

Moreno's Work and Outward Appearance Hid an Often Troubled Side

By Jay Tokasz, Buffalo News, October 28, 2012

(photo caption:) The Rev. Joseph Moreno's ministry work - such as this event with the family of injured police officer Allen Gerhart, who is not pictured - often earned him media attention.

He endeared himself to area police officers, responding at any hour of the day to their personal or professional tragedies.

Parishioners of the East Side parish where he celebrated Masses grew to love his disheveled, everyman way of ministering, and impoverished residents in the neighborhood appreciated his caring attention.

In some ways, the Rev. Joseph F. Moreno Jr. did the kind of gritty priestly work for which few other clergy are suited.

Yet Moreno, 54, also was by many accounts a tortured soul an enigmatic man who craved attention but refused to allow people to really know him.

His death Oct. 13 due to a self-inflicted gunshot wound sent shock waves across Western New York and caused his family and other supporters to blame diocesan officials for what they called a callous mishandling of the priest.

With the Catholic Church's clergy sexual abuse scandal still looming as a backdrop, some people wondered whether an allegation of that sort had surfaced for Moreno, who reportedly was distressed over his pending departure from St. Lawrence Church, where he had been living since 2005.

In a statement, the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo said no allegations of sex abuse of a minor were ever raised about Moreno. There were no indications Moreno harmed a child. But the priest had other troubling incidents in his past, including a 1989 conviction for attempted arson and falsely reporting an incident and a 2005 bankruptcy filing in which he listed \$447,000 in debts.

Portrayals of Moreno as a saintly man and model priest don't tell the whole story, according to multiple clergy sources.

"He did a lot of wonderful things, but there is the dark side," said one priest who spoke on the condition that his name not be used.

At times in his priesthood, Moreno could be highly unpredictable, to the point of missing Masses for which he was scheduled to be the celebrant.

"You never knew where he was going to be. He was supposed to be saying Mass somewhere, and he was someplace else," said another veteran priest who requested anonymity.

He sometimes acted oddly, giving extravagant gifts to fellow clergy despite serious money problems. Clergy observers said Moreno fabricated or embellished stories about himself. In 2006, for example, he told Buffalo police he fought off a 6-foot-5, knife-wielding burglar who cut the priest's hand, requiring treatment at a local hospital.

Fellow priests suspect there was no burglar at all, and police said the case generated no leads and hasn't been solved.

So erratic was his behavior that some clergy suspected Moreno battled depression or bipolar disorder and wasn't adequately treated.

"It's always been a source of happy hour conversation: 'Did you hear what Joe did lately?'" said one clergyman. "It's a tragic thing."

Moreno's father, Joseph, and his sister, Susan, declined to comment for this story.

Arson at St. Aloysius

Whatever his personal demons were, Moreno kept them to himself, said Monsignor William O. Wangler, a retired priest who worked with Moreno in Springville more than 23 years ago.

If anyone tried to talk with him about stresses or problems in his life, Moreno deflected the overture or denied anything was wrong, said Wangler.

"Many people, including the chancery, tried to help him, but if a man doesn't want help, you can't help him," he added.

Some members of the clergy said diocesan officials struggled for years with what to do with Moreno.

"I think they just gave up and said they can't control him," said one priest.

Moreno's problems dated back to his early priesthood.

In May of 1989, three years after his ordination, Moreno was arrested and accused of arson in connection with a fire in the rectory of St. Aloysius Church in Springville, where he was an associate pastor.

He ultimately pleaded guilty in State Supreme Court to charges of fourth-degree attempted arson and falsely reporting an incident, both misdemeanors. He received a conditional discharge and was

transferred to St. John Church in Olean.

Priests across the diocese were aware of the Springville incident, though the case had never been reported publicly.

Afterward, Moreno may have received residential treatment at a place such as Southdown Institute, a facility in Aurora, Ont., that provides a full range of mental health services to clergy, according to some priests.

The diocese declined to answer several questions about Moreno's conviction and any treatment he received afterward. Instead, through spokesman Kevin A. Keenan, the diocese issued the following statement: "Father Moreno's ministry was one of presence to first responders, the needy and the parishioners, and many others he served. The diocese makes available to all of its priests a full range of assistance for any issues that might arise during the course of their ministry, and that certainly was the case with Father Moreno."

The statement also said: "It is unfortunate that these matters are now being raised when Father Moreno cannot speak for himself and when his family and friends are still grieving his unexpected, tragic passing."

Outside of some self-admitted traffic violations, Moreno didn't have subsequent run-ins with the law.

But he did encounter serious financial problems.

In 2005, just a month after his Town of Tonawanda home was foreclosed upon, Moreno filed for Chapter 13 bankruptcy in U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Western District of New York, declaring assets of \$145,610 and an astounding \$447,086.55 in liabilities mostly credit card debt incurred in May of 1999, a time when Moreno didn't have a priestly assignment in the Buffalo diocese.

Moreno testified that he incurred the debt because of living expenses and as a result of extensive stock trading. His case was converted to a Chapter 7 filing, and he was granted a discharge of the debts in 2006.

Moreno ended up at St. Lawrence rectory around the same time the bankruptcy case was unfolding.

"He was very straightforward about this when he moved in with me at St. Lawrence," said the Rev. Paul D. Seil, former pastor of the church, who lived in the rectory with Moreno before moving on to become pastor of St. Bernadette Church in Orchard Park. "He didn't hide it, and I didn't dwell on it or get into details."

Some priests speculated that Moreno had a gambling problem that led to the debt, but Seil said Moreno was not known to frequent casinos, and he never spoke of placing bets.

"I do know that he was buying a fair amount of lottery tickets," said Seil. "Once when I talked to him about this, he said he was in a group of guys [mostly cops], and he picked up the lottery tickets for the group."

In his bankruptcy filing, Moreno revealed he won \$15,300 in the lottery in 2003.

Never named pastor

In his 26 years as a priest, Moreno never was appointed pastor of a parish, and the bankruptcy, combined with the earlier arson, made such an appointment highly unlikely, even with the Diocese of Buffalo's growing priest shortage, clergy sources said.

Nonetheless, parishioners of St. Lawrence Church were disappointed when Bishop Richard J. Malone decided not to name Moreno pastor of the parish on East Delavan Avenue, not far from the Cheektowaga border.

Instead, Malone asked Moreno to leave St. Lawrence and live, at least temporarily, with Seil at the St. Bernadette rectory in Orchard Park.

"He was our shepherd and he should have been our pastor, but he never had that title," said parishioner Eleonore Clark, who described the usually upbeat priest as like "a whipped puppy" after a meeting with Malone in which the bishop told him he would be moving.

Moreno had a profound impact on people's lives, regardless of whether he had the title and duties of pastor, said Monsignor Robert E. Zapfel, chairman of the Buffalo diocese's Council of Priests and pastor of St. Leo Church in Amherst.

"He did great ministry. He touched the lives and the hearts of many people, and he did it maybe because he wasn't pastor," said Zapfel.

Moreno's faults might have helped him connect with people who "saw in him a very human priest, with failings as well as many blessings," he added.

He "really understood their brokenness, their heartaches, their ups and downs, in ways that others couldn't," said Zapfel. "From those perspectives, he was a great priest. Was he perfect? No. But none of us are."

Wangler, too, said Moreno had "beautiful pastoral gifts" and was selfless in his concern for others, but he lacked the organizational skills that parish pastors must also possess.

"I think he had a personality that was a little bit not healthy, but he would deny it," said Wangler. "One of the consequences of that kind of personality is that he needs attention and he needs to help

people, more than people need the help."

Trauma by proxy

There's no question Moreno helped plenty of people, including police officers, to whom he ministered regularly, even though he never was officially assigned as their chaplain.

And it's possible that Moreno's regular presence in tragic situations had an effect on him.

Care providers of all kinds can be profoundly impacted by aiding people in trauma, said Douglas B. Fabian, executive director of Crisis Services.

"They, too, become traumatized after a while," said Fabian. "It's what we call vicarious traumatization."

"For people to think that a priest is any stronger than anyone else," said Fabian, "I don't want to burst the image, but that's not necessarily the case. They are in a position to see more trauma, to see more problems, than anyone else."

Over the years, Moreno attracted positive attention from The News and local television stations, which some clergy said helped insulate him from chancery discipline.

Often in the media

Moreno loved the limelight, regaling in his associations with the likes of Jay Leno and Derek Jeter. He seemed constantly to be delivering pizza and baked goods to one needy group or another.

"Because he was so high-profile, administrators left him alone," another priest said. "As long as what he was doing was admirable priest to the poor and all that it took them off the hook."

But Moreno's work wasn't always so public, said Seil.

"A lot of times he was out there, bigger than life, getting attention, but a lot of times he was doing things privately, behind the scenes, with nobody knowing," he said

Moreno's fellow priests are still struggling to come to grips with exactly who he was.

Seil, who preached at Moreno's 25th anniversary Mass and probably knew him as well as any other priest, wishes he had more answers about his friend.

"He left a lot of questions," Seil said.