

10-1-2002

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### Recommended Citation

Schmalzbauer, John (2002) "In the First Person: Rediscovering My Catholic Family," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 22, Article 11.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol22/iss1/11>

# Rediscovering My Catholic Family

John Schmalzbauer

*This article explores a Protestant faculty member's reconnection with his own ethnic Catholic roots at the College of the Holy Cross.*

I assume that I was asked to contribute to this issue of *Conversations* because I am a non-Catholic. As a member of Salem Covenant Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, I worship in a Protestant denomination that could best be described as a pietist offshoot of Swedish Lutheranism. Although I am most certainly a Protestant, I cannot resist the temptation to answer this

question in a way that blurs the boundary between Catholicism and "my own religious tradition." The great-grandson of a German Catholic immigrant (my paternal great-grandfather Otto Schmalzbauer) and the grandson of a Norwegian evangelical (my maternal grandmother Evelyn Viken), I grew up in a world of blurred ethnic and religious boundaries. While my fundamentalist grandmother's faith prevailed in our household, I attended many Catholic family weddings and first communions during my Minnesota youth. These were festive times of ritual (the Catholic Mass), music and dancing (on at least one occasion a polka band), and moderate alcohol consumption (most of the time) that both fascinated and unsettled me. Why can't we take the bread and wine? Why is drinking beer here okay but not at home? Why are Catholic weddings more fun?

Though few and far between, these family gatherings provided me with my first taste of the



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Catholic side of my heritage. Like Garrison Keillor's visits to Our Lady of Perpetual

Midnight Run (Street outreach by Marquette students to the homeless)

Photo Courtesy of Marquette University Office of Public Affairs

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Responsibility in Lake Wobegon, they also told me a lot about growing up evangelical.

Ironically, I received my first exposure to the intellectual side of Catholicism at the very Protestant Wheaton College. In a contemporary theology course I read excerpts from the documents of Vatican II and was heartened by their ecumenical spirit. In a course on the history of Christian worship I participated in simulated third-century and medieval liturgies. In social science classes, I read about the corrosive effects of Protestant individualism on American culture, as well as the communitarian sensibility of Catholic social thought. Though I remained a Protestant, I gradually came to see Catholicism as part of my own religious inheritance.

My academic interest in Catholicism was further deepened during graduate study in sociology at Princeton University. Urged by my mentor Robert Wuthnow to broaden my focus beyond evangelical Protestantism, I embarked on a comparative study of Catholics and evangelicals in the allegedly "secular" professions of journalism and higher education. In the course of my research, I had the privilege of interviewing such figures as E.J. Dionne, Peter Steinfeld, Cokie Roberts, Jay Dolan, Kenneth Woodward, Andrew Greeley, Mary McGrory, Philip Gleason, and Colman McCarthy.

It was this scholarly interest in Catholic intellectual life that brought me to Holy Cross. Hired to teach courses in Catholic Studies, the sociology of religion and media sociology, I began the next phase of my Catholic education. Though a scholar of Catholic higher education, I had never been a member of a Catholic college community. Though a regular reader of Catholic periodicals, I had little first-hand exposure to the lived experience of post-Vatican II American Catholics.

In contemporary Catholic circles, one often hears about the "religious illiteracy" of Catholic college students. While I don't want to dismiss such complaints, I do want to qualify them with my own experience of young Catholics. For starters, many of our students *are* literate in Catholicism, thanks to courses in history, religious studies, visual arts, philosophy, and literature. More basically, many of our

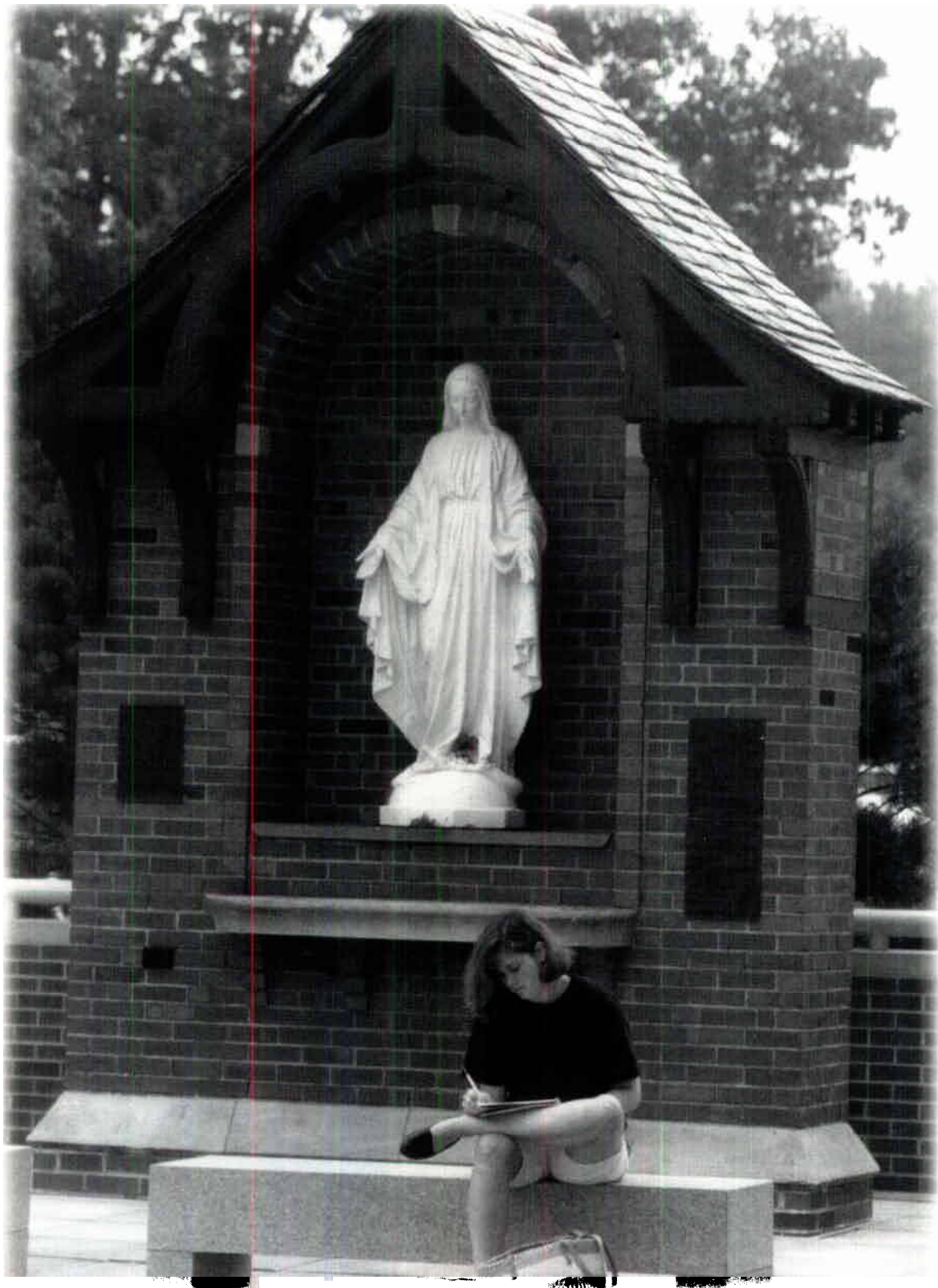
students possess what Andrew Greeley and David Tracy would call an analogical or Catholic imagination, grounded not so much in formal theological study, but in the rituals and symbols of Catholic culture.

Since 1998 I have taught a course on "Catholicism, Media, and Popular Culture." In this course, students explore the impact of a Catholic sensibility on the careers of Catholic film makers, journalists, and musicians. For me the most fascinating aspect of teaching this course has been hearing the autobiographical reactions of my students:

- Most immediately recognize the religious angst and "seeker spirituality" of their own generation of Catholics in Edward Burns' *The Brothers McMullen*, a film set in the Long Island suburbs they know so well.
- Many resonate with the images of food, family, and community found in Nancy Savoca's *Household Saints* and Stanley Tucci's *Big Night*. For my Italian-American students, the small "s" sacramentality of these films evokes stories of holy cards on the dashboard and Sunday dinners at grandmother's house.
- After reading the journalist Pete Hamill's memoir, *A Drinking Life*, my Irish-American students (59 percent of the student body) grapple with their own ambivalence about



Baccalaureate Mass, 2002  
Photo Courtesy of Marquette University Office of Public Affairs



Statue of Mary

Photo Courtesy John Carroll University

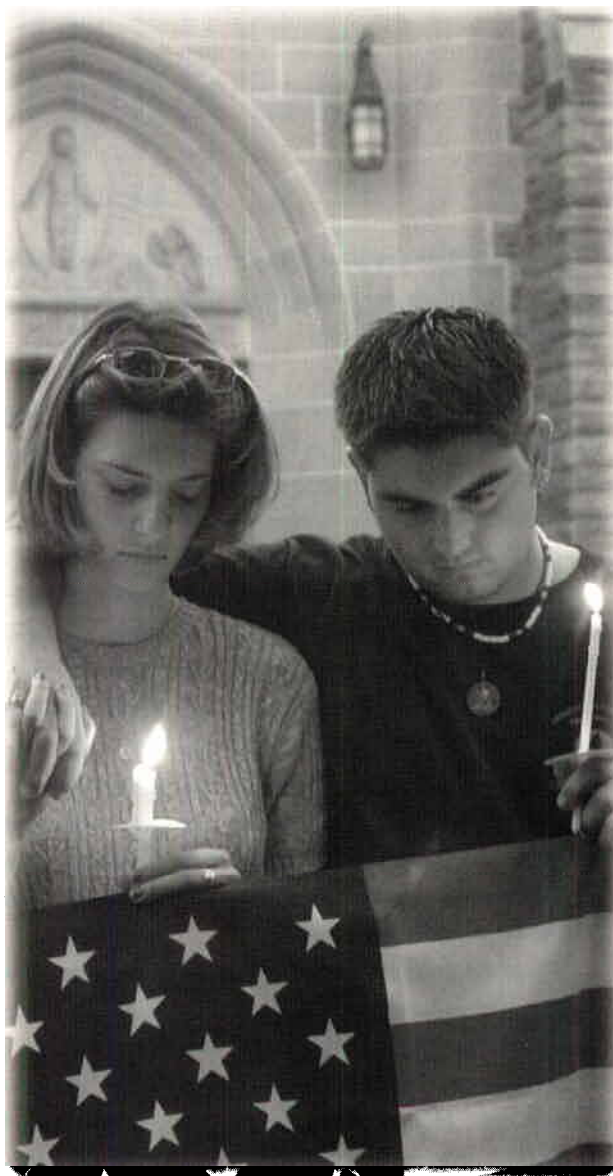
the role of alcohol in Irish Catholic culture, as well as the meaning of celebration in a sacramental religion.

- Most strongly identify with the crusades of the "Waterfront Priest" in *On the Waterfront* (modeled on John Corridan, S.J.) and Sister Helen Prejean in *Dead Man Walking* (a generational icon on many Catholic campuses), finding inspiration for their own social activism in both films.

Through the reactions of my students, I have learned a great deal about American Catholic youth culture. While often shockingly ignorant of the Bible and Catholic theology (a problem that needs to be addressed), my students are surprisingly literate in the culture of popular Catholicism. In Greeley's terminology, they possess a Catholic imagination that is both communitarian and sacramental. In hearing their stories, I have witnessed firsthand the resilience of this Catholic sensibility in suburban America, as well as the earnest piety of a generation committed to service and social justice.

How has all this affected my own religious faith? Though I am a Protestant, I share my students' connection to an ethnic Catholic past. Like their grandparents and parents, the Schmalzbauer family struggled to transmit the Catholic faith to the coming generations. Obviously, they failed in the case of my father and me. Or did they?

Teaching at Holy Cross has provided me with an opportunity to reconnect with my own Catholic background. Like the family weddings of my childhood, my time at Holy Cross has enabled me to get reacquainted with the other half of my family. While Protestant in religious affiliation, I have grown to appreciate the Catholic side of my heritage. As a sociologist I am well aware of the superficiality of "invented" religious and ethnic identities. At the same time, I have felt a kinship with the Catholic undergraduates in my classroom. As the great-grandson of Otto Schmalzbauer, I am grateful for such family ties.



Candlelight vigil  
Photo Courtesy of Loyola College of Maryland

Loyola College in Maryland seniors Jessica Ditterline and Patrick Donahue stand in front of Loyola's Alumni Memorial Chapel during a Sept. 13 Candlelight Vigil on the College's Quadrangle that drew 1,400 members of the College Community and concluded with 10 minutes of silence. In addition to the Vigil, Loyola held several Evening Prayer services and a special Mass of Reconciliation coinciding with President Bush's call for a day of Prayer and Remembrance.