

Doing Our Best

by Jim Martin, SJ

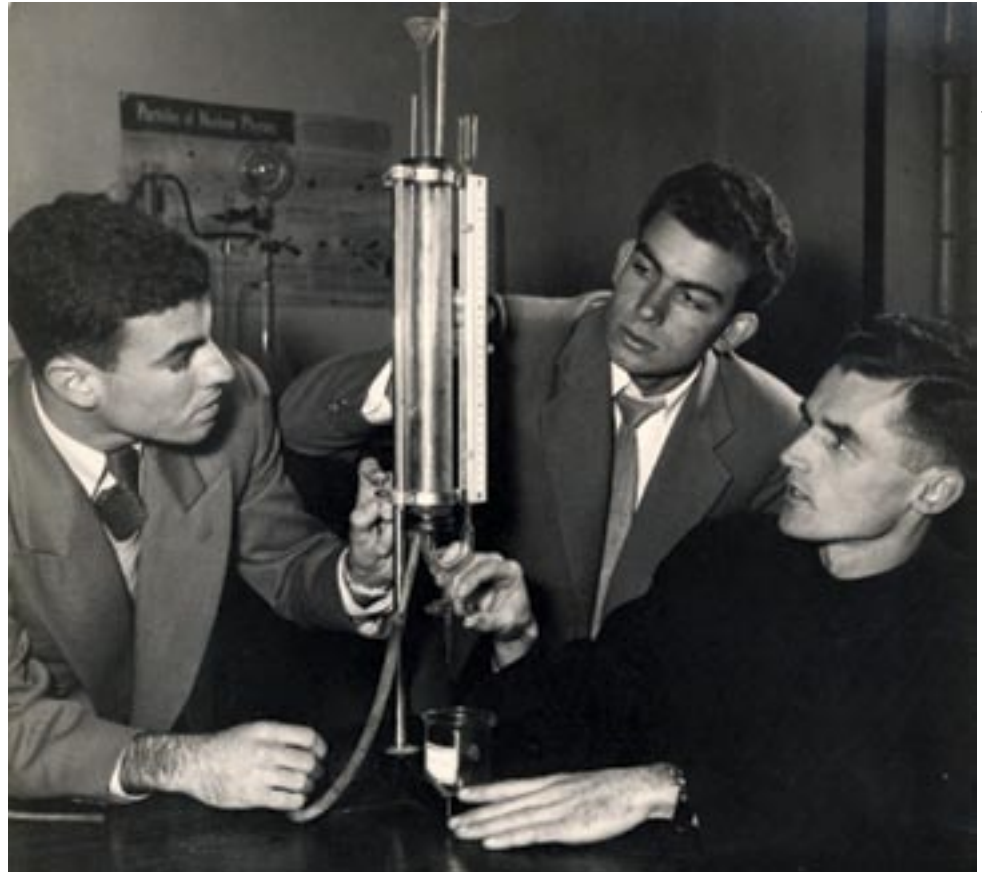
JOE MACDONNELL died in June. You may not have known that.

On second thought, it wouldn't surprise me if you did. Joe, a Jesuit priest, taught mathematics at Fairfield University in Connecticut for over 30 years. During that time he influenced a great many students (and faculty). He was a founding father of the Clavius Society, a group of mathematicians named after the sixteenth-century Jesuit who collaborated on the Gregorian calendar reform.

Joe was also the author of a number of lively books, including *Jesuit Geometers* and *Jesuits by the Tigris*, about the work of the Society of Jesus in educating the youth of Baghdad from the 1930s through the 1960s. (In 1969, Jesuits were tossed out, virtually overnight, by the Ba'ath party, Sadaam Hussein's faction.) He also penned a pamphlet marvelously entitled *Why are the Fairfield University Buildings Named After Dead Jesuits?*, a boon for any student who wondered why he or she lived in Kostka Hall.

There are ten Jesuit provinces, administrative areas organized geographically, in the United States. Each has its own subtle but distinct personality, perhaps the result of particular regional characteristics, or the original ethnic makeup of the Jesuits in the province, or even a few influential men who put their stamp on the province (much as the personality of the founder of a religious order imprints itself on the men and women who follow).

Now, as a New England Jesuit myself, I'm not foolish enough to put into print my descriptions of other provinces' personalities. But I have come to appreciate the personality of my own province: at once wry, no-nonsense, and somewhat flinty. And deeply spiritual. Perhaps because I entered the novitiate in New England, I associate my home province with a profound appreciation of Ignatian spirituality—centered geographically, at least for me, at our retreat house on a windswept promontory on the Atlantic



Joseph MacDonnell, SJ (1929–2005), taught physics and math at Baghdad College and Al-Hikma University, the two Jesuit schools in Iraq, until Jesuits were expelled in 1969. His other duties at the schools ranged from giving retreats to coaching basketball (and introducing one-on-one defense).

Ocean in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

As in other provinces of the Society of Jesus, there is in New England a venerable reluctance to change. (“I’m against change,” one priest in my community enjoys saying, “even for the better.”) How many New England Province Jesuits, goes the joke, does it take to change a light bulb? Two: one to change the bulb and one to say how much better the *old* light bulb was.

Apart from the reluctance to change, Joe MacDonnell seemed the quintessential New England Jesuit, perhaps because he was one of the first I met: intelligent, cheerful, and hardworking all the way up until the end of his life and dedicated to the Society of Jesus. Three of his brothers, in fact, were also New England Jesuits.

His younger brother Marty, now living in the Jesuit infirmary in Weston, Massachusetts, once served briefly as our province's director of formation, charged with overseeing Jesuits in training. After philosophy studies I was scheduled to meet with Marty to discuss my “regency” assignment—the period of full-time work before theology studies. I figured that as a temporary placeholder, Marty would be a powerless figurehead with no real authority. I was mistaken.

“What are you thinking about for regency?” he asked. “Well,” I said, “I am equally willing to work in the States or with the Jesuit Refugee Service overseas.”

“In that case,” Marty said without even taking a breath, “We’ll send you overseas. Working in the missions is a terrific oppor-

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tunity.” He decided instantly: something that appealed and still appeals to me. I once told Joe that story and he laughed. “That sounds like Marty all right!” Like his brother, Marty had worked in the “missions” as well, in Brazil.

A close friend of Joe’s recently described him as “one of the most generous and creative guys you would want to meet, always trying new things.” At Baghdad College in the 1960s, for example, while teaching mathematics and physics as a young priest, Joe began broadcasting a science program on the local radio station and instituted a physics lab at the school. After returning to the States and taking up a teaching position at Fairfield University, he completed a PhD in mathematics by studying part-time at Columbia University. “I’m not sure if the Jesuits at Fairfield even knew he was doing that!” recalled his brother with a chuckle. And, along with another Jesuit, he founded a worldwide organization for alumni, both Muslim and Christian,

of the now-shuttered Baghdad College, which still meets every two years and provides financial support not only for Iraqi refugees but also for the New England Province. It is a stunningly successful charitable organization.

But Joe’s greatest talent was always for people. “He was just one of those guys people liked to be with,” said his friend. “Most of all, Joe was interested in people and how they related to God,” said his brother Marty. “Even after he entered the province infirmary, people wanted to see him for spiritual direction.” In short, Joe led a life distinguished not so much by headlines as by its effect on the hearts of others. He exemplified Ignatius’s ideal of the Jesuit as the one who “helps souls.” On such quiet lives are built the Church.

This summer, while I was staying at the Jesuit community at Boston College, a note went up on the bulletin board from Joe, who had been recovering at the infirmary from dialysis treatments. I

had heard that things were going poorly, but I did not know how poorly. Later I learned that when the doctor told him that the dialysis wasn’t working and read out a list of medical options, Joe said, “There’s one option you’re forgetting about, and that’s to do nothing and to go home to God, which I’ve been preparing for all my life.”

The note on the community bulletin board told how things were hopeless—at least physically. Joe admitted this, asked for everyone’s prayers, and bade farewell to his brother New England Jesuits. At the end of the note he signed off, “We did our best.” Joe MacDonnell died a few days later.

That note was classic Joe and, to me, classic New England Jesuit. Reading it made me sad at Joe’s leaving us, proud to have known him, but hopeful, too. It reminded me of the value of a life of devotion to God, in which—even in the midst of a terminal illness, at the very end—one can see things as they are: with a wry, no-nonsense, flinty, but deeply spiritual outlook.

And isn’t that how God sees all of us? Jesuit, Franciscan, or Benedictine? Lay or clergy? Married or single? Gay or straight? Conservative or liberal? Doing our best for the Lord: the *magis*, as we Jesuits like to say, in New England and around the world. **C**



A doctorate in math from Columbia University set MacDonnell up for a career teaching the subject at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut, and a particular interest in mathematical structures, including polyhedra, tetrahedra, and “ruled surfaces” (above).



James Martin, SJ, is associate editor of *America* magazine. He is the author of *My Life with the Saints* (Loyola Press 2006).