

CHAPTER TWELVE

• THE GIFT OF YOU •

In America during the war, we became familiar with stories of war heroes. Newspapers and radios told of numbers of men and women who had done great and heroic things for the good of their country and democracy. We realized that many other unidentified and unsung heroes daily put their lives in the line of fire.

Perhaps one of the most outstanding stories of heroism was the story that splashed across the front pages of our local newspaper in February 1943. It was about the heroism of four Army chaplains—two Protestant ministers, a Jewish rabbi, and a Catholic priest.

Reports said that these four military chaplains had rallied and brought hope and courage to the immediate survivors of their torpedoed ship. As the ship began to sink, there were no more life jackets left. The four men of God took off their jackets and gave them to four men nearby who were next in line. Seeing that they had done all they could do, the four of them joined arms and began to pray aloud to God. As the ship began to slip into the rough, cold waters, survivors reported the four chaplains' voices still were heard offering prayers. Two or three of these chaplains had ties to Philadelphia, and all four of the city newspapers extolled their heroism on their front pages for days.

I read the newspaper reports to Nonna as she busied herself in the back kitchen.

“What a pity,” she said, when I finished reading, “that the place of this great act of love could not be marked. They gave their lives with love.”

I folded the newspaper and left the kitchen, returning to my geography book. I started reading about Latin American countries, thinking the incident would be soon forgotten.

I was wrong. In the days that followed, Nonna never stopped giving praise to the four chaplains. Soon, by extension, she began to praise all priests, ministers and rabbis. At every opportunity, she remembered and then reminded the entire family of all the sacrifices that men of the cloth make. She prompted us to always be respectful to these men of God.

She reminded us of the things these men had to do and renounce for the love of God and neighbor. Constantly, she drew us back to the story of the four chaplains and of their love of their fellow man, which they put above the love they had for their own lives.

One day, Nonna found my cousins and me in the dinette doing our homework. She came and sat across the table from us.

“Have you been listening to what I have been saying these past couple of days? I truly hope so. This story about the four men of God is very important for us to understand. These men are examples of complete sacrifice and unselfishness. As you go through life, look at what you can do for other people. In other people, no matter how ugly, sick or poor they are, there is God. See if there is anything that you can change or make better or different in the world. It can be anything, even a small thing, but leave a mark on this earth that you can see from heaven and that you can point back to and show God you were down here. Let Him see what you did to help shape or reshape the life He created. To do nothing, to leave nothing, to leave no mark is not living life; it is just using time,” she said decisively.

“Never stop praying for people who serve God. It makes no difference if they are of your faith or not. If they are doing good, if they are bringing God to the broken, the sick and the needy and returning faith, hope and love back to God, then we should always have these servants in our prayers.” I felt that she was talking not only to my cousins and me but to the rest of the family and maybe even to herself.

“To be a member of God’s family, as we all are, is a blessing and a privilege. To be a servant to God’s family, like priests, ministers, and rabbis, is a greater blessing and greater privilege, because God uses them to lead us to Him,” Nonna said as she rose from her chair to return to the back kitchen.

As she tossed a dishtowel over her shoulder she said, “Sometimes in our darkest moments the men of God become the only light to follow.”

What Nonna had said to us made a strong impression on me because I was getting ready for my First Confession and Holy Communion. A lot of what was going to take place would come from the hands of a priest.

At that time, a Catholic child received First Confession on a Saturday. The next day, Sunday, he or she would receive First Holy Communion.

The night before my First Confession, Nonna came and pulled me aside. She told me to think carefully of what I was about to do as a child of God, as a member of His Church and as a sinner. “You will get a lot of goodness from the man who gives you this Sacrament,” she said. “Do not take it lightly. Remember all the sacrifices that others have made, the sacrifices that were put in place before you got to where you are.”

The next day, the day of my First Confession, Nonna insisted on coming with me as I just knew she would. All the children in my class were in the church, and Sister Mary Madeline, with the help of Sister Mary Killian, lined us up along the church wall in a long single line so we could enter the confessional.

All was quiet and extremely serious and respectful.

As I stood in that line, I grew more frightened and more excited with each passing minute. As I got closer and closer to the confessional, I actually began to tremble.

Many things were racing in my head. I was confident of what I had to do for I had been carefully prepared for this

sacrament. I knew all the catechism questions and answers and all the prayers that were needed to make a good confession. For days I had been getting all my sins together, running them over and over in my head, and I was ready to unload them on to the priest who was representing Jesus.

But the longer I waited, the more new questions came to me.

Suppose I am dumb enough to make a mistake? Suppose I forget some of my sins? Suppose I am so great a sinner that I will not be forgiven? Will I feel all clean and white all over after confession? Will I then know what it feels like to be a saint? If so, would Jesus come to me in a vision?

I looked around. Nonna sat in the back of the church. Even though there was a great distance between us, I could hear her praying in a low voice. I felt warmed, seeing her kneeling in prayer, for I was sure she was praying for me.

With Nonna on my side, all is going to be okay, I thought to myself.

Safety and security wrapped around me. I was in church and that always made me feel I was safe. After Confession, I would be safer—I would be near to Jesus, and I would be near-perfect in God's eyes.

But where would Satan be? Was he waiting outside ready to tempt me? Would he tempt me with something that I could not refuse? Would he show me a new sin? Make me get even, or mad or want to hurt someone? Would I be strong enough to get rid of him? What happens when I sin again? Will I feel dirty and alone, unsafe?

Finally my greatest fear, the question that bothered me so often, surfaced.

What was it like in that dark box? In that dark box, would Jesus know it's me? Suppose He thinks I'm someone else?!

My turn came. I obediently entered the confessional and was enveloped in darkness. My mind went blank.

I was alone with Jesus through His priest.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw a grayness coming from the

other side of the sliding door. Through the slats on the confessional door, small slices of sunlight dappled the box.

I heard Nonna's words: "Sometimes in our darkest moments the men of God become the only light to follow."

"Yes?" Father said softly.

"This is Vincent Iezzi, I wanted you to know that."

I heard a chuckle, "Okay, Vincent."

With faith that could only be matched by a saint—any saint—I said: "Bless me Father for I have sinned..." and on I went, each word cleansing and turning me into a clean person. Almost as soon as I started, it was over. My sweaty hands grew dry and my shaky legs grew stronger.

I came out of the big black confessional box, and Sister pointed me to the altar railing to say my penance. As I knelt there finishing the cleansing, I felt Nonna beside me.

When I finished, Nonna whispered "Vinzee, who heard your First Confession?"

"Father Wassel," I replied, in a whisper.

"Good, always remember the priest who gives you the sacraments for the first time. That way you can always pray for him for having given you the gifts of God."

"For all the sacraments?" I asked again, in a respectful whisper.

"Your first Confession and Communion and Marriage, yes, and the bishop who anoints you for Confirmation and Holy Orders. And now we must find out what priest baptized you," she answered.

"How about Extreme Unction? If I'm sick and dying, how can I do anything then?"

"You don't have to worry about that priest. God will remember him and He will bless that priest because that priest has given the gift of you back to Him."

Nonna grabbed my hand and together we rose and walked the length of the church aisle. As we walked out of the church, I realized that I would have to remember a lot of

priests. Most important, I would have to always remember Nonna because she was always giving me back to Him.