

An Unexpected Journey



by
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An Ideal Beginning

1940 was a year of great uncertainty with a war underway in Europe. America, at the time, awaited the signal to engage, which would propel most young men to venture abroad to rid the world of human cruelty at the hands of a vicious dictator. No one knew what the future would bring. Dominating the minds of most was a tinge of hope lingering just beneath the weight of worry.

Southwest of St. Louis, MO, on Scanlan Avenue, within the secure walls of a small A-frame house, Peter Grams was welcomed into this uncertain world. His mother and father delighted in their first child, willing themselves to imagine a future that was bright. The distant war was of no consequence as they made perfect their home. His mother was overjoyed at having her first child and doted on him, documenting every moment from his first tooth to the long list of guests at his first birthday celebration.

For three years, Peter was the centerpiece in this family of three, never having to vie for his mother's attention. When brother Hal came along and two years later Jon, however, his mother's affection had to be shared. Though Peter liked having other boys with whom he could play, he couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. As a result, he resorted to mischief. Because Hal was such a rule follower, Peter did not bother to use him as bait for his wrongdoings. John, however, was the perfect victim to be used as Peter's scapegoat whenever the need had arisen. Peter would often tattle on his youngest brother and blame him for his own bold actions.

His attention seeking ways and need for nurturing got him into trouble at school as well as at home. Peter's kindergarten teacher, Sr. Madelaine, at Epiphany Catholic School gave him all the nurturing and reinforcement he needed. It all changed in first grade when he met a teacher who was strict and lacked affection. As a response to this, he acted out. The following year, Peter's

mother enrolled him in Longfellow Elementary School, the nearby public school. Of course, Mrs. Grams was embarrassed that her eldest son failed to exemplify a good Catholic boy among the scrutinizing eyes of the religious.

Peter's family was quite ideal if one were to have a peek inside their suburban home. His father was vice president of broadcasting at KSDTV in St. Louis, providing his family with a solid income. He was a quiet, serious man who rarely laughed or expressed affection, but Peter never doubted his love for his wife and children. His mother, on the other hand, extended affection often and was involved in her sons' everyday activities. As a homemaker, she focused her efforts on maintaining a clean house, well fed family, and happy children. Each evening, father would come home from work, pour himself a martini, and read the Saturday Evening Post or The New Yorker as his wife readied the children and set the table for supper. Peter's mother succeeded in making the home ideal for her family.

Because his father was rarely home, discipline generally came from his mother. Peter caused his mother to expend more energy than either of his brothers. He and his best friend Joey Barnes, who lived just five houses away, were quite a pair as they often found ways to antagonize their neighbors. Innocent fun, of course, but it usually ended in some sort of disciplinary response. Their antics consisted of lighting aluminum foil in the crawl space underneath the house, shooting off rockets, scaring an unsuspecting neighbor with a cap gun, throwing eggs at passing buses, and riding escalators up and down the floors of May Company Department Store. Though Joey may have been a bad influence on Peter, or possibly it was the other way around, his parents were good friends with Mr. and Mrs. Grams. In fact, Joey's father helped in convincing Mr. Grams to convert to Catholicism. Peter's mother, a devout Catholic herself, was overjoyed when her husband agreed that he and his sons would be baptized.

At age ten, Peter and his family moved to a newer suburb in Glendale, MO. Peter was heartbroken at having to say goodbye to his best friend Joey. It was here that Peter was enrolled at

Mary Queen of Peace School. He would try his hand at a Catholic education once again. With bated breath, his mother was hopeful that her son's conduct would be exemplary this time around. Though Peter's behavior improved overall, his innate desire to wreak a bit of havoc resurfaced from time to time. For instance, in 7th grade, the students were given the task of writing a paper about someone they admired. Peter chose to write about Willie Sutton, a famous safe cracker who at the time was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list for his bank robbing exploits. This, of course, was unacceptable as the subject did not exude the characteristics of decency. This resulted in a call home to his mother and the raising of a red flag at the school. To counterbalance her son's behavior and possibly to secure some pity for her plight, Mrs. Grams managed to get a part-time job at the school. This allowed her to keep a watchful eye on her son and curb his behavior when necessary.

Hook, Line, and ...

In 1953, during his eighth-grade year of school, Peter began to set his sights on St. Louis University High School. As with most young boys who prepare to venture into new territory, Peter considered high school to be a daunting proposition. He'd be forced to meet new people, with only a hope that they'd accept him. He'd have to become comfortable with teachers who were undoubtedly more demanding than those of his primary years. He assumed, with great regret, that his childhood antics, the ones that had made him so popular, would no longer be admissible. The building itself would pose a problem, existing as an ominous maze of staircases and corridors that he'd have to learn to navigate on his own. All these factors, as he added them up, one by one, only increased his anxiety.

It wasn't until Fr. Al Svobodny came to school and spoke about the missionary work of The Oblate priests that Peter considered spending his remaining school years as a seminarian studying for the priesthood. Though his mother was a dedicated Catholic who guided his path of faith, she never pushed such a calling upon him. Going to Mass each Sunday and successfully urging her Protestant husband to convert to Catholicism was the extent of her persuasion. Though Peter was a dutiful altar server at the time, becoming a priest never crossed his mind.

Fr. Al was one smooth operator, however. He had the good looks and charisma that could persuade just about anyone toward a religious calling. Looking back, it is clear why the powers that be chose this dashing young priest to recruit impressionable young boys. Peter was taken aback by this man and quite understandably wanted to be like him. He wanted to have the same qualities that capture and secure the attention of others. This was the first draw. The second and most compelling aspect of living the life of a missionary priest was the possibility of living out adventures in foreign countries, heroically assisting the most vulnerable and needy.

When Fr. Al gave Peter some literature about the accomplished works of The Oblates of Mary Immaculate, he was

intrigued. He gladly returned a survey to Fr. Al and, upon it, Peter indicated his interest in foreign ministry. The fishing line was cast, and Fr. Al knew it was only a matter of time before he'd hook this young man. Whether the boy would sink or swim only God could tell.

So, in the summer of his eighth-grade year, Peter agreed to attend a summer camp in Carthage, MO, home to The Oblates, to see if his interest in the religious life would grow. Summer camp was a success, as most summer camps prove to be, and Peter began to consider this path. His interest in foreign missionary work could not be contained.

When Peter returned home from camp, Fr. Al invited himself to the Grams home once again, intending this to be his final visit as he was certain his skill for persuasion was still very much intact. Upon arriving at their home on a warm night in early August, Peter, his parents, and Fr. Al gathered on the screened-in porch. As they sat, each with a cold lemonade in hand, Peter was asked about his decision regarding his future. The boy considered the recent visit to Carthage and remembered it fondly. The activities, lectures, and fellow participants made for a pleasant visit. The idea of beginning his high school years with boys he had already befriended was far more appealing than being subjected to the trials of nurturing new friendships at St. Louis University High School, which was becoming even more ominous as he weighed the options. He would know not a single boy if he began at the traditional school, and the campus itself was already a considerable worry to him.

Peter's mind raced between the two choices, and he looked to his parents for some sort of direction. Neither his father nor his mother threw him a line with which to rescue him from having to make the decision on his own. Each displayed a countenance that was unreadable. This was the moment, as it turned out, that young Peter could have used some parental guidance. Understanding that such a decision should be the boy's alone, one should also consider that such a young and underdeveloped mind needs the wisdom of a trusted adult to influence him. Looking back, Peter is certain that had one of his parents given

him any sort of notion that he should not join The Oblates, his decision would have taken a different turn. Nonetheless, their silence weighed heavily upon his final consideration, and he said, “Yes” to the seminary.

Though Fr. Al already knew that Mrs. Grams liked him quite a bit, influenced by his looks and charm, he thought it best to secure the admiration by offering her some reassuring words. “Don’t worry, Ma’am. If Peter doesn’t like it, he can come home at any time,” he said with a sincere look upon his face. Well, these words were all that she needed to reassure herself and remind her husband, the convert, that their eldest son made the most logical decision. Peter’s father sat there, seemingly unaffected by this young priest’s assurances, and halfheartedly accepted his son’s decision with love and support. His mother delighted in the realization that those with whom she worked at the parish would hold her in a higher regard, for everyone knows that the very best mothers produce priests.

Answering the Call

As the summer of 1954 ended, just two months shy of his fourteenth birthday, Peter returned to Carthage, MO, as a new seminarian for The Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Our Lady of the Ozarks Catholic Church. He, along with thirty other young boys, excitedly embarked upon this unexpected journey.

Peter would soon come to learn that the Oblate order was established in 1816 by a French missionary named St. Eugene De Mazenod. Since its founding, it has become one of the most prolific religious orders in helping the poor and disenfranchised throughout the world. This idea of ministering to those in need had interested Peter from the first mention of it. He was happy to be a part of something so noble.

Adapting to his new environment, though barely a teenager, didn't pose much of a struggle for Peter. The young seminarians followed a schedule designed in such a way that it did not give them time to be homesick. Their busy daily routine consisted of classes, labor, sporting activities, and communal meals. The first four years of general education classes followed the state high school curriculum. When not in class, the boys had chores that included such things as mopping the hallways, yard work, and painting.

Peter was gifted in academics. Apart from science classes, he never had to worry about major inadequacies. In fact, he took a special interest in discussion and debate with his fellow seminarians. The boys would often pair off and debate over social issues of the time. Peter recalls one incident when he got into a physical altercation with a boy. The two didn't see eye to eye when discussing an issue relating to desegregated busing in schools. Peter argued that it was necessary to uphold the 14th Amendment and ensure that all students, no matter their socioeconomic status, received the same quality of education. Thus, his desire to combat social injustices and stand up for the underdog was ignited in these early years.

In addition to academic guidance, each boy was assigned a spiritual director, and Peter was assigned Fr. Joe Paris. Fr Paris

was a very direct man who never hesitated to express harsh realities when it came to each student's spiritual formation. His job was to guide these young men into becoming grounded in a spirituality that reflected Christ's teachings. Jesus taught the virtue of humility, and Fr. Paris was determined to see to it that each student embraced this important virtue. "Peter," he said one day while counseling the young man, "your biggest challenge is going to be your pride." Peter was struck by this remark. He didn't recognize himself as a prideful person, and he let Fr. Paris know it. Fr. Paris suggested, "Maybe your pride is keeping you from recognizing it. It's something you need to work on." This notion that he may have a problem with pride remained with Peter throughout his life, as it often resurfaced unexpectedly.

As with most Catholic institutions, working on spiritual health was coupled with discipline. It was believed that discipline, and one's ability to self-discipline, was necessary in developing the whole person. Fr. Francis Zockman, Prefect of Discipline, handled all kinds of difficulties when it came to misbehavior among the seminarians. Peter was part of the infamous Nail Biters Club (NBC). He, along with several other boys, were subjected to Fr. Zockman's grueling punishment in response to their stubborn habit. Often after breakfast, the group of boys was summoned to display their hands for Fr. Zockman to inspect. With scrutiny, he'd peer closely upon each cuticle and nail bed, looking for evidence of nibbling. If his assessment resulted in evidence being found, the towering figure would present the only weapon that would suit such an occasion, that being a lumber pencil. Under the nail beds that slanted stick would go, until each boy understood the error of his ways. Not surprisingly, it didn't take long for Peter to overcome the filthy habit of nail-biting.

Though Peter adapted easily to the structured life of a seminarian, he was unaware of the distance it was creating between him and his family back home in Glendale. While he was living his days away from home, his brothers were bonding, as siblings naturally do during the earliest years of growth. All the while, Peter was living 260 miles from them, among strangers

with whom he was required to form a different kind of brotherhood, and where he'd soon develop a fondness for the practice of solitude. Because he wasn't given a chance to nurture his most important relationships, he most often felt like an outsider within his own family.

This separation, this feeling of existing on the margins of a family, was significantly more obvious when his sister Susan was born. In 1954, during his first year away, the Grams family welcomed an unexpected addition to the family. Though Peter was thrilled at the idea of having a baby sister, he couldn't help but feel isolated at a time when he should be sharing in his family's delight and rejoicing in this new creation. The limited time spent with Susan, even in her tumultuous teenage and young adult years, caused him an even greater sense of alienation, and he never grew close to her. This would come to be one of Peter's greatest regrets later in life.

Peter made the best of his visits home during his years in the seminary. Each summer, he returned home to work as a golf caddy at the prestigious Algonquin Country Club. This was before golf carts roamed the hills and valleys of the lush courses, making a caddy's job pleasant. Sans motorized transportation, he was forced to hoist the heavy clubs upon his back and secure the bag's thick leather strap around his shoulder before trudging his way between each of the eighteen holes. Of course, he welcomed the hard work, as he was awarded cash tips at the end of each day.

In the summer of his third year, Peter's father presented him with a second job answering phones at the television station. This job kept him from idleness, which his father knew was a characteristic most teenagers gravitate toward. One morning, as the two drove to work, Peter's father, a station manager at the time, expressed the latest issue over an employee who needed disciplinary action and how the only recourse was termination. When Peter expressed remorse for the employee's predicament, his father taught him about the necessity of being tough in such a situation. "You cannot let yourself get so disheartened," he warned him. Later, when the station employees went on strike,

he remembers his father suffering with ulcers because of it. Peter and his brother Hal were responsible for getting lunch for their father and his colleagues, helping the men avoid the protesters as they picketed. This was Peter's first experience with an organized union and the plight of the worker. Though his heart was with his father at the time, Peter would later grow to support the plight of the worker. His advocating for the underdog would grow, and his desire to be a sympathetic voice would ignite.

Seminarians of Change

After four years of academic courses, Peter began his novitiate year as a seminarian. This was a year dedicated to spiritual formation in preparation for the religious profession. Students learned the history of the Oblates and their mission of service to the poor. Through intense reflection and devotion to prayer, each novice was called to test his commitment. This time of contemplation gave them the opportunity to discern and imagine their futures. Peter was excited to begin this part of his formation, remaining intent on his future as a foreign missionary.

Maury Lindros and Gary Paul were Peter's roommates during this time. While Gary was friendly but quiet, Maury was preoccupied with joking around and playing pranks. He seemed an unlikely candidate for the priesthood, but he committed himself to it nonetheless. Silence was practiced during most of the novices' waking moments, even during meals, making it especially difficult for Maury.

Everyone loved Mrs. Jones, the African American cook. They looked forward to walking into her dining hall and taking in the wafts of freshly baked bread and fried chicken, or the sweet smell of her famous pineapple upside down cake. The novices regarded her with fondness; however, they couldn't help but express amusement when Maury pushed her buttons and ruffled her feathers from time to time.

Mrs. Jones was a short-tempered, strong-willed woman in her forties. She demanded that everything she did and all that was done to assist her was done to perfection. Every fork and knife had to be placed in the proper spot, napkins had to be folded and displayed in a perfect linear fashion, and elbows were never to be found resting upon the surface of her linen clad tables. All the young novices knew this, and most obliged her high standards. Maury Lindros knew her rules too, but he often took it upon himself to rearrange the order of things or put his elbows where they were ordered not to be so that laughter would ensue behind the tight-lipped mouths of his fellow novices.

Tom Kozney, another young novice, was quite the opposite of Maury. Tom was considered the smartest in the class, and his parents were very devout Catholics. Though he was quiet, he was friendly and solid in character. From the beginning of their novitiate year, everyone agreed that if anyone were to become a priest for life, it would be Kozney. He, however, like many of these young novitiates, ended up leaving the priesthood some years later.

The summer of 1960 came with the excitement of impending change in America as the country was on its way to electing the youngest president in history. For the first time, America's youth was engaged in John Kennedy's campaign platform, which focused on issues such as racial equality and economic justice. Although Peter and his fellow seminarians were not considered part of this youth and discouraged from reading or listening to the latest media, they couldn't help but feel the surge of change in the air. Peter, a budding social activist at heart, was especially compelled by JFK and his mission to upend the country's most deeply rooted injustices.

At this time, Peter's novitiate training had come to an end, and he and his class of young seminarians were sent to Mississippi where they would continue their training with two years of philosophy studies. The boys were anxious to begin this portion of their formation, but they wondered how the social climate of the South might influence their mission as Oblates. At its core, the mission of The Oblates reflected the same purpose as the Civil Rights Movement, which was to promote social justice for the oppressed. Though the Civil Rights Movement was well underway, Mississippi seemed to be at a standstill when it came to the kind of change that much of the country was considering. Segregation, admissible by Mississippi state laws and the influence of "Jim Crow," continued to perpetuate the act of subjugation among its African American population at this time. Peter recognized this even within his own population, as black seminarians could not serve in white churches or schools. Even though many religious working for the Catholic church, the Jesuit order especially, openly embraced the fight to protect civil rights

for all, they could not combat the prejudice that was so deeply rooted in the southern people.

During the two years in Mississippi, a clique, made up of the brightest seminarians, befriended a local African American woman known as Mrs. Guiddian. Though Peter was not a part of this clique, he was aware of the rumors that surfaced. Mrs. Guiddian owned a house in the woods nearby, and she offered her home as a refuge for these young men to openly discuss topics that had been taboo in the confines of the seminary. These students were considered rebels as they would steal issues of Time Magazine from the Oblate professors' recreation space and take them to this secret hideout. There, they would discuss the latest news, drink beer, and smoke cigarettes. It was their way of connecting with the outside world and keeping abreast of the most important current affairs. All the while, Mrs. Guiddian listened intently to these young intellectuals as they discussed the social changes that concerned her and those of her race. Discussions often turned to issues regarding the Catholic church and how there existed within it a similar need for change. Though Peter was on the outskirts of this group, he, like most seminarians of the 1960s, was influenced by the perspectives that dominated the social conscience of the times.

In 1959, Pope John XXIII had announced the preparation of the Second Vatican Council. He intended for this council to discuss and implement changes that would affect the church worldwide. By 1962, the council was underway, and these seminarians, on the verge of becoming priests, were excited to be part of the changing times. Pope John XXIII, with his Vatican Council, was as vital a figure to them as MLK and JFK were to Mrs. Guiddian. Each was a catalyst, intent on moving mountains for change.

The topic of change being presented by the Vatican II Council followed the seminarians to San Antonio, TX, where they would spend their final four years preparing for their ordination. This was their final stop. They'd have one more chance to test their commitment to the priesthood and set aflame the changes that would undoubtedly happen as they began their

lifelong vocation. During this time, they spent their mornings meditating in the chapel. This was a struggle for Peter as he often found himself helpless against the urge to sleep. He tried relocating outside to the beautiful grotto, certain that it was the perfect place for silent contemplation, but he continued to struggle. Meditation was something he was never able to fully conquer, and this bothered him.

Peter found more enjoyment singing in the liturgical choir Schola. He loved this group even though other members may not have been so appreciative of his participation. He remembers Ted Cholowinski, a fellow choir member standing in front of him, cupping his ear to avoid Peter's off key singing of the Gregorian chants. This did not deter Peter in the least even when performing during the High Mass on Sundays.

It was during these years in San Antonio that the seminarians truly bonded and began to realize their kinship. Peter looked forward to the after-dinner walks when they'd talk in quiet conversation. Though they may have differed in personality and background, they had a common desire to live as holy men and bring the Word of God to others. Their voice would be one of reason that culminates through an understanding and acceptance of others. They were laying out their path, anxious to embark upon it.

Of course, theology classes continued, and the young men grew in their interpretation of scripture. Peter recalls the lectures of Fr. Kelly Nemic, a young Oblate priest who taught theology. He was favorable to the teachings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest and theologian whose works had been recently condemned by the Catholic church. He provided a new perspective on theology that was not well received by the traditional priests. Fr. Nemic added fuel to the fire as he spoke to the interests of Peter and many of his classmates. He tested boundaries and urged his young pupils to do the same as he presented them with a new way of looking at the fundamentals of theology. Peter responded to this new view with an openness and a renewed excitement for things to come.

In June of 1963, about halfway through the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII died. This was a blow to the seminarians and all those who supported the Pope's efforts. Though their hope for change remained, they worried about the extent to which change would occur. Just five months after the death of their beloved pope, another death would occur, and it would reach every corner of the nation.

Peter remembers, with great clarity, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated. A full year into his theology studies in San Antonio, his superior, Fr. Kippis, instructed the young seminarians to do something they were rarely permitted to do. "Turn on the TV. See what has happened," he urged them. "You need to know about this." Peter remembers gathering with his classmates around the TV set in the common area. Silence resulted from the overall feeling of shock as they listened to Walter Cronkite's account of the breaking news. They were heartbroken as they watched Jackie, in her bloodied suit, stand beside LBJ as he was sworn into office. The sense of loss was overwhelming, but just beneath the surface, a hint of anger began to fester and permeate throughout the group of seminarians. They were angry with Texans, their adopted neighbors, knowing their opposition to Kennedy and how it had been so palpable.

The days that followed were somber as the nation said goodbye to a fallen hero, yet it was a unique opportunity for a country to come together to honor one of the few catalysts of change in a nation that was wrought with discrimination and a lack of vision for moving forward. These dark days continued with the death of Lee Harvey Oswald. This "eye for an eye" mentality managed to continue the vicious cycle as one life was taken for another.

Over the next two years, Peter continued his theology studies in preparation for the final ordination. He and his fellow seminarians held their breath for what was to come as Pope Paul VI, their new leader, and the Second Vatican Council convened until its completion. They hoped to be among the first to embark upon a new church, one that breathed a renewed Christian spirit

of religious liberty, adapting to the times, and reviving the lives of the religious who served it.

One of the last steps before ordination was practicing the role of deacon. For Peter, the most enjoyable part of this role was the opportunity to present the homily and connect to the congregation on a common level. In doing this, he understood the importance of making the Gospel readings more relatable to them and their daily lives. At this time, it was rare for a priest to have notes while presenting the homily, so Peter felt the pressure. He seemed to have a gift for this practice, however, and quickly grew to understand what needed to be done to do the job well. The congregation had a direct influence on him, and he considered his role in their lives an honor, likening it to a guiding voice.



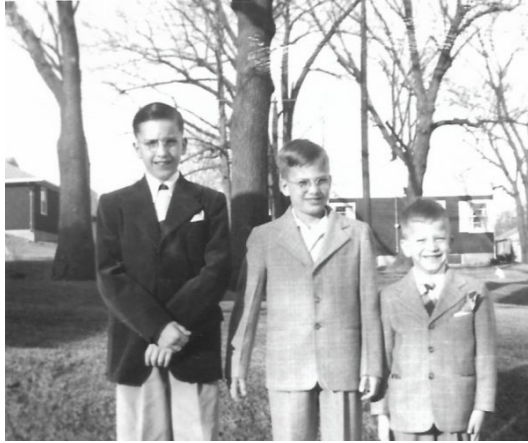
Peter's father, a broadcaster for KSDTV in St. Louis.



Peter with his mother.



Cherished moments spent with his parents.



Peter with his brothers, John and Hal.



Peter (back row, second from left)
with his fellow seminarians.



Peter, as a novitiate, with his father and Susan.

A Dream Fulfilled

It was finally time for Peter's ordination in December of 1965. Each seminarian returned to his home parish, where his journey began, symbolizing having come full circle. Peter was excited to celebrate with his family and to witness his mother's pride as her parish paid homage to her son's remarkable accomplishment. He celebrated his first Mass the following day at Queen of Peace Church where he gave communion to his family and joined in celebrating with local parishioners and priests from the area. Fr. Paris, Peter's spiritual director for all five years of his training, said the homily. Remembering his very first piece of advice to Peter, Fr. Paris reflected upon how his pupil had transformed into a humble young servant of God, having successfully relinquished his pride to be of service to others. This commitment to serving others would be one of Peter's greatest joys as he traveled even farther from home to live among the poorest of the poor in the barrios of Brazil. Finally, he was fulfilling his dream.

By the end of the summer of 1966, at the age of 26, Peter, newly ordained, arrived in Petropolis, Brazil, a mountainous region above Rio. He was instantly amazed at the beauty of the land as the mountains were dense with lush vegetation as far as the eye could see. White stucco buildings, set deep within the green foliage, peppered the hillsides as feathery white clouds sat low and a slight breeze traveled from the sea. Peter was full of anticipation, excited to make this spectacular land his home.

Over the next three months, he had the difficult task of learning Portuguese. He, along with other religious, both male and female, attended classes each day. While some students didn't seem to struggle with learning the native language, Peter did. He was doubtful that he could manage to learn enough to be successful in his work as a missionary. In addition to the difficulty of learning the language, he was anxious over not having a spiritual adviser to rely upon when times were tough. For the first time in his life, he felt like a fish out of water, having to learn and adapt on his own.

The language instructors, made up of young Brazilian men and women, brought an energy that was new and refreshing, as it contrasted with the serious approach taken by the old Oblate priests in Missouri. This new way of living was also different from what Peter and the other religious were used to. They shared small rooms with two beds, a cabana, and bathroom with a toilet and shower. They drank coffee outside in a beautiful courtyard where they could converse freely with one another. Occasionally, they had dances and went on cultural trips to the interior where they'd visit museums and churches. Sometimes they'd even travel by bus into the vibrant city of Rio.

As he left Petropolis, at the end of a three month stay, Peter was sad to say goodbye to his instructors and classmates because he had such a fun time with them. Though he was terrified that he didn't have a good grasp on the language, he was excited to immerse himself into the Brazilian culture even more and begin his long-awaited missionary work.

Peter was assigned assistant pastor of a small parish in Jordao, one of the poorest barrios in Recife, Brazil. The Oblate mission had been founded by Fr. Jim Komeitcher just eight years prior to Peter's arrival. Six other priests were assigned to the Recife mission in Jordao, including Fr. Darrell Rupiper, the pastor at the time. Peter worked closely with Fr. Darrel, and they both had the support of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who was a strong advocate for the poor of Recife. As missionary priests of the Oblate order, Archbishop Camara believed that their mission was not only to evangelize but to be a voice for those who were voiceless. He created a movement titled Action-Justice-Peace for his diocese. His nickname "The Red Bishop" was in response to his efforts to promote human rights under a military dictatorship. For this, he was considered dangerous.

Brazil's military dictatorship began in 1960 when the democratic government was overthrown in a coup for fear that the president's progressive ideas were a sign of impending communist rule. Military rule connoted a sense of doom where rights would be eliminated, and the iron fist of oppression would smother the freedoms that are paramount in securing peace and

prosperity. In recent years, however, since the rise of military rule, Archbishop Camara recognized a greater neglect. The poor population not only continued to be disenfranchised, but they were further ignored. He hoped that Fr. Peter and Fr. Darrell could help him be the quiet voice that the people needed.

Jordao was largely inhabited by immigrants from Pernambuco, the capital of Recife. They migrated from the sugar cane fields that produced Brazil's most profitable resource. As with most profitable resources, it took a toll on the worker. Aside from the grueling conditions and backbreaking labor that physically tore down the worker, the wages earned were inadequate. Unable to afford housing, families were forced to move and settle in Jordao and several other barrios in Recife where they built homes made of mud and straw. These mud huts served their purpose of providing shelter during the dry months, but the months of tropical rain flooded the area, and the homes had to be rebuilt. The absence of clean water and the lack of adequate sanitation posed a constant problem in this region. Residents were forced to journey at least a mile for clean water.

As Peter got to know the people and landscape of Jordao, he grew more and more aware of the injustices put upon the people of Brazil. The unequal distribution of wealth, joblessness, lack of sanitation, and hunger were common battles fought in the barrios of Brazil. Illiteracy was rampant due to the country's dismal approach to education. Archbishop Camara tried desperately to work with various city departments to improve living conditions, but such cries for help landed on deaf ears as the people of this region experienced little change.

Though the parish was poor, the people of Jordao made it vibrant. They welcomed Peter with a friendliness that he had never encountered. They helped him adapt to their culture and learn the language on a level that was far beyond any classroom. Within just three months, Peter's apprehension about his lack of language skills had disappeared as he realized the ease with which he was able to converse with his parishioners. They packed the church every Sunday as Peter and Darrell presided over the Masses. He walked the barrio every day, visiting families, and

taking communion to those who could not attend Mass. He soon learned that the people of Brazil had a remarkable sense of humor that allowed them to laugh at themselves and joke about serious issues they faced. Even though they were poor, they had a happiness that radiated and brought joy to those whom they met. They never let their poverty get them down, instead they expressed gratitude even for the most minor of blessings. Their greatest blessing was having Fr. Peter visit their home so regularly and making them feel so special.

Peter befriended Joaquim, an older man of the community who tended to the chapel nearby. He was a very holy man who could have been a priest had his circumstances been different. He soon became Peter's assistant, introducing him to people within the community and expressing his desire to bring good things to the families. Antonio was another layman in the community who helped the priests in various ways. Both men wanted to be a part of something that would reinvigorate the community they loved.

Families experiencing extreme poverty existed alongside wealthier middle-class families. Homes made of mud were built alongside houses of plaster. Such varying degrees of wealth and status coexisted within this hillside barrio. Jaime and Selany, a married couple, lived in one of the more affluent homes. They became good friends with Peter, often inviting him to Sunday lunch.

A young musician also lived in one of the plaster homes in the barrio. His membership in the Brazilian Symphony Orchestra made him a bit of a celebrity. His home was the only one with a telephone. Though he may have been a wealthier and more notable member of the barrio, he did not put on airs when it came to living among the poor. Whenever Peter or anyone in the barrio needed the use of a telephone, this young musician graciously offered his.

Over the next three years, Peter became more and more impressed with the people of this community. Their willingness to accept their neighbors regardless of their socioeconomic status was refreshing to see. He couldn't help but reflect upon the

situation debilitating his own country where Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leading civil rights activists were trying to rid the country of bigotry and hatred while replacing it with a common love for humanity and a solidarity to live in peace despite the differences. The citizens of Jordao somehow seemed able to combat bigotry with a humble acceptance of one another and their circumstances. This way of thinking, however, was counterintuitive when it came to creating the change that was desperately needed. The priests' greatest challenge was energizing a population that was so accepting of their circumstances.

An Abrupt Departure

As pastor, Fr. Darrell slowly began to infuse the growing human rights concerns into the minds of his small congregation. He and Peter often met with university students who were anxious to be the catalysts of change for a population that was shackled by fear and ignorance. Bringing these issues to light added a whole new dimension to their mission. Peter was supportive of Archbishop Camara's efforts to expose the suffering of the poor, and he agreed that the world needed to know the truth about the human injustices that lurked beneath a military dictatorship. Though he wanted the best for the people whom he grew to love, Peter was also aware of the consequences that may arise. He knew of priests being imprisoned and tortured for speaking out against the government. Though this was a concern, he began to wonder if the fire within him was now growing into an inferno of passion to create a change that was beyond his scope of vision. He loved the simplicity of his missionary work. Whether it was sitting down with someone to provide spiritual guidance after a death in the family or simply distributing communion after a thoughtful interpretation of the Gospel, Peter came to cherish this work. He did not wish to sacrifice it for the passion for social justice that was growing within him, so he remained a quiet warrior.

One injustice with which Peter and his fellow priests were concerned involved the mandatory military service forced upon every Brazilian male. It was a topic of discussion during meetings with the university students as well as conversations with Archbishop Camara. The parish bulletin was an effective way of quietly disseminating information to the community. One week, Fr. Darrell decided to include the question of mandatory military service in the bulletin. In it, he asked the congregation whether they believed that making military service compulsory was justified. Though Peter was uneasy about this quiet act of defiance, knowing the risk that was involved, he did not object to it.

The following Sunday, Peter officiated the evening Mass. The church was a circular, open building with multiple entrances along its perimeter. After the service, once the congregation had gone home, Peter, Fr. Darrell, and Antonio remained in the church to clean up. As they were doing so, five men in plain clothes, with guns in their hands, entered the church. At first, Peter and his colleagues were startled by these men and unaware as to the reason for their presence. The armed men arrested them, put them in handcuffs, and forced them into three cars parked outside. At the time, Peter thought that because he and Darrell were Americans, they wouldn't be harmed. His heart took a sorrowful turn at the thought of Antonio, who was a mere poor man of Brazil. Peter knew how the military treated their own kind, and this knowledge scared him. The cars sped away, stopping at the single paved highway only a few yards ahead. Here the future of their lives was uncertain. Turning left would take them safely into the city; however, turning right would take them into the brush where a ruthless execution was sure to await them. Any optimism that Peter may have had slowly diminished at this telling crossroad. The seconds that it took for the car to stop and begin again seemed a lifetime, but the wheels turned left.

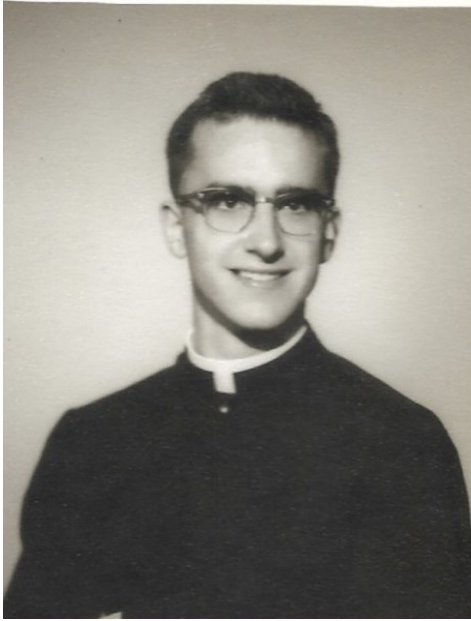
The two priests and their mild companion, Antonio, spent the week in the city jail. They were arrested on charges of subversive activities stemming from public criticism of the Brazilian regime. During these seven days, they experienced constant interrogations. The military police were certain that these priests weren't priests at all but simply men, most likely trained in Cuba or China, acting as religious, intent on spreading communist ideas to the poor of Brazil. The police questioned them further regarding their involvement with the university students. Though Peter admitted that they had met with the students, he vehemently denied any sort of plan to work against the wishes of the government. Finally, they questioned the content of the bulletin and whether there were Brazilians who helped them write it. Peter was careful not to incriminate anyone. "You have it all wrong," Peter tried assuring them. "We

are simply here to minister the people, to strengthen their faith, to help them have a better understanding of their religion. We are not here to form opposition groups of any kind.” He could not convince these men of the truth.

As he sat in jail, Peter once again began to consider the severity of their actions as priests. In his heart, he knew that their attempts to create a better life for people suffering the effects of poverty under a selfish and antagonistic regime, were justified. Yet, he wondered what cost would remain for the people of Jordao. Peter hoped that his and Darrell’s actions would not cause the people of this community to have to sacrifice the peace they found in the help they received. They lived their lives simply, without complaint, content in the knowledge that they had priests as their neighbors and faithful friends.

In the end, the two priests were given two choices. They could stay in Brazil and go to trial, or they could leave the country. Knowing the corruption that existed at the top of the political chain, Archbishop Camara advised the men to return to the United States. “Go back to your country and tell them how bad it is here. Tell them how the military of Brazil is treating its people. You can help in exposing the truth.” Because Peter knew of other Oblate priests who were in prison at the time, he was fearful of experiencing the same fate had he and Darrell chosen to stay and go to trial. Though Darrell didn’t seem as fearful of the idea, he eventually agreed to leave the country.

On Christmas day, the day before returning to the United States, Peter and Darrell gathered with priests from the area to celebrate Mass, share a meal, and say their goodbyes. Because Antonio had been so roughed up during his interrogations, he was unable to see them before their departure. Peter felt a tremendous sadness over this but hoped his dear friend knew the depth of his gratitude. Peter longed to continue his work as a missionary and help the people of this community, and he feared that he’d never experience the same degree of purpose again. The least he could do now was commit himself to never forgetting the beautiful people of Brazil.



Peter with his parents as a newly ordained Oblate priest.



The language school in Petropolis,
September of 1967.



Oblate mission church where Peter worked as assistant pastor.



Simple church altar.



Assisting during Mass.



Serving families in Jordao, one of the poorest barrios in Recife.

A Difficult Decision

The following day, they flew from Brazil to Miami where they were met by reporters who questioned them about their experience under the military dictatorship. The fact that reporters were interested in hearing their story surprised Peter and Darrell, but it made them feel like minor celebrities. They then flew to Belleville, IL, where they debriefed with the provincial superior. Because Peter's father worked in television, he was able to get them an interview with the Today Show in New York. Peter was hopeful that this would expose the situation in Brazil. Upon their arrival to the studio, they were surprised to know that Joe Garagiola, a sportscaster, would be conducting the interview. Immediately, Peter thought it was a joke. Why would a sportscaster cover a piece on a couple of renegade Oblate priests? As it turned out, Garagiola was Catholic and an avid supporter of the Church's work in ministering to the poor. The fifteen-minute interview went well and remains an honest attempt at exposing a terrible truth about an injustice happening abroad.

In the weeks that followed, the two famous Oblate priests were invited to various protests. They were considered activists of the time, loyal to fighting for the underdog, eager to create change in an imperfect world. In January of 1970, students from Michigan University were in an uproar over the Vietnam War. As with most of the country, they did not see the war as a necessary means for peace. Peter and Darrell were invited to the scheduled protest where Darrell spoke in support of the students and their mission to end an unjust war.

Once the hype over their story had simmered, their fifteen minutes of fame was over, and life as a religious priest took over. Peter was given a teaching assignment at a local high school, but it did not provide him with the same enthusiasm as his missionary work in Brazil had provided. He missed it and longed to replicate it somehow. Though he was presented with an

opportunity to work in a poor parish in Chicago, he couldn't imagine it fulfilling his need.

What lingered deep within Peter was a resentment for being expelled from Brazil. He was angry that the work he loved so deeply had been taken from him so abruptly. Furthermore, he was disappointed in the Vatican II Council for their unfulfilled promise to create change within the Church. These feelings persisted to a greater degree over time and would cause him to leave the priesthood in the summer of 1970. Finding peace with this decision would be the most difficult task of his life, knowing the heartache it would bring to his mother.

He agonized over telling his parents while having dinner one Sunday evening in April. He was quiet for most of the meal. His heart raced in anticipation of speaking the words he practiced so many times over the last several months. Trying to find the right time to present his truth, he'd attempt to blurt out the words but then refrain from fear. His nerves caused his entire body to tremble as he, his parents, and sister Susan passed the dishes and filled their plates. How could he disrupt the pleasantries of sharing a Sunday meal with words that would come like razor blades to his mother's ears? Peter knew he must do it like one would tear a band aid from a wound. When his mother heard the words, "I'm leaving the priesthood," Peter could see their impact. Her stunned expression was followed by tears even though Peter reassured her that his discernment over the matter had been long and painful. His decision was made with the help of God, as Peter sought His guidance. He trusted that God brought him to this decision though it was a difficult journey. Through his mother's tears, his father assured her, "Flo, he's just changing jobs. That's it." Peter was grateful for his father's understanding, but he knew that it was more than just a job to his mother. All that Peter could do was remain hopeful that she would grow to understand it too.

Though his mother had always been an active member of her local parish, participating in various ministries, her enthusiasm declined once Peter received dispensation from the Holy Father and his departure from the priesthood was final. Maybe she

hadn't the strength to withstand the judgements that she felt sure would come her way.

A New Beginning

Though Peter was heartbroken over his mother's disappointment over his leaving the priesthood, he felt a huge sense of relief once his decision was known and the matter was finally over. He was eager to move forward with new plans and begin a new vocation that would once again allow him to help those in need. In September of that same year, he enrolled in a social work program at St. Louis University.

For the first time in his life, Peter was met with the challenge of keeping himself financially independent. As a priest, he didn't have to worry about paying bills or keeping a roof over his head and food in his belly. Such matters were the concerns of his superiors. The life of a priest was simple compared to that of an ordinary citizen who was met with the everyday struggles of keeping his head above the financial tides. He worked a factory job to pay for tuition and had little else to splurge on life's extra comforts.

Though he was poor, he was content with knowing that good things were ahead. It was during this time that he not only discovered a new purpose, but he discovered love for the first time. He met Kathy Krekel while taking classes at the university, and she too was working toward a master's degree in social work. As it turned out, she and Peter shared a similar past. She was a former Catholic nun just as he was a former priest. Together they continued to practice their faith by attending Mass every Sunday and participating in the Catholic group on campus. Peter was comfortable with Kathy and happy to have the companionship of a woman.

The two grew closer as a couple, sharing common interests beyond their faith. They both were committed to social activism and fighting for the rights of the marginalized. The early 1970's was a time of great protests, especially regarding the Vietnam War. It was a period when the young people of America were the collective voice of reason, urging their country to see the wrongs of their government. It reminded Peter of the university students in Brazil who were just as passionate about changing the

consciousness of a country. The fire within him, the one that sparked his missionary work and encouraged him to take up a moral cause for the wellbeing of humanity, still set itself ablaze.

In the summer of 1971, Peter traveled to Southern California where he joined Caesar Chavez in his fight for the rights of fieldworkers during the Grape Boycott. He was immediately taken by the sunshine of California. The fact that there were no mosquitoes or humidity persuaded him to return for good. After graduating in May of 1972, Peter and Kathy moved to Southern California where Kathy was offered a job with the VA Hospital in Long Beach and Peter worked for the city of Santa Ana.

Peter reconnected with his former friend Maury Lindros who also answered the call to leave the priesthood and subsequently moved to Los Angeles to teach. Peter was grateful to have such a close friend nearby, and the two remained friends for the rest of their lives. Maury eventually married and settled in Northern California where he raised a family.

In 1975, two years after arriving in Los Angeles, Peter and Kathy married in Laguna Beach. Since leaving their religious vocations, the couple found their faith in the Catholic religion gradually decline. Their foundation wasn't solid enough to withstand the worldly influences that were presented to them outside the protected structure of religious life. They began to question the Church more intensely regarding various issues and continued to be disappointed in the lack of foresight and the intention to change. As a result, they chose their Lutheran friend to officiate the wedding as a symbol of their shared renewal. While Peter was excited on this day, he was troubled by his mother's absence. He received no blessing or acknowledgment from her. Though Peter was pleased that his father attended the celebration, he was sad to know that his mother was still hurting.

It wasn't until the couple had a child, in 1976, that Peter saw his mother again. Brian was the lifeline that resurrected their relationship. She was excited to visit Los Angeles and be a grandmother to Brian. Peter saw a happiness in her that he'd never seen before, and he was overjoyed. Finally, his mother seemed able to accept her son's decision from long ago and

participate in the delight he found in his new family. Though their relationship remained distant, having never discussed the incident that caused the discontent, Peter at least found peace in the fact that his mother was part of his life again.

Brain brought a whole new dimension to the marriage. Since leaving the priesthood, Peter looked forward to having a family, so the joy Brian brought to the couple was unquestionable. Peter gave his son the unconditional love that all parents aspire to give. Over the next three years, however, his relationship with Kathy began to weaken. The attention his wife gave to their son rekindled a feeling that Peter hadn't experienced since his childhood. There was a jealousy within him that ignited when the attention of a parent or spouse was redirected toward another. With all the affection that Kathy was giving to Brian, Peter couldn't help but feel left out and alone. This reality isn't something that Peter would ever be proud of; it's not something that he wished upon himself as a son or a spouse, however, it was a truth that he struggled with throughout his life. In addition to this, the couple began to realize their incompatibility. As the years went by, and Brian grew as a toddler, they became aware of how different they were in their personalities. Though opposites do attract, they are rarely meant to succeed at marriage. This led to a separation when Brian was only three followed by a divorce in 1982.

Just around the time of his divorce, Peter's mother passed away from cancer. He was able to visit her in the hospital before she died, but he was never able to find peace over their marred relationship. The guilt that he felt over hurting her still lingered, hanging like an anvil around his neck, forever troubling him. He regretted never having a meaningful conversation with her about the sorrow he felt for causing her such pain. He somehow believed that the stress he caused led to her illness. Maybe putting such responsibility upon himself was his way of atoning for the sin of breaking his mother's heart.

Despite losing his mother, Peter was able to fill the void by being the best father he could be. As a single parent, he made it his mission to strengthen his bond with Brian. His weekend

visits were very important to him. The two experienced many adventures together as Brian grew older, including white water rafting along the Kern River and boogie boarding at the best beaches along the California coast. Peter found such joy as a father and was eager to give Brian all his attention.



A new beginning with Kathy.



Peter and Kathy on their wedding day.



Peter and Brian.

Regrets

After a few years, Peter began to think about his situation as a single parent. He realized how much he missed the companionship of a woman in his life and longed to marry once again. It was in 1985 when friends introduced Peter to Michele McDonnell on a blind date at an Italian restaurant in West LA. He presented himself like a gentleman, bringing her a single pink rose. Upon taking the rose, Michele responded, "A pink rose? What does pink mean to you?" Peter was caught off guard but obliged by saying, "Friendship, I guess." Michele pursed her lips and rolled her eyes with a smile. Peter was taken by her forthcoming and bubbly personality right away. At the end of the night, he asked for her number, and the two began dating.

Michele, thirteen years his junior, worked as a nurse, drove a cherry red Nissan 360Z, and owned a house in Laguna Niguel. Peter was a low wage jewelry salesman at the time and drove a beat-up Toyota. He soon discovered that Michele was the oldest in a large Irish Catholic family. Though he thought nothing of it at first, he eventually came to realize how much it would bother him to have to share her. Again, Peter's need to be the center of attention in a relationship reared its ugly head and the two eventually broke up. Though Peter was the perfect gentleman when first meeting Michele, giving her a rose and all, he presented a very different side when sending her a letter that expressed his desire to discontinue the relationship. Peter found himself alone once again with an emptiness that remained.

Though Peter battled with his decision to break up with Michele, he didn't lose hope that he'd be with someone again. Over the next two years, he concentrated on being a dad to Brian and keeping the door open for someone new. It was during this time that Peter experienced an unexpected tragedy.

His sister Susan was born in 1954. This was the same year Peter went off to the seminary. Being away from home for so many years, he was unable to grow close to his little sister. The short visits home during Christmas and summer break weren't nearly long enough to get to know her as a person or to

understand the struggles she experienced. His mother often impressed upon him Susan's rebellious ways, but Peter considered it to be nothing more than teenage angst in response to a larger world that decried authority. Though Susan wasn't a planned pregnancy, Peter never imagined that she ever felt like a mistake. From his point of view, his parents were just as loving and attentive to her as they were to her brothers. Over the years, Susan had grown into a beautiful young woman, graduating from Brown University, and eventually marrying a music producer. However, she struggled with a deep sadness that was unrecognizable to him. Looking back, Peter regrets all that he didn't know because of the conversations that did not happen, the phone calls that were not made, the letters that were not written. Big brothers are supposed to listen and advise, reach out and protect. His absence robbed him of what could have been a meaningful role. Instead, he felt like a stranger in her life. So, on the day in 1987, when Peter received the phone call that Susan had taken her own life, these regrets flooded Peter's mind, clouding any sense of reason for this beautiful life to be cut so short. She was thirty-four years old.

Everyone considers the impact of past decisions, wishing for the chance to decide again, but life does not provide us with a looking glass to see what could have been if only our choice had been different. Peter's decision to choose the seminary makes him wonder what could have been. If he hadn't made that choice, could he have been the brother that Susan needed during her formative years, providing the listening ear, the sound words of encouragement, the healthy example? The sadness that Susan's death caused and his lack of relationship with her settles deep in his conscience still, but no one is exempt from the pain surrounding the notion of what could have been.

As Peter struggled with the sudden and tragic loss of his sister, he answered a phone call that he would never regret. After two years of being apart, Michele happened to come across his phone number and made the fateful decision to dial it. Peter was thrilled, knowing that breaking up with her had been the wrong

decision. The looking glass was in front of him now, and he could see a happy life ahead.



Peter with Susan during a visit home.



Susan as a teenager.

A Second Chance

Over the next two years, Peter grew to realize how much he wanted Michele in his life. She taught him the importance of communicating and the dangers of holding grudges. Her love for life and eagerness to travel reenergized him. She was spontaneous and encouraging, nurturing, and forgiving. Though she was all that he wanted in a companion, he still wasn't sure that he could cope with the demands of her big family. The fact that she had eight siblings, and an even larger number of cousins, overwhelmed him. Not only were they large in number, but they were also as tight as any family could be. Visits to her parents' home meant socializing with a house full of people whose names he struggled to remember. When cousins came to town, he was expected to join in the endless days of entertainment. Peter had felt like an outcast in his own family for most of his life, so how would he ever fit in with this one? Michele's need to divide her attention between him and this family truly scared him. In addition to the family, he knew how much Michele wanted a family of her own. Though he loved being a father to Brian, he was uncertain if he wanted more children. But his love for her made him want to do what was needed to make her happy.

In April of 1989, Peter married Michele. Though he would have preferred a small ceremony, she would have laughed at the request. Instead, they celebrated the union at The Ritz Carlton in Dana Point with her immediate and extended families. Though it took some years to get to know each of her seven brothers, he came to realize how much they each adored their sister. For this, Peter was grateful and soon came to terms with having to share her attention.

Just a year after the wedding, their first child was born. Peter gave Michele what she wanted, but it didn't take long for him to realize how much he wanted Caitlin too. He revisited the delights of having a new baby, and he was content with his new family of three. Although he felt it was enough for him, he could see it wasn't enough for Michele. Experiencing two subsequent miscarriages was heartbreaking for them both, and Peter was sure

they'd try again. At age fifty-five, Peter welcomed his final child into the world. Michael wouldn't experience the rafting or boogie boarding father like Brian had experienced. He would experience the older more subdued father, but they would share their love of sports, nonetheless. He supported Michael from the stands as he cheered him on at soccer and tennis matches over the years.

His success as a father is evident in the adults his children have become. Caitlin followed her father into social work, committed to being an advocate for those unable to advocate for themselves. Michael maintains an enthusiasm for life as he travels through the country, meeting and experiencing all that it has to offer. Brian, after experiencing the devastating scare of cancer, grew in strength during his courageous battle and lives with his wife in San Diego.

In establishing a life with Michele, Peter finally learned to set aside his pride and recognize his faults. She gave him a second chance at being part of a family and helped him understand that one's ability to nurture is endless. Through her example, she brought Peter back to his faith. He realized she had the foundation that was missing in his early years. He discovered a renewed desire to reconnect with God and strengthen his relationship, finding its purpose once again. He found that the ups and downs of life and brokenness of the world can often frustrate and disappoint, but God's presence is meant to make clear what is truly important in life.

Looking back upon his unexpected journey, Peter is glad to have shared in the energy of the 1960's and grateful to have been a participant in the early years of activism. He realizes how much more hope the country had back then. While there are just as many human needs today, the need to help your neighbor has been ransomed by the need to help a political party. His unique journey as a priest helped form his heart as the social worker he became. Most of his working years were spent with The Sickle Cell Foundation in Los Angeles where he tirelessly counseled patients and fought for their rights. His love for helping others

continues, even in his retirement years, and he has the beautiful people of Brazil to thank for it.



Peter and Michele on their wedding day in 1989. Pictured here with Michele's family.



Young Caitlin and Michael.



Peter with Michele.



Brian Grams and wife Domenica on their wedding day.



Peter with Michele, Caitlin, and Michael.

