

THE BISHOP AND NORMAN MAILER

D O T S O N R A D E R

WHEN I VISITED BISHOP PAUL MOORE at his townhouse in New York's Greenwich Village on April 15, 2003, I knew it was the last time I would see him. We had first met thirty-three years before, following his consecration as the Episcopal Bishop of New York in 1970. The following year I introduced him to Norman Mailer.

I owed Paul Moore a great deal. At critical points in my life he came through for me and for my friends in exceptional ways, and asked nothing in return. He was a great and unlikely priest. A former Marine wounded in combat at Guadalcanal in World War II, awarded the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, a Purple Heart, he was passionately against the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. The scion of a vast fortune (Bankers' Trust), he became a powerful voice for the poor and disenfranchised, for women's rights and gay liberation. He acted as pastor to souls outside his fold. You were safe with him.

In 1971, he gave us use of his church, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, for a raucous, unruly anti-war rally at which Norman Mailer staged his play, "D.J." at the high altar and almost brought the roof crashing down on the bishop's head. A few years later, when Tennessee Williams was intent on suicide, Bishop Moore came to our hotel and talked Tennessee back into life. Paul was a priest for sinners. And, like most sinners, we only called on him when we needed help.

When I saw Paul at his home in the Village in 2003, I regretted that I had not been a better friend to him. He was now eighty-three years old and was dying of cancer, and there was no help for it. Beyond having lunch with him and telling him that he is the only Christian leader I ever knew whom Jesus would be proud to claim as one of His own, there was nothing left that I could do for him.

I trusted Bishop Moore. I believed he personally knew God, even though I didn't think that he and God got along very well. Still, God took his phone calls. His relationship with God was similar to Norman Mailer's—that is, his relationship was the kind that the author of *The Gospel According to the Son* had with God. They were both attached to God, snagged on Him like burrs on a trouser cuff, and couldn't tear themselves free. Paul and Norman, stuck on God. They quarreled with Him, poked at Him, grew exasperated and fed up with Him, but never denied Him. Doubting and doubting again, Paul Moore, like Norman Mailer, was caught up in an addiction-like curiosity about the Divine, a kind of soul hunger that was never sated. Paul, like Norman, didn't let go because he needed to make sense out of something that defied human reason, which could not be understood by thought alone.

Paul Moore and Norman Mailer's relationship with God, then, was that of spouses hanging on in a tired marriage soured by mutual disappointment, a union they could neither make right nor renounce.

Because it was a bright, warm day Paul suggested that we go to La Focaccia, a small neighborhood café on the corner, about a half-block down Bank Street from his house. As we slowly walked to the restaurant, Paul steadied himself by putting his arm around my shoulder and leaning against me. There were moments I thought he might not make it all the way to the end of the block. "Do you want to stop a minute and rest?" I asked.

"No, no. I'm fine."

He wasn't fine. He was frail, depleted of strength. I could hear his labored breathing. I am tall, 6'3", but Paul was two inches taller, thin as a stick. As he walked he held his head high and unmoving, regally, as if balancing a miter on top his skull. His patrician face was gaunt, grey, beautiful. He looked supernal, an Old Testament prophet, a saint.

We sat at a sunny table by a window. The café was a favorite place of his. People knew him here. They liked him, and greeted him with respect and sympathy. They knew that he was dying.

We ordered coffee and juice and omelets. I had many questions I wanted to ask Paul about God and why He lets people suffer and why we have to die. I longed for him to tell the meaning of it all. "I don't know what Heaven looks like," he told me later. "I do know it is joyful and happy. I have seen God. You will see Him too."

Over lunch that day, he really did not want to talk about God and death, although he feared neither. He wanted to talk about the past.

“How is Norman Mailer?” That was the first question Bishop Moore asked me, “You know, Mailer nearly cost me my job.”

The first time I remember encountering Norman Mailer was at the March on the Pentagon in 1967, the anti-Vietnam War demonstration he wrote about in *The Armies of the Night*. I was still a student at Columbia then, and I was becoming active in the anti-war movement. I was at the Washington protest with friends from school, Craig Anderson, Jon Jarvik, Tom Seligson, and Jack Weiser, who was my boyfriend. I was just beginning to write for *The Village Voice*, *The New Republic*, and other publications. Like a lot of American writers of my generation, I considered Norman Mailer the greatest living prose writer in the English language. Mailer was our Hemingway, a brilliant, combative writer engaged in the real world. I read and admired and envied him and, before I became his friend, I was also intimidated by him, vaguely fearful of the *man*, not the writer. He was too large, too tough, too butch, too angry, too *straight*. I felt about Norman the way many of my gay friends also felt—that Norman perceived queers as he did women. We were bafflements not to be fully trusted. I sensed in his preening combativeness a sexual arrogance that held us in contempt. Ignorant of gay life, he was uncomfortable with us. Or so I thought.

After the March on the Pentagon, I found myself running into Norman at parties and public events. Typical of New Yorkers, we discovered we had friends in common. I remember talking to him backstage at Bill Graham’s Fillmore East, sitting with him at dinner at Drue Heinz’s, having drinks at the White Horse Tavern. One night we were together at party at Senator Jacob and Marion Javits’s apartment. We drank a lot. English feminist writer Germaine Greer was there, tracking Norman like a bounty hunter. We ended up riding in the backseat of a taxi going downtown. I sat quietly pretending I was somewhere else while they carried on a terrible row because she wanted Norman to take her back to her hotel. He wanted none of it.

“Stop the fucking cab!” Norman yelled at the driver. “Pull over, pull over.”

We spilled out onto Park Avenue, somewhere in the Fifties. With the taxi idling, its back doors open, Norman and Germaine continued their heated dispute until she finally told him to go screw himself and climbed back in the taxi and headed south

“Let’s get a drink,” Norman said.

We found a bar, sat at a table, and ordered drinks. Then Norman got up, went into the phone booth and called his girlfriend of the moment, telling her to meet us at the bar. It took her an hour or so to arrive, and by then I was drunk and Norman was angry and belligerent. He was pissed at Ms. Greer and the women's libbers, and disgusted with the New Lefties, accusing us of lacking imagination, and fed up with the old Lefties, like Gus Hall, who not only lacked imagination, they lacked balls.

Another drink, and he was soon off on another rail, eviscerating evangelist Billy Graham for being pals with President Nixon. Norman had never met the preacher. However, he was aware that I knew Billy and liked him. My father was an evangelist and a friend of Graham's. A couple years before, to cause a ruckus and make some money, Tom Seligson and I had actually brought Billy Graham to Columbia University to speak. I told Norman that Billy Graham was handsome, disarmingly charming, and sexy to boot. "If you're lucky enough to spend any goddamn time alone with him," I confessed, "when Billy leaves you'll find yourself lonely for him. I am." That did it.

Norman decided he wanted to meet Billy Graham and he was commissioning me to arrange it. We quickly got deeply involved in a complicated wager over whether I could induce Graham to spend some quality time alone with Norman. I thought I had a good shot at winning the bet.

Norman was fascinated by Billy Graham, by the evangelist's charismatic power over huge audiences, by the thoroughly American character of his Christian public faith, by the commanding political values that this hillbilly from North Carolina personified. Billy Graham was *American* in a way Norman Mailer could never be. His Christianity, his comfort with state power, his friendship with presidents, and his natural insight into America's sense of itself, all those qualities intrigued Norman. Graham was the *other* America. He was that vast, seductive, self-righteous, cruel country that was at once so familiar and yet so foreign.

The more we drank the more intricate the wager became, down to the exact number of seconds within a precise window of time that his being alone with Billy Graham would constitute a win for me. Norman sat writing it all down in his tiny script, and every so often I'd object to something, tell him he was bullshitting, and he would bang his fist hard on the table and say, threateningly, "That's another strike! One more strike and we take

it outside!” Meaning that any moment I would be obliged to stagger into the street and be knocked senseless by him.

At some point his girlfriend showed up, and by then he was in his cups and furious with me and her and life in general. She was very tall, very pretty. When she moved to sit next to him, he swore at her. He told her to go into the ladies room and stay there awhile because we men were busy with more important matters than listening to her yak. But he said it more forcefully than that.

Norman never did meet Billy Graham, even though I tried very hard to arrange it. I suspect the problem was that we could never come up with a reason sufficiently compelling to Billy Graham. Billy just wasn’t interested.

After we decided on the specifics of our Graham wager, we then went on to talk about the benefit at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Norman agreed to participate. His idea was to stage a prizefight in a boxing ring built in front of the high altar, a contest between sluggers of the New Left and the Old Left. He thought it would pack the house and knock the crowd silly. I nodded. I knew that bird wouldn’t fly.

What Norman did, finally, was stage his play “D.J.” before the Cathedral’s high altar. Rip Torn, Beverly Bentley, and Paul Gilford starred. Even without a boxing match, the place was packed, 6,000 people. His play followed rock bands and speeches by Dave Dellinger, Gloria Steinem, Ossie Davis, Tennessee Williams, among others. It was a disaster. Tennessee walked out halfway into the play’s performance, furious at hearing such filthy language profaning a great Christian house of worship (Tennessee’s grandfather was an Episcopal priest) and told the assembled press outside the church what he thought of Norman’s appalling blasphemy. Deeply disgusted and ashamed, Tennessee later wrote a letter to Bishop Moore apologizing for Norman, and by extension me. He never appeared at any political event again. The bishop endured a fierce clamor of protest from Episcopalians around the nation who believed Norman’s play had been an act of sacrilege at the premiere American See of the Anglican Communion. There were loud demands for Paul Moore’s resignation from his position as bishop of New York. “It was real outrage,” Paul told me at lunch in 2003. “It was intense. They wanted my head.”

Norman blamed me.

Two years later, Norman celebrated his fiftieth birthday with a bash at the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building on Park Avenue. I was invited. It was an astonishingly successful media event, Norman’s answer to

Truman Capote's Black and White Ball. The place was overrun with celebrities, as if the A-lists of Max's Kansas City's back room, and Elaine's front room, and "21," and Beverly Hills's Polo Lounge had all assembled in one place. It was, in my reckoning, the high point of Mailer's social clout. He used the occasion to announce the formation of a committee to investigate the secret government, specifically the CIA. He was establishing an organization intended to be the people's CIA, an "anti-CIA CIA." He grandly christened it "The Fifth Estate."

He called me the next day, inviting me to join "our intelligence agency." I felt like I was back in a fourth-grade schoolyard, playing Superhero games with secret codes and magic rings from cereal boxes, battling comic book phantoms.

"You can help with fund-raising," he suggested. "Do you think Bishop Moore would come aboard? He'd give us respectability."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Why wouldn't he? What else does he have to do?" I thought Norman was nuts.

"Good. Set up a meeting."

I did. It wasn't easy. A few weeks later Bishop Moore graciously received Norman and me in his offices on the Cathedral's campus on Morningside Heights.

Before we met with Paul Moore, Norman and I sat down for a strategy session. I urged Norman not to bring up in conversation with the bishop theories about CIA conspiracies, and plots to kill Martin Luther King, and the possible roles of American security agencies and corporations in the murder of Robert Kennedy and, further, it would be best not to mention Lee Harvey Oswald and his secret handlers.

"Let's try to make the project sound as non-controversial as possible, at least until the Bishop signs on," I suggested to Norman. "The bishop used to minister in a ghetto out in Jersey. He's big on civil rights. Why don't we talk to him about investigating J. Edgar Hoover's secret, extralegal campaign to discredit the civil rights and anti-war movements? Now that's something that'll wet his whistle. Let's not make him think we are, you know, *paranoid*. Or next he might think we're going to set our sights on secret UFO cover-ups and little green men!"

I laughed. Norman didn't.

Once we were seated in the bishop's imposing ecclesiastical chambers, Norman went immediately into a passionate discourse on the King/Kennedy

killings, the Oswald mystery, Cuba, the KGB and CIA, the Mafia, and other dark, lethal realities hidden from view. I don't remember if he brought up UFOs. We had tea, and the bishop asked a few polite questions, and looked at his watch. Norman talked on, warming to his subject, his confidence growing that he had indeed brought the bishop of New York on board.

Paul responded noncommittally to Norman's invitation to join The Fifth Estate, noting that he would check his schedule and get back to us. He said that he didn't want to commit to any enterprise he couldn't devote a fair amount of time to and therefore risk disappointing us. Then he wished us luck with this "exciting work," and sent us on our way.

"He could be vice chairman," Norman suggested to me when we left.

"Attend a meeting or two. Lend his name."

We'd already had one meeting of The Fifth Estate's executive committee and clearly we could use a few more heavyweight names. There were eight or nine people present at the meeting. The ones I remember being there are Jeanne Campbell and Jose Torres.

"Why not make the bishop the chairman?" I wasn't serious.

"He probably won't have the time," Norman answered. "We could ask."

It was during this period that I noticed that Norman was getting short-tempered and cranky, if not downright nasty and mean. The first time I took serious note of it was at a cocktail party at the Museum of Modern Art. He was there with his very tall, very pretty girlfriend who was wearing an extremely short miniskirt and a tightly fitted blouse. I showed up at the party with six male friends and we stood around talking to Norman, each of us holding plastic cups of vodka poured from our own little pocket bottles. One of the men with me was Sid Bernard, a nearly penniless older writer, unshaven, unkempt. He was of Norman's generation and, like him and Paul Moore, he was a World War II veteran. Sid had landed in the second wave to hit the beach at Normandy. He was on the political left. A good writer, he had fallen on hard times and was barely scrapping by on piecework journalism in small magazines. He looked twenty years older than Norman.

"You look like a bum," Norman said to Sid. "You *are* a bum. How the hell did a bum like you get in here?" He was suddenly very angry, menacing.

"He is with me," I said.

"Get him out of here."

Then Norman turned to his date, nodded toward Sid, and said to her, "Do it." With that, she gave a kick worthy of a Radio City Rockette and knocked

the drink out of my friend's hand and across the gallery. It was a stunning feat, and it seemed to satisfy whatever need Norman felt to humiliate Sid. Norman laughed, and that was that.

I thought to myself, maybe Norman looks at Sid Bernard and is scared it might be his future he sees—the writer undone, broke, unwanted. It is every writer's fear. It was mine. Norman was facing huge tax liabilities. The Government had targeted him, probably because of his prominence and politics, and they were unrelenting in their pursuit. It wasn't only the IRS that was on his case. It turned out he was the subject of FBI investigations and plots by federal prosecutors to bring him down. He was on the list. At the time, I did not know the details of all that Norman was up against. So I wrote his bullying off to booze.

Everything in his life changed for the better a couple years later when he met Norris Church in Arkansas and fell in love. She was twenty-six. He was fifty-two. She moved to New York to be with him and make him happy. I had never seen Norman happy before.

About a year after they found each other, Norman and Norris, along with Richard and Doris Kearns Goodwin, came out to Bridgehampton, New York, to spend a long winter weekend with Richard Zoerink, my lover, and me at our place near the beach. On Saturday Richard and I threw a dinner party at the house for sixty people in honor of Norris and Norman. Truman Capote, who lived down the road, refused to attend because it meant he would have to stay the night. His driver's license was suspended and he expected he would be too drunk to get in a taxi and make it home.

"So?" I said. "Just stay the night." Richard and I were used to Truman passing out at our house and sleeping it off.

"Oh, no," Truman said. "I couldn't stay the night. Not with Norman Mailer there. He'll try to rape me, and I'll have too much liquor in me to defend myself!"

I told Norman that Truman wasn't coming to the party, and why. He laughed. "Truman flatters himself."

It was during that weekend in Bridgehampton that Norman and I had our first serious conversation about homosexuality, one of many we would have over the years. It began when he asked how I met Richard Zoerink, and why I chose to be with him and not some other man or woman. I told him I was in love with Richard. It was as simple as that. Then I asked him if he had ever had a homosexual encounter. He answered no. "I wouldn't rule out

trying it,” he stated, and then quoted Voltaire, “Once a philosopher, twice a pervert.”

I don’t believe he ever did try it. His interest was intellectual, not sexual. I think he understood and sympathized with homosexuals as outsiders in America, people unfairly subject to prison and other irrational legal sanctions. Injustice offended him. In the early 1970s gay liberation had barely begun and queers were still subjected to violence, police entrapment, bigotry. Repression produced great fear and most gays, including myself, instinctively tried to keep their sexual life private. There were very few places where one felt truly safe. Norman and I both believed that it was out of this alienation and dread that creativity was born. It was this creative dynamic between a pariah class and the commanding culture that interested Norman.

That weekend in Bridgehampton he spent a lot of time talking long distance on the phone with Larry Schiller about a book they were working on. It was about a killer in Utah named Gary Gilmore.

One afternoon we took a long walk along the beach and Norman told me about the Gilmore book and the difficult negotiations with the publisher. He was nearly broke, he said, the tax thugs were on his ass. He needed money. He seemed very anxious about what might lie ahead.

Fortunately, what lay ahead was good stuff—a second Pulitzer Prize and huge critical and commercial success with *The Executioner’s Song*, his most successful book since *The Naked and the Dead*. And, best of all, he wed Norris Church and finally had a marriage that was happy. It lasted thirty-two years, a lifetime, and gave him two more beautiful sons, John and Matthew, to love.

I told much of this to Bishop Paul Moore in New York when he asked me, “How is Norman Mailer?”

After Paul and I finished lunch we returned to his house. Paul was very tired now, and as soon as we got inside he lay down on a sofa to rest. On the table nearby was a copy of his autobiography, *Presences*, and he signed it and gave it to me. I had nothing to give him in return.

“Let me send you Norman’s book, *The Gospel according to the Son*,” I offered. “It’s the best book I’ve ever read about Jesus.”

“I know,” Paul said. “I read it.”

Paul Moore died in New York City on May 1, 2003.