

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

First Three Years of an Ordained Catholic Priest



Written By
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(A PSEUDONYM BY REQUEST OF
THE AUTHOR) WAS A DIOCESAN
PRIEST AND GRADUATE
STUDENT IN ROME,
ITALY, DURING THE 21ST
ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF THE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH..

As a psychologist, I often reflect on the inability of us men to identify with a woman who is pregnant. This inability includes the ensuing stages of childbearing and childbirth. Her experiences are beyond our perceptual reach..

Without intending to be dramatic, I would say that anyone who did not have preparatory and seminary training in the 1960s will have difficulty with the emotions/experiences expressed in this article. They may even appear silly and childish. I assure you, that at the time the events herein described took place, the feelings were real, personal and life-changing.

The holy oil on our hands was scarcely dry when the bishop announced his plans for a diocesan seminary. He singled out selected four of us as future instructors and stated that he had already enrolled us for graduate studies in Rome. In September, my colleagues and I sailed on the Queen Elizabeth from New York to Cherbourg, France. Then we boarded a train to Rome via Paris.

Words scarcely describe the exhilaration I felt as the passenger turbo flitted through Paris, Lausanne, Milan, Florence, and the quaint towns in between. Because of the poverty of my family, we did not even have an automobile. Family excursions were walks to nearby places. And here I was, traveling through Europe!

I was looking out the train window admiring the countryside with its ubiquitous variety of vegetation, when a bearded gentleman in

his early thirties jarred me from my day-dreaming. "Hi, Father. Nice view, eh?" He introduced himself as an American actor who had contracted to play a part in the movie being filmed in Cinecittà (Roma), "Francis of Assisi," starring Brad Dillman, Dolores Hart and Stuart Whitman. We agreed to meet for dinner once we settled in Rome.

When the conductor announced: "Roma, la prossima fermata (Rome, next stop)" and the train ground to a halt, I was the first passenger off the train—I could barely restrain my excitement.

At the central Rome's Termini station we hailed a cab and were driven to our destination, Casa Santa Maria on Via dell' Umiltà. Did I say driven? The ride can best be described as "a near death experience." The character at the wheel could have starred in "The World's Wildest Police Videos." The thrill of being in ancient Rome gave way to fearful recitation of what I envisioned was my last Act of Contrition.

Upon our arrival, the rector and Casa staff at the American Graduate House greeted us warmly and gave us a tour of what would be our home for the next three years. With the pleasantries completed, I was escorted to my lodging—a tiny two-room apartment that faced a busy street. While unpacking, I was greeted with blaring horns, revving autos, screaming sirens, and opera-singing males. Life in metropolitan Italy.

I could barely wait to take in the grandeur of the Eternal City: the mammoth monu-

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

ments, the prominent piazzas, and especially the universities where I hoped to advance my theological knowledge and spirituality.

I especially remember stepping out into the Roman streets for the first time. I was wearing the official clerical uniform, the cassock. The older women addressed me with "Buon giorno, padre." The older men, out of timeworn reverence, moved aside as I passed them. Imagine my shock when I encountered a young man who barely gave me room to pass. He stared at my clerical garb and spat on the street. I learned that the Center of Catholicism had many anti-clericals.

Classes were in Latin, Italian and English. My Latin was rusty and needed polishing to get any meaning from the lectures. However, it was the beautiful, poetic, musical, Italian language that cast its spell over me. After a Berlitz crash course and with my trusty Langenscheidt's Jiffy Phrasebook—Italian, I boldly ventured into the shops and cafes, testing what I had learned while innocently fracturing the vernacular of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the process.

Routine set in eventually: classes in the morning, research in the afternoon, night prayers in the chapel; the rest of the time on your own. This last was radically different from what I was used to. In the seminary, which I had entered shortly after my thirteenth birthday, rules governed us from waking to bedding down. But here in the City by the Tiber, teeming with over two million Italiani and compadres, I was free to do almost anything I wanted. I had never known such freedom. No one checked my attendance at

class; no one cared when I came in or where I went. "Curfew" at the Casa was 10 p.m., after which the doors were locked. If you missed curfew, find a hotel.

I had hardly been at the Casa a week when I received word that I had a caller at the front desk. It was the actor I had met on the train from Paris to Rome. He had come to invite me to a Cinecittà - Hollywood party. His producer was throwing a production gala affair for the actors, actresses and their guests. My friend suggested I do not come as a priest so as "not to put a damper on the party." I agreed to go "incognito"! and had to borrow one of his white shirts since none of mine had regular collars!

The festivity took place in one of the majestic hotels of Rome in a huge ballroom opening to a humungous, flower-decorated, Olympic-size pool. Marble-topped bedecked tables bore mountains of food: hors d'oeuvres, salads, meats, seafood, and desserts. These edibles could have fed my hometown. However, it was something else I saw that stopped me in my tracks. Starlets pranced about revealing all but their most basic feminine parts. Native Romani hunks, in brightly colored thongs, strolled through the crowd serving drinks. I felt like I had stumbled into a nudist camp and didn't know where to go.

Clusters of actors and actresses gathered around the food areas. My actor-friend said he had to see someone, so I moved as unobtrusively as I could to the hors d'oeuvres table. As an aside, many people told me I looked a lot like Montgomery Clift and I had played the role he made famous in Judgment at

Nuremberg in my college drama productions. Anyway, it wasn't long before two or three young women, sipping on Manhattans, queried me if I was related to Clift and whether I was available. I soon found myself enjoying the attention. It didn't take long to forget I was a priest.

One brunette in particular lingered close to me. She was wearing a halter top and short shorts. She was a dazzling beauty. Before long we moved to a quieter area and began conversing. The topic of conversation eventually evolved to why was I in Rome? I answered her that I was doing graduate work. She asked what was my major? I told a half-truth, figuring she wouldn't catch the nuance: Pastoral Psychology. "Oh," she said. Taking out her business card, she began scribbling something on the back and placed it deep into my front pants pocket. "I may need your services." She winked and drew closer, suggesting we get better acquainted on the dance floor.

I excused myself, saying I had to go to the men's room. I was feeling light-headed from an earlier drink and vulnerable. I was enjoying her company too much. As I walked upstairs to the restrooms I pulled the card out and read what she had written: "I'd love to lie on your couch anytime!" And below that, her phone number in Rome. I felt guilty that I had led her on.

Looking for the bathroom and thinking I ought to leave the party, I inadvertently opened the wrong door. It opened into a bedroom and I had walked in on two of the party guests engaged in sexual activity. At first I stood watching, motionless. I

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

needed to get out of there yet I was mesmerized by what I saw. I gained composure, ran downstairs and out the front of the hotel to a waiting cab.

I finally arrived at the Casa and went directly to my room. I couldn't believe how I, a celibate priest, dedicated to the Church, trained in the seminary all those years, could allow the events of the evening to develop. Worse, how was it that I enjoyed every moment?

I stayed up for several hours assessing my predicament. I didn't know if I had done something wrong. Should I go to confession? In the seminary a confessor could always be found. What do I do here? Go to a fellow-priest? I couldn't.

Upon reflection, I became painfully aware of what limited understanding and experience I had concerning male-female relationships! I recalled the day before subdeaconate and my taking the vow of celibacy when my mother asked me: "Do you really understand what you are doing?" "Of course," I said. Hadn't the seminary prepared me? Besides, once ordained, aren't we priests clothed with the virtue of chastity? Isn't there a kind of unseen wall around us, or hovering angels, protecting us from dangers and allurements? Tonight all that confidence, that assurance, was shaken. But it wasn't the first time!

Just before embarking for Europe I was temporarily assigned to a small church. The parish secretary was exceptionally attractive and I found myself wanting to engage in whatever conversation I could with her. I noticed she was a poor typist and I was a very good one so I volunteered to teach her to improve her accu-

racy and speed. The lessons began innocently enough, but as my fingers moved over hers to guide her on the home keys I felt an inner surge of something. I wanted to be closer, to linger with my fingers in hers. I remember running to the church before the Blessed Sacrament asking the Lord what was wrong with me. How could I have such feelings? I was a PRIEST!

What did other priests my age do about this knotty problem, I wondered? How did they handle attraction to the opposite sex and the longing for affection?

One priest-friend told me that he adopted a stand-offish stance with young women. He kept all conversations with them at an intellectual level and as brief as possible.

Another priest-associate admitted he "manipulated" relationships, that is, when he needed younger women to help with some parish ministry he would show interest, compassion and amiability. Then when he no longer needed them, he would pull away. Maintaining a "surface" relationship kept his celibacy safe.

Then there were the priests, few and far between, who seemed genuinely in love with God and the Church. These appeared untouched by worldly allurements. Their relationships with young and old alike stayed balanced and spiritual.

As I lay down, tired, confused, feeling dirty and ashamed for having placed my vow of celibacy in jeopardy, I prayed for this to be a lesson to me. I would avoid any closeness or contact with women. This evening's episode had to be a

chance occurrence, a learning experience, and I would go forward better armed against any female seduction.

The plan worked for awhile. I threw myself into my studies, made regular hours of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, and in the evening hung around with the native male Italians who waited on tables and took care of the grounds at the Casa. I benefited from this arrangement in that my proficiency in Italian improved considerably.

One afternoon when I returned to my room after hours of library research, I found a note from the Rector under my door: "Please see me at your earliest convenience." I freshened up a bit and somewhat nervously walked the short distance to his office.

He was pleasant and quickly put me at ease. "Mark, I'm wondering if you would do me a favor." "Sure, whatever," I replied with a questioning tone in my voice. "I've noticed that you speak Italian quite well for the short time you have been here. Not far from here is an Italian family; the maternal grandmother is very ill and is not expected to live. The family have relatives from your home state who are coming here to be with the grandmother before she passes on. The problem is that the Italian family speak very little English and the American relatives barely speak Italian. Would you mind getting to know the Italian family, so when the American relatives arrive, you can be the interpreter for both?" Seemed innocent enough and I agreed.

Shortly afterward I went to meet the Italian family. Their apartment was on Via della Carrozze, a stone's throw from

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

the colossal Trevi Fountain. I walked up three flights of stairs, knocked on the door of the address I was given, and a middle-aged woman shouted from inside: "Chi e? (who is it)?" I responded: "Il padre Americano!" She swung open the door, kissed me on both cheeks and nearly carried me inside. After the usual pleasantries, she took me to her mother who was bedfast and spoke with great difficulty. I asked if anyone had anointed the sick woman and the mother said no. I promised I would come the following day to bring Viaticum and administer Extreme Unction as it was then called. She hugged me profusely and asked me to come around 6 p.m. when the rest of the family would be home.

I arrived at the appointed hour. Apparently much of Italy had also. On entering the family dwelling I counted about 15 people of various ages and sizes. Despite the serious illness of the grandmother, this was an occasion for traditional Italian celebration. A priest—an American priest at that—and the conferring of the Sacraments, warranted sharing in this blessed event.

Following the conferring of the sacraments, I was escorted, along with the 15+ people, to the dining area and a long rectangular table bedecked with Italian delicacies. I found it hard to believe a modest family could provide such a spread.

The mother, whom I met the day before, introduced me to the myriad of faces and finally to her husband and two daughters. One daughter, the elder, was about twenty-eight, plain, a bit chubby, who I learned later was a pre-med student. The other daughter, Teresa, was a stunning

beauty, in her mid-twenties, slim, deep brown eyes and short-cropped dark hair. Oh no! I made a mental note to play it cool.

Teresa took a seat next to me. She began conversing in broken English. I was able to discern that she worked in sales and had many American customers. She was also taking an English class. I remarked what a coincidence, since I was enrolled in an Italian language class. Her dark eyes lit up as she proposed that we study together. Forgetting my promise of no female contact, I unwittingly said, "yes." She was already pencilling in a date for our first session.

We met that following Saturday afternoon. Teresa was wearing a light sweater that covered a bra-less T-shirt, and shorts. As we sat down at the kitchen table next to each other, she removed her sweater, kicked off her shoes and made herself comfortable. We were inches apart. I soon realized that Teresa was a free-spirited individual, in tune with the latest fashions, hit songs and popular movies. She was also a touchie-feelie person and punctuated her verbal expressions with stroking my leg or arm or laying her hand on my shoulder. I knew her gestures were innocent and I interpreted them as such. Inside, I was flushed, aroused; I tried to keep cool and indifferent to her playful antics.

On my way back to the Casa I couldn't decide what to do. To stop seeing Teresa was tantamount to embarrassing her and her family. Not to mention the Rector. To continue the conversation class, well, I was afraid where that would lead.

In the meetings that followed, I behaved as though I were Teresa's older brother. She accepted my ruse without question, though this led to more expressive behavior, such as hugs and kisses, which were promptly devastating the cool composure I was trying to maintain. I wasn't sure how long I could hold out without exposing my growing feelings for her.

Two things saved me and my priesthood from Teresa. First, she had a fiance. He was a likeable fellow and he and I hit it off well from the beginning. Despite my meeting Teresa two or three times a week, he didn't seem bothered by that. It was a trust between guys that I dared not betray.

Second, I began to take notice that Teresa had mood swings. She could be angry one minute and amiable in another. Like an on/off switch. This demeanor gradually caused a loss of interest by me in our friendship.

The grandmother eventually died. I officiated at the funeral. From then on I visited the Italian family and Teresa less and less. My studies were becoming more demanding as the date for defending my doctoral dissertation was fast approaching.

Meanwhile, I strove harder to toe the celibacy line. Except for necessary contact with waitresses or female sales clerks, my contact with the feminine gender was almost nil. I was dutifully saying the breviary, offering Mass, praying the rosary and other devotionals. Spiritual complacency was setting in.

I had always wanted to be a saint with a capital S. That idea seemed to go with the priesthood. By vocation, we were "spe-

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

cially called” and promised a hundred-fold for all that we were giving up. After all, our whole life was one of service. Since we would have no spouse, no children, and any deep friendships were frowned upon, who else were we but “privileged servants” of the Lord? We had no real identity other than our tie to our diocese and the Church. It seemed logical to me that, as priests and dedicated servants we deserved special divine consideration, namely, Sainthood.

Despite this theological reassurance, my spiritual life was empty, stagnant, cold. When I read the Scriptures about God’s love for me and how I should reciprocate, I was emotionally at a loss as to what kind of love I was required to have. What was missing? The answer struck me like a violent blow to the head. I didn’t understand “adult love.” I had never been in love. Love of God and love of neighbor were meaningless nouns in my vocabulary! I could no more describe what love was than I could pregnancy! Worse, my heart was becoming a stone—on guard against affection of any sort. What a sad state of affairs!

As the academic months began to wind down and my doctoral dissertation was completed, I grew terrified of returning to my diocese. Aside from securing some high-sounding university degrees, I was bringing nothing to the people whom I was supposed to serve. Yet in a few short months I was expected to counsel about-to-wed couples, hear confessions of troubled marriage partners, and preach on love! I felt like a joke.

Inside I was rotting like an over-ripe tomato, even though I kept up the appearances of a dedicated cleric. At a

time when my confreres were congratulating me for completing my academic work, and I ought to have been relieved and overjoyed, I was growing depressed and afraid to face the future.

On a Saturday morning near the end of my sojourn in Italy I woke up early and decided to rent a Vespa and drive to the scenic Vecchia Pineta Beach, on the Mediterranean coast, to get out of this dejected state. I threw my blue windbreaker in the pouch in case of rain and headed outside.

The sun was shining through some hazy clouds, the flowers that grow wildly along the Italian roads were in full bloom, and the air was crisp with the smell of newly-cut hay. I felt in tune with nature and its Creator. This was to be a glorious day. The Spirit of the Lord was with me again. I cried intermittently out of joy and hope.

The riding time to Vecchia Pineta Beach seemed like minutes. Located on the south-eastern part of the Ostia shoreline, it is a preferred swimming place for the inhabitants of Rome. I was approaching the low bluffs that led down to the beach. As I dismounted the bike to walk the few hundred feet, I happened to glance downward. A young couple was lying next to each other. They were in an amorous position and about to begin their lovemaking.

Out of sight, I watched the two briefly. An envious longing fell over me. It wasn’t libido as much as a longing—a desire for someone of the feminine nature to confer with, to share feelings, and to be intimate with. Loneliness of the priesthood again weighed heavily on my whole being.

As this scene was playing out, I heard a voice from above. “Hello!” It was coming from behind a rock formation on top of the hill. As I turned, the sunlight temporarily blinded my view but I could make out a female figure motioning. Cupping my hands, I discerned a woman possibly in her mid-twenties, with blonde hair, wearing a light blue top and dark blue shorts. I presumed she was calling to someone nearby so I disregarded her until she said: “Yes, you!” Feeling a bit elated to be singled out by someone so pretty, I asked: “What can I do for you?” Her response took the air out of my sex appeal: “Do you know what time it is?” I turned the bike around and headed in her direction.

After giving her the time of day, I blurted out: “Hi, I’m Mark.” She responded, “Hi Mark, I’m Kathleen, but everybody calls me ‘Kathy.’” “Pleased to meet you, Kathy.” The Kathleen whom everybody calls “Kathy” was a knockout! I found myself immediately taken with her. She had to repeat the question: “Is there something wrong?” to break my reverie. I clumsily gained composure and resumed our conversation.

I learned that she had just completed her Masters Degree in Sociology and was with three female graduate students vacationing in Europe. Rome was their last stop before flying home in the morning. She had wandered along the coastline from Lido di Ostia and missed her return bus to Rome.

Without thinking, I told her that I was residing in Rome and would be glad to give her a ride if she didn’t mind the back of a Vespa. She hesitated, stating that she preferred taking a cab. I nodded under-

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

standingly but then she said: "Would you drive me to the cab stand in town?" A little was better than nothing and I agreed without delay.

She had never ridden on the back of a motorcycle so I gave her a few safety tips and we were off, she, clasping her hands around the front of me, holding on for dear life. I felt her warm body next to mine. Her perfume gently fell on the afternoon air. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I just had a shot of Bailey's Irish Crème. I was intoxicated.

I drove slower than usual until I felt her grip eased up a bit as she gained confidence in me and the bike. When we arrived at the resort center and a few cabs came into view, she motioned for me to pull over. I figured I had frightened her and that she would walk the rest of the way. Instead she whispered in my ear: "Would you really not mind driving me to my hotel?" My heart jumped a beat. "I can't think of anything better that I would like to do," I sputtered. And to reassure her, I pulled out a map of Italy and showed her the route we would take. She seemed at ease, taking out a yellow silk scarf from her handbag and gently tying her flowing blond hair. She tossed her purse into the bike pouch and motioned she was ready. I was too!

I can scarcely recall the drive back to Rome. It seemed to me as though the wheels never touched the ground. A couple of times we hit some bumps and her hands fell down between my thighs. I just about ran off the road! She laughed and shouted in my ear, "Oops, sorry!" I wished the whole highway had had potholes.

We made one stop for gasoline. I filled up the tank, Kathy excused herself and went to the ladies' room. As she strode back to where the cycle was, I stood wrapped in admiration. She had put on some make-up that highlighted her blue eyes and fair complexion. She also pinned back her hair and arranged the yellow silk scarf so that it tied casually about her neck and shoulders. She was a mark of beauty. A cool breeze hit our faces and brought me back to reality. I pulled the blue wind-breaker out of my pouch and put it on. We two bikers were on our way again.

As we arrived within the confines of the Eternal City I suggested we stop for a cappuccino and she readily agreed. We drank the milky-sweet coffee slowly, seemingly to stall this one-in-a-million chance meeting that was turning into a delight beyond description.

Then I said to her: "Would you like to see the sites of Rome? I have some time before I need to get back," hoping against hope that she would say "yes." She thought for a moment. I knew we had established a mutual trust and that her answer was dependent on her schedule.

"I would love it," came her reply. I think had she said, "Yes, I will marry you," I couldn't have been more elated. In the course of a half-day, we were becoming more than just traveling buddies and we both sensed it.

The places we visited are blurred in my memory—the Colosseum, the Imperial Fora, Circus Maximus, Mausoleum of Hadrian, the Pantheon, Via della Conciliazione—who could recall such external details when inside I felt my heart beating wildly and my nerve end-

ings tingling! I was finally beginning to internalize the meaning of love.

How I longed for time to stand still, but it would not. After a stroll through to the Trevi Fountain, Kathy asked to see my watch. "I really have to go." Five words I dreaded to hear from the moment I laid eyes on her. We proceeded silently toward her hotel, neither wanting to break the thoughts we were thinking and to savor the last minutes together. We both realized something indefinable had happened between us.

I could hardly brake in front of her hotel. The Vespa itself seemed reluctant. I found it difficult to understand how in such a brief interlude I could meet a person that I now wanted to be with forever. The thought of being a priest, a celibate, did not enter my mind. I was a man, she was a woman and we somehow had bonded. Our parting was brief. Tears filled her eyes as we kissed goodbye and she walked toward her hotel. "Will I see you again?" I shouted to her. But the noise of the traffic drowned out my voice. Within seconds her figure disappeared into the hotel foyer.

I drove slowly back to the Casa, wondering if it had all been a dream. I went directly to my apartment. I almost said "cell" because that is how it felt. My real self was imprisoned here. I longed for it to be free, to be with the one whom I had met and had let go.

I knew now what "love" was for the first time in my adult life: giving without counting the amount, sharing without requiring an even return, experiencing euphoria without understanding the flood of emotions, desiring everything for

THE YELLOW SILK SCARF

the beloved without demanding anything for myself! The realization of having tasted love was crushing; I could hardly breathe. I desired more. I needed more.

Suddenly I was tired. Fatigue had set in. I fell asleep on the bed, fully clothed. Neither the noise from the street, the singing of future Pavarottis, nor the endless honking of the Fiats could wake me from the trance I fell into. I dreamt I was driving to the coast to retrieve Kathy.

I must have slept for hours. Light peered into the room and the usual hustle and bustle in the corridors woke me. As I sat up on the bed, I realized I was still wearing my blue windbreaker. For no reason I put my hand into the right pocket. I felt a soft material. As I began to pull it out I recognized it as Kathy's yellow silk scarf. I placed it to my face and took in the faint scent of her cologne.

Something was tucked into the label of the scarf. It was a piece of paper rolled up. I frantically unraveled it. In delicate penmanship was the following message: "Mark, do you believe in serendipitous love? I think I do because I have fallen head over heels in love with you. Here is my home address and phone number. If you write or call, I will know you feel as I do. If not, I will understand.—Kathy."

A month later, my academic work completed, I was on an American Airlines flight home, with a layover in London. As the plane landed at Gatwick Airport, I felt the need to get away

somewhere to sort out the flood of feelings that was enveloping me.

I found a little Episcopal church nearby, appropriately named Good Shepherd, and knelt down to pray. I have little recollection of how long I stayed there, but I remember repeating over and over: "Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." I cried like a baby. On the one hand, I couldn't imagine my new life without Kathy. On the other, I shuddered to think how my parents, siblings and the bishop would react if they knew what was transpiring in my life! Imperceptibly, a calm settled over me, like the stillness after a summer storm. I left the church strengthened in mind and spirit.

The plane scarcely landed state-side before I dialed the number Kathy had given me. When the lines connected, I was the first to blurt out, "Hello!" There was a long pause on the other line, then, "Mark! It's you! I knew you would call! I have been waiting and hoping. I can hardly wait to see you, to be with you again!" We whispered simultaneously, "I love you." I told her I had some things to take care of first, that I owed a debt to my diocese, and when that was over, I would come to her. She replied with assuring words I have never forgotten: "Do what you have to do. I'll be waiting; you are already here in my heart."

I resigned from the diocesan priesthood within three years, and asked the bishop to petition Rome for laicization. Shortly afterwards I married my serendipitous sweetheart with the yellow silk scarf.

I ARISE TODAY BY JOHN O'DONOHUE (A BOOK OF BLESSINGS)

In the name of Silence	Blessed by all things,	Embrace of God.
Womb of the Word,	Wings of breath,	
In the name of Stillness	Delight of eyes,	May I live this day
Home of Belonging,	Wonder of whisper,	
In the name of the Solitude	Intimacy of touch,	Compassionate of heart,
Of the Soul and the Earth.	Eternity of soul,	Clear in word, Gracious in awareness,
	Urgency of thought,	Courageous in thought,
	Miracle of health,	Generous in love.