

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

The call came during supper at a modest home in a Roman Catholic parish in Flatbush, in the borough of Brooklyn, in the city of New York, in the Year of Our Lord 1939. Dad was telling Billy (Mom and the rest of the kids listening as they ate) what he was learning in night school at St. John's University, School of Commerce. All about corporations: what they are, how they are formed and organized, how they are seen as individuals under the law, the function of the Board of Directors, what proxies are. Dad had the gift of making such things simple and interesting. He should have been a teacher, with his love for explaining things and his voice, "soft as an Irish rain," as Mom would say.

Dad was right up to answer the doorbell. "Now who could that be, wanting us at suppertime?"

Tim could see from his place at the table that it was a policeman. Everyone knew "Redface the Cop," as Martin O'Rourke was called. The boys prayed that he was not calling to talk with Dad about something one of them might have done. Maybe he just wanted to remind Dad about the next meeting of the Ancient Order of

Hibernians that both belonged to.

After a whispered conversation, Dad said in a low voice, "Thanks, Martin, we'll see what can be done." Redface saluted.

Dad went back to the table with a quick kiss for Mom. "Supper was delicious, wasn't it, boys?" A chorus of "Yes!" followed.

Then, to Mom, he said, "Sorry, Kathleen, but I've got to help out up the street. I shouldn't be long. And with your permission I'll take Tim along. There might be a chance for him to learn something."

"I know, of course. Jesus and Patrick be with you."

"And Mary and Joseph with you."

"Tim, lad, we're going to the Quillens," Dad said as they ran out the door. "You are going to learn a little about being a peacemaker. And isn't the Quillen girl in your class?"

Yes, Maureen Quillen was in Tim's class, the eighth grade at St. Vincent's grammar school, which was about to graduate. She lived with her mother and father and a new baby sister in a storefront next to the bar and grill on the corner. When a small business would fail, as often happened, and move out of a store, the owner of the property would some-



Donald Mulligan

AN EARLY EDUCATION IN
PEACEMAKING IN BROOKLYN
LASTS A LIFETIME.

By FRANCIS XAVIER CUNNINGHAM

F O C U S

times rent the storefront to a family at some negligible rent like \$5 a month, or maybe even no rent at all. "Otherwise the store would stand empty," some owners would say, as if the families were not objects of their charity, but rather were doing the owners a favor by occupying the stores. Dad said it was a Christian act, done by store owners who were often Jewish. The families had to pay for heat and electricity if they wanted them and could do so, but sometimes the landlord would even neglect to bill them for the utilities.

"Mr. Quillen has come home drunk again and is beating up his wife," Dad continued. Redface had looked in and tried to quiet Mr. Quillen, but there was nothing else Redface could do. The policy of the police and the courts in New York City was clear and simple: Do not interfere in domestic troubles. "A man is the ruler in his own home." Dad said Redface was bound to either follow this policy or be fired, though he knew it was cruel and stupid.

Redface had often tried to reason with Quillen when he was sober as well as drunk. The priests of St. Vincent's had tried many times also, but nothing could stop his drinking, or help Mrs. Quillen in her purgatory. "So it's up to us, lad, to do what we can to bring peace in the home," Dad concluded.

When they got there, the baby was asleep in a cot and Maureen Quillen was sitting on a stool at the counter in the front of the store. The rear of the store was partitioned off, with a door leading to a bedroom and a toilet. Tim's heart began to pound when he heard cursing and screaming, and the sickening sound of fists hitting flesh, coming from the closed-off rear of the store.

"Tim, you know Miss Quillen. Why don't the two of you go over some of your lessons? I'll be going back to visit with the folks. I won't be long." Dad closed the door after himself as he stepped into the rear area.

Tim wasn't worried about his dad getting hurt; he knew he could take care of himself. Dad was fore-

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man of a street gang laying gas pipe for the Brooklyn Union Gas Company. He loved to tell his boys about how he had to separate his Irish immigrant workers into street gangs by their county of origin in Ireland. Otherwise there would be constant fighting among them. Dad was a Mayo man, and also a weekend club fighter — at smokers, Knights of Columbus bazaars, men's gatherings — making \$10 if he won his four rounds, five bucks if he lost. Dad didn't lose often. It was an easy way to make extra money beyond his \$35 a week as foreman — as long as you kept in shape.

One of Dad's semipro fighter buddies, "Jerry Levine, The Fighting Marine," came to dinner from time to time. Dad told Tim that Jerry could be world welterweight champion if he wanted, but he refused to fight on Friday nights for religious reasons, and therefore had to pass up the best bouts.

"Why? What's a religious reason?" Tim had asked.

"It's like we Catholics won't eat meat on Friday — it's a sacrilege that we will burn in hell for, if we do it. Just know, lad, that the man is a saint, because he won't do something against his beliefs, even though he would profit from it," Dad had explained.

Jerry was as sweet and gentle a man as you could ever hope to meet. Dad said that all really good fighters were gentle like Jerry, probably for two reasons: first, they get rid of their base instincts, their native male aggression, through fighting; and, second, they abhor chance violence through fear of breaking their knuckles on someone's jaw, and having to stop boxing and lose money until the fractures heal.

Yeah, Tim knew Maureen from school. She was a little runty kid, watery eyes and runny nose. None of the other girls were friends with her. She had black hair and a round, red face and was very shy, always hanging her head and never looking directly at you. Tim remembered that the last time Sister had slapped Maureen, her left cheek had turned white and stayed that way for a few minutes from the impact. All the guys resented it when a nun hit a girl — hitting a boy was undoubtedly deserved, but girls were entitled to a certain amount of dignity and were seldom struck. If they were, their mothers would be right up to complain to the pastor. But nobody seemed to care when Maureen Quillen was slapped.

Anticipating graduation in June, all the eighth-

F O C U S

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graders had bought little, 4-inch by 8-inch, 100-page, “autograph books” from Woolworth’s Five-and-Ten at the Junction, where Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues intersected. They brought their books to school to get their classmates’ autographs and comments.

As Tim was very bashful, he was glad to leave his book with a group of girls to sign, while he was signing other kids’ books. He could not think of clever things to write, like “Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet, and so are you” for the girls, or some tough-guy thing for the boys, like “Give ‘em hell, Flash Gordon.” He got so wrapped up in trying to think of things to write that he forgot all about his own book. And when he looked for it, nobody seemed to know where it might have gone — until one of the girls told him that Maureen Quillen had taken it because she didn’t have a book. She had been getting signatures of classmates in it, saying it was her book. But everyone knew she didn’t have a book; she couldn’t afford one, and had stolen his.

“Yeah, where would she get 25 cents to buy one?” Tim thought. He looked across the room and saw that Maureen did have an autograph book. “Oh, well, I didn’t need a book anyway.”

But some of the girls had told Sister Gonzaga that Maureen had stolen Tim’s book, and Sister apparently was determined that justice be done. “Timothy and Maureen, come to the front of the room. Maureen, bring your autograph book.” Maureen looked frightened, and Tim thought he saw a tear, but she walked up and stood beside him “bold as brass,” as the nuns would say.

“Maureen, where did you get that book?”

“At the Woolworth’s, Sister.”

“Did you steal that book?”

“No, Sister.”

“Timothy, is that your autograph book that Maureen has?”

“I don’t know, Sister.”

“Well, look at it carefully, and tell me if it is yours.”

The first page, where Tim had written his name,

class, school and date, was missing from this book. It wasn’t obvious, but he could see that the page had been torn out very close to the binding.

“Now, is that your book, Timothy?”

“No Sister, this is not my book. I’ve lost my book, but this is not it — I can tell.”

Sister Gonzaga glared at Tim for about 10 seconds. Then she told them, in a surprisingly gentle voice, to return to their places. Some of the girls started to wave their hands, obviously wanting to tell Sister something, but she looked at them and said, “I don’t want to hear any more accusations.”

And that was that, and blessed be the peacemaker.

Now Tim was trying to talk to Maureen, trying to at least get her attention. Maureen kept reading the label on a can of soup sitting on the counter in front of her, over and over, “Camp - bells - toe - may - toe - soop.”

“Maureen, listen; it’s ‘Cambuls,’ quick, like that.”

No response, no recognition even, of his presence. Didn’t she know he was president of the Altar Boys Society, that she should be glad he was talking to her, even though none of the other kids did? Wasn’t she glad he and his Dad were there to help them out? She almost seemed hypnotized. Maybe she was mad at him, ignoring him because of the trouble with Sister Gonzaga. But that wasn’t his fault.

Suddenly the door to the rear flew open, and Mr. Quillen, face bloody, and propelled from behind by Dad’s foot, crossed the room, lurched out the front door and fell onto the sidewalk.

“Don’t come back until you’re sober, Quillen,” Dad said. “And do ask permission from Mrs. Quillen; you may only enter her home if she permits it. We didn’t break anything this time, more’s the pity. But if I have to come for you again, we’ll break some ribs and arms, and maybe a jaw.”

And to two ladies who happened to be passing outside, Dad added: “Please step across Mr. Quillen, and please do accept his apology for blocking the sidewalk.

F O C U S

He pulled his State Department ID out of his pocket and flashed it, careful not to let them focus on it.

And may I add my own regret for your inconvenience?”

On the way home Dad told Tim that he was a peacemaker now. He should be proud of himself, and for the rest of his life he should be alert to the opportunity for peacemaking; it can come suddenly, without warning. There were many kinds of peace, of course. The one they had just imposed by force was a worthy accomplishment, but it probably would not hold. It was more peacekeeping than peacemaking. The most effective peacemaker cannot take sides in any way, and must have the respect of all parties. He must be imaginative, and use whatever means will help both parties keep their basic self-respect.

And a peacemaker seldom is thanked, and must be prepared for criticism, and sometimes even attack. “When we get home you’re to read the Sermon on the Mount. You’ll see that peacemakers are blessed, and they shall be called children of God,” Dad said. “And tell me, lad, did you have a nice visit with your classmate Maureen?”

“She wouldn’t even talk to me, Dad. It was as if I didn’t exist, and I felt pretty bad. She wouldn’t even say hello; just kept reading a soup can label, over and over.”

“Now don’t you be feeling bad, son. You can be sure she appreciates that you were there and trying to keep peace in the family. There was nothing personal in it on her part. She was in her own private world, a secret world where no one can hurt her, a world nobody else can enter,” Dad explained.

“Tim, sometimes things get so bad that a person has to escape from their world,” Dad continued. “They may do it by getting drunk, and maybe this is what Mr. Quillen does. Maureen escapes by entering her own private world. Maybe the real world is so bad for her at times that the only way she can survive is to leave it.

“You did a good job, lad,” Dad concluded. “Now let’s get home to the family, lest they worry about us.”

Five years later, on the athletic field behind his high school, Tim was privileged to witness another

peacemaker in action.

Brother Mark, a Christian brother who taught biology, and Vladimir Kalucki were standing about 50 feet apart and throwing a softball back and forth. Brother Mark, about 6 feet, 1 inch and 200 pounds, had played football for Georgetown. Vladimir, about 16 years old and from Greenpoint, was maybe the same height and weight as Brother Mark. But they were not having a friendly catch. This looked to be for blood.

They had been playing in a pickup softball game after school, when one of them fielded the ball and threw it to the other, perhaps with a little too much steam. The recipient took it personally, and sent the ball back even harder. The situation escalated, each of them now throwing the ball as hard as he could — and they didn’t use gloves for softball. Both players’ hands were scarlet. A group of students had gathered, fascinated, wondering in trepidation how the incident would end. A student-faculty shootout like this was unprecedented.

Suddenly Brother Cassian, the high school principal, came striding out and shouldered his way through the crowd: “Gentlemen, please let me see that ball.” Turning the ball in his hand, he continued, “Just as I feared. You may not realize how rough handling can damage these softballs. You must understand how much they cost, and how hard it is for us to come up with the funds to replace them. So, gentlemen, please — enjoy your game, but be careful with the equipment. Thanks.”

As Brother Cassian walked away, Brother Mark threw an arm across Kalucki’s shoulder. “You’ve got a good arm, Kal, but we’re going to have to work on your control.”

“Thanks, Brother. I hope I’m as good as you someday.”

Fifty years later Tim was privileged to have an opportunity to be a peacemaker again. Stepping out of a subway car at a station in Washington, D.C., he encountered a group of people watching two men

F O C U S

*And then Tim heard another voice, soft as an Irish rain,
"Good job, lad. We're all proud of you. Now go home to your
family, lest they worry about you."*

about to square off. One man, maybe in his 40s and powerfully built, was yelling obscenities at the other, itching to fight. In his 20s and slightly built, the other man obviously would be the loser, but apparently felt he must uphold his honor in front of his wife or girlfriend, who looked terrified.

Tim stepped between them and yelled, menacingly and with authority, looking at one and then the other: "You two clods knock this off right now, or I'll finish you both off." He pulled his State Department ID out of his pocket and flashed it, careful not to let them focus on it. "If you think I won't, just try me. Now I want each of you to turn around and walk away, leave the sta-

tion, before I lose my temper. Now, *move!*" The two turned in opposite directions and were off.

"Mister, you were very foolish and very lucky," a bystander said to Tim. "That one man was so mad and mean he might have attacked you. You had no authority to interfere; you bluffed it. You could have been killed; you never know about people these days. Just mind your own business after this, and let the police handle things like that — it's their job, not yours. Someone should have called the station manager."

And then Tim heard another voice, soft as an Irish rain, "Good job, lad. We're all proud of you. Now go home to your family, lest they worry about you." ■

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