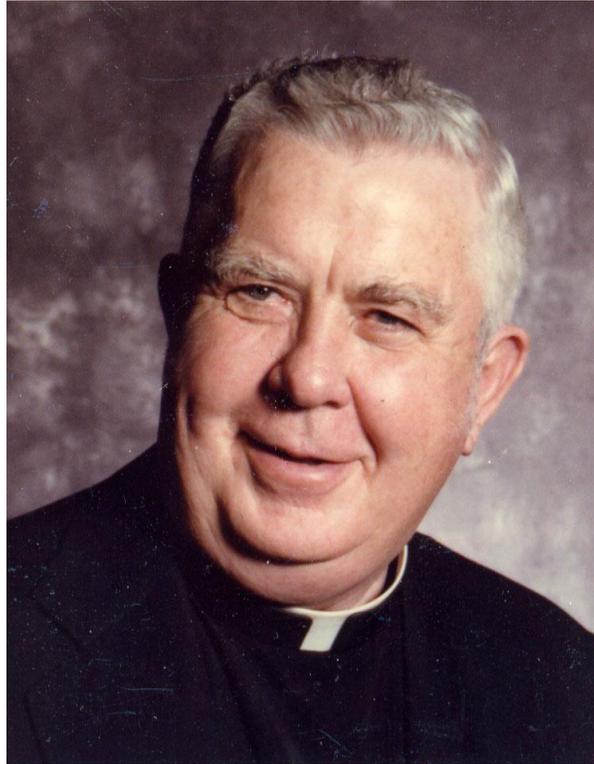


## Claretian Alumni Tribute Award for 2020

### Leo Mattecheck, CMF



*The Claretian Alumni Association honors a departed Claretian each year, a person who played a disproportionate role in the education and formation young men in the seminary. **Father Leo Mattecheck '36** was Superior at the minor seminary (Del Amo and Dominguez) as well as the college (Clareville). He is credited with adapting seminary education to a new era. John Zodrow '62 wrote and delivered the following tribute and recollection at the Aug. 29th Reunion, video-conferenced on Zoom. Fr. Frank Ferrante'65 provided additional remarks on Fr. Leo, which follows.*

#### **John Zodrow'62:**

Welcome to Zoomland, everyone. I hope you are all wearing your masks and are six feet apart. Despite this currently weird world, we're going to have a little frivolity today and hopefully a few laughs. Afterwards, Frank Ferrante will add to this memorial for Father Leo Mattecheck.

When Bob Loera asked me to give a tribute to Leo, it seemed that to understand him and his contributions he made to all of us, his story had to be put into context and some kind of contrast. Because until we met Father Leo, our lives had been about conformity with lots of rules and regulations. And Leo was definitely not any of that. In fact, he was a bit of a revolutionary. To say the least, he came as a shock.

Let's begin with Del Amo.

There, in the minor seminary, we had a rule for everything. From how to make your bed, how to tie your tie, polish your shoes and even how long to take a shower.

We were told to sign our names all in the same way, with CMP meaning Claretian Missionary Postulant. We rose early at 5:30 AM, except on weekends and feast days when we slept in until 6:00. Everyone wore the same blue cardigans, khaki shirts and pants and black ties. Talking was permitted only at recesses. We took siestas after lunch. We observed silence at all ordinary meals, listened to a reading and kept recollection, our eyes focused on our plates. We left behind our families. This was our new family. Visiting was permitted once a month. And you got two weeks at your former home every summer.

Heeding advice from the founder on how to seek perfection, Saint Anthony Mary Claret told us *noli tangere*, no touching. Do not have best friends. Don't look a woman in the face. Some of that was a little difficult to process for teenagers.

But we tried our best. We were committed to a priestly vocation and strove to be as good as kids could be. Very often we failed.

Here are a few examples you may remember with some names you might recognize.

Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at breakfast, we were served rubbery, cold oatmeal in plastic yellow bowls. Some bad actors speared it out on their spoons and slid it down the table like hockey pucks.

Those miscreants ate off their chairs while kneeling and rolled white bread around butter and sugar choosing to eat that instead. By the way, credit where credit is due. This concoction was the culinary invention of Father Steve Sherwood. For whom I am forever grateful.

At all meals, if it was your turn to read from a book, usually on a saint's life or spiritual lessons, you held your breath in hopes that you would not hear the dreaded tinkle of the bell from Father John Fessler signaling you had mispronounced a word.

Because you then had to go red-faced to the dictionary and look up the correct pronunciation while the entire community ate in silence and waited and you sweated.

If you asked John how the word was pronounced, he would tell you that if he told you, you wouldn't remember it. But if you looked it up, you would forever. And he was forever right.

After classes and study halls we kept busy playing all kinds of sports. Football, tennis, baseball, basketball, soccer and swimming. I think that was based on the Saltpeter theory.

On Saturdays, we did gardening, including planting hundreds of trees on the property. Afterwards we gathered outside the refectory to talk and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drink cool-aid which we called bug juice. I have no reason why.

When it came time to hear what you were assigned for local cleaning every six months, you held your breath and hoped you were not on the prefect's bad list and got the moniker of

“acid man”, thus receiving the awful duty of cleaning the urinals and toilets with hydrochloric acid.

Local cleaning was not to be confused with Spring Cleaning. Because that is when you learned whether you were being sent home as a reject.

One of our favorite silly teenage games we played was called “Shut Off.” If you bested another in an argument, or won in sports you finished your opponent off with the final gesture of “shut off”. It looked like this.

DO AN EXAMPLE -----

And then you said SHUT OFF!

I think it was all based on somebody noticing there was a large red gas wheel at the front of the building labeled SHUT OFF. You see what I mean about being kids?

We learned secrets of survival from the more senior seminarians. For instance, when you were punished for an infraction like talking in the dormitory, THEY TOLD YOU how to kneel on your fingertips and not be in any pain. All you had to do was open your fingers and kneel between them. It looked just like you were suffering.

The older classmates, known as guardian angels, who could also hand out penances, warned us that at 5:30 am, on rising, not to hog the sinks. Hang your towels on your bedstead to dry. Make your bed and put your crucifix on the pillow. Change your socks after you showered and played sports. That you had ten minutes to shower. Don't dilly dally.

If someone was not taking a shower often enough and was stinking up the dormitory, his bed got short sheeted so when he crawled in at night, he couldn't get his feet to the bottom.

If that didn't work, then he got the big treatment of Russianing his bed. To Russian a bed, you simply lifted the metal frame out of its four lock-in end sockets and balanced them on the NOW free-standing head and foot rails. Sometime during the night as the stinky soul rolled over, his entire bed would collapse. It was quite a shocker and usually worked to promote bodily cleanliness.

During early morning meditation, we learned how to sleep without your head dropping up and down in chapel. Some never got the hang of it and not only nodded off but bodily tilted over, striking their heads on the pew with a loud bang.

Sitting back up was to say the least, embarrassing.

Importantly, during those four years in the minor seminary, we got used to a daily routine of rules, strictures and discipline. The understanding was, don't ask for something special, outside the rules. You won't get it.

Can we ride the trolley to Long Beach?

No.

Can we drink a beer?

No.

Can we drink two beers?

Do you want a penance?

Told you so. Shut Off!

But we were still kids. And after four years, those graduating traditionally did something to celebrate. One class I heard about spread silver nitrate on the prefect's bar of hand soap and toilet seat. Silver nitrate stains the skin a brackish color.

Another, probably just a rumor, was a graduating class who cut the prefect's brake line on his golf cart and he flew off a hill.

Anyway, after four years, we graduated with a knowledge of spiritual insights and a quality high school education learning everything from English to Latin, Algebra to Geometry to History, performing experiments in the science lab, (which someone blew up) and generally being able to type with a good acquired knowledge of the dictionary.

Okay, onto Novitiate where there were more rules. For a year, we kept lots of silence, thinking, praying, reading, meditating, and in your spare time, learning how to play the guitar, the banjo, organ, and piano as well as making nativity sets, lots of nativity sets.

Now here comes Leo.

If you made the cut, you went on to Philosophy. Father Leo had just come on board there as Prefect. He was stocky, with the build of a full back, sported florid cheeks, warm eyes, and was moved to laugh often. The slightest thing seemed to tickle him. Easy going, he also had a casual humility that drew us to him like a magnet. He seemed like he was just one of us.

We had no idea what to make of him. We'd never seen anything like Leo Mattecheck. I'll start with this story.

Some of us found two orphaned baby hawks that had fallen out of a nest. When we asked Leo if we could raise them, not really expecting to get his permission, he laughed and said, "Good idea. You better learn how."

Expecting to hear "No way!" We later stared at each other in shock and asked, He said What?

He said Okay.

Maybe he didn't get what we asked.

But he did.

While studying such subjects as Prosody, Greek, Ethics, Logic, Latin, and Philosophy from Aristotle and Kant to Aquinas, Father Leo taught calculus and managed to make it interesting by cracking jokes. A difficult feat with Calculus.

When we started busing to Loyola, he encouraged us to take classes in minor degrees such as film and television, play intermural football games with the other University students, join

in singing competitions at Spring Sing (which we won 2 years in a row) and even allowed those who wanted to, to take night classes in film production at USC.

In the summer, he sent us out to San Gabriel Mission to do a census and tally the existing Catholics in the parish. For weeks, we went door to door, block after block until we finished. During that time, we drank beers. Sometimes two.

Back at the Mission, where we were staying, we taught Sunday school and gave guided tours through the gardens and museums to busloads of tourists. We served meals at soup kitchens and visited the dying in hospices and comforted those they would leave behind. We had a great choir so at Christmas we sang in hospitals to the sick. In one hospital ball room, complete with piano, Nat King Cole, dying of lung cancer, sang for us and we for him.

Some of us minoring in Loyola's Department of Film and Television, came to Leo and said, "We want to make a film about a priest who is out of touch with people."

"Excellent idea," he said.

Later we came to him and said, "You know that old English Ford behind the garage?"

"Yessssssss?" It was the sort of apprehensive, rising question he used, his way of waiting for the next shoe to drop.

"Well," we held our breaths, "that car doesn't run very well. And well, we want Brother Roy and Brother Renee to cut off the body with a blow torch."

"Yessssssss?"

"And, well, leave the chassis, steering wheel and tires and make it into a camera car."

"Anything elssssssss?"

"Well, we want to weld a crane onto it so we can get great boom shots."

"Okay. Not a problem."

Alone, we asked, "He said okay?"

He did.

Does he know what a boom is?

He didn't mention it.

We approached Ron Alves to play the lead in our little film. To which he asked, "Will I get into trouble?" To which we said, "No way!" After further consideration, he acquiesced and did an Academy Award performance.

When Leo saw our finished film, which was a satire about a self-absorbed, stuffy priest who relied on solving problems with ritual and copious amounts of holy water, he laughed, and said, "Good job. You told the truth."

He didn't get mad? We asked later.

Not a bit.

Slowly, it began to dawn on us that what Father Leo was doing was treating us like adults. If we were to go forward and become priests in a real world, he knew we had to be responsible and learn how to handle things.

But there was something else he knew. Leo understood that some of us would not go forward and become priests. And that given our different inclinations and talents that we possessed, he could not control our futures. So, he was letting us prepare for wherever our lives would take us. Whether it was a priestly or secular vocation, he simply wanted the best for us. Talk about caring.

Years later, after we left the seminary, some of us made a vocational film for the Claretians. We called it 'A Man Among Men.' That title literally meant someone who was admired with a wisdom that set him above an already superior group.

That, to us, was Father Leo.

Recently, I came across a proof sheet of photos shot October 24, 1975, by a White House photographer. In them, the 38<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Gerald Ford, is shown shaking hands and being guided through the San Gabriel Mission church and gardens by then Pastor Father Mattecheck.

In each shot, Leo in black suit and collar, is at ease, shaking the President's hand, smiling, laughing, casually pointing out the mission's history. And you can see the President's face, taken by Leo's charm, genuinely interested in what he's saying, perhaps liking the intimacy and respite of being with such an unassuming and down-to-earth priest.

We alumni owe a great deal to all the Claretians who have touched our lives in so many different ways.

Today, we honor Father Leo Mattecheck, A Man Among Men.

Thank you for listening.

And now here's Father Frank Ferrante who knew Leo well and was a major influence in his life too.

Frank, got your mask on?

### **Frank Ferrante, CMF:**

I appreciated John Zodrow's comments and anecdotes about how Leo was so special for so many of us who knew him.

I first came to know Leo before joining the Claretians when I attended San Gabriel Mission High School from 1958-62. Leo Mattecheck was Principal and math professor.

In 1964 after two years at U.S.C.—I joined the Claretians at Dominguez Seminary in Compton as a pre-novitiate seminarian. Leo was Superior during my year at Dominguez.

From 1966-68 after my novitiate year, Leo was Superior at Claretville Seminary, Calabasas, where I lived while finishing my Bachelor's degree and Master's Degree of Education at Loyola University.

As Superior of two of the communities where I lived, and later when Leo and I were on the Provincial Government together, some of Leo's wisdom and insight were manifested. Some examples of this: 1) when asked whether something was able to be accomplished, Leo would respond "Possibly so, probably not." We would know what Leo meant: "Don't give up on the idea, but also don't get your hopes up too high." Always said with a smile.

2) Concerning making policies, whether at the seminary or on the leadership team for the Province, Leo was known for his wise response: "We should make an absolute rule with an immediate exception." For Leo, flexibility and open-mindedness was the name of the game

3) In the early 1970's at an informal meeting at the Claretian Center, Leo, in a very progressive mode, expounded on an insightful comment he had made: "50 years from now, religious life and the Church will not be the same." He said this with an awareness that both the Church and religious life needed to change.

Perhaps viewing our world and Church today, pandemic and all, Leo's visionary approach to life would echo the words of St. Anthony Claret: "Christian perfection consists in three things: praying heroically, working heroically, and suffering heroically."

Leo was a person of hope—He would challenge any approach to theology based on fear. I remember his scolding one of our retreat directors at the seminary whose talks involved a hell, fire and brimstone approach to spirituality. Leo's response: "What these young men need today is hope, not fear!"

Still today, I hold Leo in my heart and see him as a hopeful visionary and prophetic mentor with a good sense of humor (Leo at breakfast loved to read the comics). He put things in perspective and moved forward with a curious mind eager to learn, a joyful spirit and a love for the poor and marginalized.

**Nominations for the 2021 Claretian Alumni Tribute made be made to the Alumni Council at [ClaretianAlumni@gmail.com](mailto:ClaretianAlumni@gmail.com). Previous recipients include: Father James Griffin CMF, Father Luis Olivares CMF, and Father Richard DeTore CMF.**