

THE HAND

by Louis S. Pettey ©

Until the hand...he had really liked Brother Zachary. Maybe even loved him in the platonic way people "love" the clergy, someone else's children, and cute pets. It had been the summer of 1972, Tony was a 15-year old with summer off from school, and his father had wanted him to be outdoors, do manual labor, make a few dollars, but not be a transportation nuisance. Transportation was a major issue in the Soriano house, a typical Italian, Catholic family of six children and one working parent. There was only one family car, and getting a teenager to his job was a challenge. Their parish monsignor mentioned one day that a church out in the country had a farm and greenhouse operation and needed help during the summer. Right away Mr. Soriano realized it would not be too far out of his way to take Tony to the farm on his way back and forth from work.

Tony loved the job instantly. There were three other teenagers working on the farm, all of whom had been there the year before and knew their way around. A parishioner had died years before and had left the land to the church. They grew corn, wheat, cantaloupe and other fruits and vegetables, and the property included a greenhouse with a barn attached to it.

The barn was actually a combination barn/farmhouse, as there was a small upstairs apartment, complete with electricity, heat (but no air-conditioning) and a small kitchen. Brother Zachary lived in the apartment that summer. He was not a brother like the Franciscan or Christian Brothers, never aspiring to the priesthood. Zachary Wilson was a seminarian, a student, who had taken the summer off to help on the farm. The title of "brother" was assigned to him by the pastor in order to give Zachary an additional layer of respect, elevating him above the four boys working with him.

Zachary at age 23 was older than the others. He had a slight build and an unassuming presence. Several of the boys came from rough backgrounds, and were strong, and crude enough to earn the moniker "bully." The pastor felt Zachary needed all the help he could get in order to keep control of the farm operation.

His fears were unfounded, however, as despite Zachary's physical appearance, he had an effective if nonchalant method in working with the older boys, who were all about 17-years old. Without even trying, he was able to get the other

boys to take on their responsibilities, as if each chore was something the boys themselves had devised.

The disparity in ages, and to some extent, disposition, between Tony and the older boys tended to draw Tony and Brother Zachary together. Tony, like any boy his age wanted to learn to drive the tractor, and Brother Zachary accommodated him with the big machine whenever there was a small job that required its use. By the end of that summer, Tony was proficient at all of the levers and gears, could use reverse or turn the tractor around, better than the others.

However, most of the time Tony helped out in the greenhouse, tending to the flowers and herb garden the church maintained, and then sold those plants and the fruits and vegetables from the farm from a rickety wooden stand out by the state road. Probably half of the time that summer, Tony worked closely with Brother Zachary, sharing thoughts, dreams and even a little religious philosophy, while learning to plant, water, prune, harvest and finally sell their goods. The Brother, Tony learned, had been groomed from birth for the priesthood. His name, Zachary, had been chosen because it was the name of a Greek Pope from the 700's. Tony also had a very strong sense of his Catholic religion, and they loved to discuss religious topics.

In 1972, the federal minimum hourly wage for farm workers was \$1.30. Even in those days that made for a puny salary. Tony earned \$13.00 working a 10-hour day. The older boys, being experienced workers, commanded the then non-farm minimum wage of \$1.60. Not a lot more, but by the end of the week, there was an extra \$15.00 in their pockets that Tony did not have. Tony wasn't envious of them, but it seemed to him he did a lot of hard work for which he wasn't fairly paid. For the church, however, the farm was a bonanza. That rickety stand on the state road did a brisk business and was a cash-only operation.

Brother Zachary stocked the inventory and set the prices. Only he knew how much was sold every day, how much was charged, and the amount of the gross income. He would report it once a week to the pastor and remit the cash. The vow of poverty notwithstanding, there was always a little extra money that found its way, unreported, into Brother Zachary's care, and after a few weeks of working on the farm, Tony began to receive a clandestine "bonus" in the form of a folded \$20 bill that Brother Zachary would slide into the front pocket of Tony's jeans every Friday afternoon. Tony appreciated the extra cash. The timing, just as the weekend began, was always perfect, and he never thought about the method of delivery, since it was always done when the older boys were around, the implication being that they might otherwise notice that he was getting a little cash "on the side."

With about two weeks of summer remaining, Brother Zachary made a suggestion that really stirred Tony's interest. They had talked a great deal about the Catholic Church's reaction to Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, a show commissioned in 1971 to open the new John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. It defied tradition, Bernstein calling it simply a "Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers."

As it was an irreverent work about an institution that tends to take itself too seriously, *Mass* was condemned by many in the church hierarchy, while it was loved by many Catholics, including the clergy, who actually listened to it. Brother Zachary was the proud owner of the recording, and a stereo system. He invited Tony, who had never listened to *Mass*, but had heard about it, to stay after work one day and enjoy the recording. They were to eat at the rectory with the parish priest and then go to Brother Zachary's apartment in the barn. Brother Zachary would use the church's pick-up truck to take Tony home before 10 p.m.

Tony cleared the plan with his parents, who also were fond of Zachary, and looked forward to the event all week long, asking Brother Zachary for more and more information about the music during the week, finally reviewing the album cover and lyrics that came with the record between sales at the stand. After dinner with the pastor, they retired to the apartment and played the recording as loud as they liked, reveling in the fact that the barn apartment was very distant from the church, the rectory and the road. And there was no one there to be disturbed. Brother Zachary offered and Tony accepted a little "sacramental wine," which they shared out of the same chalice. They did not drink enough to get intoxicated, but enough to "loosen up" a teenager.

When it came time to put on the second record of the two-record set, the two young men stood over the stereo and Brother Zachary took the needle off of the record for a minute. He approached Tony and said, "Here, I have a little something extra for you tonight." Tony leaned forward, smelling the Brother's cologne, expecting the usual folded twenty to slide into the front pocket, and expecting maybe a little more cash. But when Brother Zachary's hand slid down the front of Tony's jeans, he was shocked. They stood nose-to-nose, and the Brother being two or three inches taller, was now leaning against Tony. The Brother began fondling him.

The wine and the music had fogged Tony's senses and for a minute he just stood there, not knowing what to do, not fully comprehending what was going on. Suddenly, he pulled away and screamed, "NO!"

As Tony backed away, Brother Zachary's hand, still caught in the leather belt in Tony's pants, the two tumbled against the stereo stand, knocking over the

clumsy speakers, and smashing the turntable to the floor. The Brother's hand became dislodged, and Tony was free. He bolted for the door, ran down the stairs, and fled the barn, heading for the state road. He ran as fast as he could and far as his breath would allow him, then walked toward home. Knowing he would never be home on time by foot, he began hitchhiking. He didn't want to have to explain to his father why he was late.

Thinking back on that moment thirty years later, Tony smiled to himself. Great irony, he thought. He had always been told not to hitchhike, since you didn't know what kind of pervert might pick you up. And, of course, you could always trust a priest...well, at that moment it was hard for even a 15-year old to figure that he would run into an individual on the road that was as bad as the one he had just left. All he knew today was that the smell of Brut by Faberge always induced a little nausea.

For the remaining two weeks of that summer, Tony avoided Brother Zachary, even swapping chores with the older boys so he could stay in the fields. He knew there would not be anymore "bonuses," but that didn't matter. He told his father that he had some school assignments that had to be finished during the summer, and for the last two days and he didn't go to work.

A few years later, Tony learned that Brother Zachary had been ordained to the priesthood, and had been assigned to a parish in another state. That was the last he had heard of him until today. In the years that followed, Tony had married Eileen, a pretty Irish girl from his high school, and they had a beautiful daughter. They had received the blessed sacrament of matrimony, in a lovely ceremony, celebrated by the same pastor of that same country parish church.

But the marriage lasted only six years. Eileen fell in love with another man, found a good lawyer, and they divorced. Eventually, Tony met Joanne, a girl with a Methodist upbringing, and wanted to marry her. He warily consulted the country parish priest about the marriage, and was told the church's position on divorce and remarriage. Unless, he was told, he went through the costly "annulment" procedure, he could not re-marry within the Catholic church.

He thought the process was stupid and insulting. So, he married Joanne anyway in a civil ceremony and what little religion they now practiced was at the local Unitarian Church. His Catholic background was scarred forever by the memory of the pedophile brother, now a priest, and pitted by the realization that he, as an innocent divorcee, remarried to this lovely lady, living a life in a way that he thought Christ himself would approve, was no longer permitted to accept the Eucharist, while Father Zachary was administering that very sacrament. Tony expected that even if the church knew about the priest's actions, nothing would

be done other than perhaps a transfer to another town or another state, where the wayward Father would prey on other youngsters. In Tony's mind, any religious institution that had such a mixed-up philosophy was no place for Tony.

Finally, after reliving that experience in his memory over the Sunday paper, Tony looked over at Joanne, who was focused on a front page article. She was so intent she didn't notice him staring. He decided to re-read the piece in the middle of the page:

Ex-priest found dead, suicide suspected

Wilmington, Delaware, June 1, 2002. Former Catholic priest, John Zachary Wilson, was found dead in his home in Wilmington. Police suspect he had been dead for several days. Co-workers at the Catholic charity where Wilson worked had reported him missing after he failed to appear for work on Wednesday. Wilson was found hanging from a belt, but authorities declined to confirm the death as a suicide pending a coroner's examination. The police confirmed no suicide note had been found. The official report noted that the kitchen table was covered with articles from newspapers and magazines concerning the recent news of pedophile priests and the efforts of the Catholic church to discipline those who abused children. Co-workers confirmed that Wilson had been a parish priest until he retired 10-years ago. Authorities believe Wilson is survived by a sister in Massachusetts.

At last Joanne looked up from the paper and peered at Tony over her reading glasses. "Well, I finally finished this article rehashing the Watergate break-in." She added in an exasperated tone, "I just can't believe people can be so interested in something that happened thirty years ago."

Tony shook his head and smiled back weakly.

THE END

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