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Spencer Tracy, Hollywood priest

by Kurt Jensen by Catholic News Service

NEW YORK -- Screen legend Spencer Tracy (1900-1967), who won one of his two Academy Awards for portraying a priest during Hollywood's golden age, played Catholic clergymen three other times, but was never comfortable with it, reveals a forthcoming book about the star.

In "Spencer Tracy: A Biography," to be published this fall by Alfred A. Knopf, James Curtis writes that MGM director W.S. "Woody" Van Dyke had to talk Tracy into taking the role of Father Tim Mullin, the pugilistic childhood friend of Clark Gable's character Blackie Norton, in the 1936 film "San Francisco." Before then, clerical roles in films had always been assigned to character players, not leading men.

"If he had any fear," Curtis writes, "it was the fear of artificiality, the fear that lifelong Catholics would look at Father Tim and see a movie star pretending to be a priest and not the soul of a real priest." As it turned out, Tracy's portrayal was so convincing, his fan mail began to include requests for spiritual advice, leading him to reflect to his secretary, "You can't live up to an idealistic role."

Tracy, a lifelong Catholic whose boyhood parish was St. Rose of Lima in Milwaukee, played a priest for the last time as Father Matthew Doonan, rescuing children from a doomed hospital in 1961's "The Devil at 4 O'Clock."

But he's best remembered for two portrayals of a real-life cleric, Father Edward J. Flanagan (1886-1948), in 1938's "Boys Town" and its 1941 sequel, "Men of Boys Town" -- winning an Oscar for the first film.

It took another Catholic -- Eddie Mannix, production manager at MGM -- to persuade Tracy to take the part of Father Flanagan. "Your name is written in gold in the heart of every homeless boy in Boys Town," Father Flanagan eventually wrote Tracy from the Omaha, Neb., headquarters of the charity he had founded in 1917, "because of the anticipated picture you are going to make for us."

Tracy and co-star Mickey Rooney, who played would-be tough guy Whitey Marsh, were never close. Curtis writes that on the first day of shooting, Tracy growled at Rooney: "The moment I catch you trying to louse up a scene I'm in, I'll send you to purgatory."

Tracy learned of one unexpected result of the famous part in 1967 while making his last film, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." With the help of a studio plumber, an outsider, a man in his mid-30s, sneaked onto the set.

"Uncle Spencer?" he said. "I'm Bobs Watson. I played Pee Wee in 'Boys Town.'"

Watson, then occasionally working as an actor, told Tracy of his plans to become a Methodist minister. "And I wanted to tell you that though I know it was a role, the way you were as Father Flanagan -- the warmth and loving and caring I felt -- was a major influence on my decision to enter the ministry."

Tracy, Watson remembered years later, "was very moved."

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Tracy never resolved his real-life conflicts about his faith: Though his Catholic sensibilities -- perhaps along with other factors -- prevented him from divorcing his wife, actress Louise Treadwell, with whom he had two children, he nonetheless engaged in a number of extramarital affairs, most famously a longtime relationship with Katharine Hepburn. Yet Curtis writes that the actor still acknowledged his spiritual needs.

One occasion for doing so occurred during a 1966 visit from then-Maryknoll Father Eugene Kennedy, after Tracy's health had begun its final decline. Tracy, the former priest recalled, embraced a wooden statue of the Madonna he had found in Chamonix, France, and told Kennedy, "This is something I truly love. It's so simple."

Just before dinner that evening, Tracy confided, "You know, I thought about being a priest once; I guess every Catholic kid does, or did, anyway. I don't know how they feel with all these changes taking place. Now Pope John XXIII, he was my kind of pope. But with this Vatican II, I'm not sure that priests believe in sin anymore or still hear confessions."

He paused, then asked Kennedy, "You still know how to?"

[Jensen is a guest film reviewer for Catholic News Service.]

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