

Psalm

OF A CIGAR SMOKER

In the beginning, there was the seed. And the seed was void of worth or purpose. Thus, the workers planted the seed, harvested the crop and rolled it into a new form, one that brought profit, pleasure and controversy.

This creation, which man called a cigar, traveled many miles to a land of wheat and wind, where a priest named H plucked it from a box and held a lighter to its end.

And then there was light. The light shone at the foot of the cigar, and H saw that it was good.

But not all saw the cigar as good. Doctors deemed it as harmful. State and city officials began discussions of banishing it from public. Some business owners took matters into their own hands by forbidding it from their establishments. Even after a citywide smoking ordinance passed, the debate raged on.

Yet H remained steadfast. At the heart of the nation's Bible Belt, the most unlikely of people—a Bible-wielding, scotch-drinking, Roman Catholic priest—became the face of a small group that

defended the cigar. He held smoke-ins with fellow cigar smokers. He wrote passionate letters on his website, holy-smoke.com, urging his peers to resist proposed state and city smoking bans. He testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee alongside cigar manufacturers and bar owners to oppose a possible statewide smoking law. He fought to host his annual cigar dinner fundraiser, planned for its 12th consecutive year this month.

Like any devout religious man, H spoke with fervor and conviction for that which he believed. And H believed profoundly in certain things, including God and cigars.



>> Father H Jay Setter, a priest at All Saints Church, is among Wichita's most vocal citizens opposing city or state smoking bans. Father H has appeared in *Cigar Aficionado*, is close friends with the cigar industry's elite and hosts an annual cigar dinner that's raised more than \$150,000 for nonprofits during the past 11 years.



WE LIKE OUR PRIESTS PURE.

We like our priests consumed by a singular cause, one that extends beyond flesh and bone and, as a result, in some way detaches them from the rest of humanity. We like them dressed in black and white, the same way we attempt to see the world in terms of right and wrong. And therein lies the paradox of Rev. H Jay Setter.

You've heard of him, of course. How can an outspoken, 6-foot, 5-inch priest who appears in *Cigar Aficionado* and media outlets across America go unnoticed in his own hometown? How can a well-read priest with copies of *New York Magazine* lying near the Bible not stir up some curiosity from both the devout and the skeptical? How can a priest who wears his humanity so openly on his sleeve not defy expectations?

The first time I meet Father H, he is not wearing a white collar. Instead, he is clad in a button-down shirt and jeans, and he's returning to the rectory at All Saints Church after eating lunch with a coalition of cigar smokers. Despite his imposing stature, he immediately comes across as warm and welcoming. He extends a firm handshake. "Father H," he says, as if an introduction is necessary.

We climb a set of stairs to his den. At the stairs' summit, a photo-covered wall is filled with images of Father H posing with cigar-toting celebrities like Jim Belushi and Chuck Norris. We continue past the photos and into the priest's room. Thousands of cigars line a wall with five humming humidors. A case with cigar memorabilia stands in one corner, next to photos of H posing next to cigar manufacturers, men he considers family. A black and white sign with the profile of a bushy-browed author reads: "I smoke in moderation. I only have one cigar at a time. — Mark Twain."

The 49-year-old priest plops down in a leather chair and invites me to do the same. Then, fittingly, we start from the beginning.



HIS NAME NEEDS

only a solitary letter. By now, he's heard the question countless times, but he still doesn't have a simple answer. "I'm not sure this is exactly, unequivocally true," he warns. To the best of his understanding, his father, Harry Joseph Setter—who later changed his name to H Jay Setter—made a pact with his mother

that they would name their son H if they had a boy. So, when the second of three sons came into the world, they held true to their pact. "Of course, one of the follow-up questions is always, 'Well, what's your middle name?'" he says. "So I say, 'Jay,' and they're thinking just the letter, but it's actually spelled out."

Before there was ministry, there was music. As a boy, H frequented the orchestra with his aunt Marge, who also took him to Mass on Sundays. At the orchestra, the two would sit and listen to the sounds of strings and horns rising from the stage and filling the heavens. Years later, these moments influenced H to major in music performance at Wichita State University.

It was while in college that H discovered his other great passion. He had dabbled with machine-made cigars and a briar pipe that he found at a yard sale, but it was around the time of his freshman year at WSU that he strolled into Lawson Pipe Store. Without knowing what to look for, he picked out a Punch Rothschild, lit it up and took his first puff of a hand-rolled cigar. "Boy, it was great," he recalls with a smile.

H did more than smoke cigars—he studied them. He collected cigar memorabilia. He sampled different brands. He bought books on the subject. He developed a profound respect for cigar making—the way in which tobacco is grown through a time-consuming process, delicately rolled by craftsmen and then aged for years. And as he puffed with people from a spectrum of backgrounds, he realized something else, something that connected cigars with his first passion. "There is a certain camaraderie that comes with cigars that I have only found with one

other thing in this world—music," he says.

H graduated from WSU, obtained a master's in music at Friends University and conducted chamber orchestras in McPherson and Wichita while still in his early 20s. He then reached a fork in the road. He was well on his way to a career as a conductor, but he felt another calling. "It wasn't so much a conversion experience as an eye-opening experience," he says. "I reevaluated some things and religion and faith came back into focus." He applied to a summer institute led by legendary conductor Leonard Bernstein. As he waited for an acceptance letter, he mulled over the decision. "I guess that, like many people, I was looking for a sign," he said. When he wasn't accepted, he signed up to attend Mount St. Mary's Seminary near Washington D.C. H devoted his life to another mission.

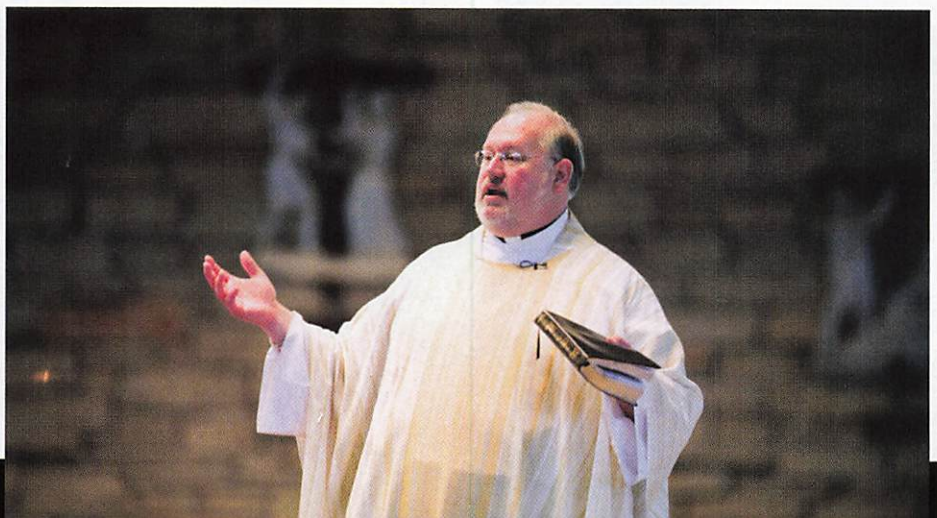


PRIEST'S LIFE REVOLVES AROUND RITUAL.

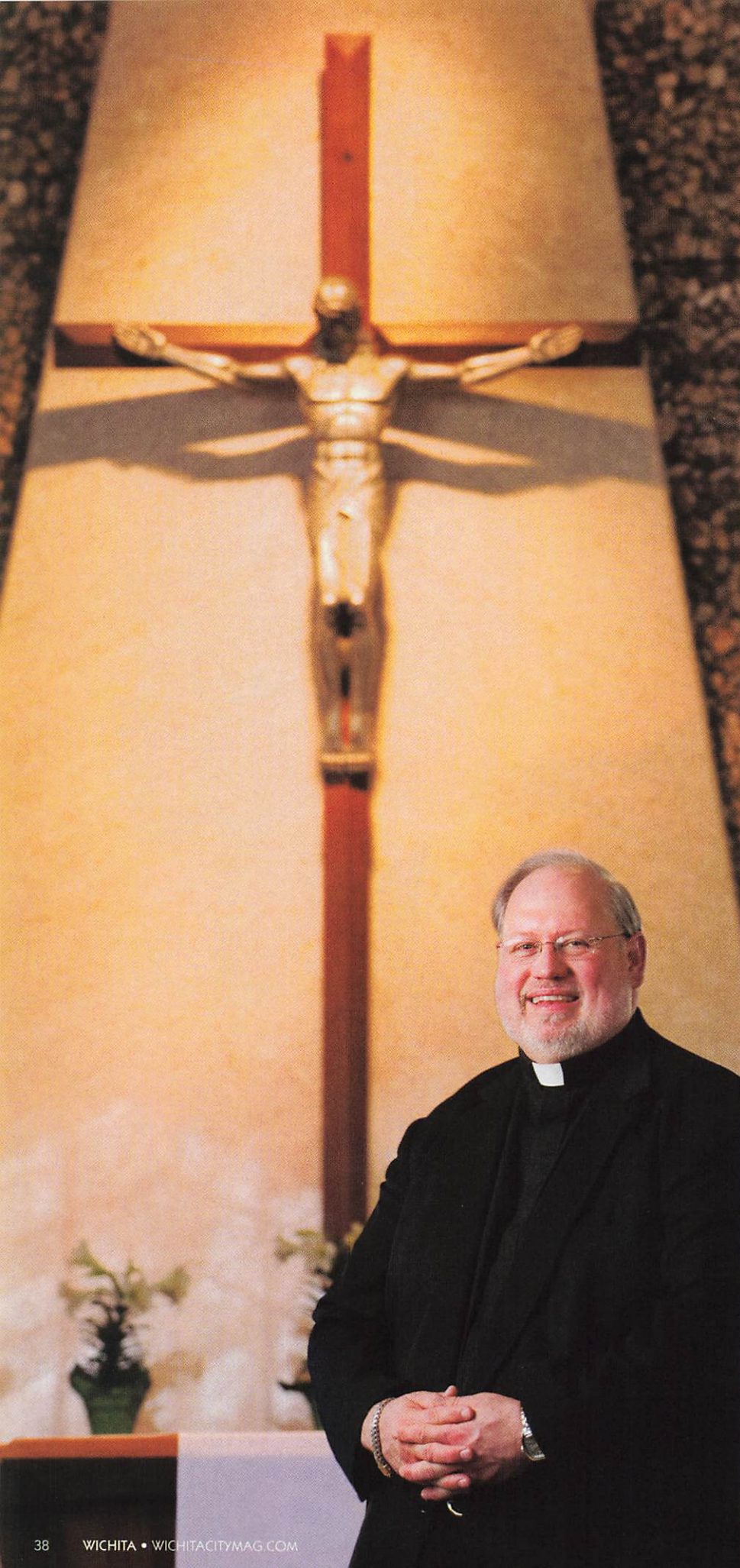
There is Mass, communion, prayer. Then there are the less formal rituals that make up every day. For H, there is breakfast at Tok's Coffee House nearly every morning at 6 a.m. There is an hour of prayer afterward. There is Mass at 8 a.m. on many mornings. There are meetings, phone calls, paperwork. There is a constant switching of gears as he goes from consoling a grieving parishioner to rejoicing with a couple who just learned they're going to have a child. There is *The Wall Street Journal*, a glass of Dewar's and a cigar to end the day.

Then there is the actual ritual of lighting the cigar.

"There's an art form to it," he says.







“There’s been a lot written about the protocol, and it boils down to the individual.” The first obstacle is figuring out which brand to smoke. Sometimes he’ll stand in front of his five J.C. Pendergast humidors, debating for several minutes. Of the more than 7,000 cigars he owns, which one will he smoke? “It’s a great problem to have,” he says. Once he’s settled on a cigar, he uses a double-bladed guillotine to cut off the cap. He pulls out a silver lighter and toasts the cigar by rolling it just above the flame, to where it smokes the edges. He then allows the flame to kiss the cigar’s center and create an orange glow. Finally, he places it between his lips, takes a deep puff and smiles.

“Just happened to have one sitting there,” he says. “Imagine that.”

“T HERE ARE CIGAR SMOKERS

and then there are cigar smokers, and then there’s Father H.” That’s how Marvin Shanken, editor and publisher of *Cigar Aficionado*, once introduced H to a group of cigar-industry leaders in Miami.

Since *Cigar Aficionado* first began publishing, H has subscribed to the magazine. Every year, he flies to the magazine’s Big Smokes, large gatherings with the world’s cigar industry leaders. He arrives at the events, gathers up cigars from vendors and spends the rest of the week mingling, snapping photos and getting autographs from the people he reads so much about. Over the years, this has grown into an annual routine. “I’d gone to Big Smokes for years, and no one else was doing that,” says H. “These guys had to be there. I wanted to be there.”

As you might imagine, a stout 6-foot, 5-inch priest stands out in a room of cigar smokers. After several years, he befriended the cigar industry’s elite. The registration table workers dubbed him “Big Smoke Ambassador” and made name badges that said so. Finally, on a day in 1996, Shanken assigned a story about the cigar-loving priest. The result appeared in the Autumn ’96 issue of *Cigar Aficionado*, one featuring actress Demi Moore on the cover. A prominent photo showed Father H, cigar poking from his mouth, steeple rising behind him.

“When that issue hit, there was a whole bunch of press,” H recalls. Suddenly, newspapers, TV stations and magazines

were calling from all across the nation. “They weren’t sure what to make of me. I was kind of an anomaly to them, and it caused a lot of attention.”

H had a choice. He could bask in the spotlight, or he could use the publicity for a greater good. So, the same year, he hosted the first-ever Father H Benefit Cigar Dinner. It was supposed to be a one-time fundraiser, but guests clamored so much about the smoke-filled event that he made it an annual gala. To date, it’s raised more than \$150,000 for local charities. People attend the event by traveling from all over the United States and beyond, with cigar manufacturers such as Sal Fontana, Carlos Fuente Jr. and Tony Borhani attending in past years. This year’s event, on June 20 at the Hilton Wichita Airport, is sure to sell out. The city’s smoking ordinance makes a special exception for the nonprofit event and others like it, due in part to the fact that Father H is preaching more than religion these days.

H E’S HEARD THE CRITICISMS.

He’s read them in the *The Eagle’s* op-ed pages and blogs. People have quoted 1 Corinthians to him. (“I’ll admit our body is a temple, no question about it, but I think it’s a stretch to make blanket statements,” he says. “Go and look at the context.”) A journalist once asked him what he believes God thinks about him smoking cigars. He shot back, “I’m sure He doesn’t mind; after all, He smokes Cohibas.” He fielded questions from the congregation at All Saints Church when he moved to the church from Goddard last July. “I’m not going to pretend like I don’t smoke cigars,” he says. “That’s hypocritical. It’s a legal product, it’s done in moderation and you don’t get addicted to cigars—you appreciate cigars.”

He’s openly debated his stance on the smoking ordinance with *Eagle* columnist Randy Scholfield, legislators in Topeka and congregation members who bring up the subject. “I don’t think we need smoking bans because we already have them in that a business owner says whether or not an establishment is smoke-free,” he says. “I don’t think people should be subjected to smoke in places we have to go to. But we’re talking about private businesses and a legal product. That’s where I get concerned.” Nonetheless, H believes the new smoking

ordinance is a good compromise.

Personally, H has his own rules. He doesn’t talk about cigars while preaching because he believes there are more important things to address at the pulpit. He doesn’t smoke or drink in front of kids. He never smokes cigarettes. He rarely smokes more than two or three cigars per day. He quotes his general rule of thumb: “Too much of anything isn’t good for you.”

H invites other viewpoints. “I know what I believe, and I believe in it completely and wholeheartedly, but I also think that I can learn from others, especially their good examples and their good motives,” he says.

When he watches television, H skims a tattered dictionary to expand his vocabulary during commercial breaks. He reads and re-reads presidents’ inaugural addresses for inspiration. He subscribes to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wichita Eagle*, *New York Magazine* and other publications. “I’m disappointed if a day goes by and I haven’t genuinely learned something,” he says. “As a priest, one of the things I try to remind myself is that if I don’t know what’s happening in the world, there’s no way that I’m going to be able to assist or help others work through it.

“That’s one reason that I am the way I am. I know that I’m pretty rough around the edges for some people. But I’m a normal guy,” he says. “I can’t be someone I’m not. I’ll be the first one to take ownership of what’s there.”

SUNDAY, 10 A.M., All Saints Church. Every pew is filled. Father H stands at the altar in a flowing white robe and leads the congregation



in a responsorial psalm, hymns and a passage from 1 Peter 1:3-9. He then comes to his sermon, a reflection on the story of Thomas. Many Christians know the apostle by his nickname, Doubting Thomas, yet H disputes the stereotype. “When I think of Thomas, I remember the old saying among pastors,” he says. “No one remembers when I do something right. No one forgets when I do something wrong.”

He preaches with great fervor, his voice filling the room. “At some point, every one of us will find ourselves doubting because of tough circumstances. It’s part of being human.” He offers the example of the families of four high school students from Ulysses who died in a car accident. He refers to a mother who learns her son was killed in Iraq. “You see, there are experiences in life, no matter how faith-filled we are, that will test us.”

He never refers to notes or stands behind a pulpit but instead paces back and forth across the altar to address the entire congregation. He dabs at his glistening forehead, working up a sweat as he preaches. He ends his sermon by quoting 18th century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He says, “Never be afraid to doubt, if only you have the disposition to believe.”

Mass finishes with communion and prayer. Afterward, H shakes hands with the congregation as people pour out the doors. He then walks down the center aisle through the empty church and into a small sacristy room behind the altar. He takes off his white robe and carefully hangs it on a stand shaped like a cross. He removes his stole and collar and places them in a closet. Then, dressed in black, H throws on a tan jacket, tucks a Bible under his arm and strolls out of All Saints Church. ❖