

Hoping mom gets double the graces



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Stephen F. Gambescia of Havertown just completed a book giving testimony to parents who raised big families.

My siblings and I are all praying for the parents of the families having dinner with the pope.

Our father was the personal physician for a cardinal of Philadelphia, and he made house calls for him. Sometimes the cardinal would ask my father to bring my mother and “some of the children” for dinner. This would include about eight of the 16.

For most parents, this would be an honor filled with excitement. For our poor mother, this was high anxiety. She not only had to ready the group but pray that nothing would “come from the mouths of babes” to embarrass her.

We rehearsed how the cardinal should be addressed, and discussed at length why we would kiss his ring. There was always a “first claim” for who would ring the doorbell.

We were greeted by a religious sister. We felt the calmness in this home. We asked our mother if we qualified as dignitaries. She explained that the cardinal was very pleased to see his doctor’s family, but as far as she was concerned, she prayed that the visit would be unremarkable.

We were escorted to what was one of several living rooms, replete with fancy furniture. A few words of welcome were exchanged, and then my father and the cardinal disappeared for doctor/patient confidentiality things. Our mother assured us that the cardinal was not sick and this was simply a checkup.

One of the younger kids asked why the cardinal did not go to our father’s office in South Philadelphia. Another explained that bishops and popes do not know how to drive. Another said that was not true. This brought on much banter among the kids

about what temporal matters cardinals were able to do, given that much assistance was given to them, such as “holding their cane” and “taking off their hats and stuff.”

Invariably, musical chairs ensued in the living room. We knew not to sit on any chair that had a sash across the seat; it was tempting. One sibling said the chair was broken, another said someone important sat there and once that happens nobody else is allowed to sit in the chair. An older sibling helped our mother by asking: “Are you kids going to say such stupid things when we eat dinner with the cardinal and embarrass your mother and father?” Mother appreciated the help, but warned that “stupid” was not a nice word.

With all the hopping up and down on the furniture, shoes became untied, shirt-tails dropped, and dresses became less “lady like.” Mother was in overdrive and got each child fixed in a second. It never seemed that long since our father, and the cardinal slipped away because there were so many things to see and discuss, but it must have felt like eternity for mother.

We heard a louder than normal pronouncement from the cardinal when he returned: “So, shall we eat?” The formal dining table was the only table we knew that was close in size to ours, but ours was still bigger.

The younger kids sat closest to our mother, and the older ones got as far from the cardinal as they could, fearing they would be asked questions — answers to which they may have forgotten since Confirmation. The grace before meals was actually shorter than our own. Who would think that we had bragging rights over the length of a cardinal’s dinner prayers?

The cardinal was a tall man with large features. His voice was soft and he spoke ever so slowly. One occasion when we were readying to accompany my father to the cardinal’s home, we had a conscientious objector. Brother John, at about age 6, had had enough of the cardinal visits. When asked why he did not want to go, he frankly said: “He takes too long to ask questions and even longer to answer mine.”

Over time, we learned that he would ask questions about “normal stuff,” not about higher order theology. He always wanted to know what school we attended — Catholic school, of course. When he found out which school he gave a brief history of the religious order that ran the school, so we were up on the history of Sisters of Mercy, Augustinians, Christian Brothers, and the Jesuits. He had a closing remark about the Jesuits that only he, our mother, and father understood and laughed about.

We knew our mother would love to see the kitchen, but would not dare to ask. The head sister would sometimes sit for coffee and dessert. She asked our mother who helped her cook and serve the score of people coming for the Holidays. Our mother used this as an opportunity to explain that everyone pitches in, and she gets a lot of help from her mother-in-law. The cardinal offered the good sisters services if things got too challenging. My mother winked at the sister and said she would send over the directions to our house.

The dinner party ended when our mother asked the cardinal to bless the family; she dropped her head and we all did the same.

Leaving the cardinal's residence through the gate, our mother commented on the size of the house and how neat it would be to live in such a home. One of the older girls yelled, "Yes, but I would not want to clean it." A young sibling asked if next time when we were invited if we could sleep over.

All the visits to the cardinal's residence fortunately went without incident. Our mother gave thanks on the ride home, and we hope she gets double the graces.

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