



# **An Opus Dei Priest With a Magnetic Touch**

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Beliefs

By MARK OPPENHEIMER

Last fall, I traveled to Palo Alto, Calif., to meet the man with the unusual gift.

Some priests are known for their work among the poor, others for their learning, still others for decades of service to a parish. The Rev. C. John McCloskey III, a priest of the traditionalist Opus Dei order, has a different calling. He makes converts, often of the rich and Republican. He has personally prepared for conversion to Catholicism, among others, Gov. Sam Brownback of Kansas; the Supreme Court nominee Robert H. Bork; the columnists Robert D. Novak and Lawrence Kudlow; the conservative publisher Alfred S. Regnery; the anti-abortion activist Bernard Nathanson; and Lewis E. Lehrman, an investment banker and former candidate for governor of New York.

Father McCloskey, 61, is hardly the only conservative priest or minister. But few have his knack for persuading political conservatives to adopt a different religion.

## **The Rev. C. John McCloskey III in 2002.**

**STEPHEN CROWLEY / THE NEW YORK TIMES**

After military school, Columbia University and a stint at Merrill Lynch, he joined Opus Dei and became a chaplain at Princeton University. He then ran the Catholic Information Center, an outreach ministry near the White House, where he introduced many Washington insiders to Catholicism. At his silent retreats in Virginia, Capitol Hill and K Street types see one another and nod.

When we think political influence, we think big money: the Koch brothers or Sheldon Adelson. Father McCloskey has taken a vow of poverty, but he has another kind of influence. He has helped shape the spirituality and the thinking of powerful people who have similar views about the market and social issues. Many of his converts know one another; it is a kind of club. As Pope Francis is breathing life into the Catholic left, Father McCloskey is defibrillating the Catholic right. In Palo Alto, where Opus Dei sent him in 2013 after a period in Chicago, Father McCloskey and I shared a late-afternoon cocktail. He talked about his college years, his time on Wall Street and his calling to become a priest. I had expected to be overwhelmed by charisma and instead was drawn in by gentleness. He listened more than he spoke, asked about my family, touched my arm several times.

Then, when it was over, Father McCloskey surprised me by asking that I not quote him. Opus Dei would not let him speak on the record. So, to learn more about him, I turned to some of the men and women whom Father McCloskey has counseled.

Several discussed the pleasure he takes in conservatives' company, and his quiet facility with networking. He gets referrals. To take one example, before Mr. Regnery ever met Father McCloskey, he knew about him from Mr. Kudlow and Mr. Novak, converts of Father McCloskey's who, as conservative opinion columnists, knew pretty much everyone.

And in a church whose priests are often on the left economically, Father McCloskey has a niche. He is a devout free-marketeer, a priest who defends the compatibility of pro-business policies and Catholic theology.

But more than anything, when I asked what made Father McCloskey so successful at persuading people to join the church, I heard the answer, counterintuitive in its simplicity, that he befriends people, whether they ask for it or not.

“Once Father John gets his claws into you, he never lets go,” said Mr. Kudlow, who was fighting addictions to alcohol and cocaine when he met Father McCloskey in the 1990s.

“He reaches out and gives you that kind of companionship, and stays in touch,” Mr. Kudlow, now clean for almost 20 years, added. Shortly after he began counseling Mr. Kudlow, Father McCloskey suggested that he go to church. Mr. Kudlow found that he loved Mass, and in 1997, he was baptized Catholic.

Mr. Brownback and Mr. Lehrman did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did the presidential candidate Rick Santorum, whose son was baptized by Father McCloskey. But Mr. Regnery, whose family firm has published William F. Buckley Jr., Ann Coulter and Dinesh D’Souza, did respond, effusively.

In the 1990s, dissatisfied with the Episcopal Church, Mr. Regnery attended two weekend retreats run by Father McCloskey. They became friends, and in 2006 or 2007, he became a Catholic. Father McCloskey knows that many men “don’t have any friends but their wife,” Mr. Regnery said. “He’s the kind of person, I guess, that if he weren’t a priest, you’d still want to befriend.”