

BROCK'S BANTER: Saints Preserve Us

By Brock Weir

Growing up, it is hard to avoid hearing about the exploits of the saints, no matter what religion ? or lack thereof ? in which you might be raised.

You can't go through life, for instance, hearing about St. Patrick and his vermin control in Ireland. Or, about Joan of Arc's visions, and her fate, either through textbooks, films, or even through the particularly memorable theme song from television's Maude which described her as ?a sister who really cooked.? Terrible, but memorable.

Whichever saint you might have felt a particular kinship with, these were often remote figures whose relics had long become dusty, venerated or, in some cases, debunked and questioned. They were figures from history with whom you would not necessarily have a personal connection.

Therefore, when I went to bed on Saturday night, my head hit the pillow sure in the knowledge that when I woke up the late Pope John Paul II would be made Saint John Paul II with a few flutters of ancient tradition. For the thousands of people the world over, John Paul II was essentially already nearing the finish line to sainthood in life and to those people, his new status might seem second nature. For a non-Catholic like myself, I'm left slightly mystified.

Despite being nominally raised as a Protestant, I found something compelling about the man. While I personally came to disagree with his stance on many social issues, there was no doubt he was a captivating and charismatic figure who was able to engage people of all stripes and all ages. So, when he came to Toronto to participate in World Youth Day in 2002, I felt almost duty-bound to take it in with my own eyes, if only gain a better comprehension of precisely where this spark between him and his flock really ignited. Mission accomplished. I saw him with my own eyes not once, not twice, but thrice. And a half. Let's start with the half first. That was shortly after his arrival in Toronto when his three helicopter cavalcade flew directly over Aurora and Newmarket on the way to a Lake Simcoe retreat. The second was walking what felt like an eternity through a sea of pilgrims from Harbourfront Centre to the Princes' Gates to catch a glimpse of John Paul II going by in the Popemobile. The third was under the cover of darkness huddling with friends outside the fence of the convent in Thornhill where he stayed during his visit. The final time was braving gale-force winds at Downsview Park for the Papal Mass.

So, I thought on Saturday night, soon I will have seen a saint several times with my own eyes. What that would mean, if anything, I wasn't sure. Actually, I am still not sure, but it seems like an entirely foreign concept. At the very least, I thought, maybe after Pope Francis did his thing and made everything official, these eyes which took in the Saint so many times might be miraculously cured of their Mr. Magoo levels of nearsightedness!

Needless to say, I am writing this once again leaning ever closer and closer into my computer screen. Alas, that time will come, if only for the blisters suffered by this Protestant who inexplicably felt the need to go on a holy pilgrimage.

SAINTS PRESERVE THEM

Alas, the time is also coming to hear the fate of the proposed Heritage Conservation District (HCD) in Southeast Old Aurora. Neighbours fretting about the implications of the HCD either positively or negatively will learn this month whether designation is here to stay or dead in the water.

In my experience, it is never a good sign to arrive in Town Hall to see extra chairs set up in the hallway to handle what is expected to be an overflow crowd. Actually, let me rephrase that. It is often good for a newspaper, but perhaps less so for the sanity of everyone else in the room.

The last time that truly happened was in the Great Cultural Centre Debate of 2012 when absolute chaos and mayhem rung out in Town Hall in what was ultimately the most entertaining, but least productive, four consecutive hours ever spent in that long-suffering room.

I was pleasantly surprised, however, by what took place, particularly in contrast to the last fiasco.

To talk to the different factions of the HCD debate as groups, rather than individuals, it seems they are two or three groups which will be at perpetual loggerheads, maybe even to the detriment of their own community. What actually transpired, when push came to shove, was a remarkable demonstration in civic engagement, civil dialogue, and healthy debate within an equally healthy and thriving community.

There was an energy in the room at the start of the meeting which gave a sense of tension, that fireworks were to be expected, and battle lines drawn. As the meeting wore on, this energy shifted into something different, an almost imperceptible shift in the

temperament of the crowd realising their goals might not be so far apart after all. They all want what they feel is best for their community, their respective liberties, and what they have personally invested in their properties.

It will be interesting to see whether in the three weeks ahead this can be built upon and the 'creative' alternatives sought by the audience to make everyone happy will come from municipal staff in their next report, or whether further suggestions on achieving these goals might spring out from the community itself.

As someone who currently lives in a house with a heritage value in the negative column, it is hard for me to take a firm stance in the debate either for or against, but it is very easy indeed to appreciate both sides of the argument.

On the one hand, it is very important for property owners to retain rights to their properties and if such a designation would truly have an adverse effect on their property values or insurance, that is obviously a most important point to consider.

On the other hand, as many opposing the plan pointed out, Aurora does not have to look any further than the opposite side of Wellington Street to see an HCD in action. In my years covering Council, I personally have not heard any complaints relating to the HCD come to the fore, bar one man who was having trouble with striking the right balance with an addition he proposed for his home. At the end of the day, the biggest gripes in the area pertained to the traffic control measures put in place, in part, to maintain the 'character' of the community.

On a personal level, I also look to a street in Etobicoke where I spent a great deal of my childhood. Built in the mid-1950s, it was a street that looks its age. When I lived there, it was a very model of a 1950s suburban neighbourhood which would not have appeared out of place used as a backdrop on *Leave It To Beaver*.

In the intervening years, however, those pristine middle class homes have been steadily bulldozed and replaced with 'monster homes' which shrank in the wash, but nevertheless tower over their neighbours, creating a very disjointed and jarring neighbourhood.

So, for those who feel this might happen here, I feel your pain, but given the shared love in the room on Wednesday, I don't think that is an option anyone would even consider allowing to happen.