

Father Benedict Groeschel:

A Conversational Biography



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This book is dedicated to Jim Schaffer, former Director of Development for Good Counsel.

PREAMBLE



For half a century Father Benedict Groeschel, CFR, has been a blessing to many. Father Benedict was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, which was the brunt of many of his well thought out humorous stories.

He was ordained June 20, 1959 as a Capuchin and in 1987 was one of eight in his community to leave and begin a new community called the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. Other highlights in his life include founding Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry, NY (1960), joining the staff of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, NY (1965), founding St. Francis' Home in Brooklyn (1967), and founding Trinity Retreat in Larchmont, NY (1973).

He was perhaps best known for his weekly EWTN television program, "Sunday Night Live with Father Benedict Groeschel," than for his many books, retreats and international speaking engagements.

The beloved Capuchin and then Franciscan Friar was a regular guest on many programs as soon as Mother Angelica's network began during the 1980's.

Since Father Benedict was well respected as a preacher who can make the complex easy to understand and often wrote as he spoke, I had thought it would be a good idea for this book to be a collection of conversations. Plus I had a crushing deadline to meet and very little time to craft a narrative!

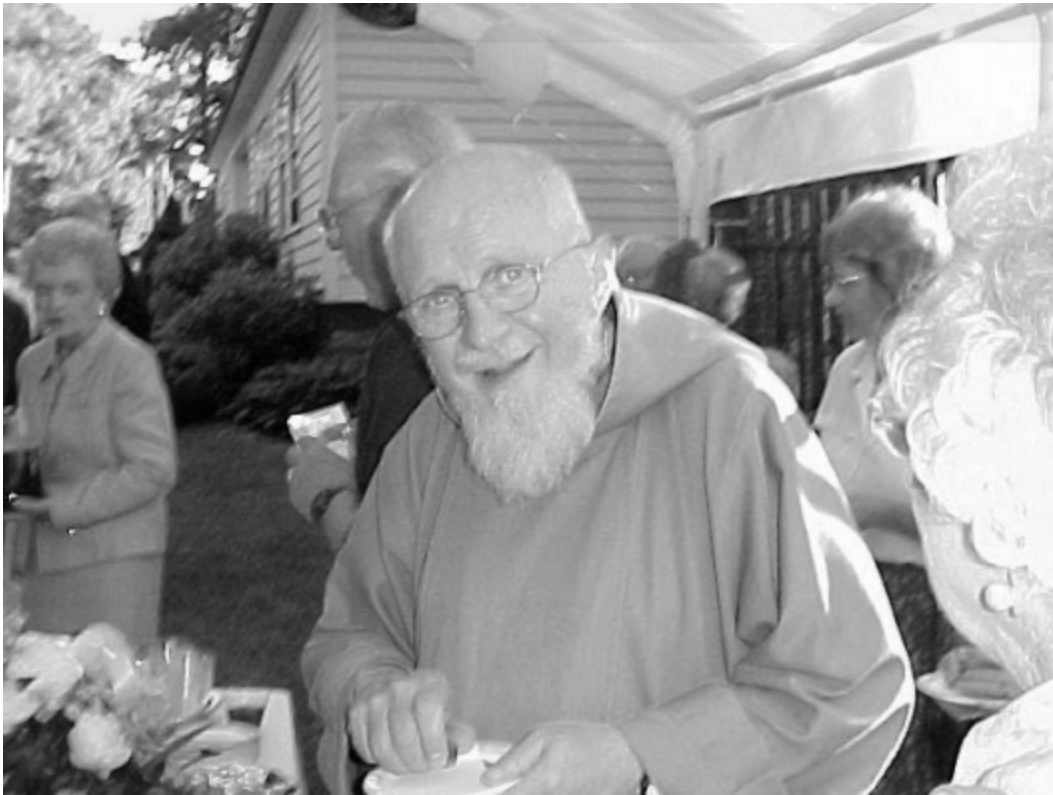
The conversations in this book are with people who knew Father Benedict very well and for many years:

- Marjule Drury, Father Benedict's sister
- Christopher Bell, co-founder and Executive Director of Good Counsel, Inc., a Catholic agency that operates pro-life homes for homeless pregnant women and their children.
- Father John Lynch, whose vocation was nurtured by Father Benedict, and who has a vivid account of Father Benedict's near death accident in Orlando, Florida.
- Father Andrew Apostoli, CFR, a founding member of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal and a person who worked closely with Father Benedict at Trinity Retreat in Larchmont, New York.
- And of course we will hear (or read) the words of Father Benedict himself, who I sat down with just a month before he suffered a mild stroke in May of 2009.

The conversations recorded in print are meant to give several points of a view of a very humble priest who really does not like to talk about himself, except in the case he is able to teach a powerful lesson or help a worthy cause.

I had planned to publish this book in 2009 to coincide with Father Benedict's Golden Anniversary but events beyond my control shelved it for most (there were limited copies self-published), and I apologize that for many of you this is being offered for the first time now. Still, there is enough interesting material here that I felt with Father Benedict's passing it would be good to revisit the priest so many of us loved.

Joe Quattrocchi



Introduction—Mother Agnes Mary Donovan, SV Superior, Sisters of Life



Mother Agnes is one of eight original members who formed the Sisters of Life under the direction of John Cardinal O'Connor of New York in 1991. Mother Agnes is a former school psychologist and was a professor at Columbia University prior to entering religious life. The following is excerpted from her speech at Father Benedict's 50th Anniversary celebration on Sunday, October 18, 2009.

Father Benedict, thank you for letting us celebrate. I suspect this is a little hard for you but it is a blessing to us to be able to celebrate the priesthood and to celebrate your fidelity during all of these 50 years. I have the joy to be able to say a few words about you and what comes to mind are the words: priest, prophet and king.

Father Benedict has certainly participated in the priesthood of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as a priest, prophet and king.

I think an apt patron for you Father Benedict might be St. John the Baptist whose job it was to ***Prepare ye the way of the Lord***. Through the years, Father Benedict has counseled many, beginning at Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry, New York. He has served priests, seminarians and countless others at Trinity Retreat House in Larchmont, New York. With his blessed intuition and the gift of his learning, he has led us to a better understanding of our humanity and then to our God who shared that humanity.

On a personal note, during the summer the Sisters of Life were founded, Father Benedict invited the eight of us over to Trinity Retreat House. He said we would have a Mass and a barbeque. I had only read his books. I was not much of a television viewer so I really didn't know what a personality he was.

So we went and had a beautiful Mass inside the chapel at Trinity. We ate a wonderful meal and then went on a lovely walk on the Long Island shore. At one point during our walk he took me aside just for 30 seconds, looked at me and said, "Sister, this will be a very difficult undertaking and I want you to know I'll be there for you."

I thought to myself, "So what's so difficult?" But I'll tell you it wasn't very long after that I began to understand what some of the difficulties would be and Father Benedict was true to his word. Whether it was ten at night or four in the morning, Father Benedict would be there and he would answer the phone and see someone in distress.

Thank you Father Benedict. The Sisters of Life are here because in no small part, you were there for us.

A prophet. Father Benedict has forcefully proclaimed the Word to the world through his books, through his preaching and through EWTN. He has proclaimed

the Word in a thousand ways to all of us who needed hope. He has guarded the Church and the treasures of its grace. We really can't imagine the millions who have listened to him and who have been blessed.

We had one really striking experience at Sacred Heart where we care for and have young pregnant women live with us. Justine was a young girl who grew up in Brooklyn in the midst of great poverty. But really the greatest poverty was within her home where there was tension, sorrow and terrible fighting between her parents.

One night as the fighting escalated she returned to her room and to television just to block out the noise and fright of hearing her parents fight. She was surfing through the channels and she happened to stumble upon Father Benedict who at that moment said, "God loves you."

Who knows what the theme of his show was, but for Justine it was a profound moment of grace and she realized, even though her parents were incapable of properly showing it, God did love her. She hung on through a rough adolescence because of those words and she would look for this bearded Friar on television even though she did not even know his name. In essence Father Benedict became like a father for her.

And then one day when Justine was living with us at Sacred Heart, Father Benedict walked into our convent for a meeting and Justine saw him. She ran over to one of our sisters very excitedly asking, "Who is that? Who is that?"

And the sister responded, "That's Father Benedict."

Justine went through a whole series of questions and asked, "Is he on TV sometimes?" And she came to discover that this was the same Friar who she had known as a little girl.

As the meeting concluded, our sisters brought Justine over to Father Benedict. He blessed her and her unborn baby. Several months later Father Benedict came and Baptized Justine's little boy who she named Sebastian.

For many of us, Father Benedict, we have not surrendered to fear because of you. You have challenged us and you have stood with us. You have led us forward to live our faith in joy and in courage. You have stirred our lagging hope and faith. By the witness of your life you have challenged us to be who we are; the Church Militant, which means the people of God, called forth in grace to engage on the earth the fight between good and evil.

For those of you familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings*** I think of you Father Benedict when I hear the words of Aragorn who summoned those of Rohan to engage the definitive battle for Middle Earth. He said:

"My brothers! I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of woes and shattered shields, when the age of men comes crashing down! But it is not this day! This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good Earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West!"

Father Benedict, how many times have we said in the face of fear and difficulty, it is not this day, because we are blessed to have you with us. Thank you!

Chapter 1: Marjule Drury



Marjule Drury, born Marjule Groeschel, is one of six children in Father Benedict's family. Marjule, a native of Caldwell, New Jersey, was kind enough to talk about her family life and her very famous brother on April 20, 2009.

Joe Q: Marjule you have a very interesting name. How did it come to be?

Marjule: It's Margaret and Julia. It's my mother's two Great Aunts' name. My grandmother put the names together for Marjule, which was also my mother's name.

Joe Q: Do you know anyone else with the name?

Marjule: Well I named my daughter Marjule and my niece has it as well. I didn't think the name existed anywhere else until after my brother Ned passed away, I heard from a woman whose husband worked with him. She saw the obituary and contacted me when she saw my name. She was from Finland and her original spelling was "Marjuwle" but when she moved to the United States it was changed to my spelling. I did call her up because she may be the only non-family Marjule in the entire world! (laughter)

Joe Q: So tell me about your parents.

Marjule: My parents were Marjule and Edward Groeschel. My mother grew up in Bayonne, New Jersey and my dad grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey. My mother was one of four children. My father had two brothers.

Joe Q: Your father traveled around in his work right?

Marjule: Yes, my dad worked on the roadways in the beginning. He was a civil engineer and he used to take the train out from Jersey City to go to Hackettstown, but they would always stop in Caldwell and my dad just loved it here. He thought Caldwell was like paradise, and back in the 1940's, it probably was. And he told my mother all about it and they decided to move. And a year after they moved to Caldwell, I was born.

Joe Q: So you were the only one born here.

Marjule: My four older brothers, except one, were born in Jersey City. One was born in Berkeley Heights. Then came me and my sister.

Joe Q: So you are one of the youngest Groeschel children. How much older is your brother, Father Benedict?

Marjule: He is 13 years older than I am and when my sister Robin was born I was two and my mother did not come home from the hospital for eight months.

So Benedict was my primary care giver. He'd come home from school, pick me up from the baby sitter and take care of me until my dad came home.

So he said to me, maybe four or five years ago, that if I ever feel that there's something wrong with me, blame it on him and just keep on going! (laughter)

Joe Q: So he's your scapegoat?

Marjule: Yes! (laughter)

Joe Q: Just so I am straight with the order, you are number five of six children in the Groeschel family.

Marjule: Yes, there were four boys and then two girls. Benedict is first, Edward, who we called Ned was second. Gerard, who we called Gary, was third. Mark, who was two years older than I, was fourth. And then there was me and my sister Robin.

Mark passed away in 1983. He was a Type I childhood diabetic and he died from complications and Ned passed away in November of 2008 from complications after a bad fall that he had.

Joe Q: So your oldest brother Benedict goes into the seminary at 18 years old. Do you have any early memories of that being that you would have been only five at the time?

Marjule: Oh yes I remember the day he left because my mother was extremely upset because when he entered into the Capuchins we were not allowed to see him for two years! There was no contact at all. It was like he was moving from our family to another family and that was really hard for her. But after the two years had passed we were allowed to go visit once a month on a Sunday.

Joe Q: And how was that?

Marjule: Up in Garrison, New York and it was a seminary and there wasn't anything for me or my sister to do, we were so little, but we used to sit out on the big lawn overlooking the Hudson River and I remember sitting on his lap and combing his beard. We were fascinated with the beard he had grown.

Joe Q: He did not have one prior to his entering?

Marjule: Oh no, but once he entered that was the rule. They needed to have a beard. He was happy to see us and we were happy to be there. Every time I would take a picture of him when I saw him he was always smiling.

Joe Q: When I spoke to Father Benedict he told me your mother knew he was going to be a priest at a very young age. He didn't necessarily think his father knew as early as your mother. Did you think your family, as a whole, knew that he had a vocation in the works?

Marjule: Absolutely! Now my father was a practical person. You might even say he could be a bit cynical. He did work in New York City and I suppose that can make you a little cynical, but my mother was very close to us all and she knew early on about his vocation. Benedict says he knew he was going to be a priest at seven years of age and I believed him.

Joe Q: What did you see at an early age?

Marjule: Well what I saw was that he spent most of his time after school up at Caldwell College and Mt. St. Dominic. He would go up there for art lessons. He loved art and the nuns would teach him in exchange for cleaning the classrooms because it was not coed. It was strictly female, but Benedict and the Mother Superior were very much alike and he had great respect for her.

Joe Q: Your brother always seems to get along with many different people.

Marjule: Yes and I remember years ago at our parish, St. Aloysius in Caldwell, there was our sexton, an elderly man named Patty Callaghan. My brother spent a lot of time at St. Aloysius so he got to know Patty very well and was fascinated that in his early years Patty had been a jockey in Ireland. Patty and Benedict became good friends.

Well Patty was trying to set up a room for himself in the basement of the church rectory where he could live and my mother was going to give him a table and some chairs. So he came over to our house and Benedict naturally is helping him move the items.

Patty and Benedict put the chairs in the car we had, an old yellow Hudson Hornet, and then they took the table, laid it on the roof with a little rope to try and hold it on.

Joe Q: Why am I getting a feeling that this story is going to turn into a comedy? (laughter)

Marjule: Well Benedict was too young to drive. Patty obviously wasn't but I don't think he had a license.

Joe Q: No?

Marjule: Well he certainly did not drive a car as well as he used to ride a horse! (laughter) So Benedict and Patty are in the Hudson driving up Bloomfield Avenue, which is the main street in our town of Caldwell, and the light turns red right in front of where the Presbyterian Church is and Patty slams on the brakes, which resulted in the table sliding forward and going off the hood of the car and out into the center of the street!

Joe Q: Oh dear! Well at least they didn't hit anyone. (laughter)

Marjule: Well it was a sight as the two of them were in the street, blocking traffic, trying to get the table back up on top of the Hudson Hornet!

But you know something, despite the age difference, Patty Callaghan enjoyed my brother's company because he could see something in Benedict. Patty was a good man but he was also a crazy Irishman! (laughter)

END OF SAMPLE

To obtain the full version of this book, please contact 201-795-0637 with a memorial gift of \$75 or more in Father Benedict's name.

Your tax-deductible gift will help Good Counsel - a ministry very close to Father Benedict's heart - to keep the doors open to many homeless, pregnant women in dire need.