

'Not to be trusted'

Fr. Joseph F. Wilson

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As a priest today, the Rev. Joseph F. Wilson says he is constantly on guard - and furious with the Church that has made him live this way.

The fellow turned the corner, asking, "Sammy, you done?" Then, seeing me standing there at the sink - rather, seeing my clerical collar - he stiffened. I had barely noticed the 8-year-old boy who was standing four sinks down from me in the Delta Shuttle men's room at LaGuardia Airport.

Pointedly, emphatically, the man said, "Sammy, is everything OK?" Just a small incident. The boy probably did not even realize its significance, having paid less attention to me than I to him. But, of course, I understood. And Sammy's father understood. In his eyes, I am of a class of people not to be trusted, especially by the fathers of little boys.

I am a Catholic priest.

From the age of 8, I have spent a great deal of time around priests. I was an altar boy; later on, sacristan of my home parish (responsible for opening up, closing and preparing the church for Mass) and part-time rectory office boy. During those years, I got to know scores of priests. It was a great way to grow up.

Without exception, these priests were principled, prayerful, dedicated men. They were an interesting lot, with varied personalities and interests; keen students of human nature. Some were easier to deal with than others; some perfectionists, others forgiving to a fault. All of them had strong senses of humor and were the most interesting company you could hope for.

And I was around that rectory and church at all hours - morning, day and night. Never did I see anything inappropriate in their behavior or their lifestyles. They were men, real men, dedicated to their vocations and pursuing their ministry. It was a profound, rich way of living, and to those men I owe my vocation.

And I could not be sorrier that there must be many young men today who will never have the chance to know such men so well. For now, the sacred priesthood has been deeply tainted, and those of us whose young lives were enriched by the friendship of great priests know what a sad impoverishment that is.

And this affects us all, every one of us still serving in the priesthood. I'm much more guarded with young people, especially young men and boys. In my last parish, I was moderator of a youth ministry. I think those days are over for me. Wearing a clerical collar in my beloved New York City, even in the parish, is to be constantly on guard. One does not want to do anything that could be misinterpreted.

The people are good and supportive. Love of the people of God is one of your strongest motivators when you are in the seminary and after ordination - and the people are very worthy of it. In many ways, our good people keep us going.

But we are called to be priests for the whole of society, too. And that, never easy, is infinitely more difficult now. The restroom incident was minor, almost ambiguous. Not ambiguous at all was the scene a few weeks later.

I was returning one night from a wake. The funeral parlor is an eight-block walk from my rectory. As I passed a bus stop, a young man lounging there looked up and, spotting my cassock, yelled across the street, "Hey, Father - how many kids did you molest today?"

I was furious, absolutely livid. Do you know why? Because I really couldn't blame the guy.

That very week, New York Newsday had reported, in detail, how my since-retired bishop had testified in court proceedings that while serving as Vicar General in Boston, he had not called the police about serial child molester Father John Geoghan because at that time he had been unaware that a priest who assaulted children had broken the law. Under oath he said that!

What should I expect the young fellow lounging at that bus stop to think, reading that? What should I expect anyone to think, reading that not only were many of these predators coddled and transferred from place to place, but also that most of the bishops who made the situation so much worse have blithely continued in office? What other organization, anywhere, would expect the public to believe that a problem had been seriously addressed while the leadership that allowed it to happen remained virtually intact.

Furious, absolutely livid – and sad. Not for myself, so blessed to have grown up in the Catholic Church when I did, to know those fantastic priests, those wonderful Dominican sisters. But furious for those who will be deprived of something they'll never have the chance to miss. And at the callous leaders who are so indifferent to that precious heritage.

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