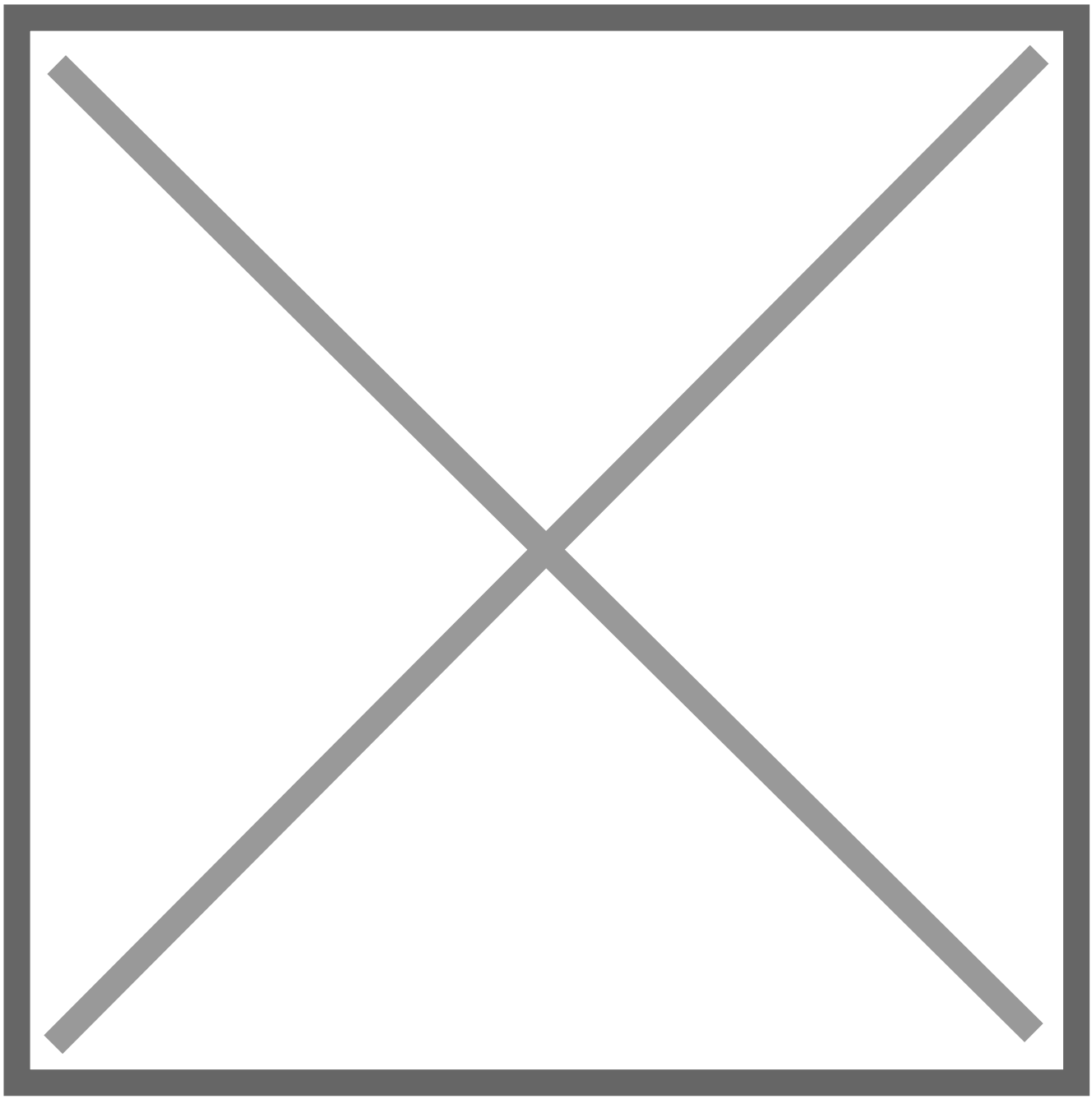
News



Redemptorist Fr. Francis Xavier Murphy, pictured in a 1996 file photo, wrote a series of dispatches on the Second Vatican Council for The New Yorker magazine. Written under the pseudonym Xavier Rynne, his "Letters From Vatican City" caused a sensation by offering a behind-the-scenes look into the secret proceedings. (OSV News file/The Catholic University of America)

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When the Second Vatican Council opened in 1962, its proceedings were shrouded in secrecy.

Bishops were sworn to silence and journalists were barred from covering internal debates that would reshape the Catholic Church for generations. For the wider world, the main access came through carefully curated Vatican summaries that revealed little of the council's inner workings.

Then, unexpectedly, a mysterious byline appeared in The New Yorker: Xavier Rynne.

In a series of explosive dispatches, the anonymous insider revealed the council's unseen conflicts — ultraconservative factions working to block reforms, curial power plays and intense exchanges shaping the church's future.

Convened by St. John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council took place in four sessions from 1962 to 1965.

Captivated by the intrigue, the world devoured "Letters from Vatican City." Some church leaders, however, were scandalized and launched a hunt to unmask the author.

Now, Richard Zmuda, a parishioner of St. Mary in Annapolis and author of "The Mole of Vatican Council II: The True Story of Xavier Rynne," tells the tale behind the pseudonym: Redemptorist Fr. Francis Xavier Murphy, the priest who became Vatican II's whistleblower.

Based on years of meticulous research into Murphy's life, Zmuda paints a portrait of a man whose conviction brought the hidden proceedings of the council into the open.

"Every quote that was in The New Yorker was true," Zmuda told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. "They couldn't dismiss it. It was written in fact. And Fr. Murphy just had the guts to put it out to the rest of the world. The Curia and the Vatican itself wanted everything to be just a secretive meeting before they made these decisions — but Fr. Murphy realized early on that unless some truth came out, Vatican II would fail."

Murphy, stationed at St. Mary in Annapolis from 1985 until his death in 2002 at age 87, spent part of his early priesthood as a chaplain at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. He went to Rome in 1948 as a researcher and ministered with Catholic War Relief Services, eventually serving as a U.S. Army chaplain.

In the late 1950s, he began teaching patristic moral theology in Rome and was in the city when the pope officially opened Vatican II on Oct. 11, 1962. The council ended on Dec. 8, 1965, with a closing ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica.

A Bronx native and scholar of medieval history, Murphy had unlimited access to council proceedings while serving as a "peritus," or theological adviser, for Bishop Aloysius Willinger of Monterey-Fresno, California, a fellow Redemptorist.

"He had access to everything — conversations on elevators, conversations in coffee shops, meetings — and he literally wrote it all down," Zmuda said.

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Murphy was fully aware of the risk of excommunication. Three years into the council, Archbishop Pietro Parente, assessor of the Vatican's Congregation of the Holy Office (now known as the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith) confronted him on behalf of a conservative cardinal, but Murphy "squirreled his way through" the meeting

without excommunication, Zmuda said. Xavier Rynne would later come under the protection of St. Paul VI, the author added.

"They did take a vow of secrecy and he violated that," Zmuda said. "There's no question about it. But he looked for the greater good."

Murphy's revelations emboldened reform-minded cardinals to challenge those who had held what Zmuda called a "stranglehold" on church doctrine and power.

It would take more than two decades after Vatican II for Murphy to admit he was Xavier Rynne. His nom de plume drew from his middle name and his mother's maiden name — a choice Zmuda called probably the "worst pseudonym in the world."

"It's surprising that it took three years for the Curia to find out who he was," Zmuda said.

Investigators into Rynne's identity had initially focused on cardinals, then bishops among the 2,500 council attendees, before zeroing in on the American delegation.

"It was just a matter of time," Zmuda said.

Zmuda first met Murphy in Annapolis. Murphy, aware that Zmuda was a literature teacher, asked him to write the foreword to a book on Vatican II. While working on that project, Zmuda realized Murphy's own compelling story was waiting to be told.

Nearing the end of his life, struggling with cancer and Parkinson's disease, Murphy asked Zmuda to share that story. Zmuda had access to Murphy's personal files, manuscripts, detailed histories and personal correspondence. He made two trips to Rome, where he was given access to secret files on Murphy.

Zmuda remembered his friend, buried at the Redemptorist cemetery at St. Mary, as smart, confident and outgoing.

"He was social," said Zmuda, whose book is written as a historical novel and was awarded first place this year by the Catholic Media Association for best book by a small publisher.

"He loved a good time," Zmuda said. "He was an Irishman and he could tell a tale. You could just picture him at a dinner party holding forth and laughing."

Murphy, a former adjunct professor of politics at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, had a photographic memory for names, events and personalities, Zmuda added.

"He was passionate about the Catholic Church and he was passionate about the changes that had to take place in the Catholic Church," Zmuda said.

And what Father Murphy make of the church today and how it's evolved from Vatican II?

"He would love it," Zmuda said. "He would absolutely love it."