

The Last Word

By Christina Loud, B.A.'92

His pledge name was “Boss Hogg” – a tribute to his round stomach, balding head and love of food. He was loud, boisterous, funny, self-possessed, and made friends with nearly everyone he met. I am talking, of course, about Father Joe Cotugno, Catholic chaplain at UAlbany when I was an undergraduate.

It was impossible to overlook Father Joe. His bright Chapel House office contained jars labeled “blessings” and “angels.” “Hello!” he would boom over the telephone; “this is the Holy Man of God

student’s parent and therefore actually listened. He said Mass outdoors, cajoled his mother into



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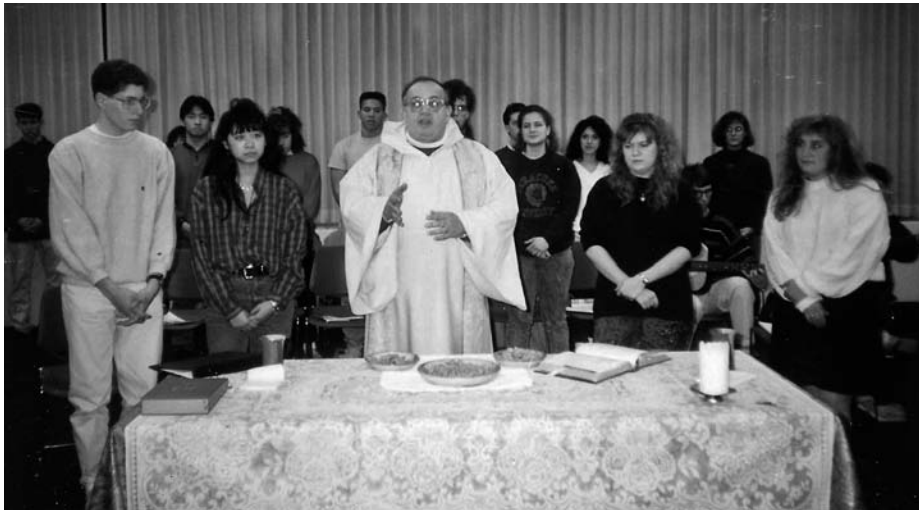
cooking homemade marinara sauce for an entire retreat, and drove around Albany with his two dogs – and all the students who lived off campus and needed rides home.

This exemplary priest helped many students deal with alienation, financial hardships, worries about their academic standing, thoughts of suicide and struggles with their faith. In him, those disillusioned with the Church found someone waiting with open arms to welcome them back.

Joe left UAlbany when his health began to fail. A diabetic, he spent 10 years on dialysis, waiting for a kidney that never came. He kept both his sense of humor and his faith, giving a pet name to his dialysis tube; admitting that he cried when he learned a relative did not match as a donor; and realizing that, with his health in rapid decline, he would be going home to God. He offered a special Mass to celebrate his life and say goodbye, dying at St. Peter’s Hospice two days after saying his final Mass at the Capital District Psychiatric Center, where he ministered to patients.

A week later, nearly 15 years after my graduation, I was touched that so many UAlbany alumni had gathered to say a final goodbye at Father Joe’s funeral. He had loved our hearts, fed our souls and shown us true faith. We had gone to college to learn and grow, and he had succeeded in helping us to do both.

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This photo from a Chapel House album pictures Father Joe Cotugno celebrating Mass in 1992 at UAlbany.

calling! And how are you today?” He was quick with a joke; gave long hugs; and ended all conversations with his trademark “Peace, love and joy.”

At his standing-room-only Sunday Masses, his homilies frequently focused on both world issues and student concerns. They resonated with his young congregants, who found Mass – often for the first time – a welcoming place. He really did pledge a fraternity, and students wearing T-shirts with Greek letters started showing up at Chapel House functions. Joe really did have an adopted son, Jason, the SUNY Buffalo student he could talk about so frankly that we forgot we were hearing advice from another