



ONCE A PRIEST

Ed Griffin



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By
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Prologue

One morning when I was a young priest in Cleveland, Ohio, the housekeeper called me on the intercom, “Father Griffin, there’s a woman in the office to see you.”

I put on my cassock and went downstairs to the office. An attractive woman, perhaps in her thirties, sat opposite the desk and when I entered, she stood. Her sad blue eyes and tight lips told me there was a problem. Brown hair surrounded her thin face and she wore a navy overcoat against the early November snow in Cleveland.

“Can I take your coat, Ma’am?” I asked.

“That’s okay, Father. I’m cold.”

I sat down and she did as well. “How can I help you?” I asked.

She opened her purse and handed me a clipping. It was about a priest from Illinois, Father Leo Carlin, who had died in a single car accident a month before.

“Tragic,” I said. “Did you know this priest?”

“Yes,” she said and tears appeared in her eyes. I moved the tissue box closer to her. She shook her head. “My name is Selina,” she said, “and I’m from California. I came here to visit my sister. She suggested I come and talk to you.”

I nodded and said, “Un-huh.”

She seemed to settle back into the captain’s chair that was in this office, and she started to talk. “I met Father Leo in Acapulco, but I didn’t know he was *Father Leo* at the time. I was thirty-one, going to college in California, and recovering from an immature first marriage.

“I met him on the beach – he was really unusual, not the typical lonely guy cruising the beach. He had a cute bald spot on the back of his head. He was friendly, not just to me, but to everyone, to children who ran by on the beach, to the waiter who served us drinks and to the maids in the hotel. But he always seemed to hold a part of himself back.”

“Yes,” I interjected. “It’s part of the training. Keep your distance.”

She smiled. “Like the song, *I am a rock*. That was him.” The smile disappeared, and she continued. “We talked and talked for almost two days and nights. He finally told me that he was a Catholic priest. It really didn’t make any difference to me. I’m not Catholic myself, but I knew

priests couldn't get married, so I guessed he was breaking some rules, but I had no idea how deep it went.

"Anyway, one thing led to another and I let my motel room go and moved in with him. I wanted to forget my first marriage and to rest. It was January between semesters and I got three weeks off from my waitress job.

"He was the most wonderful man I ever met, sensitive, caring, personal. And a great lover."

She blushed slightly and glanced at me. I kept my *priest* face on.

"He told me about his upbringing," she continued, "how he grew up in a strict, but loving, Catholic family. I told him all about my first marriage and for the first time in my adult life, I felt someone understood me and valued me for who and what I was.

"He told me how he loved kids and he showed it when a little Mexican kid tried to sell us some chewing gum. He didn't take the gum, but gave the kid some money. Maybe I'm not telling it right, but I knew he loved children.

"What a perfect father for a family he would have made."

She paused, looked out at the snowy parking lot and then continued. "He told me he was trying to figure things out and that's why he had come to Acapulco.

"Maybe I was foolish, but I let it go at that. I mean, Father, he was such a gentleman and so attentive. I had never met a man like that before. I don't mind telling you I wanted, even then, to spend my life with him.

"Anyway, we had wonderful times together, but at the beginning of the third week I went to the beauty parlor for an appointment and when I came back to his room, he was gone and there was a note for me. It said that he felt terrible guilt for breaking his vows and he had sinned against God and sinned against the people in his parish.

"I almost ripped up his note at that point because I was so angry. I mean, where was I in all this business about vows and sinning?

"But I read on. I remember the next line: *Selina, I love you more than my life itself. This has been the happiest two weeks of my life. I want to be with you forever. But my job – I love my job, too. I love being a priest. I'm going back to my parish to think.*

"He said he knew how to get in touch with me – and that he had paid for the room for another full week.

"I knew that if I wanted to, I could find him, but I didn't want that kind of relationship, where I forced myself on him. And sure enough

three months later he called me from a phone booth a block from my apartment in Monterey.

"First I was mad at him for leaving me like that, but I got over it. We talked and talked. He told me how he loved being a priest, how he loved to help people, how people called him when someone died or when someone got engaged. He was part of the lives of these people and he didn't want to give it up.

"Slowly I understood how guilty he felt. He said the church considered our relationship a very serious sin."

She paused her story, "I'm not Catholic myself, Father. I hope it's okay if I talk to you."

"Not a problem," I said. It was an interesting story and I could feel tragedy coming.

She continued the story. "True love can never be a sin, I tried to tell him, but his guilt ran deep. I even suggested that he become an Anglican because they were like Catholics and he could still be a priest then. I didn't like the idea so much of being a minister's wife, but I would have done it for him.

"He would wake up in the middle of the night and sit up. I knew he was worrying. I didn't know how to help him.

"We talked a lot, but we also did things. We drove to Mt. Shasta and stayed in a B & B for a few days. It was lovely and I loved being with him."

She reached under her overcoat and pulled out a beautiful Jerusalem cross on a silver chain that hung around her neck. "He bought me this in a store on that trip. I think I'll wear it forever."

She put the cross back under her coat, then looked at me. "I just couldn't get to the bottom of it all, Father. I don't know how you people are trained, but he was tortured with guilt. Being with me was a sin against God, he said, and it was damning him to hell for all eternity. I just couldn't get him to value love for itself. I couldn't convince him that love comes from God."

She stared at the floor. I glanced at the clipping again. A single car accident, the story said. The highway patrol said the car was doing over one hundred miles per hour and went over an embankment.

"What happened then?" I asked in a soft voice.

She looked back up at me, and tears ran from her eyes. She took a tissue from the box.

“He went back to his parish one more time, he said, to say goodbye and then...” *She pointed to the clipping.*

“I know it was suicide, Father. I know it. First I thought he might be coming back to California for me, but I found out there was no luggage in the car.”

“How did you learn that? You were in Monterey.”

“The police told me. He had a card in his wallet that I was his ‘next of kin.’”

Tears came to her eyes. She took some tissues and tried to compose herself. I used the time to figure out what I was going to say. The woman was too intelligent for placebos.

“How can I help?” I asked. “It’s a tragic story. I agree with you that love comes from God.”

She stood up. “You know, Father, I guess I came in here to complain about the Catholic Church and to find fault with all this guilt, but just talking about it has made me feel better. Thank you for listening.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. I handed her the clipping. “I just wish I could do more.”

“I appreciate you taking time for me. You don’t have to come up with any answer. I’ll be all right. I will think of Leo forever, but I will get on with my life.”

She nodded to me and walked out of the office and out of the rectory.

* * *

My best friend as a priest was a man named Jason.

From the third grade on, Jason wanted to be a priest. His family owned a string of hardware stores and he could have easily walked into a comfortable position in management. But not him. He wanted to help people.

Jason was ordained in the early sixties. He was thin, of average height with a receding hairline. When he walked into a group of people, it was like the sun had come out after a week of rain. The man was always smiling.

Even though he was a year behind me, I looked up to him because he had such great people skills. He could talk to anybody and got along with even the most difficult, cranky pastor.

He supported me time after time when I took a controversial stand. Civil rights? Change in the church? World peace? Jason was right behind me – no, alongside me, adding his own voice for social change.

We had another priest friend, Don. Don was our age, an athlete, with a great smile and friendly eyes. The three of us became known as the *three musketeers* or the three men who were always stirring up controversy in the diocese of Cleveland.

Many of us wanted much more from our church. We wanted community. We wanted to challenge ourselves in the company of friends, to bring about real change for the poor. Jason stepped forward and built the ideal church community, the very thing Jesus talked about. I was part of it.

The group consisted of two nuns, two married couples, a single woman, and Jason and I, nine in all. We met in homes and developed our own services for mass. We had communion with whatever was available, rolls or bread, wine or grape juice. There were no sermons at our services, just deep discussions of God and how to live as Christians in the modern world. We tried to get back to the words of Jesus, to break bread in remembrance of him and to love others.

Whenever I am asked about the ideal church, I talk about this group. Jason was its acknowledged founder and leader.

While I hesitated to confront the powerful Monsignors who controlled the diocese of Cleveland, Jason stood up to them. Monsignor Cullen was in charge of social action for the diocese. Cullen was a large man with a gruff manner. He was a good man, but he was yesterday's liberal, supporting labor unions because in the thirties most Catholics were members of trade unions. But it was the sixties now and the issues were civil rights, peace in Vietnam and change in the church. Catholics had moved from a union card to a middle management necktie, from the city to the suburbs and from the Democratic Party to the Republican.

Monsignor Cullen tried to stop progressive movements in the church. Jason ignored the good Monsignor and set up peace committees, civil rights programs and other social action activities. Where I would go underground, Jason was right out in the open.

He gave sermons for civil rights and appeared on TV as often as I did, but he had the happy ability to escape censure. While the bishop was always calling me downtown to be reprimanded, Jason could say and do the same things and not hear a word about it. Maybe it was his people

skills or maybe it was his family background – the well-known hardware chain – that made officials afraid of him

We became fast friends. He did charitable works, like giving money to the poor, but it was clear to Jason that more was needed in times of racial prejudice. He talked about civil rights to his classmates and worked with civic and church organizations to eliminate racism. Following the lead of Dr. Martin Luther King, he branched out in his concerns to world peace and poverty.

He was always ‘there for me.’ When I was being moved from parish to parish like an ecclesiastical hot potato, Jason would remind me that Jesus wasn’t very popular with the religious authorities of his day. When I felt lonely, frustrated and worn out with ramming my head against the rock of the Catholic Church, I would call him and we would go out for pizza and he would cheer me up. He didn’t just introduce me to groups he was associated with, he built me up as an heroic young priest.

In December of 1967, Jason, Don and I stood on a hillside overlooking the beautiful city of Cuernavaca, Mexico. We were there for a conference called *The Priest in Crisis*, which was just right for me because I was debating whether or not to leave the priesthood. Jason put his hand on my back and told me I should just follow my heart. “If you’re not sure about leaving,” he told me, “just tell the bishop that you’re taking a leave of absence. That way you don’t burn any bridges and you can come back if you want to.”

Like the lights coming on after a power outage, his advice restored my confidence and solved my problem. Four days later I left the official priesthood, never to return. Without Jason, I don’t think it would have been possible.

A year later Don left the priesthood and Jason was alone. While he had been there for Don and me, we were both busy with our new lives and Jason slipped out of our minds.

I heard about him later from friends. Jason liked being a priest. At family reunions, when his more prosperous brothers and sisters talked of their successes, he didn’t feel envy. Loneliness, however, weighed on him. There was no one to talk to, no one to share the frequent pain of the priesthood, no one to just hug him and hold him.

Year followed year and the loneliness got deeper. Twenty years passed. He began to drown his loneliness in the bottle. As the old saying goes, ‘First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes the man.’ One night Jason, the wonderful young priest I had known, ended up drunk,

lying on a sidewalk in downtown Cleveland. When the cops helped him to his feet, he slugged a cop and was arrested. The next day the media featured the picture of Jason hitting the police officer.

When he sobered up, he was so embarrassed, he left the priesthood.

A year after these events, I met Jason for coffee. He was a changed man and the sunshine was gone from his face. Of course I can't justify excessive alcohol use as a cure for loneliness, I just wished we could go back to that hillside in Cuernavaca and I wished he had said, "I'm leaving, too."

Did Leo have to speed over a freeway embankment? Did Jason have to end as a drunk on a downtown street? While every person is different and no one can say with certainty that this circumstance or that circumstance caused a specific action, I am convinced that Leo would still be alive if he had left the church and married Selina. And if Jason could have lived a normal life and worked through the loneliness we all feel, I think this dynamic priest would still be doing good works today.

It is my hope that this book will show how priesthood can exist totally apart from the Catholic Church. Those men – and now a few women – who love being priests, need not think that their priesthood will end if they leave the church. I believe my own life shows that a person is a priest forever, as the Bible says. What's different is your parish and what you preach about. I haven't mentioned God in a public setting since I said my last mass and heard my last confession forty years ago. My parish now has no *Saint* in front of it nor the word *Holy* in the title.

My parishes have been:

A number of kids at a youth center in Rockton, Illinois

The people of the third ward of the city of Milwaukee

The customers of Sunny Slope Greenhouses

The inmates of the maximum-security prison at Waupun, Wisconsin

The writers of Surrey, British Columbia

The inmates of Matsqui Prison, Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Two people called me 'Father' after I gave up being Father Griffin.

Only those two people can say whether I deserved the title.

It is my belief that you can take the man out of the priesthood, but you can't take the priesthood out of the man. Take away the Roman collar

and in most cases you still have a person who will strive for the underprivileged and who will help people get one step closer to the transcendent.