

John Boccacino:

Hello. And welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Father Gerry Waterman:

I've never been welcomed more than I have been in this place. I can say that I felt so welcomed by faculty, staff, students, administration, everybody is very welcoming, that's number one. Number two, I find the caliber of student here. There's a biblical word for them that I'll use it's guileless. What you see is what you get. There's no hidden agenda to the students I meet here. None. I just find them transparent. I find them grounded by the earth. I find them so Franciscan like, because Francis was a very down to earth human being. And that's what I find in our caliber of students.

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Our guest on this 'Cuse Conversation is Father Gerry Waterman, a man of devout faith who has been making a difference in the lives of Catholic students on the Syracuse University Campus since 2016, as the university's Catholic chaplain Father Gerry brings people together for sermons and service, and he is proud to share his faith, and his love of service with the campus community.

On this episode, Father Gerry discusses how the Catholic center provided a sense of community to Syracuse University's students during the pandemic. And why he was beyond humbled to have received the chancellor's forever orange award for his work as Catholic chaplain. He also shares how a fateful encounter while out for a run, convinced him to join the Syracuse University community and relives his days as a commercial winemaker. Father Waterman, thank you for making the time to join us.

Father Gerry Waterman:

Thank you John. Just for purposes of calling names, we go by first names in our Franciscan community. So you can always refer to me as Father Gerry. Everybody knows me as either Father G, or FG, or Father Gerry.

John Boccacino:

I want to ask you how you personally are holding up. How are you doing? It's been a trying time on campus. Since you've been on campus, the last four years has been unprecedented. How are you holding up these days?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I have to say I'm holding up pretty well. Because what this pandemic tried to do, was the antithesis of what we try to do on campus. We try as a campus ministry and a house of welcome, we try to bring people together. And the pandemic tried to keep people apart. So I had to work very hard with my team to try and bring people together safely. And we did that during the pandemic. It was just unfortunately, to a reduced number of people because of course, space being six feet apart. That's how it was. But we still continued to serve via our Catholic center and Hendricks chapel. We still served meals after Thursday night mass. It was just on your lap, rather than at a table. And it was in pod six feet apart.

John Boccacino:

Faith knows no bounds and it knows no space limitations.

Father Gerry Waterman:

Correct.

John Boccacino:

But it must have been a little difficult for you to try to still instill that sense of community, and comradery that the church is known for. How did you go about tackling that project?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, we had the Zoom platform. Okay. Which as you could see was like Hollywood squares. So you had all these groups of people coming together. So there was Bible studies done on Zoom. We had masses done on Zoom. There was... And we didn't only use Zoom, we also used Instagram, and we used YouTube, and we used Facebook. We used every possible social media platform that we could to get people together, besides as the few we could grant get physically together.

John Boccacino:

When you got into this profession, when you became ordained, did you ever think of a day when you would be using means like social media to try to connect with your faithful?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Never being an extrovert and a people person, I am energized by people. So having to do this virtually was the greatest difficulty for me. In fact, I'll share a story with you. When the pandemic hit, it was our spring break two years ago, and I happened to be visiting some friends, some graduates of Syracuse, a couple in their home in Phoenix, and then continued on to our Franciscan friary in Boynton Beach, Florida, because it was March, and I could get a little beach time and a little bit of running in the sunshine. And that's when New York state got crippled with the pandemic pretty much.

So my provincial superior said, "Why don't you just stay in Boynton Beach? The students aren't in campus, and you can do virtual masses from there." So this was an experiment for me because all I had was my iPad and my iPhone. And I learned to set this up with the help of some good friends, and started having, offering broadcasting masses. But for me being a people person, it was so hard just to look at a blank screen as I was celebrating mass. So being the people person, I had pictures and photos of our students on my phone that I soon printed into 11 by 14 pages, and had them taped all around the wall of the chapel. So that as I was celebrating mass, I could see their smiling faces.

And I got to tell you John, it made the difference for me because looking at a blank phone screen is not the way I want to celebrate a sacrament. It just isn't. So even though the students faces were on paper, and they weren't physically there, I have great memories of them being in the spaces where they were photographed. And those were the images that came to my mind, and warm my heart for me to continue celebrating.

John Boccacino:

That's a great example of taking a situation that's not ideal and making the most of it, and making it so you can still see the smiling faces of the people that you're you're talking to, and you're delivering your messages. And when it comes to, we all know that you're passionate about your faith, but did you have to modify your messages at all during the pandemic when you were doing it virtually?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Not at all. I was as creative, because I could see their faces and imagined them there. I was as creative with my homilies and messages as I could be. There wasn't a lull in that.

John Boccacino:

How do you manage to maintain that optimism, the faithful spirit, when there's so much adversity that we're dealing with?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, my faith is nurtured by my relationship with Jesus Christ, and I totally depend on the Holy Spirit to continue to inspire me. And my ministry is relational. So I was able to stay in contact with students, and seeking their faith and having it nourished was my inspiration. Because they weren't going away John. They kept coming, whether virtually or physically, they kept coming. And they wanted to gather in our space here on campus because we have a large enough space for them to socially distance, and still be with each other. Either playing pool, or ping pong, or watching a movie they could do so, even socially, they can do that with distance and safety.

John Boccacino:

Do you recall what it was like going from purely being virtual, to when we started slowly allowing crowds to come back in small in person gatherings, what was it like watching the tide flow from being solely online to slowly trickling back to in person?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, the unfortunate part was being in person was great, but everybody was masked. And I'm a person who looks at eyes. I rely on facial expressions because I'm that person. So yes, it was there, and yes, it was great to be together and our joy was infectious, but it was still hampered by that mask.

John Boccacino:

I know it's not you operating in a bubble, you have a support staff that has really stepped up. What can you say about the people you work with that made sure that the people who wanted to pray, the people wanted to seek service did not miss a beat during the pandemic?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I will say my staff is fearless. And I'm speaking specifically about a campus minister, whose name is Jeremiah, who is getting married on Saturday and moving on to another profession as a hospital chaplain. He was fearless as well as I, and that fearlessness made students feel comfortable and welcome. And yes, we were masked, but we were always available. That's the key, John. If you're a man of the cloth and you're trying to lead students in the faith and present Christ, you have to be available and ready for them, when they're ready to come to you, that's accompaniment. The word is accompaniment and company means with bread, by the way. So it's comforting. You know what I'm saying?

John Boccacino:

Well, you definitely get that sense of talking with you, Father Gerry, that you are extremely comforting, that you're extremely warm and welcoming. Is there something, when you look back on your dealings with our students, that really makes you proud of what you are able to offer them, because they're the

ones who have a college experience, unlike any other. They're the ones who are trying to figure out who they are. And they're dealing with this once in a century pandemic, they're dealing with unprecedented social justice movement calls, where the world seems like it's turning on its ear. What makes you proud about how they handled all of the conflict?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I think they were able to work through all of that in their own lives. And I'm looking, and here's where the pride comes in, I'm looking at some of them going out into their world, and this world is scary sometimes, but as leaders in the faith. They're stepping up in their own respective parish communities, or Catholic communities, wherever they are. That gives me great joy to see that they are blooming where they're planted, because we gave them wings, we gave them wind, we gave them time. And I think we just launched them in a sense, commencement just happened. They left the nest. Some of them are flying pretty high, and pretty far because of what they've gained from the experiences here. A well rounded experience, not only academically, but also spiritually. We have a very spiritual campus.

John Boccacino:

I love that phrase, bloom where you're planted. If it makes you feel better talking about commencement, that's a phrase you've mentioned. And Mary C Daly, who was our commencement speaker a couple years ago, she's in charge of the federal reserve out in San Francisco. She had that exact same motto, bloom where you're planted. And when it comes to being planted, commencement is a time where students, like you said, they go to wherever they're going to go. They're going to plant their seeds, and they're going to establish and launch themselves. I want to talk about your launch point. How did you get involved in this line of work, and being someone who is a chaplain, who's offering services that comfort, but that also challenge and nurture our students?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I can tell you, the university chaplaincy began in 2005. I was a very happy parish pastor in Connecticut. And my provincial superior came with a plane ticket and he said, "I need you to go to Elon University in North Carolina, and they're looking for a chaplain and I need you to go look there, because I think you'll be the best person for that job." And I did go down, and what I saw was very, very inspiring for me to see young people, trying to be involved in their faith and wanting to have a part in the development of their faith. And 11 years later, I moved to Syracuse University.

So 11 years there and doing what I do, I was asked to come here. My predecessor died December 1st 2015 from a heart attack at a very, well, I say a young age, 72 is not old in my book. And my provincial superior was looking for somebody to come and fill this void here. And I guess he went through a number of people before he finally landed on me. And I had some experience in campus ministry, obviously at Elon. And he presented me here. And I really did not want to move north. I don't know if you're a native of Syracuse or not. You certainly know what this winter in Syracuse is like.

And I would even say even spring sometimes is like, because I saw snow here on May 5th, the last year, the year before. Okay. So I was literally reticent to come here and was praying about it. And I was going to refuse John, to be honest with you, and my spiritual director back in North Carolina said, "How do you refuse something you really haven't seen?" Even though I knew about this place, our friars have been here at Syracuse University since 1999. I knew of it. I knew the challenges and everything else. I really was, I didn't want to come.

And so he said, "Go visit. And then you can say no, if you want to say no." So the last diocesan chaplain who was here is here, still working in the diocese. He was my tour guide, if you will. He set up appointments with me. And the first day that I was here, I had two students who I didn't choose, the campus minister at the time, Maggie Byrne Southwick, I celebrated her marriage. She still works for the university. She had gotten two students to be my tour guides. And both of them were from my parish in Connecticut, go figure. And she didn't know that. That to me was the first sign from God to me.

And then I met the Bishop the first day, I met the Dean of Hendrix Chapel the second day, and all the chaplains. And I was still, "I don't want to move." It was very cold and windy here that April, that I was visiting very damp and raining. And so the next, the last day was my interview with Kent Syverud, with the chancellor of the university. And I asked the friars at assumption where I do live, if there was a running route that I could take and not get lost, because I really didn't know the city of Syracuse. I just wanted to go for a 5k somewhere. And they said, "Yeah, just go down Spencer street, you'll hit the Creek walk. If you take a right you'll run to Onondaga lake, turn around and come back and that's three miles, or you go left and it goes to Armory Square, turn around and come back. It's three miles."

So I chose to go left towards Armory Square. And I'm praying to God the whole time, if this is really where you want me to be, you need to give me a sign. And again, that was my prayer. And I was on a little bridge, right adjacent to the Onondaga Creek. Interstate 690 was above me. And I looked to my left, and there was an open storm drain, and then an iron covered storm drain. And I looked at the iron plate covering the storm drain. And there stamped in the iron was the initials, WATERMAN. And I said, "No, that has to say water main, that's not Waterman." And John, it was my name stamped there.

And if that wasn't enough, right underneath is a number 84, which is the year I was ordained. And under that is the year 55, which is the year of my birth. I had tears coming down my eyes because when you ask God for a sign and you get that sign, it is very humbling and very emotional. The sign is now framed, the picture is framed. I've taken a picture of it. It is framed on my wall. As a reminder, here in my office at Syracuse University Catholic Center that God chose me to be here. I didn't choose.

John Boccacino:

We all think we have some control over our lives, and you weren't going to come to Syracuse.

Father Gerry Waterman:

I'm laughing out loud.

John Boccacino:

You weren't thinking to come into Syracuse, even though I love the fact that it wasn't like you were a stranger to the cold weather growing up in New England. I mean, we just have more of the snow here than you guys probably did back in your hometown.

Father Gerry Waterman:

And dreariness.

John Boccacino:

Well, as Jim Boeheim likes to say, "Syracuse is like Hawaii, six months out of the year. We just don't talk about the other six months out of the year."

Father Gerry Waterman:

True enough. I agree. I mean, who doesn't love Syracuse in the spring, and the fall, and summer?

John Boccacino:

Oh, no doubt. The sun is shining and people are... We appreciate it more having been through the doldrums.

Father Gerry Waterman:

There's the key. We appreciate it more. I talk about the sun when it comes out to my friends in North Carolina. They say, "Why are you talking about the sun?" Because we don't see it that often, and we're grateful when it shows.

John Boccacino:

You have served as the Catholic chaplain, since 2016, August of 16 is when you took over leading both the Syracuse University, and the SUNY ESF communities. What is it about the Syracuse University and SUNY ESF students, and the community that has made it so rewarding for you to work with?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I've never been welcomed more than I have been in this place. I can say that's number one. I felt so welcomed by faculty, staff, students, administration, everybody is very welcoming, that's number one. Number two, I find the caliber of student here. There's a biblical word for them that I'll use, it's guileless. What you see is what you get. There's no hidden agenda to the students I meet here. None. I just find them transparent. I find them grounded by the earth.

I find them so Franciscan like, because Francis was a very down to earth human being. And that's what I find in our caliber of students. They are very, they'll say anything to me John, which is what I appreciate. There's no, oh, you're a Father. You can't hear that. Who they are is who I see. And I love that. I love that transparency, because that's what God sees. And that's how God created them to be. There's no such thing as a facade with God, God sees.

John Boccacino:

It's no surprise that recently you were honored by chancellor Syverud, and the Syracuse University community with the chancellor's forever orange award. It's an award that's conferred on students, faculty, or staff who quote "by virtue of extraordinary hard work, good values and commitments excellence, embody the best of Syracuse University." It's an outstanding honor. It's well deserved. How did you feel about that? I know that it can be a little tough to have humility, and have an award kind of thrown at you. Were you surprised by that?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Surprised, shocked and utterly humbled. I said this to the chancellor, as he handed me this award on the stage on April 22nd of Hendricks Chapel, I said, "Every Sunday I celebrate mass. I preside on this stage. I make Jesus present for the students here, and I speak about the gospel here on this stage." I said, "My knees never, ever shake. Today, receiving this. My knees were wobbling." Because I didn't want to be there. I don't. When chancellor told me that I needed to be present at this ceremony on April 20, I said "Why?" He said, "Because you're receiving an award." I said, "I don't want an award." He goes, "That's why you're getting this award. I knew you don't want it." Yeah. Very humble, very humbling.

John Boccacino:

If you can allow yourself to brag a little bit, I know you're very modest, but what do you think it is about your service? What do you think it is about what you provide to this campus community that made you worthy of getting this award?

Father Gerry Waterman:

Well, I think you already know. I love people. And I don't care who it is. I tell the students, "Study hard in school because what you learn is very important, and can take you to great places." I said, "But don't miss an opportunity to meet another human being, talk to the people who clean your hallways and your toilets, get to know who they are. They're providing a service to you. They're the salt of the earth." So for me, I want to know the names of the people who are cutting the grass, or planting the flowers, or putting the ice melt on the roadways and the walkway. I want to know who they are. I want to offer them coffee, or something to eat because that's who I am. I'm a Franciscan. I want to bring people together all the time.

John Boccacino:

The sacrament is obviously incredibly sacred, and wine is a critical part of the sacrament. I'm going to take a left turn here, but our audience might not know, you have some experience as a commercial winemaker, which I found fascinating. Explain that for us.

Father Gerry Waterman:

I do. I do. Well, I can explain this part first. I was five years old growing up in an Italian household, four families including my maternal grandparents, and my grandfather made wine every year. And of all the grandchildren, he asked me at five years old to help him in the basement. Okay, where he made the wine. And so from five or six years old, you remember those jelly jars that used to come. They were cartoon characters about a quarter of the way filled at my dinner table every night, was that little bit of my grandfather's homemade wine. So I learned to appreciate the wine at a young age. And very seldom would I ever abuse it as a high school student?

Because I appreciated it, and liked it too much to abuse it. And I was teaching a college seminary in outside of Springfield, Massachusetts. We used to help out at the local parish, and there was a man who was a lector and he threw me a bunch of grapes in a bag. And I said, "These are wine grapes." He goes, "Yeah, I have a vineyard in the back of my house." She said, "We're picking actually,." It was early fall. He said, "we're picking if you want to join us." So I went that following Saturday and picked some chancellor wine grapes, red chancellor grapes. And I made about 10 gallons of wine with it, that we serve at our table at the seminary. Okay.

And eventually. Every year we have what is called, it was the garden party. It was our annual fundraiser. And the guy in charge of that, one of our friar my confer said, "Would you be willing to do a wine tasting booth?" And I said, "It's a lot of work." I had a whole year, I said, "It's a lot of work, but I think I can." And so I made 190 bottles of nine varieties of wines, including fruit wines. So loganberry, and apple, and besides grape and I made my own labels and glued them on with an elmer's glue and corked them myself with a hand corking device.

And it was really a labor of love John, I'll be very honest with you. And in a matter of an hour and a half, I was completely sold out. And my provincial superior at the time came and said, "We need to go into the wine business." And I said, "Oh yeah, sure." I humored him for a second. The following

summer. No, not a following, it was a few months later, he calls me and he said, "Have you looked into the wine business?" I said, "You're kidding me, Mark." He goes, "No, I really want you to look."

So being born and raised in Connecticut, I knew of a winery home, a family owned winery in Connecticut, and I inquired. I went for a visit and inquired and I ended up working with them hand in hand on our conventional Franciscan wines and wine labels. And we were in business for five years. I really think it was one of the greatest things I've ever done. Talk about people person in a tasting room to see a Franciscan in a habit, pouring wine and talking about it, like it's your best friend.

John Boccacino:

I think we need to bring this back. I mean, the Finger Lakes is not that far from here. We're a great growing wine growing region. I think we should make this happen again Father Gerry?

Father Gerry Waterman:

John, wine is a passion for me, but I know how labor intensive it is. And I also know that I couldn't do the two jobs of being a chaplain here, and being a winemaker at the Finger Lakes. I couldn't do it as much as I... Again, I tell you I still have a passion for wine. I collect wine, and I enjoy wine. And I will talk about wine. In fact, a year ago, I had a grad student Bible study that we called theology in the vineyard.

And part of the talking about scripture was wine tasting. It was just part of the experience. And I would share a particular grape, and different levels of production of that grape, and quality of that production. So a lot of fun, there's always fun in wine. And they say in vino veritas, in wine there is truth. I say in wine, there is actually love because it brings people together.

John Boccacino:

Inquiring minds want to know what was your favorite wine to make, and what is your favorite wine to consume?

Father Gerry Waterman:

I'll start with the consume part first. My favorite wine to consume is a wine made in the South of France. And it is very, very religious, if you will. It's called chateauneuf-du-Pape. And the name translates new house of the Pope. When the papacy was forced to move to Avignon France, the grape growers, just above that palace of the Pope decided they would be the winemakers. Originally 13 grapes had to go into this wine, and of course, 13 grapes coming together and waiting for them to marry, it took at least five years in a bottle before that could happen.

So an aged chateauneuf-du-Pape was probably the best thing you've ever put in your mouth. And I really think it's so complex because of that blending of grapes. It's really a fantastic wine. The one I like to make, believe it or not is elderberry wine, because it's very unique, very unique. And my uncle who lived in our maternal grandparents' house when I was growing up, he used to make dandelion wine. So I appreciate the grassroots of herbal and fruit, non grape wine. It was always a challenge and I really still, I don't do it anymore, but I really enjoyed making elderberry wine.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned being unique. I think that you are a unique talent to have here on the Syracuse University Campus, as the chaplain of the Syracuse University Catholic Center, you have just such a warm and inspiring personality. It's been great to get to tell your story here on the podcast. I hope that you have a lot of sun filled days this summer, and get a chance to really kick back and relax a little bit,



while still teaching those essential messages to our students and our campus community. Thank you so much for making the time today Father Gerry.

Father Gerry Waterman:

Thank you John for the invitation,, and it was a joy to talk with you.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.