

After leaving the priesthood for love, a return to the altar

By Thomas Farragher - Boston Globe Columnist

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In the basement chapel of Gate of Heaven Church in South Boston, the early arrivals — bundled against a bracing wind — have completed the rosary and rise in unison as the priest enters the sanctuary for the 9 a.m. Mass.

Father Frank Daly is 74 now and, like many of the congregants before him, he's the product of Irish immigrants. He looks the part, a familiar, friendly, white maned man whose tone is

soft and sure, whose homily is blessedly brief.

He seems straight out of central casting, the Irish priest in a Boston neighborhood that still celebrates that heritage, except for one thing. When he raises the chalice of consecrated wine, the gold wedding band on his left hand fairly sparkles in the reflective light of candles.

"When I first came here, I met a lady and she said, 'Oh, Father, welcome to South Boston,' " he said later, while removing his purple Lenten vestments. "Then she stopped and said, 'We don't like long homilies.' And I said, 'Well, about three months ago, I was sitting where you are. And I don't like them either.' "

Frank Daly's remarkable journey back to the altar of the Roman Catholic Church is the story of a thoughtful and accomplished man who studied theology in Rome, who baptized babies in Dedham and Sudbury, who fell in love and left the priesthood for a woman who became his wife and the mother of his two children. It's also the story of bedrock faith and of a priestly calling that was coaxed back to life after the searing grief of his wife's death two years ago.

"I remember thinking that I would love to see him as a priest again," said his daughter, Meghan Daly Murphy of Mansfield. "He's just a special man. He has a gift."

The second of four children born to immigrants from Skibbereen in County Cork, Daly had his first priestly gift conferred upon him in late 1967 at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, where he had studied at the North American College. His mother, brother, and sisters were there for his ordination as was his uncle from Ireland, Monsignor Michael Daly, witnessing his first steps into what would become a decidedly unconventional priestly life.

That path led to St. Mary's in Dedham, where, beginning in the summer of 1968, he worked to find his clerical voice. "I think I was good at it," Father Daly told me at the rectory in South Boston. "And I liked it."

He was just 25 then. The rhythm of the sacraments became the metronome of his young life. Baptism. Confession. Communion. Confirmation. Once, while visiting the death bed of an elderly woman who wanted to receive the Holy Eucharist, he

blessed her. She told the young priest that she was from Castlehaven in County Cork. “I know Castlehaven,” the priest told her. “My parents were married in the church there.” The old woman brightened.

As he prepared to leave, she tapped her forehead. “If you want another blessing, I’d be happy to do it again,” he said, recalling what he told her. No, the woman said, tapping her forehead. A kiss. “As a priest, you’re admitted to some of the deepest human things that happen in people’s lives,” he said. “And these encounters are sacred because Christ has promised to be present in them.”

In Dedham, he met a parish family who made an impression. The Goulds. They had a daughter named Janice. It wasn’t until he was later serving in Sudbury that a different kind of calling began to take hold. She was attractive. They shared common interests. In fact, she had once been a nun, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She was bright, not pushy. And she made him feel like no one else ever had.

Their courtship moved slowly, cautiously. There were phone calls and dinners. On his day off, Father Daly and Janice Gould would meet to talk about their lives and hopes.

His being a priest complicated things, of course.

“Initially, if you find someone like that attractive, you recognize that that’s something that you’ve kind of sworn off,” he told me. “You try to integrate it into your spirituality — that it’s not something that you really should pursue.”

He went to California for further studies in theology. He also needed time and space to sort things, to make sense of a deep, developing relationship. “I thought it would give me a breather to work this whole process through in my head,” he said. He was being pulled by a force he did not expect. He wrote Janice often. He had fallen in love.

They were married in a civil ceremony in early 1978. He had sought permission to leave the priesthood before the marriage, but was refused. He asked again afterward, won approval, and was married in the Catholic Church in the fall of 1981. He believed that his life in the rectory was behind him.

He found work in the Massachusetts secretary of state’s office, where he served for a time as director of public records. He worked as a special assistant to US Senator Paul Tsongas and later led the business ethics program for the defense contracting giant Northrop Grumman.

Janice was a beloved middle school math teacher. Their two kids formed the family’s nuclear core. Together, they cheered for Meghan on chilly soccer sidelines in Duxbury, where she was a star player for the hometown team. Their older child, Chris Daly, now an Army pediatrician in Texas, recalls a genial dad who carted him around to hockey games, a man who expected much of him but was also a gentle moralist.

He told the story of the day he dreaded his dad's return home, knowing he would have to admit to having smashed a window in the rear of their home with an errant fly ball.

"He said, 'Well, every American kid breaks a window with a baseball once,' " the son said. "It took me off guard. I think I had to do extra chores."

Frank and Janice Daly had the kind of easy, caring relationship that made an impression on their children even at a very young age. They went to church each Sunday. When the clergy sexual abuse crisis rocked the US Catholic Church, beginning in Boston in 2002, he was horrified. He had been classmates with some of the abusers. As a father himself, he felt sick for the victims.

In 2003, when Janice suffered a stroke in the middle of a Mass at the church of the Catholic school where she was teaching, it surprised no one when her husband became her omnipresent caretaker.

She suffered left-sided paralysis, but cognitively she was the same woman. "She was very resilient and came back from the brink of death a number of times,"

Father Daly said. There were daily outings. They'd drive to Duxbury Beach for a day in the sun. They'd spend an afternoon at the Derby Street Shoppes in Hingham, where he'd peruse books at Barnes & Noble and she'd check out the fashions at Chico's.

He was a constant presence by his wife's side for 12 years until her death two years ago.

Daly sought out his spiritual director and again tried to make sense of his life — his two lives actually. The arc of his thoughts bent back toward the priesthood, but he didn't want to do anything that might seem to diminish his married years.

"I had all sorts of things I had to work through," he said. In time, his inner debate led him into conversation with officials of the Boston archdiocese.

"They said, 'What are you willing to do?' And I said, 'What do you mean?'" he recounted. Then "They said, 'Would you go to the seminary?' I said, 'Sure.'"

During the academic year he spent at Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, a petition process wound its way through the Vatican bureaucracy, a process whose outcome was hardly a slam dunk in a church that is desperately short of priests but also cautious about change. Only just recently has Pope Francis renewed the idea of allowing married men to be priests.

Mary Gautier, senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, said that while it is not uncommon for widowers to enter the priesthood, Father Daly's return to the altar after giving up his collar to marry is uncommon to say the least. "This is the first one that I've heard of," she said.

He was at home on the day before Thanksgiving last year. It was his birthday. The phone rang. "Is this Frank Daly?" said the deep voice he instantly recognized as

that of the archbishop of Boston.

“Frank, I’ve called to wish you a happy birthday,” Cardinal Sean O’Malley said to him. “I have a present for you from Rome.”

The following Monday, Frank Daly arrived at the rectory at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in the South End. He was vested in an alb and, after the gospel, Cardinal O’Malley administered the oath of fidelity.

And then, once again as the Rev. Francis J. Daly, he said Mass with the cardinal.

“I think it’s a wonderful story,” Mary Prokop, 72, said the other morning after Father Daly had finished the 9 o’clock Mass at Gate of Heaven. “He met somebody and fell in love. And now he’s back.”

Later, at the rectory, Father Daly deflected a suggestion that his uncommon career trajectory makes him a better priest.

“Implying that those priests who aren’t married men are not as good a priest as me, that isn’t true,” he said. “I’ve been the beneficiary of extraordinary men who’ve never been married and who understand what it means to be human whatever your situation is. So this notion that a priest can’t help a married couple because he hasn’t been married, in my view, is like saying a psychiatrist can’t help you if he’s not psychotic.”

Father Daly, the grandfather of five, is getting a new title soon. He’s been named pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Sharon. He starts there on June 1.

And on Saturday morning, his children were with him as he celebrated Mass at Holy Family Church in Duxbury, marking the second anniversary of his wife’s death.

It was an emotional day and a proud one for the kids he raised, a son and a daughter who have known Frank Daly as father longer than anyone else.