into the aisle and watch her bend down, and when she came back to her seat I'd wait for her eyes to flick over mine. But most of the time Father Parlante didn't use the chalk. He just sat at his desk and talked. We all took notes even though we weren't sure which things we'd be tested on, even though he hadn't given us any tests yet. One day he asked us what we called the Church's authority to teach doctrine and proclaim moral law. No one knew.

"The magisterium," he said. He put his hands together on his desk and leaned forward slowly. The room was dark; he never turned on the fluorescent lights because they hurt his eyes, and the windows were filled with gray sky. "Listen," he said. "This is very important. We never question the magisterium. We never question the magisterium in this class."

He didn't say anything else. I raised my hand. It took him a while to see it. He didn't call my name but just sat there looking at me.

"Why not?" I said.

I was in the back and everyone turned around. I could hear the clock ticking, a metal locker clanging shut somewhere down the hallway.

"I am sorry," he finally said, "I cannot recall your name."

"Mark," I said.

"And your family name?"

"Raferty."

"Mark Raferty," he said, rising slowly to his feet, "you ask me why we cannot question the magisterium in this class. Because,

Mark Raferty, it is a very grave sin to question the authority of the holy Roman church. It places our souls in mortal danger. As your own soul is now."

He was standing now, his voice rising. He leaned towards me with both hands on the desk.

"I didn't question it," I said. "I didn't question anything."

"You have brought temptation to sin into this classroom and endangered the minds and souls of your peers. You should go to confession immediately."

He was waiting for me to leave. I looked around the room, trying to find in someone's face what I should do, but they were all staring at Father Parlante now.

"Remember you know not the day or the hour," he said, almost shouting. He was pointing toward the door. "Father Kearney is in the chapel. Go to him and confess what you have said here. Tell him –"

Before he could finish he started coughing, a harsh phlegmy cough that left him slumped across the desk with his hands over his mouth. Then he got up slowly and walked out the open door. We could hear him coughing all the way down the hall. People spoke in whispers; I had just challenged the teacher and sent him hacking into the hallway. I felt the need to explain myself to everyone but I couldn't think of anything to say. Arlene was looking at me with what I thought was concern and pity. I'd been in trouble before, but I'd never been accused of committing mortal sin. When Father Parlante came back he was walking slower than ever and rubbing his mouth with a hankie. I expected him to fall into another fit when he saw me – he had told me to go to the chapel, yet here I still was, disobeying him again – but he told me instead to see him in his office after the final bell. He sat down heavily and the chair rolled back and stopped against the blackboard behind him.

The only thing I could think to say was, "I'll miss my bus."

"So you shall. Consider it a – what is the word – a detention."

The chapel was a small room on the third floor, with ten rows of wooden pews, a small folding table for an altar. To the left of the altar was a door. A faint light shone underneath it. I knocked and Father Parlante said to come in. I'd never been in his office before, and all afternoon I'd been nervous about it. It was no bigger than a large closet, with a bookcase, no windows, and two plush chairs across from a small desk. He was sitting behind the desk, writing

on a piece of school stationery. An antique-looking lamp sat on a corner of the desk. Without looking up he motioned for me to sit.

"I will be with you soon," he said.

I sat down and put my bag on the floor and looked at the pictures hanging on the wall behind him. They were the kind of pictures everyone has at home, only these were blown up and framed. In three of them Father Parlante was standing or sitting with people I took to be relatives. One showed a cluster of homes at the base of a mountain. In the other picture he was standing on the steps of a church in his cassock and surplice. The sun was off to the side, and his shadow fell down the steps like a crooked carpet.

He dropped the pen on his desk and sat back.

"So. You are Irish."

I didn't know what to say. I thought he'd told me to come here so he could lecture me about sin.

"Raferty is an Irish name, is it not?"

"Yes," I said. "My father's Irish. My mother's everything else."

He smiled. "And your father, was he born in Ireland?"

"No. My grandfather was though. He immigrated in the twenties."

"And where was he from in Ireland?"

I shook my head. I had known this once, but couldn't remember. It had been a long time since I'd thought of my grandfather. He'd been dead for years.

"Ah. So the connection has been broken. I doubt very much you would understand."

"Understand what?"

"What it is like to be far from home." He swiveled in his chair and gestured to the wall. "This is the town where I am from. I have not been there in many years."

He missed his family badly. He said he wrote letters to them every week. He said the people in the pictures, his mother and sisters and cousins, were from a village in Italy where all the people were very religious and all the sons were expected to go to the seminary and all the daughters to the convent, but he was the only one of his friends to pursue a vocation. He said the picture of him in front of the church was taken the day he was ordained. At that moment, he said, he thought he had made a terrible mistake by entering the priesthood, and he kept the picture on the wall to remind him that faith is always precarious, that even in our strongest moments we are tempted to give in to doubt. No one, he said, can be too vigilant in protecting his faith.

He swiveled back to face me. "And so we come to the reason why you are here." He crossed his arms and smirked, as if we were about to share secrets. "You think I am being unreasonable when I tell the class they cannot question something. You think that anything that is true should withstand questioning. Am I correct?"

I nodded, even though I hadn't thought any of those things until he said them.

"Good. This shows you are mature and intelligent. The Church always needs followers like you. You must understand, however, that not all of your peers are as advanced in their faith as you are. You must understand it is my duty to protect them until they are able to fend for themselves. Because if the heart and mind are not ready for questioning, then the soul can be lost. Do you follow?"

"I think so," I said, but it was a lie. I asked him if I still needed to go to confession.

"If you understand, there is no need to confess." He put his hand to his chin and looked at his desk. The paper in front of him was covered with small, jagged letters; they looked as if they had been painful to write. "On the contrary, it is I who must ask forgiveness. I am sorry I was angry with you today. Sometimes I am too – " he looked at me again " – too zealous, maybe? Yes. Too zealous in my desire to protect the young."

He yawned, as if all this talking had drained him, then leaned forward and took up his pen.

"Is there anything else you would like to speak to me about?"

I shook my head.

"You may go then. I am glad we had this chance to talk. Come again if there is anything on your mind."

He started writing again, so I picked up my bag and stood up and opened the door. Before I left he said my name and I turned around. He was still writing.

"I am also sorry you missed your bus."

He didn't look up, so I said, "That's okay," and closed the door behind me.

Father Parlante's last day in class was the day we were supposed to hand in our answers to the questions he'd given us. I had used ten sheets of loose-leaf, both sides. He was sitting in his chair when we came in, and Father Kearney, who would become our teacher the next day, was leaning against the desk, talking to him. By then we'd all heard the rumors about cancer and chemo. Someone had told me his perfect black hair was fake. My parents had

heard the rumors too, and they must have known there was something to them because neither of them were asking me about him anymore. When the bell rang, Father Kearney left the class, and Father Parlante had one of the girls in the front of the room collect our papers. She stacked them on his desk and he placed his hand on them and rippled the edges with his thumb. "You have been busy," he said, smiling at us. He said he was too tired to speak today. He said that now we should know a great deal more about our religion than we had at the beginning of the semester, and he told us to spend the period in silent meditation on what we'd learned. If we wanted to put our heads down, that was fine, as long as there was no talking. Some students lay their heads down immediately, and by the time the period was half over almost all of us were slumped across our desks. I shut my eyes and fell asleep to the sound of Father Parlante paging through our papers.

He died a few weeks later, in the beginning of November. They were going to send his body back to Italy, but before they did we had a service for him in the auditorium. His casket was on the stage, surrounded by lilies and gladiolas. Bright shafts of light fell upon it from the rafters. Students filled the bleachers and the metal chairs on the basketball court as organ music came through the speakers. Our class as a group went up the aisle between the chairs and walked up the ramp to the stage. He looked no healthier in death than he had in life, just a bit more relaxed maybe, less likely to jump up and order someone to confess. His hands were folded on his chest, his fingers entwined with a glittering rosary. We spread out around the casket and knelt on the hard wood in front of it and prayed for his soul. I could hear the girls weeping, their heads nodding up and down. I thought I could hear Arlene weeping above the others. And all I could think of was that my day would soon be over: the principal had announced that Father Parlante's students could go home after the service.

I waited for her by the fallen trunk. It had been knocked down during a storm, its muddy roots partially ripped from the earth, stretched taut as if they were trying to pull the tree upright. I watched her come down the path, and for a second I was afraid she would walk right by. She stepped over some broken branches and sat next to me on the trunk. She was wearing the fall uniform, a plaid skirt and blue sleeveless sweater. There was no trace of tears in her eyes.

"Are you alright?" I said.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"He was my favorite teacher."

"Mine too."

"No he wasn't."

"Yes he was."

"You're just saying that."

"No."

She was quiet then. She lay her head on my shoulder. Her cheek was warm through my shirt. I listened to the movements of birds and squirrels through the trees. Then Arlene took off her sweater and placed it carefully on the ground and sat on it and pulled me down to her, and when I saw she would not stop me this time I had one of those moments when we believe with something like the certainty of faith that we can know the future. I believed our lives would be full of tears and sex and dramatic acts of forgiveness. I believed Arlene and myself would come to the woods every day after school, and when it turned cold we would borrow a car and drive illegally to some dark remote place near water. I believed in the need to throw stones at her window after midnight. I believed in the many trials of our love: her parents would hate me, her older brother would jump me on the street and beat me, I would have to violently defend her honor in the face of terrible odds. And in the end, Arlene's hand in mine, a gleaming bus idling behind us, I believed I would stare hard at my weeping parents, their pleading faces, and without the least trace of remorse I would say to them, I am never coming home.