

HE SELLS A DIFFERENT KIND OF REAL ESTATE

by Bee staff writer Paul Clegg

"If I hadn't become a priest, I'd be in commercial leasing," the Rev. Virgil Cordano says with a laugh and a touch of irony.

Certainly, the road of life could have led the 76-year-old Cordano into real estate, as it has for his older brother James, developer of Sunrise Mall, Florin Mall and other major Sacramento projects.

But as a poor kid growing up Catholic in Sacramento near 6th and S, one of five boys born to Italian immigrant parents, Cordano became convinced at the age of 13 that he wanted to be a priest.

"I just sensed God was asking me to be a priest," Cordano said. "It came from deep within me. My dad died when I was 10, and I felt the next life mattered, and I felt God was asking me to work for the promotion of faith."

After two years at Christian Brothers High School, Cordano left home for St. Anthony's Seminary in Santa Barbara, the first step on his journey that has led to his life-long vocation as a Franciscan priest, educator, public relations man and pastor of the historic Santa Barbara Mission, where he has spent most of his adult life.

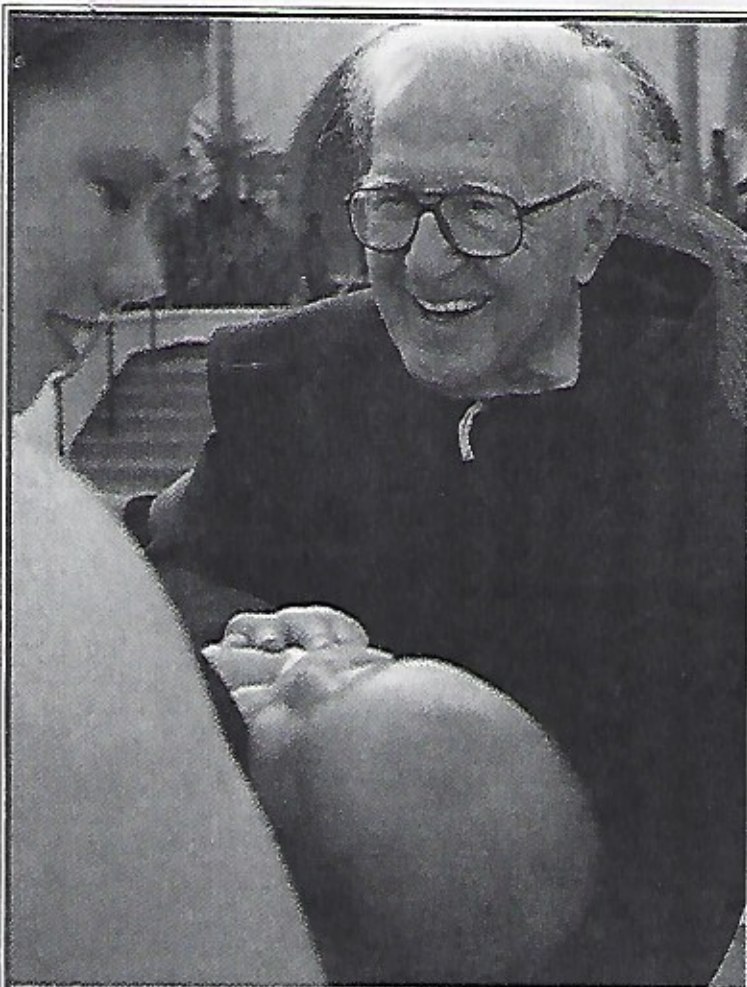
In June, Cordano marked the 50th anniversary of his ordination, and the milestone was greeted with consider-



able publicity in Santa Barbara, where one writer called him the best-known local Franciscan since the Rev. Junipero Serra, founder of a string of missions in California.

In regard to the church he has served, Cordano would like "to see more changes than we have seen" in recent years. He is open to the idea of ordaining women priests and thinks optional celibacy for priests should be considered. On birth control, largely rejected by the Pope but practiced by many Catholics, Cordano says diplomatically: "I understand the Pope's argument, but in practice the majority of Catholics make up their own mind, and pastorally I'm very respectful of the decisions Catholic couples make."

This month in Sacramento, there will be a Mass celebrating Cordano's anniversary followed by a reception hosted by the Cordano clan. For more information on the Aug. 27 activities, call Alan Cordano at 443-4618. ☛



PAUL WELLS/STAFF

Father Virgil: A Love Story

BY SARAL BURDETTE

After studying with Father Virgil for years, I came home from the Mission one day and told my husband that I was falling in love with him. I looked forward to seeing Virgil every week. I adored his mind and his heart. I missed him when we were apart. David looked at me and said, "If you are ever going to fall in love with another man, I think an 85-year-old celibate Catholic priest is the perfect choice."

My story with Father Virgil began in 2001. I had a mystical experience that rocked my world. For a person who did not believe in an intervening God or in miracles, the experience left me reeling and in need of someone to talk to. Through the serendipity of fate, I ended up in the Porters office at the Old Mission. Father Virgil sat with me for an hour as I poured out 25 years of mysticism and the recent experiences that I was grappling with. After a series of questions that included, "Is there mental illness in your family?" and "Are you taking any medication?" he paused, looked at me, and said, "I will be here for you any time of day or night."

And he was. For seven years, Fr. Virgil met with me once a week. He educated me in mysticism and theology. He helped me understand the essence of monastic vows: to listen, to trust, and to love. He prepared me to take those vows. I was an interfaith celebrant and he was a Catholic priest, but we both delighted in the same God.

When Fr. Virgil died last week, I called *The Independent* about writing a story. No one had been more of a mentor for me, a father, and a friend. I wanted to honor a remarkable man whom I loved deeply.

In preparing to write this, I talked to many people who knew Fr. Virgil. I discovered I was not the only one with a life-transforming tale about him. What's really exceptional about my story is that it is not exceptional. Person after person recounted how he had changed their lives. The real love story was not between Fr. Virgil and me. It was between Fr. Virgil and an entire town.

That story started in 1934, when a young boy named George Cordano came to the Santa Barbara Mission. He felt called to become a priest. At 14 years old, against the wishes of his family and the mother he adored, he chose a new life and was given a new name: Virgil.

At first, Virgil struggled through depression and loneliness. His superiors were strict. He missed his family. He longed for the day he would be ordained and someday have a parish of his own. However, instead of being sent into ministry, he was chosen to go on for higher education. His superiors were wise enough to recognize an exceptional mind and they wanted to invest in it. He was devastated, although in the long-run, that education turned out to be a godsend.

Virgil left Santa Barbara for five years of study, the only five years he would spend away from the Mission for the rest of his life. He came back and began a career that is well documented in his biography *Padre*, which reveals much of the story between Fr. Virgil and the town he adored. It included becoming a professor and a superior at the seminary, being the pastor at the Mission, being an active part of Fiesta, offering Mass for the Poor Clares and the Immaculate Heart Center for Spiritual Renewal, hearing children's confessions at Marymount, blessing the Harley-Davidson riders, working for Hospice and La Casa de Maria, supporting the Anti-Defamation League, baptizing countless babies and adults, witnessing numerous marriages, and doing what he could to encourage the faith of every single person he met. >>>

Father Virgil Cordano served Santa Barbara for more than 70 years, not only as a beloved parish priest, but as a messenger of kindness, tolerance, and acceptance. He strived to open all our hearts to love one another and to persuade us that there is a God who loves us all.

When the Heavens Wept

BY JOHN ZANT

I was riding my bicycle along Junipero Street a week ago Wednesday. To my right was Oak Park. To my left was the Mission Terrace Convalescent Hospital. I was headed to the pedestrian bridge over the freeway, the safest route to my home from downtown. But before I got there, an inner voice told me to make a U-turn, park my bike in front of the hospital, and go see Fr. Virgil.

Fr. Virgil—for many of us in Santa Barbara, his name was a succinct answer to the question: Why am I a Catholic? He taught us to be humble in our faith, to see the good in people who disagreed with us, to accept our human limitations. During a homily at a weekday Mass, he made a statement that stuck with me: "Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved."

I thought he would make a great Pope. In fact, Pope Benedict XVI took a page right out of Fr. Virgil's playbook during his recent visit to the United States. Instead of unleashing censure and reproach for our sins, he stressed compassion, love, and forgiveness.

Fr. Virgil and I talked about sports now and then, although it was a subject that in recent times had brought him considerable frustration—his favorite teams were the Dodgers and Notre Dame. He spoke highly of the DiMag-

gio brothers, who shared his Italian heritage and Northern California upbringing, but he did not single out sports stars as heroes. To live heroically, he said, was something that all of us were called to do.

I was a minor character among Fr. Virgil's many colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. My wife, Kathleen, and I did have the honor of being married by him at the Old Mission 11 years ago. When we heard that he was stricken by cancer, we discussed visiting him sometime, but we did not want to contribute to an overload of well-wishers.

Much to my surprise, Fr. Virgil was alone in his room when I entered last week. He did not have the strength to carry on a conversation. I looked into his glistening eyes, held his hand, and—much to my further surprise—I did all the talking. I thanked him. I told him that his work was done, that the hundreds and thousands of us who were touched by his goodness would carry on in his spirit, that he could rest in peace, and that we loved him very much.

Surely others had expressed the same sentiments, but I was so glad I had taken the opportunity when, just a day later, Fr. Virgil took his last breath.

The next morning, Santa Barbara was darkened by a thick layer of clouds. Periodically during the day, a gentle mist fell to the ground. The heavens were weeping. I do not think that was any more a coincidence than the impulse that had led me to the padre's deathbed.

John Zant, Santa Barbara Independent sports columnist, has written about sports and life in Santa Barbara for more than 30 years.

Father Virgil's Memorial Service

Santa Barbara will come together to honor the legacy of Father Virgil Cordano at his funeral mass on Friday, May 30, at 11 a.m., on the steps of the Santa Barbara Mission. There will also be a rosary service today, Thursday, May 29, at noon, and a prayer vigil tonight, at 7 p.m., both at the Mission, where his body is lying in state until 5 p.m.

>>> Fr. Virgil became what Harriet Miller called "the heart and soul of Santa Barbara," meeting all sorts of people, from the Queen of England to the Dalai Lama.

Virgil began each day by reviewing the commitments for that day and dedicating it all to God. He loved to say that God was not only in church, but also at the baseball field, in the bar, and in and through every human interaction and endeavor. He enjoyed talking about politics, sports (he loved baseball), and the Vatican ("If only I could be Pope for five minutes..." he would say). He wrestled with difficult topics. He was deeply upset about the abuse perpetrated by clergy. He advocated dialogue and lamented actions that did not foster healing and reconciliation. He wanted to help those who had been hurt.

Virgil's love of humanity and divinity led him into a progressive theology. He thought heaven was a state of being, a oneness with love, and it was open to anyone, to an atheist as well as a Catholic, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a Jew. "If you have an exclusive God," he would say, "you have a false God."

"Perhaps it is more important to Jesus that all people be saved than that all people be saved through him." That theology excited Virgil. He valued love and inclusion over all other ethical considerations. He believed there should be married clergy and female clergy. He believed in accountability, and also in acceptance and forgiveness. "If you think God is a judgmental God, you are not allowing God to be God," he would say. "God is love. Love doesn't judge."

Rabbi Arthur Gross-Schafer called him "A Man for All Religions." He said, "Fr. Virgil had a sensitivity that reached out to all religious groups. He radiated compassion, respect, and safety for everyone. He could have a strong opinion, but he also created the space for others to disagree."

"All of life comes down to dealing with our differences," Fr. Virgil would say. "We cannot just tolerate our differences. We need to celebrate them. We have to empower the other to be other." Those thoughts are echoed by the rabbi, who said,



Saral Burdette with her spiritual mentor, Fr. Virgil. He loved to say that God was not only in church, but also at the baseball field, in the bar, and in and through every human interaction and endeavor.

"Fr. Virgil championed the idea of the big tent, a place where everyone could worship, where there was room for all."

Fr. Virgil was remarkable in countless ways, but he was also quite human. He struggled with being judgmental, especially of people he considered spiritually undereducated. He could be stubborn and intolerant, especially of intolerance. The people he most admired were simple, kind, and generous, people who were "heart-centered." He found it difficult at times to be emotionally open. He came into his heart through the side door of his mind.

The evolution of both Virgil's mind and heart during his

89 years is inspirational. He was an extremely methodical thinker. He would often say "wait a minute, wait a minute..." as he took the time to process what someone said. He didn't rush to make a decision. He thought through the steps logically and carefully, and was deeply circumspect. During the course of his life, he became a radical, but he was always a cautious radical.

Steve Jacobsen, a Presbyterian minister, recalled how wonderful it was to have Fr. Virgil offer the Eucharist with him at his church. Jacobsen said that one of the many things he admired about Virgil was that he didn't believe that >>>

Writing Father Virgil's Life Story

BY MARIO T. GARCÍA

For almost eight decades, Fr. Virgil made his mark on our city by his unselfish service to the community as a spiritual and civic leader. I had the unique opportunity to record many of these contributions by writing his life story, *Padre: The Spiritual Journey of Father Virgil Cordano* (Capra Press, 2005).

We worked for three years on this project, taping some 40 hours of interviews. At one point, I visited every week, and we would sit and talk about his life for an hour or so. I looked forward to these visits. Fr. Virgil was always ready for me, and it didn't take much prompting from me for him to pick up where we had left off. I described our working relationship in the introduction to *Padre* but would like to reflect some more now that he's gone.

First and foremost was his love for his family, and especially his mother, María. She was everything to him. As, for the most part, a single mother, María brought up Virgil and his two brothers, Jim and Ray. Always wanting to please her, when Fr. Virgil (then George Cordano) decided that he had a vocation to become a priest, he agonized about telling her because he did not want to upset her.

As a teenager, he left his hometown of Sacramento to come to Santa Barbara and begin the long road to becoming a Franciscan friar. But he knew his mother really did not want him to go. He suffered major homesickness. For almost six years, he did not see his mother due to the rigid schedule of his seminary training. Imagine not seeing your mother as a teenager and young adult for so long!

Even after his ordination as a priest in 1945, Fr. Virgil did not often see his mother, but he always kept her and his brothers in his prayers. His mother was proud of what Fr. Virgil became, and that was the biggest tribute he ever received. In the prologue to *Padre*, Fr. Virgil movingly wrote, "She gave me life that I might one day enjoy the fullness of eternal life with her."

Although agonized over being separated from his family, Fr. Virgil was consoled by his new family, the Franciscan Order. He loved being a Franciscan, loved wearing the brown robe as a symbol of his commitment to God, and never regretted his decision. He gave his whole life to the Order, and never gave up hope, even though he was pained over those Franciscans who did not live up to their vows. He knew that no one was perfect and everyone was human, including himself, and he forgave others as he hoped others forgave him. He suffered the falls of his brothers because he loved them.

Fr. Virgil as an intellectual also struck me. An excellent student who obtained a doctorate

in divinity studies, he possessed a curious mind and read widely. He talked often about key books in his life and was a frequent customer at Chaucer's Bookstore, where everyone knew him and catered to his interests in books on religion and spirituality. Yet he was a people's intellectual, always able to link his intellectual interests with the Santa Barbara community.

He never believed that his responsibility as a priest was only to Catholics—he reached out to people of all backgrounds and faiths. Fr. Virgil was the symbol of ecumenism. He believed in the sanctity of all religions and even of those of no religion. For him, everyone was a child of God.

He often said to me, "Nothing human is foreign to God." He wanted everyone to recognize each other as part of the community of God. That's why he embraced opportunities such as Fiesta that brought together people from diverse backgrounds. For him, Fiesta was a way of creating community. He respected differences but also understood and stressed what human beings held in common. It was this sense of community that genuinely made him grieve for the victims of the failures of some of his fellow clergy.

Writing his life story also showed me Fr. Virgil's fantastic sense of humor. What wonderful and funny stories he shared with me as he shared with others! I remember laughing when he explained how he and some of the seminarians went to the Santa Barbara Public Library to look up names for babies in order to come up with their new Franciscan names. He felt lucky to have chosen the name Virgil while others chose less attractive names such as Benignus. I laughed when he told me about the many times he was asked if he missed being married. "Why marry one and disappoint 50?" he said, with that great twinkle in his eye. We had a hearty laugh when he told me about the two streakers who passed behind him as he was blessing the Rancheros Visitadores. When he noticed them, Virgil spontaneously said, "I have a word from the Lord for those two gentlemen: 'Repent, for your end is in sight!'"

It was an honor and privilege to have worked with Fr. Virgil on his life story, a tale we all should cherish of a man who gave so much to this community. His death should remind us to move from self-centeredness to otherness and to live a life of giving to others.

Fr. Virgil, I'm sad that I did not see you much the last few months, but I will always have you in my memory and in my heart. Look over me and all of us.

Father Virgil's biographer Mario T. Garcia is a professor at UCSB. His book Padre is for sale at the Old Mission.



Fr. Virgil brought the whole community into the heart of the Mission, especially at Fiesta, pictured above with newscaster Paula Lopez. He preached every year about the need for peace in the world.



PAUL WELLMAN

said, calling from the ER, "but I almost died last night"

He had arrived at the hospital with a 107-degree temperature. The doctors were amazed that he was coherent. They told him he was dying, unless he wanted "heroic measures," which they weren't necessarily recommending. Virgil went into prayer. He saw Fr. Junipero Serra. Fr. Serra had been willing to do a lot of work. Virgil felt God needed him to work hard as well. He opened his eyes. "Do whatever it takes," he told the doctors. Fr. Virgil later woke up to the words: "It's a miracle."

In the year of life that that recovery bought him, Fr. Virgil did many things. He fought through his ill health like the best of warriors. Because the Mission no longer has an infirmary, he was moved to Vista del Monte. He mentioned that he deeply missed morning prayers and his life at the Mission. I offered to take him to prayers, but he replied without hesitation: "Wherever I am is my Mission." He began to offer mass and classes on spirituality at Vista del Monte. But then his health took a turn for the worse. He was diagnosed

with esophageal cancer. Once he realized he did not have the strength to fight it, he quickly shifted into preparing to surrender his life.

I asked him if he had any fears about death. He looked at me with tears in his eyes. "I only hope I can surrender fully," he said.

We talked about his funeral. He wanted to be sure it was said that he received more than he gave. He cried many tears of gratitude for the life he lived, for his faith, for his Franciscan brothers, for his family, and for his friends in Santa Barbara. (His "5,000 best friends," as one friend commented.)

Fr. Richard bent over Virgil as he lay dying. "You have spent your life in service of a very large God," he said. "Now you are going into the arms of that God."

Fr. Virgil Cordano died on Thursday evening, surrounded by people who loved him. Fr. Richard said a prayer and, when Virgil took his last breath, the people there burst into spontaneous applause. He had lived his life well, and, in the moment of his last breath, he became one with "the Love that is eternity."

I am deeply sad that he is gone, that I cannot call him, that he will not argue theology with me any more or delight in our shared faith. But far more than I am sad, I am grateful. He taught me to have a "spirituality for all of reality." He taught me to meet people where they are, not where I would like them

to be. He taught me that it was possible to be passionately connected to a religion and at the same time to be able to transcend it. "Theology can divide us," he said. "Spirituality unites us." The unifying spirituality of love is where he and I met. It is where he sought to meet every person, and it is the legacy he leaves to Santa Barbara.

Fr. Virgil's funeral will be held outside at the Mission. He once mused, "Maybe God is happier seeing people gather outside the church than in it." Maybe Virgil said that because we can all fit there, out in the open, where there are no walls.

This year at I.Madonnari, the featured artists did a piece with seven angels. When Fr. Virgil died, they added a depiction of his face with that wide, inviting smile. Seeing that smile takes me back to a time many years ago when he and I were leaving the Mission. He saw the chalk painters, threw up his hands, and beamed. With the purest joy he exclaimed, "Oh, look! Just look!" I imagine him saying that now.

Sara Burdette is an interfaith celebrant, performing rituals for people of all faiths. The Santa Barbara resident is also a writer and a storyteller.

>>> our differences should get in the way of loving each other. Lois Capps remembered when her husband Walter would bring his religious studies students to the Mission to meet Virgil. "The students were taken by his openness," she said. "Father Virgil was Santa Barbara's padre. People flocked to him. He reminded them of what was important in life."

Athena Roebuck remembered when she lost her three-year-old child, Renee, to leukemia. Virgil was there when her daughter took her last breath. Athena and her family remain deeply grateful for everything he did. Alice MacDonald went back to study theology because Virgil encouraged her. He thought a rigorous education would support her deepening faith. He was there with the rest of her family at her graduation from Loyola Marymount, cheering her on. The children at Marymount delighted in Fr. Virgil's kindness and humor. They came to him to confess sins like "I was mean to my brother last week," to which Virgil might reply, "Sometimes I was, too."

Lois Capps summed it up beautifully when she said, "You didn't have to take a test to be Fr. Virgil's friend. He was just so open to people."

On April 24, 2007, the night before my 50th birthday, Virgil was rushed to the emergency room. I had invited him to my party, but since I knew he hadn't been feeling well, I wasn't surprised when he didn't show up. I was, however, profoundly surprised by the four phone messages I listened to after everyone had left. "I'm so sorry I'm not there," he

Virgil's Last Altar Boy

BY JIM BRADY, about his father, James T. Brady Sr.

From these final years of Fr. Virgil's life there is an image of friendship, an afterglow of warmth to a life of service and devotion.

There is friendship of the spirit. Virgil wakes up on a Sunday morning at Vista del Monte. It may have been an uncomfortably sleepless night of discomfort and pain, but Virgil gets out of bed because, there's a 10 a.m. mass to be said. Parishioners and friends will arrive soon, as will the altar boy to assist with the mass. My father arrives around 9 a.m., breathless, which is normal for an 87-year-old altar boy, and assists Virgil in his wheelchair into the chapel where the congregation awaits.

There is friendship of community: Fr. Virgil, Jimmy de Loreto, and my father sit in Harry's on a Wednesday evening, as they have for many, many years. Virgil knows everyone there, of course, and probably half of the people in the photos on the walls. In the later years, it was an effort for Virgil to get from home to car to Harry's, but with effort and friendship, the three gentlemen settle in to cogitate about history, matters of the flesh and spirit, and baseball. (Though Virgil always said he could change the Catholic Church for the better if he were allowed to be Pope for 15 minutes, we wonder if he would have traded that offer for 20 minutes as manager of the Dodgers.)

And then there are friendships of time: Three of Santa Barbara's finest gentlemen with 50 years of family, service, and friendship, and decades of conversation and humor, and stories, always the stories. And with time, the stories become legends.

Jim Brady teaches at Santa Barbara Middle School.

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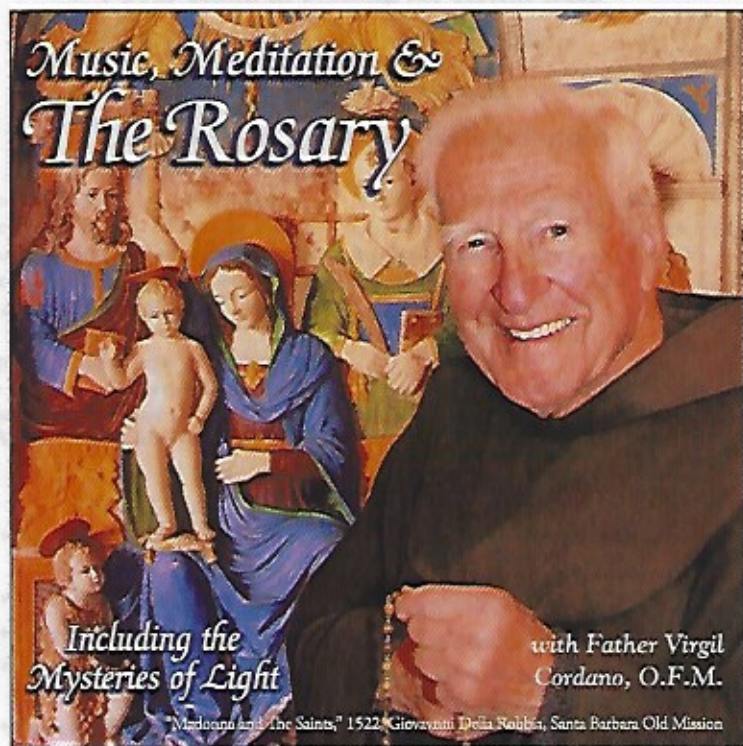
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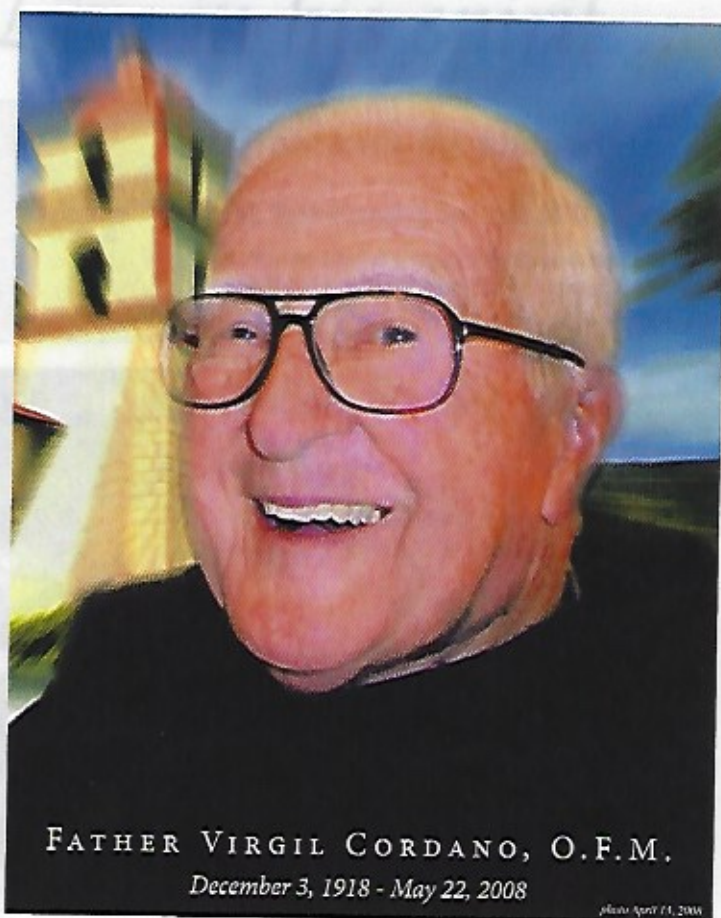
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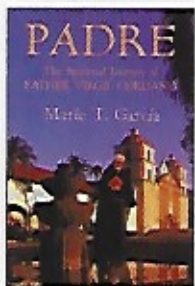
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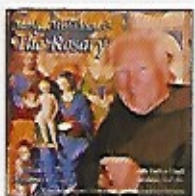
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Hidden Treasure

The Della Robbia pictured on the cover of *Music, Meditation and the Rosary* has significant meaning which relates to the Rosary.

The mystery began in 1995 when an art sculpture in ten wooden crates was donated to the Santa Barbara Old Mission. The crates were placed in storage and forgotten for over ten years. Father Nevin Ford, O.F.M. realized the mysterious crates with Japanese writing must be thoroughly examined before the contents were discarded. He made a remarkable discovery: an authentic Giovanni Della Robbia sculpture entitled "Madonna and the Saints" lay before him in 27 fragmented pieces. His work ensued for many months as he meticulously restructured the 9' x 6' treasure to fit in a niche within the Sacred Garden at the Old Mission. The date is carved in Roman numerals MDXXII (1522). The inscription carved, in Latin and Italian, on the base of the throne where Mary is seated states: "Hail Virgin, Mother and Advocate of the Whole World. Hail peoples Hope, Grace, Life and Salvation."

The CD cover pictures Father Virgil in front of the Della Robbia, symbolic of the *Hidden Treasure* the Rosary can be to our spiritual life. Father Virgil believed we are not confined to praying the Rosary in a quiet room or church but can pray the Rosary as we move throughout our busy lives with so little time. Father Virgil believed the Rosary is available for all people, regardless of faith, as "God meets you where you are."

"People tend to be overactive, this Rosary CD gives the listener the opportunity for quiet reflection as to what is going on within, hopefully allowing one to make better decisions." *Father Virgil Cordano, CASA Magazine.*

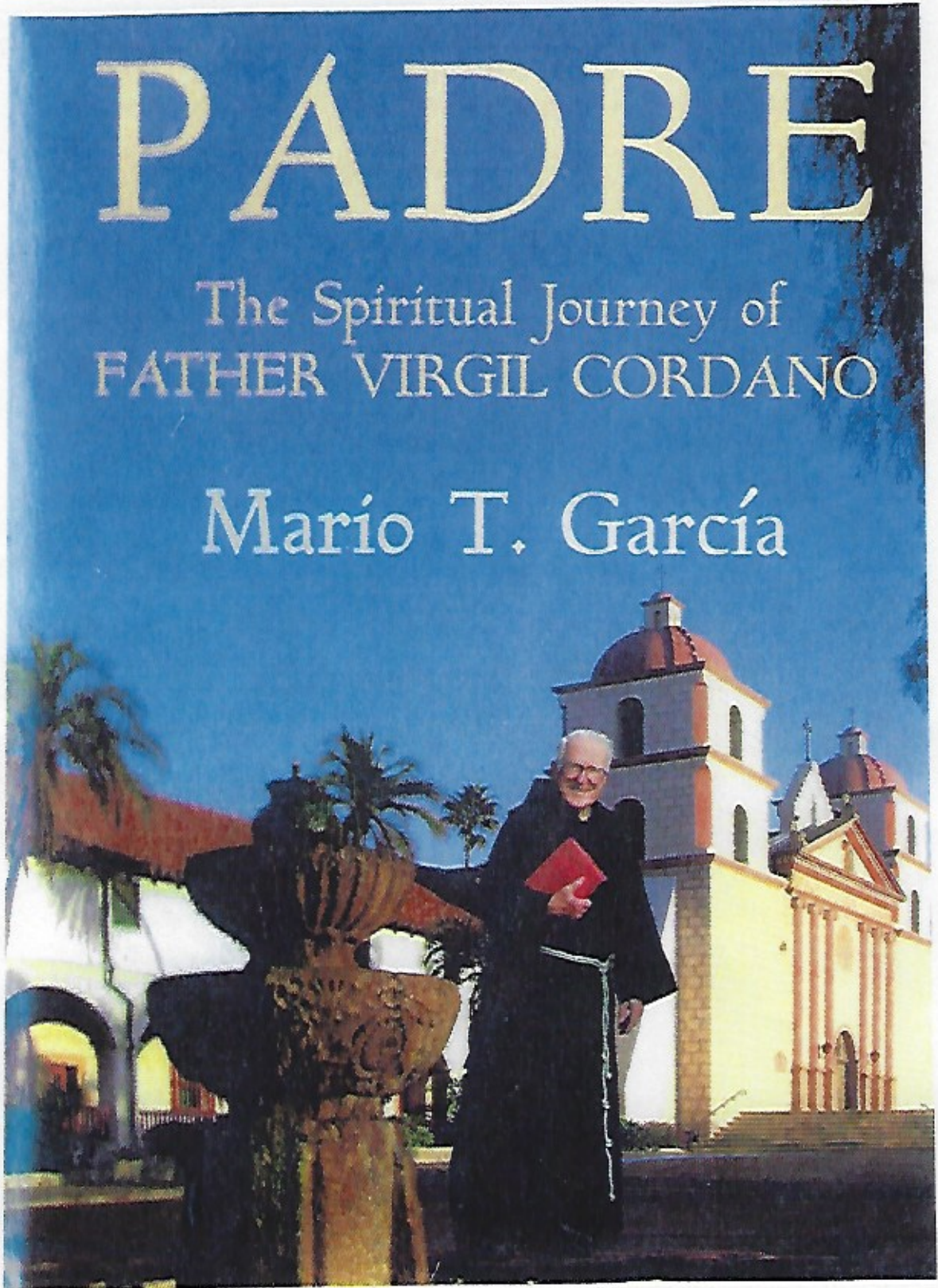


Father Nevin Ford stands beside the completed installation

PADRE

The Spiritual Journey of
FATHER VIRGIL CORDANO

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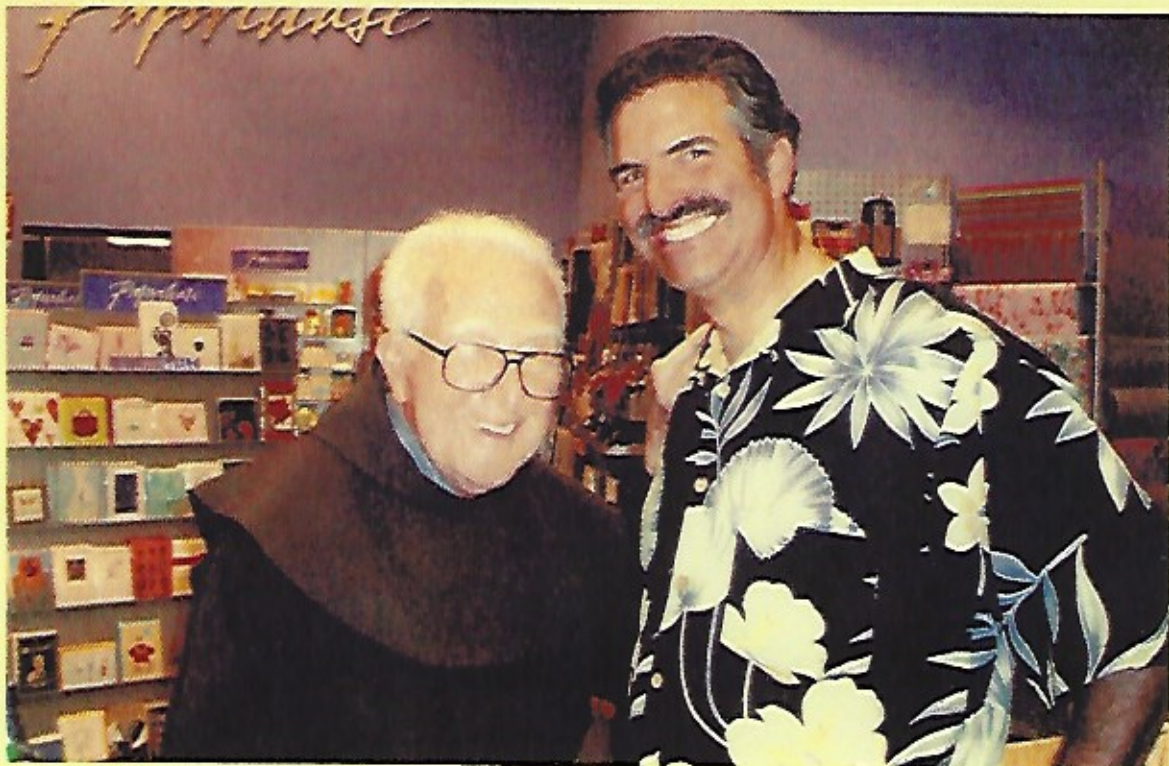
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FRIAR VIRGIL CORDANO

1918-2008

A gentle, loyal and apostolic friar died on May 22, 2008. Friar Virgil was a Christian, a Franciscan, a priest, a Scripture scholar, a professor and a popular, highly effective liaison with the city where he lived, with the exception of higher studies, since 1946 at Mission Santa Barbara.


A Sacramento boy, he was one of 4 sons born to Italian immigrants Vittorio and Maria Cordano. After grammar school and 2 years of high school in Sacramento, he entered St. Anthony's Seminary in August, 1934, and followed the customary course of studies with investiture in the habit at Mission San Luis Rey, July 16, 1939, professing solemn vows on July 17, 1943, at Mission Santa Barbara where he was ordained by Bishop Joseph T. McGucken on June 3, 1945.

Father Virgil was slated from the start to become a seminary professor and submitted to this, even though "what I wanted most was to be assigned to do parish work."¹ In 1946 he was already a young professor of Scripture before enrolling at Catholic University, Washington, D.C., where he eventually received his doctorate. So basically he spent most of his life at Mission Santa Barbara in roles of teacher, guardian, definitor, master of clerics, pastor and, in 1994, Director of Community Relations.

He was extraordinarily well known in the city and served on many civic committees. Harriet Miller, a former mayor of the city, noted that "Fr. Virgil is the heart and soul of Santa Barbara."² In his honor the Virgil Cordano Chair of Catholic Studies was endowed in the Department of Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara in 2004.

¹ García, Mario T.: Padre: The Spiritual Journey of Father Virgil Cordano. [Capra Press, Santa Barbara. ISBN 1-59266-052-5]

² *Ibid.*



We invite you to join us in spreading Father Virgil's Ministry of Peace through Praying the Rosary

Father Virgil Cordano returned to the Lord on May 22, 2008. A beautiful memorial celebration of his 89 years on earth was attended by over 2000 people on the footsteps of the Old Mission Santa Barbara.

One month before his passing, in the true giving spirit of this beloved Franciscan Priest, a discussion and CD signing at Border's Music and Books in downtown Santa Barbara took place. This event was covered by television station KEYT, The Independent, Scene & Heard magazine, and numerous other papers and magazines.

His recording of the Rosary is designed for today's fast-paced life. One may pray the entire Rosary in one sitting or during a short drive. Father Virgil believed that in praying the Rosary we may discover within ourselves, the ability to forgive others as well as the ability to forgive ourselves.

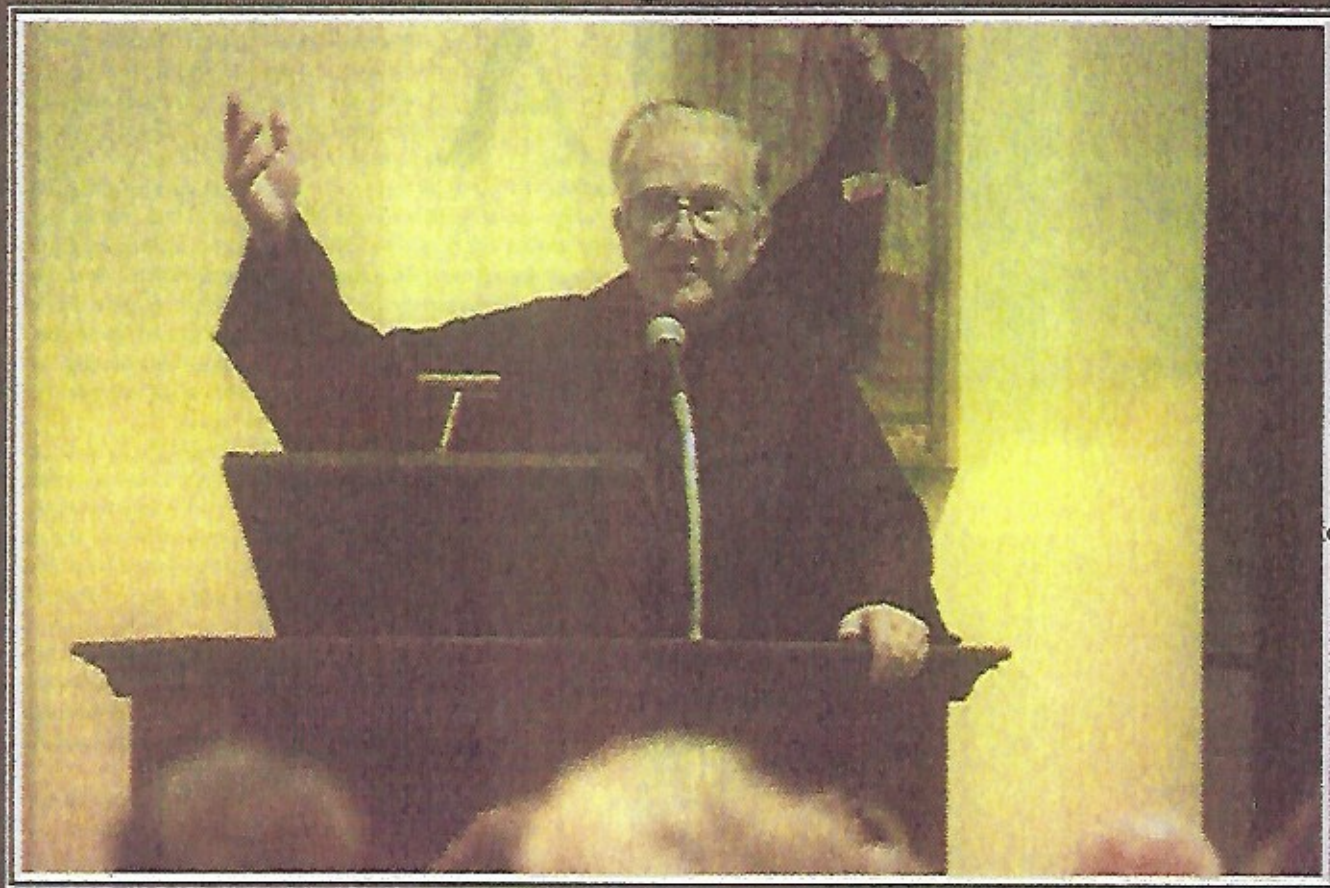
Father Virgil's CD is currently available in churches, such as the **Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels** (*Los Angeles*) and most of the **California Old Missions**, retreat centers such as the **Serra Retreat Center** (*Malibu California*), **La Casa De Maria** (*Montecito*), funeral homes, hospital gift shops, retirement communities, and many books stores. Recently a letter of thanks was received by the Vice President of the United States, **Joseph Biden**, expressing his deep appreciation. Father Virgil was moved as to how well *Music, Meditation and the Rosary* had been received and was delighted to see it helping souls around the world. To date nearly 15,000 of his Rosary recordings have been sold.

Christian churches also gladly welcome this beautiful CD, as Father Virgil is a shining example of one of the most iconic priests. Whether he was welcoming the Dalai Lama, The Queen of England or baptising a newborn baby, Father Virgil left a defining legacy. He was a decidedly humble servant of the Lord, deeply spiritual, loving and scholarly.

Father Virgil was a Doctor of Sacred Theology, he welcomed men of all faiths and encouraged us to **celebrate our differences**. Hours before his passing, a promise was made to continue his ministry on earth.

We have included a copy of *Music, Meditation and the Rosary* for your consideration. Please use the order form enclosed and fax.

REMEMBERING *Father Virgil Cordano*



SANTA BARBARA'S MOST POIGNANT MEMORIES OF OUR COMMUNITY'S GODFATHER

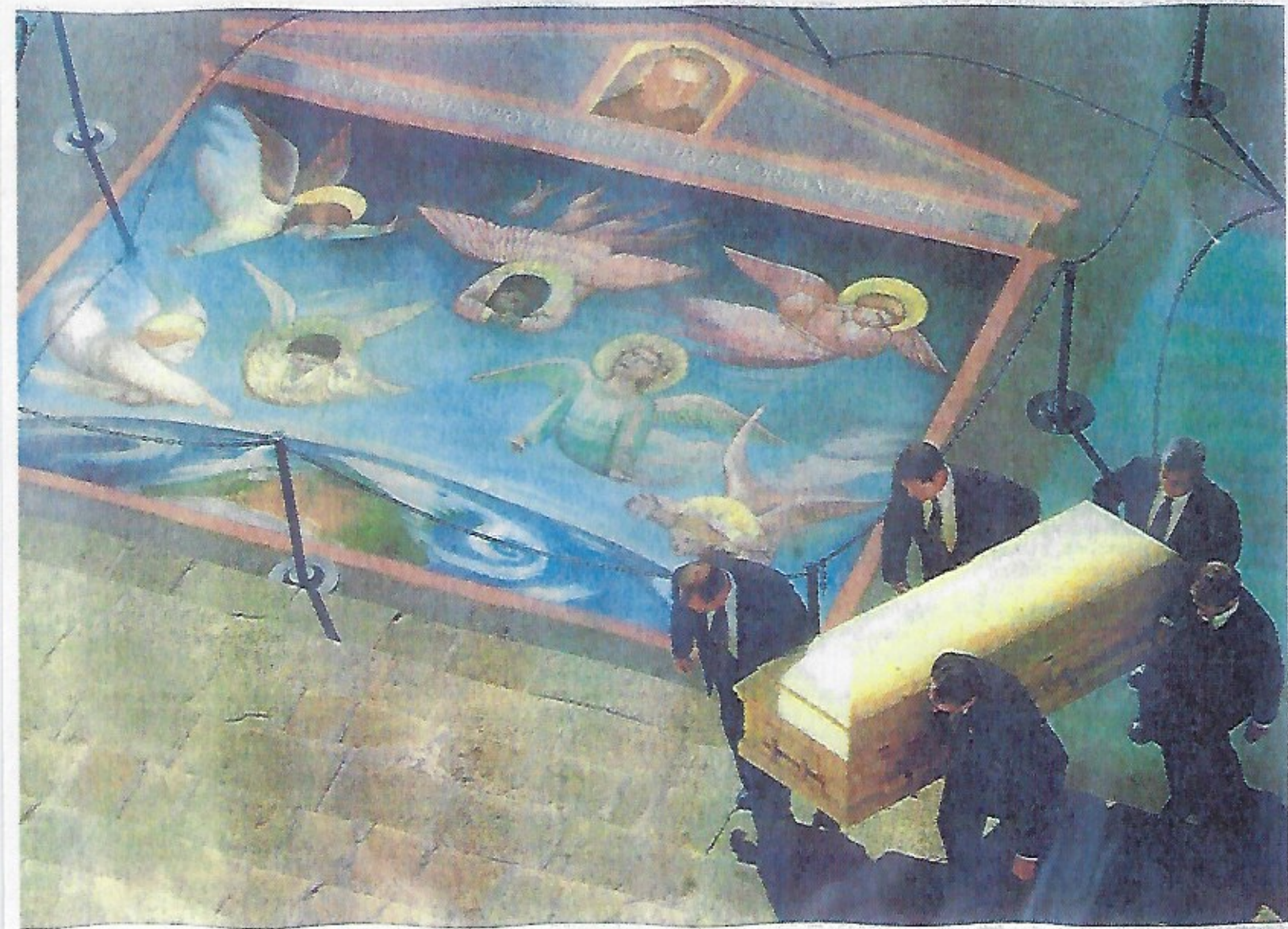
On Thursday, May 22, a little after 5 p.m., Father Virgil George Cordano left his Earth-bound body and headed toward heaven. The outpouring of emotional response since the Santa Barbara Mission's long-time pastor died has been overwhelming, coming from passionate Catholics and nonreligious folk alike. As a tribute to his legacy, we present the following memories, collected from diverse corners of the Santa Barbara community. To share your memories about Father Virgil and to see other

SBARBARA NEWS-PRESS



THURSDAY, MAY 29, 2008

Fare thee well, Padre



MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS



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Paul Wellman (file)

Father Virgil Cordano Dead at 89

Pastor Emeritus was the face of the Santa Barbara Mission

Thursday, May 22, 2008

By [Ramey Brantingham](#) ([Contact](#))

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Fr. Virgil Cordano, OFM, pastor emeritus of the Santa Barbara Mission, died on Thursday, May 22, at about 5:14 p.m. in the Mission Terrace convalescent home.

He had been in failing health and fighting throat cancer. In an interview Wednesday, he told me that he wanted to "die at the Mission," but that was not to be. His two nephews, Jim and Alan Cordano of Sacramento, were at his side Wednesday as Fr. Virgil spoke to them in a whisper.

Photo Gallery

Father Virgil Cordano



[Enlarge photos](#) | [View thumbnails](#)

Father Virgil Cordano died on Thursday, May 22, at 89. Here are some photos from the latter years of his life.

At the initial time of this posting, no arrangements for funeral services were announced, and as one Santa Barbaran said, "There isn't a church in Santa Barbara large enough to hold everyone who would want to come." However, it has not been officially announced that there will be a memorial service for Father Virgil on Friday, May 30, at 11 a.m. on the Mission steps. See below for more details.

Fr. Virgil was widely known on the South Coast among Catholics and non-Catholics alike for his many years of hosting the annual Fiesta Pequena festivities of song and dance on the Mission steps, kicking off Old Spanish Days.

The man who grew up in an Italian family in Sacramento only wanted to be a humble country priest, but found himself not only personifying the Mission, but beloved by the community as a whole for his humanity, humor, erudition, and readiness to reach out his hand in friendship to all.

During his last months of life he still said Mass and taught classes. Fr. Virgil first came to the Mission in 1934, studying for the priesthood at the adjacent St. Anthony's seminary. There, far from home, he felt shy, "like a fish out of water," he said in his memoir, *Padre*. Except for graduate work at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., he spent his career at Mission in a wide variety of duties.



He walked with the mighty, including greeting Queen Elizabeth during her 1983 visit, but made it a point to preside at the blessing of the motorcyclists every year.

Bells in the Mission tower were tolling on Friday to announce Fr. Virgil's passing and artists working on I Madonnari chalk art festival in front of the Mission were planning memorials in his honor.

He was preceded in death by his parents, Victor and Mary Cordano; four brothers, James, Andrew, Garfield and Raymond; and survived by nephews James Cordano and Alan Cordano of Sacramento.

Father Virgil's Funeral

A funeral mass will be conducted for Fr. Virgil on Friday, May 30, at 11 a.m. outdoors on the steps of his beloved Mission. The steps were chosen in order to accommodate as many people as possible.

There will be no reception afterwards. Burial will take place afterwards in a crypt in the Mission mausoleum in a private ceremony for family and friars only. Next week his body will lie in state in an open coffin for prayerful public viewing throughout the day on Wednesday and Thursday, May 28-29, from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. He will be wearing his brown Franciscan friar's habit. Since the church can accommodate approximately 400 people, doors will be closed once the church is filled, due to fire and safety laws.

On Wednesday, May 28, there will be a morning prayer service at 9 a.m. and an ecumenical funeral prayer service at 7 p.m. at which representatives of various community religious organizations will take part. On Thursday, May 29, the Rosary will be recited at noon, and the evening prayer vigil service will be at 7 p.m., with the Mission Choir.

At his request, contributions in honor of Fr. Virgil can be made for the preservation and advancement of Old Mission Santa Barbara. The Fr. Virgil Cordano Living Memory Fund has been created for this purpose.

Memories of Father Virgil?

Anyone with memories of Father Virgil can leave their comments below, or send their thoughts to letters@independent.com. There will be a special tribute in next week's issue of *The Independent*.

Barney Brantingham can be reached at barney@independent.com or (805) 965-5205. He writes online columns and a print column on Thursdays.

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Rev Fr Virgil Cordano

Memorial Photos Flowers

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Birth: Dec. 3, 1918
Sacramento
Sacramento County
California, USA

Death: May 22, 2008
Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara County
California, USA

Father Virgil Cordano, O.F.M., legendary spiritual figure and inspirational icon at the Old Mission Santa Barbara entered eternal life peacefully in Santa Barbara late in the afternoon of May 22, 2008, with members of the religious community and his nephews by his side. He was 89 years old. Bells in the Old Mission tower tolled solemnly to announce to the city that their beloved "Father Virgil" had passed.

Father had recently been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. In spite of other illnesses this past year, he presided at Mass, conducted theological reflection groups, heard the confessions of second graders at Marymount School, and made home visits to sick and dying friends. For the past six months he had been cared for at the Vista Del Monte Center and recently at Mission Terrace Convalescent Hospital.

Father was born in Sacramento, California, to Victor and Mary Cordano, Italian immigrants who came to Sacramento from Genoa, Italy. At his Baptism he was given the name of George. He had four brothers James, Andrew, Garfield, and Raymond. They attended a traditional Catholic parochial school in their native Sacramento. At the age of twelve, George recognized his priestly calling. In 1934, as a teenager, he entered Saint Anthony's Seminary in Santa Barbara and graduated in 1939 as class valedictorian.

Father took the name of Virgil when he received his Franciscan habit. He was ordained a priest in 1945. Except for five years in studies elsewhere, including earning a doctorate at the Catholic University in Washington, D. C., Father Virgil spent the rest

of his life in ministry in Santa Barbara in various capacities. He served the area as a seminary rector, parochial pastor, professor, author, Mission curator and pastor at the Santa Barbara Mission.

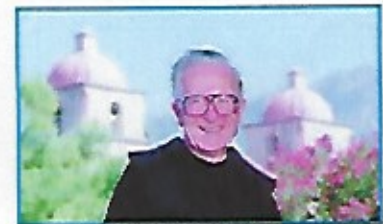
He served as pastor of the Santa Barbara Mission from 1976 to 1994. Since then, he has served as pastor emeritus and director of community relations, linking the Mission to the Santa Barbara community. He was a faithful Franciscan friar for 69 years and a priest for



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Rest In Peace, Father Virgil!
- [Eman Bonnici](#)

Added: Nov. 7, 2012



- [Dave Weiss](#)

Added: Jun. 7, 2012



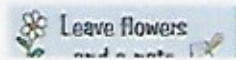
God Bless You Father Virgil, please greet all of our Franciscan Family especially Noel Moholy, and Blessed Junipero

- [Dave Weiss](#)

Added: Nov. 9, 2010

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memorial for 63 years and a priest for 63 years.



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Mario T. Garcia, University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) history professor and his biographer, wrote, "Fr Virgil Cordano, OFM, is a shining example of everything that is good about the Catholic Church." Harriet Miller, a former mayor of Santa Barbara said, "Fr Virgil is the heart and soul of Santa Barbara." Fr. Virgil's life and work led Congresswoman Lois Capps to write, "This priest and pastor is equally at home blessing the fishing fleet and the Los Rancheros Visitadores as he is saying Mass at the Monastery of the Poor Clares or sitting by the bedside of a dying parishioner." Annually, he blessed a group of leather-clad motorcyclists who rode up to the Mission in a long parade.

Father was a strong believer in interfaith dialogue, and was named Santa Barbara's Man of the Year in 1988. When Capps' congressman husband, Walter, a Lutheran, died in 1997, his funeral was held at the Santa Barbara Mission, where Cordano officiated with a Lutheran pastor. Fr Virgil's life was a testimony in itself and a witness to the love of God for all people, no matter what faith, or how much faith.

Since 1963, Father served on the board of directors for the Old Spanish Days, La Fiesta Pequeña, acting as a sort of spokesman for the annual event. He blessed every board meeting and events he attended, encouraging all Santa Barbarans to come together in unity. Tim Taylor, a fifth-generation Santa Barbaran and this year's Old Spanish Days El Presidente, visited Father's bedside the day before he passed. As he got ready to leave, he looked to the sky above the historic Santa Barbara Mission, and said a traditional farewell, "Vaya con Dios, my friend." ("Go with God, my friend.")

Taylor said, "Father was truly larger than life in this town. He will be missed, but he will always be in our hearts."

Father Virgil was preceded in death by his parents, Victor and Mary, and four brothers, James, Andrew, Garfield and Raymond. Besides his Franciscan family, he is survived by immediate family members, his nephews James Cordano and Alan Cordano of Sacramento, and nieces Mary K. King of Carmel, and Patricia Gamero of Monterey.

Father Virgil's body will lie in state for public prayerful viewing on Wednesday and Thursday, May 28-29, 2008, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm at the Old Mission Santa Barbara. On Wednesday, a Morning Prayer Service will be at 9:00 am and an Ecumenical Funeral Prayer Service at 7:00pm. Rosary at Old Mission on Thursday will be recited at 12:00 noon, and

Funeral Mass: Outdoors on the front steps of the Old Mission on Friday, May 30, 2008, at 11:00 am in Santa Barbara.

Burial in a private family service will take place at the Friars Vaults at the Old Mission following the funeral.

In honor of Fr. Virgil, and at his request, contributions may be made to the Father Virgil Cordano Living Memory Fund for the preservation and advancement of Old Mission Santa Barbara at 2201 Laguna St., Santa Barbara, CA 93105.

Mario Garcia's presentation of the book he authored about Father Virgil Cordano: [Padre: The Spiritual Journey of Father Virgil Cordano](#)

Burial:
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Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara County
California, USA

Created by: [Elizabeth & Ron](#)
Record added: May 24, 2008
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October 20, 2008

Ms. Charlene Imperatrice
9900 Wilbur May Parkway
Unit 4403
Reno, NV 89521

Dear Ms. Imperatrice:

I want to personally thank you for providing me with a copy of "Music, Meditation and The Rosary." This recording is a thoughtful gift, and I look forward to listening to it.

Thank you again for the kind thoughts, and best wishes.

Sincerely,



Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
United States Senator