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MENU

John Sweeney gladly left fast-track to millions to embrace poverty

12:00AM / Wednesday, January 17, 2001

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On track to become a millionaire bond salesman on Wall Street, John Sweeney gave it all away to embrace a life of radical poverty. Six-foot-plus tall, with a long beard, in the full-length dark robe of a Franciscan, and a wooden rosary on his belt, Sweeney spoke Jan. 13 to a crowd of more than 40 men ranging from college students to retirees at a monthly men's breakfast meeting at St. Patrick's Church in Williamstown. Sweeney was born on Long Island, N.Y., the youngest of eight children in an Irish Catholic family. He went to Catholic grade school and public high school and attended the University of Virginia. "Basically, I stopped going to church when I was about 13 years old," he said. "No interest, really. I mean I just never caught the Catholic ball, as it were." He would pretend to go to church and then slip out the back door. "I basically lived a pagan lifestyle at UVA. I ran two bars, played on the lacrosse team. I majored in finance, accounting and economics, to basically make money," he said. "I knew what I wanted to do from when I was 10 years old - I wanted to make cash, and a lot of it." Inspired by an uncle who was a bond broker, Sweeney knew from a very young age that he wanted to work in bonds on Wall Street, which he began doing six days after graduating from college. At age 25 he was a vice-president at Prudential Bache, making \$500,000 a year and probably on track to making \$1 million or more per year in a few years. "Everything is going great. God is nowhere in my life, and girls are everywhere in my life, and drinking is everywhere in my life, and the clubs of New York are everywhere in my life." In July of 1988, he was at a new firm and was seeking to acquire a client from a fellow bond trader: "I want to finagle him to give me that account." However, the man was uninterested in a deal, and turned the tables by asking Sweeney if he had ever heard of a place called Medjugorje, a small town in what was then Yugoslavia, where the Virgin Mary was said to appear in apparitions to six young children, giving them messages for the world. The man gave Sweeney some brochures on Medjugorje, which he promptly forgot about. In an idle moment two weeks later Sweeney picked them up - just to kind of see what foolishness religious folks are believing in these days. However, he was powerfully struck and confronted by the core of the Gospel message, which is repent and believe - found in the messages from Mary. Sweeney soon set out for Yugoslavia to see if the apparitions were in fact taking place, traveling with his fellow bond salesman and one of his sisters. Seeing the visionaries first on tape and then one of them during an apparition up close in person impressed Sweeney greatly. "If this is real, I'm five feet from the Mother of God. Who has been this close in history?" he said to himself at the time. "My basic prayer at this point is just, 'If this is true, I want to know.'" According to Ivan, the visionary who saw the apparition that day, Mary's message was to pray, especially on behalf of young people for Satan is incredibly strong and they are in grave danger. Sweeney immediately began praying for his 18 nieces and nephews. Then halfway down the hill where the apparitions occurred, he burst into a bucket of tears. "They weren't tears of sorrow, they were tears of joy," he said. At the bottom of the hill his friend asked him if he was OK. Sweeney replied: "I don't know. A couple of things I do know: this event is real, God is real ... and my life is never going to be the same." The next day he had a mystical experience while walking with his sister, seemingly seeing the light of God and his own self and soul in this light. Other mystical experiences followed. Back in New York, at his desk on Wall Street, his perspective clearly had changed on a job he once had loved. "I almost threw up on my desk when I got there, there was just so much evil around, so much greed, so much lust, so much arrogance," he said, while noting that some good people worked there. "But there is just an incredible culture of oppression that's there, and I think it's in a lot of other places, too." At first, Sweeney's ultimate path was unclear, but his vigorous faith life included daily Mass, periodic fasting, three rosaries a day, and confession to a priest two times a week. He also gave to charities and helped out at homeless shelters. Eventually he gave away his money and possessions and bought a one-way ticket to Yugoslavia, eventually joining the Friars in Medjugorje where he learned the Serbo-Croatian language and began his studies for the priesthood. With a deep and growing desire to live a life of radical poverty like Christ and St. Francis, he returned to the U.S., completed his studies for the priesthood, and with five other men founded a community of Franciscans of Primitive Observance. "We're trying to live the original rule of St. Francis of Assisi - prayer, penance - mostly living in poverty and trying to witness to the sufficiency of the providence of God," he said. The community has a place on a mountain in Stamford, Vt., where novices are trained and he is novice master. Three novices currently reside there. The men's breakfasts are held on the second Saturday of each month and have averaged 30 to 40 men. The events begin at 8 a.m. at St. Patrick's Parish Hall on Southworth Street in Williamstown and include a breakfast, a couple of songs, a five-minute brief talk on some aspect of Catholic faith, and a testimony such as Sweeney's. The events last about an hour and a half and a contribution of \$3 from each man is accepted. "We hope it will strengthen the faith of the men who come," said Jim Conway, one of a committee of men who organize the breakfasts. "But also we feel that men need to have fellowship and get together. It's something we're kind of lacking in our society these days, a place for men to ... get together and talk. Men from the area are invited to attend and organizers hope that such breakfast groups will start up in other Catholic churches. They also hope that some small groups for men will start to help men grow, learn more about the Bible, support one another, and have fellowship. If interested in starting breakfast meetings elsewhere or starting small faith-sharing groups, call Conway at 458-8525.

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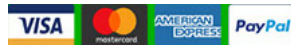
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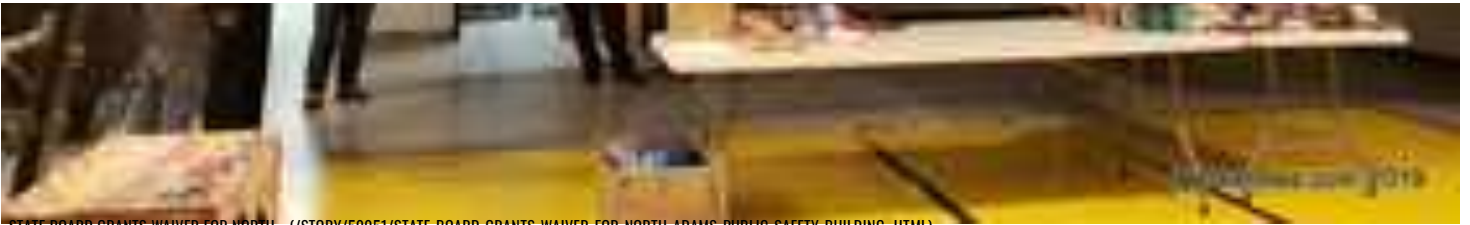
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