

In the summer of '62

In memoriam
Monsignor John Henry Westhues (1922-2008)

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A fitting epitaph for my first cousin, Monsignor John Henry Westhues (1922-2008), would be the one requested by Father James Fuemmeler (1932-2012), another priest rooted in the German Catholic community around Glasgow, Missouri: "It is no little thing to be found faithful to the end." Father Jimmy was indeed faithful, and so was the man I knew as Father Jack: faithful to the Catholic Church from Baptism on, and to its priesthood from the day of ordination until death.

Jack was faithful also to his extended kin, going out of his way to accommodate requests to perform priestly functions at family events. He celebrated the funeral Mass for my father in 1970. In 2002, he made the three-hour drive from Springfield to Glasgow, to give my mother his blessing at our reunion for her hundredth birthday. He made the trip again the next spring, to preside at her funeral Mass. Jack's singular place in our clan shone brightest on

Sunday, July 19, 1992, when he celebrated an outdoor Mass at the original Westhues homestead for five hundred of Wilhelm and Theresia's descendants gathered to mark the centennial of their migration to America.

Adventure in the Ozarks

The closest I ever got to Father Jack was in the summer of 1962, just after my high-school graduation from St. Thomas Seminary in Hannibal. I was seventeen years old, looking forward to continuing my studies for the priesthood that fall at Conception Seminary, a college run by Benedictine monks in Missouri's northwest corner.

That spring, a letter had come from Father Jack, inviting me to spend some weeks with him at his parish in Marshfield, a town 30 miles northeast of Springfield. I would teach in his vacation Bible school, mow the lawn, and do odd jobs around the rectory. I would sleep in the guest bedroom and take my meals with him. His housekeeper, Miss Delia, would cook enough for both of us.

I accepted Father Jack's invitation eagerly. I had never been in that part of the state, and it was a chance to apprentice in my intended life's work. I was cocky and naive enough to believe Jack's blarney, that I would be performing important service to the church. The thought of declining never crossed my mind.

Besides, my mentor would be not only an admired cousin, but a rising star in the church hierarchy. Ordained in 1948, Jack had subsequently been sent to Rome for a degree in canon law, then appointed to the chancery (central administration) of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. In 1956, when the new diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau was created, and St. Louis prelate Charles Helmsing was appointed its bishop, Jack moved to Springfield with him, becoming chancellor of the new diocese at the young age of 34. Helmsing immediately made Jack a Monsignor.

Early in 1962, Helmsing had been promoted to the larger diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, and a new bishop had been appointed to Springfield. Jack continued as chancellor, commuting daily to the diocesan headquarters from Marshfield, where he had the additional job of pastor.

By that summer, I had spent already four years in the seminary and picked up lots of clerical gossip. I got respect just from having the same surname as Jack. He was well-known, respected, and reputedly destined for higher things. That he would soon be made a bishop was widely assumed. Some priests were surprised that he was not Helmsing's replacement. At 40 years of age, he was still a bit young.

Jack's hosting me in Marshfield was first of all an act of kindness to a teenage cousin, a gesture of solidarity with a young relative. Beyond that, I'm sure he saw my spending time with him as a way of strengthening and safeguarding my plan to become a priest. Summer vacation was a dangerous time for seminarians. Our teachers cautioned us about this repeatedly. Away from institutional discipline, we were exposed to the temptations of "the world." Jobs like the one Father Jack offered me were low-risk learning opportunities, keeping seminarians close to the church even while out of school.

Before the world turned upside down

In that summer of '62, neither Jack nor I could have guessed that we were living at the end of a long era, and that during the next half-dozen years, the settled order of both the United States and the Catholic Church would be convulsed and overturned in ways we never imagined. We did not know that revolutionary new historical directions were about to take shape, and that so common a direction would never again embrace the two of us.

Postwar prosperity had resulted in dazzling advances in material life. Air-conditioning had become widespread. Jack had his pilot's license. In a station wagon borrowed from my home parish, I drove by myself to Marshfield on the new dual-lane interstate highway that had replaced Route 66. America was at peace. This was pre-Vietnam. The conclusion drawn from World War II still held, that American military might was inalterably a force for good. As a seminarian, Jack had been exempt from military service in the war, but he was now a chaplain in the state militia. Race riots were thought to be a thing of the past. The civil rights movement had barely begun. American society was less divided in 1962 than it would be for the rest of Jack's life.

As for the Catholic Church, its place in America had never been stronger, especially given the election in 1958 of the now martyred first Catholic president. In 1962, the structure and rituals of the church were the same as they had been for 400 years, since the Council of Trent, and the descendants of Catholic immigrants to America treasured them. The numbers of Catholic priests, seminarians, and members of religious orders were at their peak. There was no sign of the mass defections of priests and nuns that would commence in the later sixties. Church attendance was higher than it would be for the rest of the century. The Second Vatican Council, with the long decline it ushered in, would open only later that year. Child sexual abuse by priests was unheard of.

In retrospect, I remember that summer as an innocent time. Besides being blood relatives, Jack and I shared certitudes of national loyalty and religious faith. We took these for granted, like bedrock. They seemed as solid as the Ozark hills.

Memories of everyday life

Those weeks in Marshfield must have left a deep impression on me, since many images remain in my mind even now, half a century later, of things I did with Father Jack.

My classes in the Vacation Bible School left no enduring impression on me, probably none on my students either. I suppose I taught whatever was in the catechism. I remember enjoying the children, just as I did my nieces and nephews when they visited at my parents' farm.

My memories are vivid of watching Jack do his priestly work. I served Mass for him every morning in the parish church. It was the traditional Latin liturgy. He followed the rubrics exactly.

He wore a simple black cassock, without the fuchsia buttons, piping and sash to which his rank of *Monsignor* entitled him. I asked him why. He said the fancier garb cost too much. There was probably more to the story. Maybe he was following the example of his father, my uncle Henry, a judge on Missouri's supreme court, who disliked judicial robes, preferring a conservative dark suit.

Administering the sacraments is a priest's first duty. Jack fulfilled it routinely, reverently, unostentatiously, in the matter-of-fact way that a barber gives a haircut or a nurse gives a shot.

One Saturday morning we drove for an hour into the backwoods to bring Communion to two homes, a shack where an aged woman lived alone, and another where an aged woman lived with an unmarried middle-aged daughter and son. Father Jack asked me to drive. Since he was carrying the Blessed Sacrament, we did not converse, only said the rosary and other prayers.

I was shocked by the squalor in which these poor old people lived. The first kept her chickens inside the house. At the second place, the son headed to the barn when we arrived, apparently having no use for religion. The mother was of German origin. She showed me a prayerbook in that language she could no longer read. She and her daughter talked in strange, short sentences. After receiving Communion, they served breakfast to Father Jack and me: eggs,

bacon, and glasses of milk. The plates had not been washed from preceding meals. The mother accidentally knocked my milk over onto the floor. “Here, Shep,” she called, and a big mangy dog came to lick it up from the unpainted planks.

Jack showed no revulsion from these run-down homes. Neither did he demonstrate much empathy toward their inhabitants. He was friendly, not warm. It was all in a day’s work. He was like an old-fashioned country doctor making house calls.

Jack did me the huge favor of letting me tag along when he travelled to perform duties as priest and chancellor. He took me with him to a prison, where he said Mass for Catholic inmates, and to a Trappist monastery far off the beaten path.

We stopped by the Springfield dump to chat with an old, unwashed, but proudly Catholic garbage picker. The man brightened to see Jack, poured him coffee from his thermos. Jack thanked him, said, “Hot coffee on a hot day keeps you cool.” Jack raised the tin cup to his lips a few times, then casually turned and threw the rest of the coffee out before handing back the cup. “I hated to do that,” he told me afterwards, “but that man has TB, and once I remembered that, I just couldn’t drink from his cup.”

On yet another outing, Jack and I visited a large, boisterous family living in a rough cabin on Table Rock Lake. They fit the popular image of kind, cheerful hillbillies. They loaned us an old boat and weak motor with which Jack tried to teach me to water-ski. They set places for us at their dinner table, and we joined them.

I recall Jack taking me with him into only one affluent home, namely that of the bishop, who was out of town. I sensed that his relations with the new man in charge, Ignatius Strecker, were cooler than they been with Helmsing. Bishop Strecker moved Jack out of the chancery three years later and made him a full-time parish priest, which he remained for the rest of his life.

Father Jack in a teenage cousin's eyes

It seemed to me in that summer of '62, that Father Jack was more than a priest. He was a *churchman*. Sociologists use the term *organization man* for one who subordinates himself to a company or corporation, surrenders his individuality to it, lives wholly within its boundaries, to the point of fusing his very self with it. That is what Jack had done, so it seemed to me, the organization in his case being the Catholic Church. Indeed, it seems almost blasphemous to refer to him in these pages as *Jack*. He was *Father Jack* or *Monsignor Westhues*. No part of him lay outside his ecclesiastical positions. The church – I'm sure he wrote it always with a capital C – was his life. The term *churchman* fits.

Most other priests I had come to know by then wore their clerical identities more lightly. My teachers at Hannibal were priests, but they were educators, too, and we students could see their passion for humane learning and fields of knowledge outside the Catholic world. My French teacher gave me an issue of the French edition of *Reader's Digest*, suggesting I read and translate some articles from it. This was a *secular* magazine. I saw no secular magazines or books in the Marshfield rectory. I do not remember speaking of politics with Father Jack. There may have been a television in the rectory, but I do not recall it being turned on while I was there.

Casually one day, in easy conversation between us, Jack mentioned that in his youth he had been bothered by scruples. I understood what this technical term from Catholic teaching meant: the unhappy condition of magnifying one's own sins, obsessing over them, feeling excessive guilt for them, trying fanatically to abide by every rule and do everything exactly right. Jack got over the problem, he recalled, with his spiritual director's help, but I remember thinking at that time that an inclination to scruples fit with who he was. He wanted to be a 100-percent perfect Catholic priest, and he dared not allow himself the slightest lapse.

There must have been moments in Jack's life when he let his hair down. I never witnessed one. He rarely took his Roman collar off, even in Missouri's sweltering summer.

Unexpected lessons learned

The plain fact is that Jack's earnest, generous effort in that summer of '62 to strengthen my priestly vocation was in vain. This was not immediately apparent even to me. I enjoyed my time with him. He seemed to approve of me and my work. We never argued. I was grateful for the experience, thanked him for it, and continued in the seminary for four more years.

Still, so far as I recall, neither he nor I ever raised the prospect of repeating the adventure in subsequent summers. Perhaps in some unspoken way, we both realized that I could never follow his path, even in that pre-Vatican II era of the church.

It was not in me to surrender myself totally to any organization. Even had I become a priest, I could not have become a *churchman* like him. I knew what scruples were only from Catholic teaching, not from personal experience. Rules could never have that much hold on me. From the point of view of Catholic teaching, my problem was not too many scruples but too few, the sin of pride: shameless individuality, independence of mind, self-will.

I was a bookish kid, unapologetically so. I loved learning and schoolwork and read for the fun of it, far beyond what was assigned. This fit with a value on individuality. Doubts did not trouble me; I revelled in them. I liked puzzling over just about anything. One of the lessons I took from that summer in Marshfield was that being pastor of a small-town Catholic parish in South Missouri is uncongenial to such inclinations.

I made friends with some local Catholic boys, and sometimes hung out with them while Father Jack was at his office in Springfield. I still remember one boy announcing the meaning of *PhD*. “It stands for *post-hole-digger*,” he said. On the outside, I laughed with everybody else. On the inside, I wished I was back in school.

Father Jack himself, though obviously a smart man, seemed little interested in scholarship. He was not a doubting, questioning kind of man, so far as I could see. A book on some theological topic arrived one day in the mail. I was with him when he opened it. “It’s not so bad to quit reading books,” he joked, “but you still have to buy one every now and then.”

Decades later, when he was in his seventies, I wrote Jack a letter proposing that he set down on paper his reflections on the huge changes in Catholicism that had occurred in his lifetime. I urged him to write a book about his priestly life, said it would be a great gift to his family and the public. In response he telephoned me. We had a cordial conversation. He told me he appreciated my suggestion but that writing was not how he wanted to spend time.

In that summer of '62, clerical celibacy was not yet an issue for me. I had never yet asked a girl out on a date. Those weeks in Marshfield were a first lesson in how a priest should relate to a woman in close quarters. The rectory was not just Father Jack’s home but Miss Delia’s. They encountered each other at breakfast every morning, at dinner every night, and occasionally during the day. It was plain to me that they were fond of each other, and in fact she remained his housekeeper for decades, until her death.

Yet there was a coldness in his manner toward her that took me aback, so different was it from my father’s gentle, chivalrous manner toward my mother and all women. Sometimes when Delia was serving our meal, Jack would tease her so harshly that I was embarrassed and wished I were somewhere else. I understood his behavior – correctly, I believe, since I would later see other priests

behave similarly – as his way of keeping distance from her even while living in the same house. He seemed to feel a need to demonstrate unmistakably that there was nothing sexual or romantic between them.

Miss Delia did not have a car. Once a week Father Jack would drive her in his car to buy groceries. She sat in the back seat. He explained to me that people in Marshfield might otherwise get the wrong idea about their relationship. For the same reason, I suppose, Miss Delia never sat with us at the dining table. After serving us our meals, she ate her meal on a corner of a kitchen cabinet.

Miss Delia was kind to me that summer. I liked her. She put a sprig of mint leaves fresh from her garden in the iced tea she made every day, and took delight in my enjoyment of her cooking. I felt bad for her, maybe more than I needed to. She probably understood better than I celibate priests' distinctive ways of relating to women.

The sixties and after

When Father Jack and I met at family gatherings in the years and decades following the summer of '62, I inevitably felt some awkwardness, knowing that I had disappointed him. It was I, not he, who had changed. He had in due course embraced the postconciliar liturgical reforms, and like most people, he mellowed with age. But the key contexts of his life stayed the same: Catholic faith and priestly ministry in South Missouri, USA.

I, on the other hand, in the midst of the wrenching cultural upheavals of the 1960s, crossed one after another of the boundaries that Jack and I both stayed within during that summer of '62. I abandoned my studies for the priesthood, quit living within Catholic circles, moved away first from Missouri and then from the United States. I made a career of studying, questioning, teaching and writing critically about the bedrock on which Jack built his life. I

became what in Jack's world was called a "fallen-away Catholic" – and an apostate from America to boot.

It is to his credit that despite my failure to fulfill his hopes for me, he remained friendly and cordial. My wife Anne and I stayed on his list for Christmas cards, and he on ours.

Now that Father Jack is gone, I feel free to say out loud what long puzzled and saddened me, that the church did not make better use of his abundant talents and unwavering loyalty, nor give him commensurate honor.

Why he was never made a bishop and entrusted with a diocese is a mystery to me. His early appointments in Rome, St. Louis, and Springfield pointed in that direction, and he had friends aplenty in high places. Successive bishops of the Springfield diocese moved into the church's highest ranks. Ignatius Strecker (1962-1970) was promoted to Archbishop of Kansas City, Kansas. William Baum (1970-1973) moved up to the Archbishopric of Washington, DC, and was named a Cardinal. Bernard Law (1973-1984) became Cardinal-Archbishop of Boston. All these men left Father Jack behind, caring for parishes in the South Missouri hinterland.

The church might at least, as Jack grew into old age, have given him a higher rank of Monsignor. The title of Honorary Prelate is often bestowed on priests with long, devoted service in large parishes. Even this recognition eluded Father Jack. I am sorry for that, though he probably considered it God's will. In my view, he deserved better from the church to which he committed himself so fully for so long in such an inauspicious period of Western history.

"It takes all kinds of people to make a world," my father used to say. I treasured that adage, still do, because it shows tolerance and respect for difference. Father Jack was a different kind of person than I, but my life was enriched by his. The learning opportunity he

gave me in that summer of '62 helped me find my personal path in the overall human journey. I thank him for that.

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