

Chapter 20

A Family Affair - The Cordaros of Des Moines

All this education I got. Tom and Frank were my teachers. I became the pupil, and I was very open, very open.

—Angela Cordaro

Angela Cordaro and her sons Tom and Fr. Frank—a warm Italian family, generous with their words, generous with their lives. Although each was interviewed separately, I've combined their words into a single conversation.

ANGELA CORDARO: I never in my wildest, wildest dreams ever thought Frank would be ordained. He was a jock on campus. Won the best legs contest two years straight. Such a ham, oh my God! He went to University of Northern Iowa, and got his degree in coaching, of course. Wanted to be like his Dad. A very frank and open boy.

FR. FRANK CORDARO: My father was the athletic director at the all-boys Catholic high school in my home town, and I lettered in four major sports. Eight different letters. President of the student body, president of my class, a big man on campus.

Basically, there are two types of deviants in high school: the juvenile delinquents the ones everyone can pick out—guys who smoke and cheat and leave school—and the other deviants, the ones who've got the system beat. They belong to all the clubs, and they're officers, so they run the school and can get out of all the classes they want. That's what I was. I was a "go to the head of the class," play-the-system kind of guy. Of course when your dad's the AD., it's not hard to rise up in the ranks.

I was a real Neanderthal. The Vietnam War was going on. I would have fought there easily, all the way through college. (I went to college between 1969 and 1973. For Iowa, the sixties happened in the early seventies.) I was on a campus that was not radical at all, but for two of the four years there, spring term tests were called off because of the antiwar movement across the country. It was a unique time to go to college, but I was just on the fringe. I got

elected president of a fraternity because I was one of the few sober and non-drugged-out people in the whole group. Just really oddball folks—no political conscience whatsoever. However, I was very much involved in the Newman Center, going to daily Mass, which was odd for my jock image and my fraternity image.

I'd been dealing with this damn priesthood idea since way back.* You know, you go to Catholic schools and . . . but I wasn't the one. My brother Joe was. He went to Loras, but when my dad died, Joe moved back in to Des Moines to be with the family, and I got to go to college because I got a football scholarship. And then Joe got married, but I still wasn't the best shot for priesthood. If you want to pick a guy with more perceived priestly qualities, it would be Tommy. Temperament-wise, anyway.

It's real . . . I never fell in love with the cheerleaders. So I decided, "What the heck!" I didn't feel like I wanted to work after I graduated, so I went in to see Bishop Dingman. Great man!

I hemmed and hawed and said maybe I'd like to, but I didn't know. And of course if you've got a B.A. in anything and the right plumbing on the outside, the door's open. Bishop Dingman got me into Aquinas Institute in Dubuque, the Dominican Studium. I had a great three years.

Spent my first summer in the South Bronx, at a black and Puerto Rican parish, and I finally began to question the assumed realities that most kids like me are brought up to believe. You know, the cold warrior stuff. America the best. Being in the Bronx just kind of concretized the whole thing. And also, while in college and in seminary, I was five years as a charismatic, which is very vital. It allowed me to read the scriptures for the first time. I never, never did that as a Catholic. Now I read those Gospels as stories and let them speak to me. And the other thing [the charismatic movement did] was personalize my faith in Christ. To claim Christ personally.

*ANGELA: He told me once he would have liked to become a priest earlier, but he'd flunked Latin. And then we went into the Vatican II and he didn't need it anymore.

RO: Why do some people move out of that inward spirituality into application, and some people just stay there for years, happy as a clam?

FRANK: Beats me. For me, to stay there would have been terribly stifling. I didn't need the constant stroking. The issue was this—was being a Catholic going to be important or just peripheral? I could be a cultural Catholic like a lot of my relatives and the people back home, which is all right. These are good people. But I wanted to know whether it was going to be real. And the charismatic movement made it central to me that Christ and my faith was going to be real.

Given that, what do I do with it? I went to seminary thinking I might want to become a priest. When I spent that summer in the South Bronx, in a black and Puerto Rican parish, that just changed my whole life. I came to the conclusion that if the only poor people in the world existed in the Bronx, there were too many. And because I'm a Gospel person, I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to address those issues.

The other thing I learned in the Bronx is that I ain't black, and there ain't nothing I can do about it. I'm white, I'm middle class, I'm educated, I'm from the Midwest, I'm a Catholic and I'm a male. A white male. Where can I stand with some integrity and be a Gospel person in this country with all those things going against me?

We have what they call a January month during the seminary. We can go do whatever we want. I lined up a month with Bishop Dingman. My bishop. Just the two of us. I lived at his house. I drove him around. I did some work for him. We studied the scriptures, and I read William Miller's *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*. Boy, the Catholic Worker movement was speaking to me! So that summer, I went to the Worker in Davenport. I visited Margaret Quigley who started the Worker there, and God! I fell in love with the movement. Spent the summer there. God, I had a great time! Margaret was a great woman, the first woman my age that I really respected and looked up to. She was just a very good woman. Good spirituality. Good sense of the Catholic Worker. Lots of fun. A

great love in her for the men that she worked with. She was . . . she was good.

That summer was the first time I experienced a space where a white middle-class educated Catholic Midwesterner could be critical of society. Critique it from a Gospel perspective and be supported in this critique. Not in an abstract way but through a learned encounter with the poor.

ANGELA: One day, after three years of seminary, Frank says to me: "Ma, I'm going to start a Catholic Worker in Des Moines."

I wanted a priest. I didn't care about no Catholic Worker house, you know. So I said, "Listen!" I said, "Let somebody else do that. God wants you to be a priest."

"Mom, I'm seriously thinking about it."

"Well, I'm going to pray that you don't think."

When he decided for sure, I said to him, "If you make a Worker house in Des Moines, make it for women and children and families." And he did. I told him if he didn't, the women on the street, you make prostitutes out of them, right?

There were two guys as co-hosts—Frank and this Joe DaVia. It was funny. These two men there with the women and children. The first thing everyone thought was that these two guys were gay. Of course, after you know Frank, that's the furthest thing from your mind.

As Reagan came more and more into his regime, there were more and more people on the street. More and more kinds of people would come to the Worker house to eat, come to get food. Young married couples with two or three kids, out of a job, very clean, just . . . and they'd have a house or may be even be working, but didn't have enough money to carry them over. It just broke my heart.

It was a good arrangement. I'd babysit that house. We'd have great Masses on Friday night. It was a good thing. The poor and everything, you know. After about two years, after [Frank] got the house established, he got into his peace and justice. I remember on Good Friday, Frank would carry the big wooden cross right through town, you know, and parade down to the cathedral. God bless that Bishop Dingman! He never told him once not to do it.

I look back now on all the things that Frank did downtown—marched in the streets, carried signs. Every time a politician came, all our presidents and senators and people with the political backgrounds—they were there. Senator Grassley is our Republican senator, and Frank would go one-on-one with him, challenge him.

Frank would throw things at him about the military and all that waste, and Grassley would say, “Well, I’m not informed in that.” Or “I haven’t learned too much about that.” I was there, too. I can remember. All this education I got. Tom and Frank were my teachers. I became the pupil, and I was very open, very open.

People will say, “You don’t pay taxes. What have you got to say for the country? Go to Russia!”

We’ve been called everything from . . . you name it and we’ve been called. Or they’ll say, “I don’t want to hear about it. I’m happy. I’m content. Don’t tell me about all that stuff.”

Sometimes we wonder if Dad would approve, but the only way people will hear you is to do something crazy. I can remember the first time they arrested Frank. People came to me and said, “George would turn in his grave.” (George is my husband.) I thought, “God, that’s a terrible thing to say!”

I’d say, “Listen! George is up there telling him what to do.” No one said that to me again. And I do believe he is. I . . . we had great discussions when Frank first started this. Our family had to adjust to all of that, and it was good.

RO: Now, if you hadn’t been a widow, would you be this involved?

ANGELA: If I hadn’t been a widow, I don’t know if Frank would have been a Catholic Worker. You know, I love my boys very much. They’re all doing what I think God wants them to do and all are true to themselves. The Lord’s been very good to me. I had a rough time when my husband first died. I had . . . I have six children, okay? We were two people, and then I became a one person. It was very, very hard for me to adjust. I’d say, “Why me, Lord?”

The charismatic movement helped us really a lot, but the people are so inward. I don’t go there anymore. I don’t . . . I don’t dislike them, you know, but that just isn’t my cup of tea. There’s such a big world out there.

FRANK: If Dad hadn’t died, I don’t think I would have gotten into this stuff at all. I think I probably would have went on to be a coach. A great coach. Dad was the most important person in my life. Died on Easter Sunday morning of my senior year. My father was a great man, but his dying did more for our family than anything he ever did. Because with his passing away, we came together much closer, and my mother just blossomed into a full human being. Took on lots of responsibility. We just celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Dad’s death and had a family Mass. Still very powerful stuff. Wherever I get my strength, it’s got to be [from] my family background.

[I realized this] especially after [being with] the Worker. You spend any time at a Catholic Worker . . . I’m blown away by the abuse and the drug abuse, and the other cultural things that are just tearing away at our guests. But as amazingly high as it is in the guests, I realize it’s [present] also in the people [who] come to work with us. Many of the people who come to the Worker, either as Workers or guests, are victims of violence. Especially women. I learned vicariously that most people begin their adult life insecure, without a good self-image. And I’d been gifted with lots of breaks. Lots of love. Lots of people caring about me. Lots of attention. Lots of people saying, “You’re gifted! You’ve got things going for you.” So for better or for worse, I don’t have that . . . I didn’t go into becoming an adult with a major problem dealing with self-image and self-esteem.

Anyway, when I got back from New York, I did my internship at a campus ministry in Iowa City and fell in love with a woman. That spring I told Bishop Dingman that I didn’t think I was ready for the priesthood, and I didn’t think the priesthood was ready for the type of ministry that I envisioned. [I told him] I’d like to help start a Catholic Worker [in Des Moines].

RO: Did you tell him about the woman?

FRANK: Oh, yeah. He knew her. Jacquee. I met her in Iowa City when I was doing my internship. And we had a lot of things in

common, but we just didn't get along well in a regular normal way. Perhaps one of the strongest things we had is that we both have a call to a ministry of the church and priesthood. Anyway, Joe DaVia and I, we started the Des Moines Catholic Worker on August 23, 1976. It was a great life. I spent seven years there, more or less. Spent about ten months jail time in those seven years. For different acts of civil disobedience. I did eight months at Leavenworth once, and it was then that I really decided to deal with the priesthood thing again. It had been plaguing me all this time.

ANGELA: Bishop Dingman was nearing seventy, and Frank thought he'd probably be the only bishop to ordain him, so he went for it. The bishop sent Frank up to St. John's. Very wealthy [college]—they had ROTC on the campus, and he'd picket that. He got the seminarians all stewed up. It was a gorgeous, gorgeous setting for a college, on a little island peninsula.

RO: Ivory tower?

ANGELA: Oh, yeah. They had a boarding high school and a college and a seminary. They treated the seminarians like . . . well, they called them "princes of the church." Princes of the church! I didn't like that. Not really, not coming from where I was coming. There were some priests, though, who were very active in the peace movement, very supportive, but more of them not.

FRANK: It's easy to play a Catholic campus—a college which has the consciousness ought to know the problem. St. John's was vulnerable because it's so far off where it was in the thirties when Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin used to go there.

I mean these Benedictines have bellied up to corporate military America. They no longer . . . the whole spirit of St. Benedict is to live in harmony off the land, and [have] the discipline. These people [at St. John's] don't grow their own food anymore. They hire it out. They hire out people to clean for them. They hire out people to [do] maintenance for them. It's a rich boy's club. They are literally putting the spirit of St. Benedict at the disposal of upper-middle-class kids from Minneapolis. They rely more on their portfolio than subsistence living. The one good thing I can say about the Benedictines is

they didn't stop my ordination, and they could have.

I was really in a cultural shock up there after seven years in a Catholic Worker, you know. I told the bishop, "This is crazy! Why are you sending me there?"

"I want to see if you can survive in the institutional church."

"Bishop, why don't you just put me in a parish? Why did you send me to a seminary?"

And he looked at me and said, "Why do you think they make seminaries?"

"Oh, Bishop! I don't think I'm going to like this test."

"That's what makes it a good test, Frank."

Next to my own father, Dingman is the most influential male in my life. He was my best priest model, too. He's a great bishop.* Bishop Bullock, the new bishop, I would call C-plus. A good man. Certainly not one of the more Neanderthal bishops that have recently been appointed. He's probably left of center. It's unfortunate, though, that he followed Bishop Dingman. 'Cause compared to Bishop Dingman, he comes off looking very concerned about authority. Very concerned about control. Very concerned about boundaries and stuff like that.

RO: How do you live with this church of ours?

FRANK: Uh . . . very uncomfortably. The guy who gives me a language I can work with right now is Matthew Fox. I've grown to have a great deal of respect for him. He's pointed out that the church is a dysfunctioning organization, very much like a dysfunctioning family. And it's tragic by design at this point; there's a design flaw in our church that it's not embracing women as it should. In a sense, the hierarchy is by design—I'm not talking about any personalities here, just the design—the hierarchy is like the alcoholic father.

*Bishop Dingman suffered a stroke April 7, 1986, and died February 1, 1992. Later in 1992, Fr. Frank invited resisters to an action at SAC headquarters, asking them to "do for Bishop Dingman what he couldn't do himself—cross the line for a more peaceful world."

RO: Aren't you participating in the enabling by being a priest?

FRANK: Yes, I am. We all buy into it. It's the church of all of us. The thing about this language of a dysfunctional family is that it is family. It's my family. It's my dysfunctioning family. I don't leave family. The important role for everybody who's in a dysfunctional family is to act like an adult and stop being an enabler. So that's the challenge of being in the church today. To be an adult.

RO: How do you decide whether you're playing into it, being an enabler?

FRANK: It's not easy. Right now I'm in very intensive dialogue with a new bishop. I'm a priest so I'm . . . I'm in the club. That means [the bishop's] really concerned about me. My priesthood by definition is an extension of his bishopric, and he's responsible for me. So he's in a very difficult [position].

RO: You are, too.

FRANK: Yes. I have said that to him. I told him that the relationship I had with Bishop Dingman was a celebration. "But with you, we disagree on major things. I don't think that's bad 'cause if I can make it with you, that means I can make it with the mainline church."

At one point, I asked Bishop Dingman, "Don't you get angry about all the limitations of the church and the mistakes of the church?"

And he said, "Anger is negative. If you get angry enough, you'll eventually hate and leave." He said the proper attitude to have when the church makes mistakes is to grieve for the church. To be pained by your church that's doing the wrong thing. And I agree. I'm in grief over my church's inability to really address the major issues of the time. These days, we seem like we're entrenching and going backwards. It's silly, even tragic, this consolidating and holding on to powers and structures that are antiques. Dinosaurs!

ANGELA: You know what really bothers me? God love 'em, a lot of the priests in Des Moines today, their insight is so down the narrow path. You know, there are a few, but just . . . they get up there and they talk with tongue in both cheeks. They talk about justice, about clothing the poor, about this and that, but they

never practice what they preach. It's very discouraging. If I had a lot of guts, maybe . . . I'm more outspoken today than I ever was in all my life 'cause I don't have to hold a job. (I work for Manpower now and can work whenever I want to.) If I had the guts . . . when they start talking about that, I would get up right out of that pew and walk right down that main aisle and right around in front of him and walk all the way out.

FRANK: I challenge the church from the pulpit. Yeah, I do. A lot of people had trouble with my homilies in the beginning. "Too much social justice. Too much political rhetoric."

I said to Bishop Bullock, "Well, you know, I might be. I might be abusing the pulpit. I might be going too far to that side. But Bishop, how many of the guys do you call in for saying nothing about peace and justice? I may well have made mistakes and will continue to make mistakes, but our folks are so used to hearing nothing that if they hear anything, they think it's too much."

We're a mission diocese, and we're short of priests. I told the Bishop, "Let me try and find another priest from outside of our priest pool who will come to Iowa, and we can yoke our priesthood into one pastoral position. And at any given time, one of us would be there."

"Well, what makes you think there's anybody out there?"

"If I exist, somebody else might exist."

I am in these difficult moments with my bishop right now, but they're really good moments as far as dialogue. Amazing discussions! I asked to cross the line this August. He asked me not to do it, and I told him I wouldn't out of love and deference to him. And then he said, "Well, let's add obedience, too." He said obedience in the broadest sense means listening and that "this time we're going to try to listen to each other."

When I went to jail the last time, this man gave me one of his pectoral crosses. I told him, "I'm not going to take this to jail. They'd rip it off. But I'll give it to my mother to hold." I mean he's doing the best he can. But I think he's beginning to realize how vastly different we are. At one point in our discussion, he asked me what I

meant by jail being kind of a redemptive suffering.

Like Larry Morlan, the guy who I did time with at Marion [Federal Prison], is doing six years. No one seems to know he's there, and it's very lonely. And I gave him as an example. These guys are paying the price, doing the spiritual groundwork that needs to be done for the conversion to come.

He said, "I like that. I understand that redemptive suffering." Then he said, "But redemptive suffering comes in all different sizes and places. What if I were to ask you to spend the next five years in Logan and not do any civil disobedience? That would be redemptive suffering, too, and I would know it. You would lift that up to the Lord to let the Lord use it, and you would be in obedience with the bishop."

I looked at him. "Bishop, if you ask me to do that, I don't think I could. Because I don't trust your vision on the bomb."

"What?"

"Whenever you talk about the consistent life ethic, and you use the nuclear weapons issues, you say we've got to 'stem the excess of nuclear weapons.' Bishop, as far as I'm concerned, every nuclear weapon is an immoral redundancy.

"And when Bishop [Thomas] Gumbleton came to Omaha and crossed the line at SAC [Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base], clearly by your behavior, regardless of what you said, you saw what we were doing out there as detrimental to the church."

ANGELA: The editor of our *Catholic Mirror* came on that two-day retreat when Bishop Gumbleton [was here]. She took pictures and wrote up the articles and everything and then couldn't publish it. The bishop told her not to.

RO: So they don't want Frank's influence to spread?

ANGELA: Well, there were other priests, too—five of them.

FRANK: I said to Bishop Bullock, "One priest came in to ask you if he could cross and you told him he couldn't. Bishop, clearly you

saw [your actions] as damage control." He was kind of uncomfortable with that 'cause I named it so well. I said to him, "The church and bishops are willing to risk a lot for abortion, to risk a lot on homosexuality and birth control, but you won't do a darn thing for the arms race.

"You're willing to use your bishopric to change the laws in this country. You're even willing to risk your own nonprofit status in your struggle. You want to see all federal funding taken from abortion, and you want to make abortion a criminal act. But what do you do for the arms race? Nothing. You're not seeking to take all federal funding away from nuclear weapon production. You're not seeking legislation to make possession of a nuclear weapon a criminal offense.

"The church by and large has blessed and supported the nuclear establishment from the beginning. Catholic nuclear physicists put together the bomb. Catholics are on those production lines. Catholics are in those missile silos, ready to use a weapon on a moment's notice. You just don't have the same commitment. It's not consistent."

RO: Frank, are you going to do a Plowshares [resistance] action?

FRANK: I'm certainly open to it. But let's be . . . I'm not ready to sit in jail for a number of years, and that could happen. At this point, I've been doing this thing at SAC. It's my . . . you grow where you're planted. Everybody's got a piece of the Pentagon almost in their backyard. At SAC, we're talking about the main command post for the land and air components of our strategic nuclear weapons—the total workbook on how to go to nuclear war at any given moment, at any given time, at any given level. And the guys who are working there are updating war plans that include first-strike nuclear war, plans that believe if we go to war, we go to win. Which are completely contrary to the conditions that the bishops put forth for the moral acceptability of deterrence.

Over twelve years of jail time have been served by people in the last ten years, just for crossing the line at the Omaha SAC. You couldn't get a more abstract, more pristine civil act. Draw a line and put your body across it. That's the statement. No blood. No ashes. No property.

ANGELA: I tell him, “Frank, he’s short of priests. How can you say you’ll go do a demonstration just to satisfy yourself? When he may need you?” I just hope eventually Frank will mellow and know where his needs are.

FRANK: See, Bullock’s worried because I don’t stop. I’m not going to stop recruiting other priests. I tell him, “Bishop, this is puny. This isn’t even a beginning. I’m embarrassed that this is all I do.”

But I understand his position and I want to respect it. ‘Cause we are different. Let’s admit it. Now what relationship can we have and coexist? It’s not easy. [Pause] It’s not easy at all.

RO: It seems to me that being a priest really forces you into a lot of contradictions. How do you deal with that?

FRANK: I just know that when I dig deep enough, the contradictions disappear and [I see] the many gifts that the church has been for me. One of my prayers before I got ordained to the diaconate was, “Dear God, keep my faith safe and keep my love for the church safe.” They’re not the same things. If I had to pick one or the other, I hope I’d pick my faith. But as long as I still have a deep love for the church and my family, I’m going to keep both, my faith and my love for the church.

Because there’s more good than bad. The biggest strain I have on my ministry is the pull between pastoral work and resistance work. I think most people say about me, “You’re difficult, but the church needs people like you. Let’s take the risk.” I hope my bishop continues to embrace that sort of mentality.

RO: You don’t like being in crowds, do you?

FRANK: Well, I’d like to be in a crowd at the [SAC] base someday. Instead of 250,000 people showing up for an open house to watch these weapons play games in the air, I’d like to occupy the base with that many people. That’s the kind of crowd I’m looking forward to. It’s not like I wouldn’t want to be in a crowd. There just aren’t a lot of crowds where I’m at.

If we really wanted to stop the arms race, we could do it. What we’re missing is the political will. The spiritual will. We’re not going to think our way to the [end of the] arms race. We’re going to act our way out of it through nonviolent direct action.

RO: When some people talk to me about nonviolence, they say it’s exactly your sort of confrontational spirit, I guess, that’s violent. That nonviolence means being accepting of everything.

FRANK: Oh, then those people have never read the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. I mean those people are living in . . . that whole idea of having an absolutely clean heart before you act, that’s weird. I don’t understand people like that. I mean fine and well, but you’ll never leave your house. You’ll never leave the pot. I’m sorry.

When I act, I act as a broken person. I also know that a significant amount of the violence that I’m addressing on the outside is [also] in me. It’s a catharsis thing, an exorcism. I got to do it. It’s trying to get rid of the violence in me as I address the violence on the outside. And we make mistakes. Lots of them.

RO: Speaking of mistakes, lots of people say you’ve got the funniest resistance stories in the Worker. Like the ashes at the White House. And that time you saw your teacher at the Pentagon. Can you tell those for the book?

FRANK: Oh, sure! They are kind of famous, I guess. Well, here goes. [Pause] It’s November 1979. I’m not a priest yet. Jimmy Carter’s pushing the SALT II treaty, and I somehow get my name on a list to go to D.C. To listen to a pep talk on this treaty and have some wine and cheese with the president. I got an invitation to go to the White House! What a surprise, huh? First of all, I had already done blood spilling at the Pentagon. I’d been arrested at Rocky Flats. My orientation was pretty well established.

They told us to send in our social security numbers to get a security clearance,

which I did. Again, to my surprise, I got the clearance. I begged the money to fly out there. Spent the night at Jonah House with Liz McAlister and Phil Berrigan, trying to figure out what I should do if I got into the White House. We settled on ashes. I'd try to get an opportunity to use the ashes and say what I could. So I got some ashes out of their fireplace, put them in a plastic bag, and tucked it down inside my pants and went on down to the White House.

That's quite a trip from Baltimore into D.C. Right through some of the meanest neighborhoods in the world. And then within a few blocks of the White House, everything turns into an open museum. Everything's clean. Everything's white marble. Monuments. All white.

I was the first person in my family ever to be invited to the White House. So I'm going through these major struggles and tensions. "God, what do I do?" Here I am invited, and at the same time I got a bag of ashes in my pants, and I'm going to try to say something to the president.

We went into the basement of the White House, which is no basement at all. It's a major mansion. And my God Everything in there was an original. One room had all these gold plates. When Reagan came into office, I remember Nancy says they needed a new china set 'cause theirs had been eaten off of. I'm like, "Hell! You've got all these gold plates right in your basement! They're not rented. Take them!"

Finally, they asked us to come upstairs, and I tried to jockey myself to make sure I got a good seat. I took third row center aisle, maybe fifteen feet away from the president's podium.

I'm very nervous, of course, 'cause I know what I'm going to do. And I'm sitting there and looking around and in comes Bishop Thomas Gumbleton. The only bishop in the country who wrote against the treaty not because it gave the Russians too much but because it allowed for the development and employment of first-strike nuclear weapons. When I saw him, I just felt such confirmation. But I'm just so nervous, so I get up and go see the bishop. Tap him on the shoulder. I lean over real close to him and I say, "Bishop, would you say a prayer for me?"

"Why, yes, I will." The poor bishop. He looks at me like, "Why is this crazy man bothering me?"

I think the president's going to be the first one to speak, but he's not. First there's a guy named Ziggy Brzezinski. Carter's answer to Henry Kissinger. (Someone who speaks funny on his cabinet.) Ziggy goes on for about forty-five minutes talking about why they need the SALT II treaty. Mooning would have been an appropriate gesture for the baloney that was coming from him, but of course you don't moon the national security chief in the White House.

Then this other guy gets up, and he's a Texan. Former chief of staff. Military person, but in a tie and suit. He was real funny. He has this Texan drawl, and the gist of his statement is, "President Carter, he don't trust the Russians. Mr. Brzezinski, he don't trust the Russians. I want you to know, I don't trust the Russians. You can't talk about security and trust in the same sentence."

And I'm thinking, "What more do we need? If we don't have trust as a component of security, we're bankrupt." Appropriately, I should have stood up and wrenched my clothes and yelled, "Blasphemy and idolatry!" But of course you don't do that in the White House. Certainly not to some big Texan who doesn't mean much.

Finally a woman said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States!" And at this point, I start seeing more of what I was feeling than necessarily what might have been really happening. Because as soon as she said that, everybody got up and I got up with them. And I started hearing music in my mind like "da da dada" . . . the presidential march.

Then all these camera lights . . . bleep, bleep, bleep, bleep. Intensive TV lights. Now this party was not a news story. But any time the president goes up public, all three major networks are covering. That's why they could catch someone like Jerry Ford eating a tamale with a wrapper on it or coming out of an airplane and bumping his head. If you had a camera on you all the time, they'd be catching you with your finger up your nose. The intensity of the media around this man is amazing.

Well, not only did I think I was hearing music, but everything went into slow motion. 'Cause when you're in a tense moment, it's like Bonnie

and Clyde. You know, that last scene where they were killed . . . Everybody's clapping, and in my mind I'm clapping real slow, and I'm standing up and I'm watching Jimmy Carter come up the center aisle. Not only is everything going slow but I'm so nervous that I literally . . . everything in my life is going through my head. "Hey! This is the White House. I'm with the president of the United States. Three major networks are covering this. Maybe he's right, and maybe I'm wrong."

"My God! This is it! Maybe I shouldn't do this." My life goes through my mind, and I literally bilocate, get out of my body. I look at myself and I say, "Frank, are you sure you know what you're doing? Here you are at the White House. These are the chandeliers. This is the president of the United States. These are the senators and representatives. Maybe you're making a mistake about your critique of the SALT II treaty."

Then in my own mind, I went into what I call "willful doing." "I'm an actor. This is a play. I've got a certain role to play. The president has a certain role to play. We'll just play it out."

So I'm clapping and I'm watching the president get up to his podium. I unbutton my pants 'cause the ashes are underneath, you know. And then everyone's sitting down. At this moment, I know I have to hit the center aisle. So I get up and grab the ashes out of my pants. I take a step out of my seat towards the podium. My back is to the crowd. I've got a hand in my pants. If you saw it from the back, you'd see a man who's hunched down and taking a step in front of the president, so it looks like he's going to pull out a weapon.

Now I'm an Italian American, but this was nine days into the Iranian crisis and if you look real quick, I could look like an Iranian. So I took that step towards the president, and the whole crowd just stopped. Their hearts stopped. If you wanted to, you could have picked up the hearts and put them in baskets. I took a step, and I immediately turned around 'cause I did not want to personally confront the president, but just stand in front of him. Then a number of things happened simultaneously. The crowd, who just a moment ago was watching their breath and wondering what was going to happen, saw that I was an opportunist to the full extent and started to boo me and scream at me. "Sit down, ya' bum!"

Which is interesting. All these people were dressed to the hilt, and they were in the White House and they were trying to act very, very suave and debonair. But it sounded like a baseball game: "Sit down!" "Get that guy out of here!"

My voice is kind of high normally, but I'm nervous, so it's even higher. [In a high-pitched tone] "Friends! SALT II is a lie, and Jimmy Carter's lying to us. These ashes represent the dead from the first strike."

I take the ashes out. Now they've been in my pants all morning, so by the time I got them out, the moisture was condensed into the bag, and they come out like clumps of clay, you know. "These ashes—and I'm looking at them [hits himself on the head]—boing, boing—"these ashes represent . . ." Everybody's laughing. And then to add injury to insult, my pants . . . I never had time to button them up, so when I started to shake the ashes, my pants started to come down. I had to stick my butt out like this to make sure they wouldn't fall down. [Here the reader must visualize the Cordaro gyrations that accompany this story.]

Then, quick as can be, this secret service guy comes and grabs me by the arm. "There, there young man, you're all right. Just come on out here." Like I was some kind of loony.

Of course, no one heard me. No one heard a word I said, but it was all on the TV. It picked up everything, and later on, a woman from Iowa got up and said, "Mr. President, I like that young man from Iowa whom you had dragged out of here. We're concerned how anyone in the peace movement can support a treaty that allows for first-strike weapons." So the media people got ahold of her right away and got my name, where I'm from, the statement I was making.

First, the secret police wanted to know if I was crazy. Secondly, they wanted to know if I had planned to do any harm to the president. Thirdly, they found out my record . . .

RO: Didn't they want to find out what that clumpy mass in your pants was?

FRANK: Oh, yeah. Then they realized, “What the hell!” They said they just wanted to keep me out of the media ‘cause I had already made a . . . and they didn’t want to press any charges ‘cause I was an invited guest. About all I did was to be rude. Rudeness is not necessarily an illegal act. The enforcements are saying to themselves, “How in the hell did we let this guy through in the first place?”

One of the last comments the secret service guy says was, “Well, I guess you know this means you’ll never get invited to the White House again.”

That night it made all three major networks. Walter Cronkite mentioned my name, and it was all on the front pages . . . it was a front page picture in The Washington Post, The New York Times, and papers all over the country. The prophet Isaiah never got that kind of exposure. ‘Course when I went back to the Jonah House people, they’re all saying, “Wow, man! You could have got shot.”

“Wait a minute! Liz and Phil didn’t say anything about being shot!”

RO: What other crazy things have happened to you?

FRANK: Well, a couple things. When I first got arrested at the Pentagon in ’77, I did a blood spilling. Just before, when I was at a pillar on the steps, holding one of the signs, I ran into my eighth grade teacher. He came out of the Pentagon door. We were spelling out DEATH, and I had the “E.” I had a bottle of blood in my bib overalls, trying to figure out how best to get it on a pillar. There were cops all over the place, and everybody was real tense. Of course I was thinking of myself. It was the first time I did CD, and the first time I ever got to see the Jonah House people, and again, I was questioning if I really know what I’m doing.

“My God! Here I am from the Midwest. These guys, they don’t know me. I don’t know them. And now I’m going to do this blood spilling.” I began to have lots of second thoughts. And out of the door of the VIP entrance to the Pentagon comes Mr. Amadao, my eighth grade teacher. He’s in the Air Force.

“Coach Amadao!”

“Cordaro!” He comes back up the steps to talk to me. You should have seen the Pentagon cops. They were really taken in by this—two guys from Iowa meeting on the Pentagon steps: one’s in the Air Force, one’s a demonstrator; one’s a former teacher, one had been the student.

We talked for a few minutes. He asked me three distinct times if I really knew what I was doing. He didn’t say I was dumb, he didn’t say I was stupid, he just wanted to know. And I could say with a great deal of conviction that yeah, I did. But I’m thinking to myself, “Gee, coach.” I mean, it’s one thing to spill blood on the Pentagon pillars. It’s another thing to do it in front of your eighth grade teacher.

Luckily, the guy he was with said, “Lieutenant Amadao, your car is waiting.” And he shook hands and left.

Then we all let go of our signs and did the blood spilling on the pillars. No sooner did I get the blood on the pillars than my hands were handcuffed, and I was under that canopy. We were screaming out, “The Pentagon is the temple of death! The Pentagon is the temple of death!” And the sound would reverberate up those large pillars. Then out of nowhere comes these storm troopers, maybe seventy strong. Blue jumper suits. Big American flag. Large clubs. Complete helmets. All of them black except for two—one kind of chubby white guy and one white woman. (At the Pentagon, if you’re pushing a drum, if you got a broom, if you’re doing any dirty work, or if you’re low man on the totem pole, you’re black. And if you’re wearing a tie, you’re white.)

We’re still screaming, “The Pentagon is the temple of death!” They take us to a bus. These two big black guys were my partners, and as soon as they got on the bus, they took their helmets off and sat down and said, “We’re real glad you guys keep comin’ here because these people are nuts. And they will use nuclear weapons. You’re just right on!”

Every time I went to Washington, something unique would happen. Sometimes you have to use gimmicks to get things across. I’ve fallen into that.

RO: Resistance as theater.

FRANK: It's good liturgy, and it's good theater. And it should be entertaining. That's another thing: if you're going to say a harsh message, I think you ought to be entertaining. Actually, I think if you're going to stand in front of any group of people, you ought to be entertaining.

We've done several things at SAC. The first thing we ever did was to climb over the fence and say a rosary on an active air field. No one came and got us, so we said the whole rosary, the whole fifteen decades. They never did come, so we said, "What the hell!" and climbed back over the fence.

One time . . . God, when was it? In December of 1980, we edited the sign out there. SAC's international motto was "Peace is our profession," which of course is a lie. They had a big billboard at that time out in front of the base. A hundred of us showed up for a prayer service. Ten of us crossed out the word "peace" and put the word "war" in its place and doused the sign with blood. All the TV channels were there. They only arrested three of us. They missed the priest. They missed the two nuns, and picked the socialist and two crazy-looking Catholic Workers, and I was one of them.

They say not everybody can do civil disobedience [or] be Catholic Workers. And I say, "That's right. I'm not looking for everybody. If one percent of the Roman Catholics in this country become Catholic Worker types and resistance people . . . just one percent! One percent of fifty million Roman Catholics in this country is five hundred thousand. Imagine a half a million Roman Catholics—crazy Catholic Worker types—gunking up the legal system. Out there on the streets. And the rest of the church supporting them.

RO: Do you miss the Catholic Worker? Do you miss living in a house?

FRANK: Oh, I miss it bad.

Frank's brother Tom was the first Cordaro I met. He now works for the National office of Pax Christi.

TOM CORDARO: I was born on August 29, 1954, to Angela and George Cordaro. Had an

Italian upbringing, living in the south end of Des Moines, which is predominantly Italian. A group with a strong sense of family and extended family, also, since all of my neighbors were relatives. My father died at forty-six, and this had a profound effect on our family. It drew us together. One by one, we began to take our faith more seriously. Then when Frank encountered the Worker house in Davenport, it had a profound effect on him, that he shared, or at least tried to share, with the family.

I felt that it was very good, and it seemed to make ample sense, just logical sense. Such an obvious kind of behaving. Unfortunately, in those early days, Frank was pretty heavy into condemning our middle-class value system and all of that, you know, like most people are when they get turned on by a new idea. At that time, I was still in college and had been doing a lot of student organizing, mostly in the charismatic renewal format. The charismatic renewal provided a place for me to develop my leadership qualities, my speaking abilities, and organizing skills. At that point, I went to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for a summer with the Word of God Community.

One instance that really made me think happened when I was placed on a street evangelizing team. I was nervous. "I'm a Catholic. We don't do those sorts of things." But I wanted to be as open as possible to the experience, so I went out and began to share my faith with people. I found out that people were receptive if you weren't belligerent, and that they were hungry to hear and to talk about their own faith experiences. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of beginning to reach out to street people and to evangelize them.

Well, I bumped into a Native American who had a bum leg and his motorcycle had been stolen and, you know, he had no place to stay and nothing to eat. It seemed natural to me, after sharing the word of God with him, to invite him home with me. I was living in one of the community homes at the time with, I think, seven other men who were part of the Word of God Community. I brought this fellow home and, my goodness, it was like . . . everyone was shocked that I would do such a horrendous thing! And I was shocked that they were shocked. I remember in particular that I was asked to sleep in front of this guy's door to make sure he didn't sneak out in the middle of the night and steal things from the house. Like a watchdog. To say

that Jesus Christ is Lord to me means that He is actually the ruling reality of my life. And whereas that was true in charismatic renewal for their spiritual and social existence, it didn't seem they were bringing that into their political or economic existence.

At the same time, because of my brother Frank and the civil disobedience he'd been doing, I began to really feel that the arms race needed to be addressed, that it certainly was an issue. So in 1978, I began publishing a newspaper called *The Voice of the Prophet*, which was an ecumenical Christian newspaper for students on campus, to help them and expose them to the social issues of the day. We had a publication of five thousand, and we were on over a hundred different campuses across the country. That was in my third year as campus minister at Iowa State. Also, at that point, I began to feel a real pull to the Catholic Worker.

At the same time, I was afraid to do more. In particular, I began to realize that my possessions had control over me. They possessed me—I didn't possess them. I was afraid—afraid of being ripped off mostly. I was unfree, a slave to my things.

Well, one evening after having a few drinks and getting ready to go out with friends, I got a call from the church that there was a transient that needed some help. Of course initially I said, "Why me, Lord? I don't need this kind of thing now." But on the impulse of the Spirit, I said, "Send him over."

After hanging up, I went around, and in a kind of ritualistic way, said "Good-bye stereo," and "Good-bye TV." And my microwave and . . . I went through this kind of ritualistic cleansing of myself from these things. Then the man came to the door. His name was Francis, and I really do think that was providential.

"Francis, the refrigerator is over there, and you help yourself. The couch is here. Here are some pillows and your blankets. I'm going to be gone for the evening, so you just make yourself welcome, and I'll see you in the morning."

And when I walked out and pulled the door behind me, I had an incredible, exhilarating sense of freedom. That, to me, was a real turning point in my conversion experience. You see, once you taste that kind of liberation, you

want more of it. So shortly after that, I sold all my things and opened up a hospitality house in Ames, along with two students—Jamie Barmettler and Chris Murphy—the Loaves and Fishes Hospitality House and Peace and Justice Center.

We set up hospitality. And began to learn the lesson that "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." I began to understand that while it was easy for me to let go of my things, and of my space, I was still holding very tightly to my privacy. While it was easy to let transients and homeless people into my house, it was a lot harder to let them into my life. I was afraid that if I did, they'd consume me with their need, and that I would just not be able to handle it.

Well, what I learned through that experience was that the poor are prophets. They tell us just who we are, in very plain ways. And I always say, "If you think you are a loving and warm individual, go to a hospitality house and learn the truth about yourself. Just see how far that cuddly love gets you."

Always, always a struggle. Always a humbling experience. To make room in your heart, not just your home. That was always very tough for me. I was never very good at it, but that didn't excuse me from doing it. I thought that I was always doing very, very meager hospitality, but I learned a lot.

Before doing hospitality work, I was pretty much of a judgmental person. Expecting people to shape up and fly right. It was only after seeing the brokenness of the world that I was able to turn and accept the brokenness in [friends and relatives].

Naturally, the course of personalism flowed into the political scene in the form of civil disobedience. It was just so natural. If there is evil, you say no. With your own body, you take personal responsibility for what's going on.

I remember the very first action I did was with some Catholic Workers from Davenport and Des Moines at the Rock Island Arsenal. It was during Armed Services Day, and we were to walk onto the island where the arsenal is and go to the museum. Some of the folks were going to unfurl a banner, and I was going to read scripture about love and war.

Well, it was like “mission impossible.” We were all kind of covert, sneaking onto the base and walking around in this museum, waiting for a big crowd to come so that we would do our action. Waiting and waiting. (I bet we probably only waited five minutes, but it seemed like five hours.) Finally, we did it. And I sprang open my Bible. “Brothers and sisters, listen to me.” My goodness! Everyone turned around and listened. I began to read the scripture, and all the time I’m thinking about our plans. We had thought, “One or two sentences, that’s all we’ll have time for before they leap on us and drag us away.”

Well, I read the whole passage and nobody was doing anything. So I flipped through the Bible and read another passage. Nothing was happening, and I’m running out of material, so I’m forced to do this kind of extemporaneous sermon. All the time I’m saying to myself, “Please someone, come and take me away.” Well, we were finally taken away. We weren’t even given ban and bar letters, just driven off the base and dropped off.

That was my very first experience. Since then, I’ve been arrested many times. I don’t know how many, anymore. And have done some jail time. I have also left Ames. I was trying to do full-time campus ministry, do the house, and do peace and justice work at the same time, and I found that I wasn’t doing justice to any of them. The resistance pushed up on my agenda to being number one, so I began full-time organizing for campaigns of nonviolent civil disobedience at the SAC base.

RO: Have you ever had anything happen in prison that you were afraid of?

TOM: I’ve had frightening experiences, but most of them were not from prisoners. They were from the system. For instance, they have this thing the prisoners call the merry-go-round. It’s a kind of floating Siberia in the federal system. For disciplinary reasons or at the whim of any official, people are put on what they call disciplinary transfers. That means they’re in a lockdown situation and moved from place to place to place.

It has the effect of making you disappear. When you get to the new place, you may not have the ability or the right to make a phone call, to contact your support people on the outside. And when you do finally get a stamp to mail a

letter, you may be moved again before your people get a letter back to you. It’s a way of keeping prisoners in this kind of no-man’s land.

In fact, the last time I was in the federal system, I started in Omaha, Nebraska. My destination was Sandstone, Minnesota. I was sent down to Leavenworth, Kansas. From Leavenworth I was to travel to Terre Haute, Indiana. From Indiana I was to be sent to Chicago. No, from Indiana I think I was going to go up to Michigan and then down to Chicago, and from Chicago finally to Sandstone. This was on a fifty-five day sentence. No way I could reach my destination during that time! You know these movements aren’t quick—you could be in transit for months and months.

I think they’re very frightened of people like us. At Leavenworth, some guy in the suit-and-tie department of the administration said to me, “We know you’re a troublemaker. We got word on you.” That carries with you all the way through.

But I’ve already seen the worst. The merry-go-round is the worst, but, as a matter of fact, in my case, it turned out much for the better for me and for the movement. The one letter I was able to get out was to my mother. I told her what was happening to me, and she got that letter to Tom Fox at the National Catholic Reporter. He organized the whole damn country! They were swamped with letters, just overwhelmed by all the letters, and got so frightened that when I got to Terre Haute, they decided to put me in a camp. Because of mom’s initiative. A lot of the public would never have known about this floating Siberia except for her.

ANGELA: I myself am very ashamed of my country. I’m ashamed. . . . you know this flag deal that Bush is pushing out here . . . I can remember parades where the hair on my arms would stand up straight when my flag went by. I haven’t . . . I haven’t had that feeling for a long, long time.