

(from The National Post)

Remembering a divine fiddle player

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Photo courtesy Natalie MacMaster

Bishop Faber MacDonald plays with Cape Breton fiddler Natalie MacMaster in a pub in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bishop delivered the homily at her wedding in 2002. She will play at his funeral on Friday.

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They were an unusual pair, an odd-looking twosome that had a way of making people stop and look twice. She was skinny, 30-ish and blond, with hazel eyes as deep as two oceans. And he was a Catholic Bishop, a septuagenarian in a clerical collar with a wispy powdering of snow-white hair.

Stranger than their physical appearance were the poses they struck at the pub in Medjugorje, a village in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Heads slightly cocked, eyes closed, with fiddle bows in hand and with fingers flying, dancing across the

strings, summoning traditional Celtic tunes — jigs, marches, reels, waltzes and airs — straight from Cape Breton before a smattering of happily speechless onlookers.

“When we went on this trip people got quite a kick out of seeing a bishop and the little blond girl playing together,” says the little blond girl, better known as Natalie MacMaster, the Cape Breton fiddling queen.

“I don’t know if Bishop Faber ever aspired to be famous for his fiddling; you know, he had an incredible ear for the music, and he could play with anybody.

“But somebody in that position — you have to practise, you have to be dedicated to something — and he was dedicated to his priesthood.”

Bishop Faber MacDonald, the red-headed, fiddle-playing priest from Little Pond, Prince Edward Island, died last Friday in Charlottetown at the age of 80. Sick with pneumonia, he succumbed to a heart attack after a long, good life.

Ms. MacMaster can’t remember when they first met. He was just always there, at East Coast music festivals, and always with a fiddle tucked beneath his arm.

Spiritually, they shared a common faith. Musically, they came from the same place and time, a mostly bygone era of kitchen parties, chowder pots and foot-stomping fiddling fun that runs deep in the seams of Cape Breton’s rock and the Island’s red mud.

“He grew up with the music as a part of his way of life and so did I,” Ms. MacMaster says. “There are some unspoken commonalities there, and it is not something you bring up, because it is obvious.”



Photo courtesy of Natalie McMaster

Bishop Faber Macdonald and Natalie MacMaster.

Ordained a priest in 1963, the future bishop served several Catholic parishes around P.E.I., entertaining them, on occasion, with his fiddle. He worried about the death of traditional music and worked hard to revive it, helping found the Rollo Bay Fiddle Festival. Now in its 36th year, it is a top draw for tourists and fiddle masters alike, such as the little “blond girl” and her famous Cape Breton cousin, Ashley MacIsaac.

Ms. MacMaster would receive letters from the bishop once her life as a travelling musician had begun. Lengthy dispatches that were spiritual, musical and affable in tone, they mixed words of encouragement and praise with theological meditations on whatever her latest musical project happened to be.

“He had this incredible capacity to express the depths of his spirituality,” Ms. MacMaster says. “I accepted his letters as gracious gifts.”

In 2003, the fiddlers trekked to Medjugorje, along with Ms. MacMaster’s fiddler-husband, Donnell Leahy. The village is a pilgrimage site for Catholics. The couple confided in the bishop, expressing their desire to have children, lots of children. He prayed over them; Ms. MacMaster is now pregnant with her fifth child.

“He said some beautiful things,” she says. “Every time I look at my children I am reminded of him.”

Music is another reminder. Bishop Faber’s funeral will be held Friday at St. Dunstan’s Basilica in Charlottetown. His old pen pal has been asked to play a tune.

“My Mum was saying to me, ‘You know, you are going to have to have a really amazing piece.’ But I don’t look at it that way.

“I think all I have to play is something simple. I have to have the intent, and the simplicity, and I think that will be more powerful.

“One of my favourite quotes of Bishop Faber is the line that he ended his homily with at our wedding. He said, ‘In the words of Father John Angus Rankin there are two things in life that are eternal — music and love.’

“I think about that a lot, and I agree.”

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