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Courage of Blessed John Paul II inspired radio newsman

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 2, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: Bill Spadaro, an editor and writer for 1010 WINS radio, was one of the first of my acquaintances to discover this Conversations column when I was at the starting gate in November 2011. I asked him how he came upon it.

Spadaro: I'm always looking for alternative news sources for a different take on the world. I've discovered over 20 years in local news that not everything can be viewed through tabloid headlines. I enjoy reading *National Catholic Reporter*, especially given its status sometimes described as "not in line" with the church. I'm not always "in line" with the church, and I enjoy stories that cover some of the more controversial topics for Catholics. It was a pleasant surprise to come across your "Conversation" pieces. You do a fantastic job and it's an honor to be a part of this series.

You and I have had some conversations in the WINS radio newsroom when I come to record my weekly religious commentaries. You've impressed me on several levels: your professionalism; your willingness to share media insights with my grandnephew, a college freshman hoping to major in radio; and, above all, your concern for your children. It's refreshing for me to find a young man like you wanting to be part of a church that has lost so many young families. Why is Catholicism important to you?

The church is like family! And my family is the most important thing in my life. I hope my kids can one day know the joy that can be found in faith.

Who influenced your devotion to the church?

Without a doubt, the most influential person to me is the Blessed John Paul II. Doing time in Catholic school in the '70s and '80s, I never had a very high regard for church leaders, and John Paul was the big cheese. But it all changed in 1983, when John Paul sat down with Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him. John Paul forgave the Turk for what he had done. I was just a teenager, but that story of John Paul's reunion with the man who wanted to assassinate him touched my heart and soul in a way I never thought possible. It was an act that set an example for the world and, to me, it was the ultimate display of mercy and grace. When it comes to forgiveness, I wish I could be as strong-willed as John Paul.

What sustains your faith?

My faith is sustained by, above all, my family. Faith, family and friends matter to me. I feel blessed to have all three of these things in my life. I know it sounds like a corny billboard message on the side of a highway, but it's true.

What does Catholicism require of you?

I try, Sister, I really try to follow all the precepts of the church. It's never easy, but I do my best. What I do think is required of me as a Catholic parent is to make sure my kids grow up to be good Catholics, hopefully better

than I was growing up. God help them.

People who work in the news industry see much that is heartbreaking, often including senseless violence. How do you retain expectations of a better world?

It's the most difficult thing that I deal with, personally, on a daily basis.

On Sunday, July 22, 2012, 4-year-old Lloyd Morgan was hit by a stray bullet in a playground in the Bronx. Two weeks earlier, on July 8, stray bullets struck 3-year-old Isaiah Rivera in the legs as he played in Brooklyn. He survived. Lloyd Morgan did not. The next day, Lloyd's anguished mother spoke to reporters, pleading with neighbors to turn in those responsible. She said of her son, "He hasn't gotten to live his life yet. He hasn't gotten to do anything." As I was heading to the office, I heard Lloyd's mother on the radio. And later, I saw video of her speaking. I'm a father. I have a daughter, 10, and two boys, 7 and 2, and I could not imagine being in this woman's place, in front of the microphones 24 hours after losing my child. During our daily editors' meeting, I started to give our afternoon crew the details of the stories we would be covering, including the Lloyd Morgan tragedy. As I was speaking, I became very emotional, as all I could think of was Lloyd's mother in so much pain. It's something all of us working to report the news have to deal with every day. If nothing else, I think the episode showed that news editors are, indeed, human.

What do you want from your church?

I was away from the church for a while because I was looking for a profound experience at Mass. That never materialized. But I was able to reach a resolution, and I've been back a while. And while I enjoy the sense of community in my church, I'm still looking for comfort. I have a son in the first grade, and the Newtown, Conn., tragedy was not an easy day for me or anyone who has kids in elementary school. That was a Friday, and I was thinking about being in church that weekend to feel comfort, surrounded by loving families, friends and neighbors. I also looked forward to our pastor offering words of hope. But Newtown was only briefly mentioned during the petitions for the general intercessions: "We pray for the families affected by the shooting in Connecticut." In my opinion, it was a missed opportunity to bring a community even closer together. It was first time in a long time I walked out of church disappointed.

You're absolutely correct in reacting as you did. Priests with access to the pulpit miss so many opportunities to offer insight and consolation to their parishioners. Is there anything else you would like to see changed?

I really don't know what I would change in my church, but I do have two thumbs down for the new Roman missal. Yeah, I get it, a more literal translation. The bishops should have sent it back to Rome. Some might view my complaint as whining over change. The problem is, I, and lot of us lay folk, spent over two decades learning every prayer and response under the old missal, much of it in Latin in the seventh and eighth grade. So after a secretive decadelong translation process, they come to us and say, oh, we're going to change it up a bit (a lot).

Whatever one thinks of it, the new text could possibly serve as a wedge to drive more people away from the church. That's how I felt when it was introduced on the first day of Advent in 2011. Now I tolerate it, even though I'm not always saying the right things during Mass. At times, I clumsily blurt out, "And also with you, and with your spirit." Some people just look at me, nodding in sympathy. And this is sarcasm: I sure do enjoy the part where we all beat our chests in a declaration of guilt.

A very dear friend of mine, a permanent deacon with a great love for the church, shares your discontent with that declaration of guilt. The previous translation focused less on our personal sinfulness and more on the joy we experience in accepting God's unfailing love and forgiveness.

You speak with affection of your own children. What was your childhood like?

I grew up in a two-family home in the Gravesend-Sheepshead Bay section of Brooklyn, upstairs from Grandma and Grandpa and some aunts and uncles. It was a gritty upbringing and one in which I learned a lot much too quickly. For fun, during snowstorms, we hung on to the bumpers of moving cars, a city-kid activity known as "skitching." It was our extreme sport. Another pastime of Brooklyn youth in the '70s was seeing how many garage roofs one can jump to without having to make contact with the ground (otherwise known as falling). I remember stickball in the street, stoop ball and block parties. It was a neighborhood of Yankees fans. But I was born a Mets fan, and I will die a Mets fan.

Where did you go to school?

I spent the highlights of my youth at St. Edmund Elementary School, where I began cultivating my editing and writing skills through embarrassing love notes to a girl in my third-grade class. Those notes were confiscated by a nun. I was suspended from school many times for various misdeeds, but I was generally a good kid. The principal at the time gave me more than my share of second chances. I was an altar boy, and I looked forward each Sunday to ringing the bells as the priest raised the Eucharist. Later, I attended Nazareth Regional High School [1] in East Flatbush, where I became a scholar and a world-class athlete, or so I tell my wife. Last year, Nazareth was dangerously close to shutting down because of its debt to the diocese and a dwindling enrollment, despite a 98 percent graduation rate and sending 96 percent of those grads to college. But the school was saved thanks to a spirited alumni fundraising effort and the leadership of principal Providencia Quiles. Nazareth is one of the last Catholic schools in the inner city, and the struggle to keep it open was a top story on 1010 WINS. It was also covered extensively in the local NYC newspapers.

Please say something about your wife and children.

My wife, Alissa, and I have been married for 13 years. We received the sacrament at Our Lady Help of Christians in Midwood, Brooklyn, during a powerful nor'easter. It made "getting to the church on time" our first big challenge as a couple.

I'm sure a lot of men out there believe their wife is the best in the world, but it is, in fact, my wife who holds that title. I can't imagine life without my daughter, Kaitlyn, and my sons, Dylan and Ryan. Kaitlyn loves to play soccer and basketball, and she's a prolific reader. She's kind and never at a loss for a smile, a helping hand or an extra hug. Dylan is happy and vibrant and loves sports, especially baseball and the Mets. Ryan loves his big brother, and often puts him in a headlock on the living room floor.

Their photo captures great enjoyment and it makes you look younger than your 45 years. How do you pray?

I know some prayers, but I prefer to talk to God like he's a buddy of mine, walking beside me. Other times, I pray during my commute that God is actually hearing my prayers.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

When I'm facing challenges in life, I think of the Sermon on the Mount passages from Matthew, particularly "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Matthew 5:12 [2]). I love the stories surrounding

Easter, and I look forward to the dramatic vigil Mass that features a darkened church. The passages that record the story of Jesus' persecution are so heartbreaking, but also a source of inspiration. There is so much drama in Jesus' final words to his disciples: "I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16:33 [3]). Isaiah 41:10 [4] is always comforting: "Fear not, for I am with you." Before taking the field before a football game in high school, I would read this passage to myself, giving praise to God for victory in battle: "It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect" (Psalm 18:32 [5]).

How do you relax?

After spending my day in the newsroom, I relax when I get home by having a bite to eat while the kids tell me about their school day. I always say, "Tell me about one thing you learned today." Really, I just love to hear their voices, and their enthusiasm is a bonus. It's a great feeling when the kids are doing something they love and they can't wait to tell me about it.

What makes you happy?

What makes me very happy is the game of soccer, "the beautiful game!" I became a soccer fan in 1982 when Italy won the World Cup. I was in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, when it happened, and if you've ever seen news footage of that day in that neighborhood, you would understand, all at once, what type of soccer fanatic I am. Skip ahead more than two decades, and I was given the opportunity to volunteer as a youth soccer coach. It's a privilege to be in a position to teach kids the game and guide them in much more important endeavors, like sportsmanship and character building. Coaches can be so influential in the lives of young people, so I don't take the responsibility lightly. Just ask some adults now if they can recall something that happened in grammar school 25 years ago. Most can't. But ask about a memory of a coach or a team they played on, they can detail their climb to a championship or how they lost a game in the final seconds. Anyone can teach kids how to run an attack in a soccer match, but it's the life lessons they will remember. That's why I love coaching, and it makes me very happy.

What else would you like us to know?

I enjoy surf fishing, and I know the words to "Danny Boy."

Thanks for this sharing. You surely have more in your life than that song in your heart.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [6] from Now You Know Media.]

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