

The White House's Resident Jesuit

By Laurence Stern

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"Power as an experience is as intense as sex," said the Rev. John McLaughlin, who considers himself an authority on both subjects. "Power is more pervasive and unremitting. Sex has periods of remission."

The Jesuit in the White House, described in the public print as the Watergate Priest, holds forth in a monastically cramped office, Room 169 of the Executive Office Building. Portraits of Pope Innocent X ("he viewed power as an ego trip") and Sir Thomas More, who was beheaded for denying the spiritual supremacy of Henry VIII, gaze down from the wall.

"We know nothing about power and what it does to the human personality," said the priest who has been deployed by the White House as the chief spiritual linebacker in President Nixon's Watergate moral defense.

"I spent quite a bit of time when I was younger exploring the dynamics of



John McLaughlin, politician-priest: "Power is more pervasive, unremitting. Sex has periods of remission."



Price Jr. late in 1970 after conducting a lively campaign as a Republican "dove" against incumbent Sen. John O. Pastore (D-R.I.), who was then still regarded as something of a "hawk" on Vietnam and military spending issues.

Father McLaughlin stumped the state against Pastore in his Roman collar and clerical black suits, calling for such anti-Nixonian policies as a 30-day withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam, establishment of a coalition government in Saigon and opposing deployment of the antiballistic missile system. "I did, however, endorse research and development money for the ABM," he emphasized in an interview.

Pastore was enraged, and by some accounts still is, at being challenged by a priest in full clerical regalia, which Father McLaughlin displayed to full advantage on television screens and in his campaign literature. Rhode Island is 70 per cent Roman Catholic.

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"How can I debate with a man my religion teaches me to call father?" Pastore declaimed in declining Father McLaughlin's appeals for face-to-face encounters. During the recent controversy over his secular ways Father McLaughlin scoffingly described the Roman collar as "a one-inch peice of plastic."

Pastore beat Father McLaughlin by a mere 2-to-1 margin, a comedown from the 3-to-1 trouncing he administered to his 1964 victim.

Father McLaughlin was hired by Price as a speech writer after the two men discussed the priest's deviation from Nixonian orthodoxy on the war and other issues during his senatorial campaign.

"I was satisfied," Price recalled, "that he was essentially on board with what we were trying to do. I always try to keep a philosophical mix on our writing team. I was quite impressed with his professional credentials, his keen intelligence. He had multiple advance degrees and training in logic, a quality we need in a speechwriter."

But the hire angered Pastore as well as conservative Republicans associated with the Nixon administration. In this spirit the conservative columnist and theoretician of the "emerging Republican majority," Kevin P. Phillips, wrote:

"The most intriguing thing about Father McLaughlin is his pre-occupation with sex . . . Before the political bug bit him, he lectured widely — and enthusiastically — on the topic . . . Father McLaughlin usually sheds his Roman collar for mod clothes: double-

love and sex," Father McLaughlin went on. "Now I find myself right here—by accident—exploring the relationship of power to personality."

It was, in fact, no accident that brought Father McLaughlin to the White House three years ago. It may have been equally inevitable that his role in de-

fending presidential profanity and his residency in the opulent Watergate apartment complex (built with Vatican financing) should mark him as target of controversy within the Jesuit order.

Father McLaughlin applied for White House employment to presidential consultant Raymond K.

breasted suits and wide, wide ties. Staffers have nicknamed him "The Swinging Celibate."

Phillips also took Father McLaughlin to task for being a nouveau Republican. The priest abandoned his Democratic affiliation in 1970 to undertake the race against Pastore.

Today Father McLaughlin laughingly acknowledges that sex was by far the most popular of his lecture topics. "But that did not exhaust my repertoire, by any means. I had 14 possible topical areas, and Kevin found the one on human sexuality was the one that invited his interest and he gave that full coverage."

Father McLaughlin wrote a book, "Love Before Marriage," and lectured on such topics as "Intimacy Before Marriage and the Swedish Experience" and "Intimacy Outside Marriage."

On the matter of his pre-Nixon political apostasies, Father McLaughlin speaks in a more serious tone.

"I would describe myself," he said, "as a crypto-Republican . . . I stood ideologically for devolution of power away from the federal government and re-provitalization of wealth." By the latter he meant returning money to private hands through tax and economic policy.

But Father McLaughlin admits that he voted for John F. Kennedy in 1960 ("it wasn't substantive ideology—he was such a magnetic figure, wasn't he?") and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. He voted for John Marchi, conservative candidate for mayor of New York in 1969, then moved to Rhode Island.

Father McLaughlin comes from a traditional Democratic household in Provi-

dence. His uncle, Henry McLaughlin, was president of the City Council for many years. Another uncle, Dr. Edward McLaughlin, was Rhode Island state health director. "My father was very interested in their careers, behind the scenes," he said.

Father McLaughlin cuts a fine figure as a political campaigner. He is tall and husky, with strong features, a booming voice and long strands of blond hair which still obscure advancing baldness.

When challenged during a television appearance on his expensive tailoring, Father McLaughlin shot back at CBS correspondent Morley Safer: "My attire may look to you expensive, but it's not really that expensive. Let's say it's . . . tasteful."

The ancient oath of the Jesuit order, founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1534, seems unambiguous in its meaning: "Almighty, everlasting God, I, John McLaughlin, moved with a desire of serving You, vow before the most sacred Virgin Mary, and the whole court of heaven, to Your divine majesty, perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience in the Society of Jesus."

Most members of the order live in "communities"—Father McLaughlin has been assigned to Gonzaga High School here—and maintain contact with their immediate brethren, even though they may pursue careers as diverse as politics, psychiatry or exploring.

Father McLaughlin acknowledges that he has little contact with the Gonzaga community. His hours are long and his duties many. His choice, last year, of the Watergate as a residence

was dictated by convenience.

"It happens to offer great security. You have a good switchboard arrangement as well as easy access and exits, and secure ones. If I didn't live in the Watergate I would have to live in some place like it so I can transact business." He laughed. "Legitimate business, that is."

But Father McLaughlin drew a severe canonical frown on May 22, when his principal superior in the United States, the Very Rev. Richard Cleary, Jesuit provincial of New England, held a press conference and announced:

"I am indeed puzzled by his [Father McLaughlin's] publicly stated interpretations of his vow of poverty and obedience, as well as his understanding of his status as a Jesuit priest."

Father Cleary summoned Father McLaughlin to Boston for prayer and reflection, the Jesuit euphemism for a public spanking, and reportedly met with the White House priest-in-residence in Washington for three hours.

Father Cleary took exception to Father McLaughlin's suggestion that President Nixon's recourse to profanity was a form of emotional drainage . . . a form of release, almost therapy." To take such a view, said Father Cleary, "I would be standing up against Moses . . . Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

Father McLaughlin disputes any literal interpretation of the vows of poverty.

"It's not physical poverty. It is a vow of dependency. The modality of this dependency is determined by the superior dialoguing (sic) with his subject. And if you

have means of support you're not dependent."

But Father McLaughlin has means of support — a White House salary reported to be in the range of \$25,000 to \$30,000, although it has never been made public.

"The modality of my arrangement," he further explained, "is temporary autonomy. If I were not both in reality and perceived to be autonomous, this would invite errors of impression. People might say, the Society of Jesus holds the purse strings (in the White House) — maybe the Society of Jesus calls the shots."

The Jesuit order is famous for its talent at equivocation, an art acquired during the Inquisition, when priests were torn between the painful immediacy of the rack and their obligations to religious conscience.

Father McLaughlin's rapid-fire way with words, some call it adroitness, is reinforced by advanced training in communications and years of experience on television and the lecture circuit.

"We think he's very effective," said Ken W. Clawson, White House director of communications, who presented Father McLaughlin

for his debut as a White House briefer on May 8. "We intend to keep using him."

It was that press conference which vaulted Father McLaughlin into his current state of celebrity, a condition he clearly relishes, and his problems with his Jesuit superiors, which appear to be the wages of fame.

There had been published speculation recently that McLaughlin was interested in a then-open seat on the Federal Communications Commission (since filled), conjecture that he brushed aside. It stemmed from a recent meeting he had with

Pastore, whose consent as senior senator would have been important leg up for federal appointment.

"I suppose you saw that in Broadcasting magazine," he said with a grin.

Pastore still maintains a vow of silence on the subject of McLaughlin, one he also imposes on his staff, which suggests not so much an unburied grudge as a desire to banish altogether from memory.

"Do you suppose it was the collar?" Father McLaughlin asked an interviewer.

"The collar," was the reply.