

Father Aldo: A Priest With Pizazz

By Lionel Fisher

The 1970 Buick GSX is straight out of a teen-age beach movie. "Rottweiler on Board!" announces a triangular sign hanging from the right rear window. On the left window, the owner proclaims, "Proud to Be Italian." As the Saturn-yellow car pauses for a red light on a quiet Newberg street, a pickup truck with a load of melons eases to a halt alongside. The driver glances over, expecting to see a Sean Penn look-alike. Instead, an elderly priest with the curly white hair and puckish features of a Neapolitan pastry chef grins back.

The Rev. Aldo Carlo Orso-Manzonetta is not your run-of-the-parish clergyman.

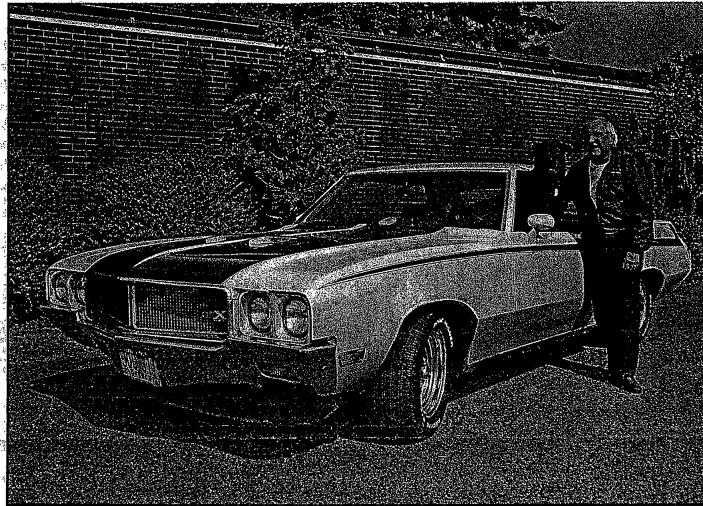
For one thing, the 64-year-old pastor of St. Peter's Catholic Church in Newberg relishes the double takes he collects at the wheel of his classic sports car. "Only 499 of this model were made," he exclaims, figuring that his may be the only GSX still running in Oregon. "I've hit 115 miles-per-hour in it — but never in Yamhill County," he adds. The quick recovery is needed in a community where policemen give a wave when Father Aldo passes by.

Sadly, Father Aldo has failed to win the hearts of his rural parishioners as readily as he's familiarized them with his car. The former pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Portland — a church the Vatican designated as the "National Church for the Italian Colony of Portland" in 1901 — brought his unfailing good humor and impulsive outspokenness to Newberg in 1983. He soon found that the qualities that engaged his downtown Portland flock didn't necessarily translate well to his new setting. Some members of the congregation accused him of "flaunting" his ethnic background.

As Bob Bigelow, a regular churchgoer, puts it, Father Aldo is unique — "and that uniqueness hasn't been accepted by everyone," Bigelow says. "He loves subtle jokes, whether the parishioners appreciate them or not. But he means well."

At the small kitchen table in his rectory, Father Aldo shrugs while sipping black coffee from a white mug emblazoned with the red letters, "KISS THE COOK." "I've seen too many priests become sour and reclusive in their old age," he says gently.

LIONEL FISHER is a Portland writer and regular contributor to Northwest Magazine.



The Rev. Aldo Carlo Orso-Manzonetta and his 1970 Buick GSX.

"I won't just put in my time. I refuse to grow old. I'll do what I can for as long as I can."

Thirty-seven years a priest this June, Father Aldo was born on Portland's east side, the son of Italian immigrants who came to America to work in a macaroni factory and were married at St. Michael's. Graduating from Washington High School in 1941 — the same year, he points out, that class president and football team captain Vic Atiyeh graduated — young Orso-Manzonetta went on to attend the University of Portland, then St. Thomas Seminary in Denver.

After his ordination in Portland in 1950, his early ministries included St. Cecilia's (now Queen of Peace Church) in North Portland, the Downtown Chapel and Our Lady of the Mountain Church in Ashland. He served as assistant to Monsignor Thomas J. Tobin in Northeast Portland, then as chaplain at the Mercy Home in North Bend, before becoming pastor of St. Michael's in 1959. He was only the third priest assigned to the church, which was declared a Portland historic landmark in 1971.

Like Michael Balestra, who remained at St. Michael's for 49 years before him, Father-Aldo had expected to die serving his beloved national Italian church. But a 1962 edict ordered that Catholic priests in the Portland Archdiocese be rotated regularly to new parishes. Having been at St. Michael's for more than 20 years, Father Aldo was forced to move and settled on St. Peter's in Newberg.

In his new rectory, the pastor bends to tug the

ears of a 5-year-old rottweiler named Massimina, the successor to a dog named Heidi, who frequently strolled up to the sanctuary during Mass at St. Michael's.

"I was giving a homily on how the spiritual grace accrued in church seems to dissipate on the way home," Father Aldo recalls of the dog's first such visit. "The bickering resumes in the car, I was saying, and by the time the family walks through the front door, the father is usually hollering something like, 'Who let the dog in?' The congregation roared with laughter. But it was only when I turned away from the pulpit that I found out why. Heidi had plopped herself down on my spot at the altar."

Massimina lacks the same visitation rights at St. Peter's.

Hundreds of operatic and classical music albums jam a bookcase in Father Aldo's rectory, revealing a love affair that rivals his delight in his

pet. As a close friend of former Portland Opera Director Herb Weiskopf, the priest was a familiar backstage figure for many years before Weiskopf's death. Besides serving as the auditorium's unofficial chaplain, he recalls, "I made my debut as an Ethiopian slave in 'Aida.' Then I was lamp extinguisher in 'The Barber of Seville.'"

Although his spear-carrying operatic career is a thing of the past, cooking remains a present passion. His recipe for success: dishing up prodigious amounts of gourmet fare — and with gusto. It has served as a way of getting acquainted with his congregation, and Father Aldo relishes opportunities to cater multicourse Italian dinners for community leaders and parishioners in Newberg. One time he hosted 50 Newberg police officers and their spouses as a gesture of appreciation for their service. "Cooking is a ministry in itself," he says.

Next July, a few weeks before his 65th birthday, Father Aldo's tour of duty at St. Peter's expires. Looking ahead to that event, the irrepressible priest notes that the men in his line of work are allowed to retire at 70. But he doubts that he will. "What would I do?" he asks.

"Once you leave a place, it's a chapter closed," the cleric says. Although he would have preferred to end his own book at the Old World sanctuary that is St. Michael's, he says, "you can't do good work by dragging your past. You just do your best." NM

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