

My new home health care referral was a priest who'd been shot in his church by a crack addict. I'd seen the story on television the month before. He was 49 years old and, along with performing his parish duties, ran a food-distribution and recreational program for the poor. The bullet had ripped his colon, and he'd needed a temporary colostomy. Now he was being discharged from the rehabilitation facility.

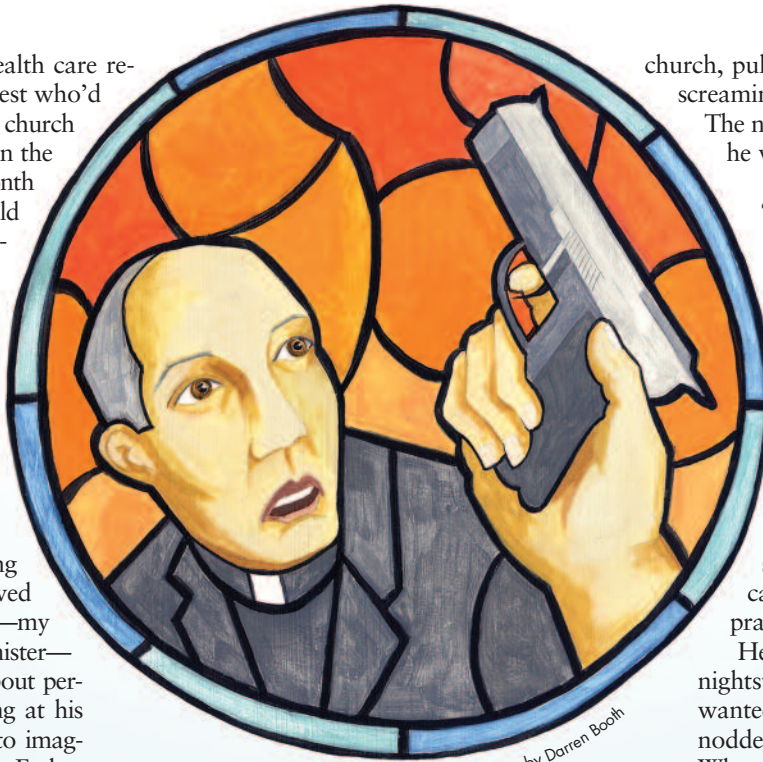
I set up a late-morning visit. I'd always been awed by members of the clergy—my uncle was a Lutheran minister—and talking to a priest about personal matters and looking at his body were hard for me to imagine. When I walked into Father Dan's bedroom, he was still in pajamas. He had gray eyes and curly blond hair, and he appeared older and thinner than he had on television. A gold cross hung from a chain around his neck. Stiff from inactivity, he hobbled over to the chair to get his robe.

For the next hour I conducted an admission interview. Father Dan seemed distracted, his emotions flat, his voice a monotone. I checked his vital signs and listened to his lungs. The colostomy was working well. We cleaned and measured the stoma, cut the wafer to fit, and reapplied the pouch over the adhesive skin barrier.

"I hate this thing," he said. "The smell makes me sick."

"Let's try a pouch deodorant," I said. "Sometimes peppermint extract works."

Over the next week, Father Dan talked, mostly about his past: he'd breezed through his time at the seminary, then been assigned to a suburban church, where he'd felt useless. His only comforts were riding his motorcycle and praying, and he'd been about to leave the priesthood when the diocese transferred him to St. Margaret's, a parish in a poor section of the city. The church's



The Other Cheek

*Trauma doesn't discriminate.
Neither does forgiveness.*

membership had been dwindling; reviving it made him feel that what he did actually changed people's lives.

One day as we were organizing the colostomy supplies, tears filled his eyes. "I hate who I've become," he said. "I'll never be a good person again. I'm not even sure anymore that there's a God."

I was surprised and unsure of what to say. When I asked how the shooting had affected his faith, he said I was the first to ask; even priests who'd visited him had assumed that his religion would carry him through. All they wanted to know about, Father Dan said, was the police investigation or the violence they'd seen on TV.

He started to sob, then looked at me. "He didn't have to shoot me, Lois. I would have given him money." He told me what had happened. The young man, Rudy, had barged into his office at the

church, pulled out a gun, and started screaming that he needed money. The next thing Father Dan knew, he was in the hospital.

He clenched his fists. "Rudy started coming to the church office a couple of months ago. We'd talk. I thought he respected me. He'd finished outpatient rehab and stayed clean." He looked at his colostomy bag, which was draining into the toilet. "I used to think serving the poor was my life's mission. Now I'm not sure. I can't forgive him. I try to pray, but I can't."

He picked up the Bible on his nightstand, and I asked if he wanted me to read to him. He nodded. I chose the 23rd Psalm. When I read, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," he covered his face with his hands. "I wake up at night trembling," he said. "In my dream I'm beating him, sometimes to death."

It seemed that nothing could reach him. Still, I touched his arm and suggested that he consider talking to our social worker. I told him that after violent trauma, victims often blame themselves. He agreed to give it a try.

When I visited three weeks later, Father Dan said he'd seen the social worker several times. Although I knew that his feelings might take a long time to resolve, I could see that their talks were helping. After two more weeks, Father Dan said, "I wrote Rudy 10 letters. Ripped up the first nine. Mailed the last one yesterday. I told him I forgive him."

On my last visit, he said he'd delivered a sermon again for the first time that Sunday, and afterward Cardinal Anthony had asked him to develop a project for the city's homeless. He smiled. I took his hand. The grip was strong. ▼

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