



Fox Rothschild Podcast

The Presumption of Innocence

Episode 61: A Call to Service: From Public Duty to Spiritual Advocacy

Featuring Matt Adams of Fox Rothschild and Father Joseph Ciccone

Matt: Welcome back to "The Presumption of Innocence," a podcast brought to you by the White-Collar Criminal Defense and Regulatory Compliance Practice at Fox Rothschild.

These days, he is Father Joseph Ciccone of St. Joseph Mission Church, a progressive Catholic church, combining traditional Catholic sacramental practices with certain nontraditional theosophical ideas that differ from the Roman Catholic Church. However, he is barred for life from applying for, or holding, public jobs. But today, such a life is really a distant memory for him. He spends his days ministering to his congregation, celebrating sacraments, undertaking social justice initiatives, and perhaps most importantly, being true to his real identity as an openly gay man in a committed relationship.

However, more than 25 years ago, he was a major political figure in Bergen County, New Jersey. Ascending there to the elected office of Bergen County Sheriff in 1998, he was the chief law enforcement officer of New Jersey's largest county. However, he was ostracized by his law enforcement colleagues for his then-perceived sexuality. And he had a very public fall from grace when he pleaded guilty to corruption charges surrounding the matter in which he obtained campaign contributions. Today, he's our guest on "The Presumption of Innocence." Welcome to the program, Father Joe.

Father Joe: Thank you, Matt, and it's great to be here. Thank you for that very detailed introduction.

Well done.

Matt: Well, we've had a number of guests on this show to tell their redemption stories, you know, evidencing that human toll of the criminal justice system on real people. Today, we're taking a familiar angle on that and exploring perhaps some of the even more significant toll when impacts with the criminal justice system happen to public officials in a very public way.

Let's rewind to the late nineties, if we could. Tell us a story about how you got involved in public life. How did you get involved in politics, and then bring us to the genesis of how you ultimately ran for county sheriff. Because a note for our audience: Unlike a lot of places around the country where you might be listening, county sheriff in New Jersey is the only elected law enforcement role in the state of New Jersey. There are no other elected law enforcement positions that exist. And for that matter, no judicial positions that are elected in New Jersey. So, Father Joe, how did you get involved?



Father Joe: Matt, before I jump 25 years back, I just want to explain from the present point of view why I'm actually on your program.

Matt: Sure.

Father Joe: I'm, you said a progressive Catholic priest and this is a life of service, helping others. But, nearly 40 years ago, that's what I started doing as a police officer. I started in my dad's footsteps. I am a product of parochial Catholic school. I put on a Catholic school uniform at four-years-old and I traded that in for a police uniform at 19.

But now, as a priest, I keep thinking about seminary and going back to school later in life after the horrors of this political attack and assault, and all of my seminary colleagues and friends, and even professors would ask, police to priest? What's that all about? Isn't that kind of odd? And my answer was very clear and very true: I joined the police department in 1980 because I wanted to serve others. I wanted to help make a difference. And Matt, I know you have some law enforcement background in your own family. I didn't get to do that. I think, as a cop, sadly, all I did was make other lives more complicated. Even though my heart was in the right place, it didn't work. And now as a priest, I am trying to save souls and I hope I'm doing a lot better with that.

Matt: So I, I appreciate that because it really does present the full circle moment of where you've been and, and, and where you are today. And your own words do far better service to that than my introduction. So, with that being said, now let's transition. You're a cop. And how long did you serve as a police officer before the idea of running for county sheriff came into your consciousness?

Father Joe: I like that point of view, "into my consciousness."

It wasn't on my radar at all, but --

Matt: That's what I knew, I knew that ahead of time. That's why I presented it this way.

Father Joe: I was a cop for 17 years. And I was doing great. I started off in Cliffside Park, one of the more beautiful towns in Bergen County, but it was the town that my dad was a cop in. And when I started off, I had to work for him first as a lieutenant and then as a captain.

And working for your dad isn't the most fun thing, 'cause I got yelled at a lot as a young cop. So I took a civil service test all over and I wound up in Fairview, the town next door. The 17 years went by in a blink of an eye, from walking a beat to being in a radio car, to being a detective, to being one of New Jersey's first DARE officers, being able to go into schools and help kids fight against drugs and alcohol abuse.

All during that time, I continued to go to school. And I had just finished a master's degree in criminal justice, although, Master of Science in Criminal Justice. And the teaching became a secondary role. So I was a full-time cop and full-time teacher and it was going great. I get promoted to sergeant in charge of the Detective Bureau. And because of the educational factor, the town, my friends in town asked me to run for the Board of Education. And that's nonpartisan, I thought that would be a, a good thing to do to help kids in the community.



Matt: So that, that's your foray into sort of elected office?

Father Joe: Yeah.

Matt: Is it a, a board seat, nonpartisan. Perhaps not as mud slinging or-- anything in today's political climate as mud slinging-- but perhaps the least of the political offices in terms of, people out there trying to besmirch people.

Father Joe: Matt, you said it. So true. It's supposed to be nonpartisan, and for the most part it really was. Fairview is a relatively poor community. When I started on the police department, it was about 90% Italian-American. It's now 90% Latino. So, it was a struggling community trying to make the best.

One of the great accomplishments I had in my first term in running on the Board of Education is we bought an old abandoned shoe factory and turned it into a beautiful elementary and preschool annex. It's still there today on Hamilton Avenue and Day Avenue in Fairview, with a beautiful bell top. And it was great.

I won again three years later, and life couldn't have been better.

Matt: You're making a name for yourself as a public official.

Father Joe: But that wasn't the point. I was actually just doing public service and a really good job at it. Full-time cop, full-time college professor at Berkeley College up in West Paterson teaching criminal justice. And then I ran the Department of Education. But the next town over, in Cliffside, uh, my dad was up for chief of police and I was all excited. Was a sergeant next door, dad was going to be the chief.

And then, lo and behold, they skip him and pass him over. And dad, who loved being a cop just as much as I did, left very upset. The mayor at that time was Mayor Jerry Calabrese. He was the longest standing mayor in the state of New Jersey. At that time, he was also the Democratic chairman for Bergen County.

So a year after dad walks away from a job that he loved, I get a call from this mayor. And he said, can you come to my office and talk to me? And to be honest, I was a little upset with him. I perceived that he had hurt my dad and my family. I go home and I tell my dad, and my dad said, you gotta go see, go see what's going on. I went and I sat in his office in the Cliffside Park municipal building. And he said to me, Governor Christie Whitman just appointed the county sheriff to run the Department of Corrections for the state of New Jersey. There's going to be a special election in eight months and we want to nominate you. And then he said, you probably won't win because the Democrat hasn't won in 25 years, but it'll be a good introduction to politics, and next year we can run you for Assembly or something like that.

I said, well, thank you for thinking of me, um, but I, I need to get back to you. And I went back to my office in Fairview and I called my dad. And, um, my dad was a former U.S. Marine, at that time a cop



for 30 years. He was rough and tough and great man. But he said, all right, get on a plane. Come down to Florida, we'll talk in person.

I said, I can't dad, I'm working!

Get on a plane!

And I could hear him pound the desk that he's sitting at.

Matt: I'm your father, dammit.

Father Joe: That's exactly what happened. Well, he didn't even have to say that. He just: Get on a plane! And I got on a plane.

Matt: I know the personality well.

Father Joe: To tell you the truth, I think we need more of those personalities today. We're lacking in that.

But anyway, I fly down to Florida and uh, we have the conversation that I had never had with my dad before. And I said, dad, as much as I want to do this, I don't think it's a good idea.

Why not? He said.

I said, I know you may have an idea, but I am actually dating someone. I am dating a young man that I just met. And, we're having a great life and ... but if that comes out, it's not going to be pretty.

Matt: Was that the first time you came out to your father?

Father Joe: It is. It is. And I really expected it to go very, very badly. His response was, it's not going to come out, don't worry about it. And I went back on that airplane, very confused. I went to see the mayor, the Democratic chairman, and um, I pulled out all the forms and started the campaign. Dad flew up and him-- my dad-- and my boyfriend at the time-- who is now my husband, we have been together 29 years-- ran this campaign.

I have never seen two people from such different backgrounds work so diligently, so loyally, and so beautifully together. And those eight months were grueling. It was every single day on the campaign trail speaking to almost a million people in Bergen County. And then lo and behold-- and those results didn't come in until 11:30 that evening-- I am the next sheriff of Bergen County

Matt: And just for our audience, right, Bergen County politics in New Jersey is about as rough and tumble as it gets. I mean, it is... all New Jersey politics has a little bit of edge to it, I could speak from experience on that. But Bergen County politics is known to be a little rough and tumble in terms of not only, you know, cross-party disputes, but even intraparty they are, you know, this is no small task, getting into one of these high-ranking offices in a county like this, the largest county in New Jersey.



Father Joe: Matt, I can't agree more. And sadly, I actually, even though I perceive what happened to me is a direct political attack, primarily because I was gay, but also because I rocked the boat. I changed politics in Bergen County like it hasn't been changed before. But it wasn't only the opposite party that went after me. It was my own party that put me under tremendous pressure.

Once I took office, you know, I did a full assessment of that department, 800 employees. And a survey went out. I wanted to know everyone's background, especially educational background. And of course who they were, how many women we have, how many Latinos we had, how many people of color. And all of those numbers were absolutely horrible.

Matt: A little ahead of your time in that regard.

Father Joe: Oh my God, it was tremendously challenging. Even though the Bergen County Jail held a majority of minority people in its walls, behind bars, the makeup was primarily white uneducated men in corrections. Those officers making over a hundred thousand a year. And of course I knew we needed some changes. One of the first changes I thought that was critical was recognizing we have a large Latino community in jail and we don't have any Spanish speaking officers working there. Handful. So I contacted civil service, it's a civil service department, and I said, I need Latino officers. How hard is that? They said, actually, sheriff, that's the easiest thing you do. All you do is request a list of bilingual officers and then we give a test and only those people that are able to speak Spanish can participate and take the test. Let's do that. And for the first time ever in New Jersey, a full academy class of all Latino officers. Worked out great.

Six months later I said, this is working so good, let's try it again. I said, I don't have any female officers. How do we do that? All we do is select the females on the list, and sure enough--

Matt: No, no female officers, and mind you, the County Sheriff's Offices as you're describing-- for purposes of our audience's context-- run the county correctional facilities where you have male and female correctional inmates, yeah.

Father Joe: Absolutely. Thousands of them.

Matt: So no, no women working in the women's jail.

Father Joe: We did have a handful. I think there were 12 when I started. But ironically, most of them had gone up through the ranks and they were bosses. So we did not have enough women working in the pods or working in housing where these female people who are being incarcerated were.

And you know, this is a county facility, which means primarily people are, are being housed there for minor events: Shoplifting, mostly drug or alcohol abuse. We have a tremendous amount of domestic violence. But we also do holding, so people that are convicted of major crimes up to murder are housed there before they're transferred to a state prison. But the jail is broken up into different housing units --except for the female unit. They're all together. Someone who could be there for a simple shoplifting charge to someone there who stabbed two or three people. It was the most challenging environment that you could imagine.



Matt: And soon after these reforms that you began to institute, you caught wind that you were being looked at, investigated, and that really set in motion how this all came crashing down. So talk to us about the first time you came to learn of the fact that you were being criminally investigated and what kind of impact that had on you.

We've heard from lots of different guests on this program about how they first heard. Some heard years before they were ultimately prosecuted. Some heard minutes before they ultimately ended up in handcuffs. What's your story?

Father Joe: I was in office for a little over three months. And those first three or four months were unbelievably hard. There was a major escape my first week as the sheriff, because they were so unhappy that I was there, they, I truly believed, let it happen. I had listened to audio tapes after I was elected of the PBA meetings that were taking place prior to my election. Where the PBA President-- that I got listen to-- would be yelling at hundreds of correctional offices, we have to do everything we can to make sure this [words bleeped] doesn't get elected. So I knew I was walking into a hornet's nest. But I walked in and I took over and things were going well. Three and a half months after I took office-- and I took office with no public knowledge of me being a gay man. And I actually, I hired a whole bunch of people. I was able to do that. And one of them was the person that I was seeing personally,. Even though it is called-- I would, not nepotism, I wasn't married. I just had met this person. He was overly qualified. He had a master's degree in human resources, and that's what I needed. So he started --

Matt: And, and you, and you trusted him.

Father Joe: I, he worked on the campaign and that's how politics works. I wish it didn't work that way, but we see it every single day on the news today. So he starts working, everything's going great, and then at 64-years-old, three and a half months into it, my dad, major heart attack and he's dead.

Matt: Oh my God.

Father Joe: And his prophecy that don't worry, it's not going to come out, did not come out while I was alive. Three months later, I made channel two, channel four, channel seven. Bergen County Sheriff hires his lover at the Bergen County Sheriff's Department. And my partner-- my husband at this point-- and we were both young. I was in my early thirties. My partner-- and I'm not divulging his name because he's a public school teacher and I just don't think that's appropriate-- was not out to his family. They got to see him come out on all the New York news stations. And it was heartbreaking.

Matt: Do you think that was orchestrated by the enemies that you had? These PBA presidents that were saying, we can't elect this, you know, using pejorative terms about you, and as you've described.

Father Joe: The PBA itself called all the news channels to do that. They brought documentation for our voter registration that we both lived together, copies of his sheriff's department ID card, they brought that all to the news stations. I drove into work that next day, and there's a four-story parking



garage at the Bergen County Justice Complex. There were four sheets hanging there saying, "Gay Joe must go."

Matt: My God.

Father Joe: You know, Matt, I, I left something out, as when I was a cop. Aside from being the first DARE officer, I became the first --'cause the law changed-- I became the first bias crime officer in the town of Fairview. Sent me to the training down to the Attorney General's Office, understanding what hate crime is.

Matt: Now, you're the victim of a hate crime at your own place of work where you're the boss.

Father Joe: You could not have said that better. Thank you, counselor. That's exactly what happened. But we keep operating. But I did, counselor, just what you probably intimated. I called the Attorney General's Office like, this is happening, this is a problem. And as soon as I did that, that's when the investigation started against me.

Matt: So who was it that was investigating you specifically?

What agency?

Father Joe: Great question. Anytime something happens with public officials or public corruption-- and I hate to use that word-- it is either the Attorney General's office, it becomes a federal event.

It was not. It was the Bergen County prosecutor appointed, Republican appointee by Christie Whitman, who was only the prosecutor for a short time. And we had been going head-to-head at the prior freeholder meeting a month before. He was telling me how to actually run the jail. And I, at that point, perceived I had nearly 20 years police experience. I have not only a master's in criminal justice, but a, a doctorate in public administration and understanding my role. And I got a little heated and I, I said something I, I, I wish I hadn't said, because that's when it all blew up. And I said, Mr. Prosecutor, with all due respect, you were a real estate attorney literally three months ago, you don't know anything about this.

And I laughed. And so did the, the news cameras and everybody else that were there. He didn't laugh. And it was that prosecutor who went after me with a vengeance.

Matt: So, by today's standard, hopefully, they, they would never keep that investigation and they would refer it out to a Attorney General's Office team that was less connected to the actual group of people that they were investigating. Because you, for all intents and purposes, the county prosecutor and the county sheriff are on the same team. They're working side by side every day. Their offices are not far from one another. They are supposed to be a coordinated effort and not having this type of diametrically opposed intimidation going on.

What was the human toll of that intimidation? And then we'll segue into sort of the way that these charges came to be. ,But when you go into your place of business and you see that kind of hatred being spewed on bedsheets, hanging from the rafters. I'm visualizing that parking deck, I've parked



in it many, many times. And it's sort of a very institutionally kind of somber place. You, you get in, you park your car and you go walk into what is a very lovely courthouse with a lot of history.

But what kind of toll did that take on you personally to have to try to do a job subjected to that kind of hate?

Father Joe: I was used to hate as a cop. That's why I volunteered to be a bias crime officer, because it was so real and so poignant. As I mentioned, I became a cop in 1980. And 1983 is the height of the AIDS epidemic. And I'm watching people dying. As a cop, I'm responding to AIDS cases where our volunteer ambulance call would say, "I'm not going in that house. They're gay." And I couldn't say anything then. It was something that scared me to death. And you know what, you asked a question earlier about, was that the first time that my dad and I had the conversation about who I was. And it was the first time we did, but it's not the first time that who I was, was notable.

My dad had a younger brother. His name was Sal, Sam Ciccone. Sam was a Fairview cop before I was. Dad became a cop in 1960. Uncle Sam became a cop in 1965. He was amazing. He was my favorite relative if not one of my favorite people in all life. And Uncle Sam was so talented, so creative. Was one of the best police officers I've ever seen. I don't find this out until years later, but like me-- because they claim this is all genetic, it's not a choice-- Uncle Sam was gay. But in the 1960s, even a thousand times worse than the 1980s. And Uncle Sam leaves after 15 years. He's actually on a fire escape on Day Avenue and Anderson Avenue, chasing a burglary suspect and has a breakdown and can't determine, um, the criminals from the police. And he leaves. And that breakdown had very little to do with police work. It had to do with who he was as a gay man.

Uncle Sam left. He went back to Ann Arbor, Michigan, back to school. And he wrote a play. He wrote a play called "Nothing to Report." His life as a gay cop in New Jersey. He did that with another sergeant-- he was a sergeant at the time-- Charles Cochrane, who would form the New York City Gay Officer's Action League (GOAL). The play goes off Broadway and it's a play about his life but the characters were him as a police sergeant, gay lover, his brother who is a police captain, his wife Kitty-- that's my mom's name-- who maybe drank too much. And then his other brother who's a Catholic priest.

Matt: Wow.

Father Joe: So that play. And then one other character is his gay nephew who just joins the police department. So that's how I am outed to the world on, off Broadway. When I got to work after that opening night, all of those reviews from *The Daily News* and *The New York Post* were taped to my locker in the police locker room, along with various female items that women use when they menstruate hanging on the locker.

And then I got in my police car and I went to work. And I'm not exaggerating: For almost a year. I would call for backup or assistance and if they came at all, it would be 10 or 15 minutes in a one-square mile of Fairview. But then, the next year I get promoted to sergeant, the next year the bias crime law takes place. And I thought I saw the end to hate, but I did not.



Matt: And here you are with this massive promotion from local municipal law enforcement officer to an elected sheriff, the chief law enforcement officer of the county. And you're now experiencing that very same hate. And frankly, this time they are upping the ante, because this is no longer just not responding to calls for backup. This is a full throated criminal investigation initiated against you. And you, you told that story, Father, of, of, you know, getting into the parking deck and seeing that hateful rhetoric. Was that the same day that you learned that the investigation was happening? How, how did that come to be? When did you first know after three months on the job as the sheriff that they were coming at you with what appeared to be a politically motivated investigation?

Father Joe: I go undaunted. I keep fighting. I keep standing up for what was right and it was working. We were doing great work. It wasn't until a year and a half after that that I endured all this. And it happened-- so sad.

Matt: No indication, right? No indication. No rumor mill. You are in law enforcement. I mean the Bergen County Sheriff's Office and the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office-- I don't know about that time, but they're in the same building.

Father Joe: Right next door. His office was right next door to mine.

Matt: They keep it a well-guarded secret, just as much as you've tried to keep, at the time, your own sexuality.

Father Joe: What the prosecutor did was he rented space in Whippany, at the Armory, and literally a whole investigative unit costing hundreds of thousands of dollars started focusing two counties away on my staff. Not on me, per se. The first arrest happened over a year later. And it happened -- so sad. It was so dreadful. A really great officer, John Inglese, he was my training officer. He is supervising the female class, the first ever in the state of New Jersey, um, at the Bergen County Police Academy. And they come up and arrest him in front of all of those cadets, just to prove a point.

Matt: And what did they arrest him for?

Father Joe: I don't know. The charges were all, everybody else's charges were dropped.

Matt: So they squeeze him early on. And at the point, you know, in the typical law enforcement fashion-- I'm astonished, by the way, you tell me they have this outpost where they're conducting the investigation from, in Whippany. Because the difference between Whippany and Bergen County, easily 30 miles, two counties away. During traffic it could take you an hour to get from Bergen County to Hackensack to Whippany. So they were doing this as a well-funded and closely guarded secret so that you didn't find out what was going on.

Father Joe: And once they arrested poor John Inglese and then they arrest another one of my strong confidants. But before that happened, I do make a mistake. This podcast, which I love, I've listened to so many of them, "The Presumption of Innocence," I made mistakes, there is no doubt about it. But what I actually am charged with has nothing to do with the investigation whatsoever.



What happened after my dad died-- because it just seemed natural. Dad was the campaign manager. It was his idea. His name was on the reelect or the elect Ciccone for sheriff. And after he died, one of the lawyers said, well, if your mom's able to do it, that would be great. She's a businesswoman and that way you could keep it right in-house.

And I asked mom, and mom said, of course, whatever I could do, I don't have to do a lot of work, do I? I said, no, no, no. We have accountants doing it. We have the lawyers. All you have to do, it's your signature. So mom was the campaign manager for my reelection. So before John Inglese, is arrested, I'm in my office-- and I'm a busy guy, the Sheriff's Department is a busy place. Not only the jail. We run in the courthouse, we run BCI. Every major crime that happens in those seven municipalities, we go there. We investigate. We take photos. So it's nonstop work.

Two of my key personnel that I had hired, one I knew from Fairview for many years. One was one of my former students at Monmouth University when I was teaching there. They were unbelievably dedicated but they were young and inexperienced. They come into my office. "Um Sheriff, we have a problem."

All right. Sit down, relax. What's going on?

We're actually going through the campaign finance reports that's due next week, and there were five or six people that gave you more than they were supposed to. And so even though I was a relatively newbie into politics, I knew what--

Matt: So, so beyond the campaign max, the, the whatever the limit was at that time for an individual to contribute?

Father Joe: I believe it was. And again, because that's not my, we have accountants, I believe it was \$2,500. So they had gone over the max. And I said, that's an elect violation. If we get caught, you have to give the money back. No big deal. It's only five people. We're not going to get caught. Just, let's focus on the crimes that we're dealing with. We shouldn't even be talking about that in this office.

Matt: Perhaps a mistake.

Father Joe: Oh, a huge mistake. A huge mistake. Then they arrest John Inglese a week later. Then they arrest one of my key people a week later. And I'm, like, ready to fight big time.

And then the Bergen County prosecutor did a, an amazing strategic move. He seized my campaign reelection accounts, nearly a million dollars of campaign funds that we were using legitimately to get reelected. He seized them and took them away. So now I have zero money to operate.

Matt: At this point, as so many individuals do, because the prosecutorial authorities have such robust pre-action forfeiture and seizure tools through statutes at their behest, you knew you were in the crosshairs by now, no doubt, right?



Father Joe: I knew it was a major problem. I called a family friend-- the prior Bergen County prosecutor-- Jay Fahy, to represent me, comes in the office, but I have no money. He said, don't worry about this. I'm going to handle it, yes, I'm taking the case. I sign all the papers.

Literally comes in the next day with a tape recorder and plays the tape. And the tape is my conversation with those two young officers, literally a week before, telling them, don't worry about it. If we get caught, we give the money back.

Matt: And bingo, they have you in the crosshairs for a conspiracy.

Father Joe: Well, he didn't say that. He said, actually, uh, they have your mother in the crosshairs. She's the campaign manager. You just said that this was okay. Unless you resign and plead guilty, in 48 hours they're going to arrest your mother.

And I said, what options do we have? He said, I think you have no options. He said, do you have any personal finances?

I worked hard all my life, Matt. I had two, if not three full-time jobs through this whole thing. And I was very fortunate. I had nearly \$250,000 in IRAs and all that stuff. And Jay said, put that into an escrow account at my law firm. They can't touch any of that. And then we'll hash that out after this is done. But my recommendation is, to plead guilty. And, then we'll, we'll walk away from this. They, they will give you your ability to get your police pension, you have 20 years in, and then you start a new life.

I said, what am I pleading guilty to? And he had three charges. The first was a public corruption charge. And I said, absolutely not. I never took a penny. None of this money was used inappropriately. This was going to get us reelected. What I did plead guilty to was, an, and you'll know this, Matt, was an old 2a statute from the 1800s called Demand of Campaign Contributions from Public Employees, that I forced the Sheriff's offices to go to my parties.

Matt: Wow.

Father Joe: And that's, that's what I pled guilty to, um, and walked away.

Matt: What was that decision like? You've shared a little bit about it. You've, you've said you weren't going to acknowledge corruption, but they surely wanted you for corruption. They surely wanted you for something bigger than they ultimately got you for, as is the case in so many investigations. It sounds to me like they went for the home run with the outpost, three counties away at umpteen hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some real cloak-and-dagger stuff that was going on at the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office just to take down somebody that they were threatened by, whether it was because of your sexuality or whatever. How agonizing was that decision to actually go in and say, okay, you want me on all this other stuff, but you've got me on this tiny piece of it.

What was that like?



Father Joe: Matt, to be honest, it wasn't agonizing at all. I knew I was doing something very appropriate, especially in protecting my mother. I miss my sainted mother beyond anyone's wildest imagination. And I did not tell this story, literally, until she died 16 years later. This was a total secret. Because I had immunity after I took a plea deal, but my mother didn't. So I kept this a secret until she died. But I also --

Matt: So they squeezed you by going after your mother?

Father Joe: Oh, it was brilliant. A brilliant police strategy. And you know, I, I often say that God has a sense of humor. Make no mistake, I was a rough and tough and brutal cop, and I put so many people in jail. And in retrospect, I could have been so much more compassionate, so much more helpful to people. But I saw the dark side of law enforcement like I never expected to see it.

So my life work now, especially as a priest, is being an advocate for criminal justice reform and to really to try to help so many people. Your podcast, "The Presumption of Innocence," to help the thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands of innocent people that are actually in jail that shouldn't be there, because that is our criminal justice system today.

Matt: And you have the experience of knowing what happens when the criminal justice system runs amuck. Whether it's trying to use criminal prosecution to achieve a political end, or, perhaps even worse, to use law enforcement as a means by which to discriminate against a person based on, you know, who they are. What are the residual ramifications of your conviction that carry forward with you today?

Father Joe: Matt, you hit it in the opening statement. You called it barred from life from holding public office. Although that is true, I am barred from holding public office in the state of New Jersey. I ironically, because of, allegedly, I made my officers go to my political parties, I am a convicted felon for life, and that is the most horrible experience I could imagine.

You know, I want to tell a, a good and, and sad story as well. I am a strong advocate of New Jersey's Governor, Phil Murphy. Actually in his reelection bid, after he got reelected, he was supposed to have his prayer reinaugural breakfast at the cathedral in Newark. And allegedly, a month before, the bishop, the Roman Catholic Bishop of New Jersey, his office contacted the governor and said, unless you change your stance on women's reproductive rights, you are not welcome in the cathedral and we will not be praying for you on that day. And lo and behold, by a miracle of God, and my dear friend from the oldest synagogue in the state of New Jersey connected me to the governor's office. And I led Governor Murphy's inaugural return to office for his second campaign as governor.

The governor has invited me to several events at the mansion in Princeton with interfaith groups hoping to fight for social justice. But sadly, even though he did something so brave and so powerful, Governor Murphy pardoned almost 40 people a few months ago, including three women convicted of murder. And even though my pardon for this terrible trauma that I've been through has been on every governor's desk since Governor McGreevey, Governor Murphy hasn't signed it yet. I am still hopeful that God is whispering in his ear and that fate will take its turn. But we have to find more



governors and more public officials willing to fight the criminal justice system, willing to say, this is wrong, this needs to be fixed and this is how we do it.

Matt: What would a pardon mean for you?

Father Joe: At this point in my life? I literally celebrated, uh, my 65th year yesterday. I am up for retirement now for my priestly work. All it means is personal redemption. I have no interest whatsoever to return to public office, or to ever do something so sad that doesn't work anymore, but it would be able to look in the mirror and to say that at least somebody else could acknowledge that this was wrong, that this was a mistake, that this was based on hate.

Matt: In the waning minutes of our time together today: You're a man of faith and that's apparent. But I want to talk about a different type of faith. I want to talk about a faith in the criminal justice system. We live in a very divisive society. Almost daily, peoples' faith in the criminal justice system is tested because of goings on at the national level, state levels, things we read about in the news. Not tough enough on crime, too tough on crime. Too much due process, not enough due process. I don't know if that's such a thing, but I've heard people talk about that. Certainly nothing in my vernacular.

But how do you not lose faith in the criminal justice system having been through an ordeal that all roads seem to point to at least some less than wholesome motivations being at least the initial reason why you were investigated? Because are you even investigated if you're not living life as a gay man? Are you not investigated if you're not a Democrat trying to unseat a bunch of Republicans? Are you not even investigated if you are not trying to disrupt the status quo?

What's it like? Do you have faith in the criminal justice system after experiencing all of those different things that could form the basis for anyone to just throw up their hands and say, this thing doesn't work, this system's broken, and just live in sort of despair?

Father Joe: Matt, that is such a beautiful question. And the answer is a very, very simple one. I am a person of deep and great faith, not just in God, but in our system of democracy. The United States of America is an amazing place to live and be and work and love. But you know what happened to me literally 25 years ago? Some of my gay friends have at the time said it's an anomaly. Things have changed. Look at the freedoms we have now.

Make no mistake, all of those freedoms are in jeopardy and not just for the LGBT community, but the people of the Jewish faith, for people of the Middle East. All of those values are at risk right now.

This podcast alone is a clear indication that people are listening worldwide to the injustices of the world. And that innocence is still a factor that we all have to take, not for granted, but to take so seriously in our day-to-day life.

Matt: Well, Father, thank you so much. We're talking with Father Joseph Ciccone, St. Joseph's Mission Church, a progressive Catholic church combining Catholic sacramental practices with nontraditional theosophical ideas that differ from the Roman Catholic Church and offered some



insights into those today, Father, as sort of your basis for surviving your own personal ordeals and struggles as it pertained to your contact with the criminal justice system.

Your story is definitely unique, but it's really not, because you can take this fact pattern and you can change out the person, you can change out the allegations. But for as long as there is power, that will corrupt. And for as long as there are hate-filled people that will use who someone is against them, we're going to have other stories like this. And I hope that they come on the program and talk about it because it's, it's important to learn. It's important to understand specifics about how this ordeal unfolded and how such an investigation for a largely nominal paperwork mix-up has impacted your life and could potentially impact the lives of others. So thank you so much for being with us.

That's all the time we have on today's episode of "The Presumption of Innocence." Until next time. We'll see you then.

Father Joe is the author of the book ["Happily Ever After!: A Guide to a Holy Marriage \(And it Doesn't Have to be in a Church\)"](#)