



Clerical Error: A True Story

Robert Blair Kaiser

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Twenty-nine years old, newly married, and fresh from the Society of Jesus, where he had spent ten years as a novice and scholastic, Bob Kaiser was picked for one of the most exciting jobs in journalism of his era: Time's reporter at the Second Vatican Council. In the words of Michael Novak: "No reporter knew more about the Council; had talked with more of the personalities, prominent or minor; had more sources of information to tap. Sunday evening dinner parties at his apartment became a rendezvous of stimulating and informed persons. In the English-speaking world, at least, perhaps no source was to have quite the catalytic effect as Time on opinion outside the Council and even to an extent within it." Much of inner story of the Council--its personalities, machinations, maneuverings between progressive forces and the old guard--was told in Bob Kaiser's bestseller of the early sixties Pope, Council, and World. This is a different story, one so raw and personal that it could only be told some forty years later in a very different church and by a much matured Bob Kaiser. The heart of the story is how Bob's wife was seduced by his friend, the Jesuit priest Malachy Martin, and how Martin ("a man who could make people laugh in seven languages") persuaded Kaiser's other clerical friends (including notable bishops and prominent theologians) to send him to a sanitorium. The story is at once hilarious (Martin was one of the great clerical con men of all time) and sobering. The "clerical error"--the refusal to see what Martin was up to--was as much Kaiser's as that of his older clerical friends who defended their fellow priest simply because he was a member of the club. Their naivete and their blindness only mirrors the church's inability to deal realistically with any issue touched by sex: birth control, remarriage after divorce, priestly celibacy, clerical child abuse, or the ordination of women. Bob Kaiser did eventually grow up. He knows the official church has a long way to go.

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