



† Camp St. John
Switzerland, Florida

50th Anniversary
1962-2012

Recollections of Shared Struggles at Camp St. John

1962 - 2012

by
Thomas J. Aglio



What would become of us?

It was 1962, a half a century ago. They traveled from the South. I traveled from the North. Each of us on an unfamiliar journey, searching for vastly different new life experiences. They left behind their country of origin, family, boyhood friends, and familiar surroundings. I abandoned a big city environment and the perks of a young professional advancing in a career in medical care. We travelers, sixty-plus boys from Cuba and one young man from Massachusetts, were on the path to a collision of diverse uncertainties in a strange new place. Their trip was far less voluntary than mine. They were sent. I was called. They travelled alone, frequently referred to as "unaccompanied minors". I was with my wife and three young daughters. They were age 15. I was age 30. We had little in common, except that we both spoke a different 'foreign' language. Under the auspices of *Operation Pedro Pan*, we were headed to "The Camp" near Jacksonville. They would arrive before I did. They were called "occupants". I was called "Administrator". None of us could predict what fate had in store for us.

My initial visit to Camp St. John in January was with Fr. John Lenihan, a local pastor and the Director of Catholic Charities in Jacksonville. He had travelled from his studies at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. to introduce me to the staff and young residents already at the Camp. They gathered around with inquisitive curiosity. The Irish priest told them who I was. However, he did not say what I was, except: "He will be taking care of you". I wondered about his choice of words. I had no written job description, only the conversations during my hiring process. I knew the ultimate outcome of my work, but knew little about the steps to achieve that goal successfully.



Tom Aglio teaches student pediatric nurses a course on the social aspects of medical care. The course presented the dignity of every patient, compassion, proper bedside manner, and personal integrity in nursing.

St. Vincent Hospital, Worcester, Massachusetts 1960

The enclave of Cuban adolescents stared at me dressed in suit and tie. They were silent. I felt that I was being x-rayed by their piercing eyes. I wondered in astonishment: Who are all these 'look-alikes'? It was the same as meeting twins for the first time, except that there were dozens of them. A grim and gruesome thought raced through my mind. What sinister man had cloned all these Cuban youths and placed them here? They appeared to be identical, with no distinguishing characteristics, no identifying differences, and no name badges. I abruptly experienced déjà vu. I was transported back to an amphitheater classroom in a school of nursing where I taught. Dozens of student nurses were lined in rows of seats facing me. All look-alikes in starched white uniforms (this was the 50s), with striped blue shirts and white collars, white shoes and stockings, and a white cap with black stripes on their short hair. I saw the group, but not the individuals. I recalled that I had overcome that dilemma more than once before. I sorted out those nurses, learned their names and what made each one unique. I would do that again in this place. I approached the boys and inquired: "Tell me your name." Slowly, I observed different sizes, shapes, color of eyes and hair, voices, smiles and frowns. Soon the differences out-numbered the similarities. Yes, I would sort them out and know them individually. It was essential, if I was to achieve success.

Prior to this first encounter, I had been given lists with all the names of the camp "occupants". I studied those names countless times, practicing the pronunciation and memorizing as many of the sixty that I could, but I had no face to put with each name. Now I could begin that arduous task. But alas, there was an obstacle in my path. I discovered soon that the majority of the boys had nicknames for one another.



The Manor - *La Casa Grande*

A few were familiar, like *Charlie* for *Carlos*, *Pepe* for *Jose*, *Tony* for *Antonio*, and *Mike* for *Miguel*. Then there were *Lorito*, *Perry*, *Para*, *Chico*, *El Topo*, *Gallego*, and *Diente*, to name a few. All the rest were an enigma to me. I listened intently, but could not understand, pronounce, or spell the words they called each other. It was like a code, a sign of their in-group familiarity, which served them well in their bonding. Later, I would discover that not all those nicknames were complimentary or flattering. I often wondered how they referred to me in my absence. What was their nickname for me? To this day, I have not learned that. Will it be divulged after fifty years?

We came together at Camp St. John on Route 13 nestled in the pines and scrub oaks on the shore of the St. John's River in Switzerland, Florida. It was so far away that it might as well have been Switzerland in Europe. It was isolated, rural, and seemed detached from the world around it. This forsaken place bore absolutely no resemblance to my former workplace in a tall, modern, 700-bed hospital. The single story buildings here were non-descript. They housed the sleeping quarters and showers for several dozen Cuban boys. These structures blended in with the surroundings as though they had been painted camouflage. The shade from the trees kept the camp dark, but thankfully short of dreary. A stately two-story "Manor" graced the grounds with a splash of splendor from years past. It had a beautiful chapel, spacious parlors, and numerous bedrooms. I lived in that sparsely-furnished building briefly until my family arrived in Jacksonville. The junior-Olympic-size pool was nearby, as well as the "Green House", aka *La Casa Verde*, (a small private-type residence, later to house certain "older" boys). There was a multi-function building with a large bell on a stand out front. The building hosted

...we embarked
on an *adventure*
which would test
our *endurance*...

the kitchen, dining space, study hall, recreation, and other impromptu activities. My last encounter with all the boys would take place here many months later, minutes after that gathering bell was rung for the last time.

Such were our surroundings, as we embarked on an adventure which would test our endurance, strengthen our resolve to survive, give birth to a new camaraderie, and build relationships which would last a lifetime. We were in this together and we needed one another in order to succeed. These brave, home-sick Cuban youth clung to each other, developed bonds of mutual dependency, shared their fears, and confronted their loneliness. They found solace in their common struggle to make sense of an unfathomable series of complicated political events in their homeland. There was a sense of security in numbers. Individually, they struggled, but together, they somehow survived. Alone, they cried and brooded. As a group, they thrived, laughed, teased, and made the best of their situation. They longed for *mama* and her *abrazo*. They pined for the *fuertza* of their now-absent *papa*. These stalwart young men recalled their yesterdays in Cuba, full of familiar people and places and events. And they dreaded their tomorrows here, full of fears, unknowns, and strangely different customs. What would become of them?

I myself was not immune to these anxieties. In the beginning, this was awkward, unsettling, and scary to this city guy. It was counter culture at its worst. Nothing was familiar. To say that I was unprepared for the task at hand would be the understatement of the year. Oh, how often I wished that I could parade the halls of the hospital on "grand rounds" with the rest of the medical team.

Now, I was walking the narrow path between the bunk beds of the dorms in the camp. I knew how to perform my duties for patients on the pediatric floor, or in the emergency room, or at the podium in a classroom full of student nurses. However, I was not called to be a clinician or an educator. I mused: just what am I expected to do? I had to find my niche. And I had to do it now, lest I lose the opportunity to connect with my wards quickly. And then, the Holy Spirit landed on my shoulder and told me to lead with my heart, not with my head. With that prompting, I forged ahead into the abyss of seeking ways to bring love, security, purpose, strength, safety, and hope to 60 scared teenagers. I was determined that they would no longer be referred to as "unaccompanied minors". To me, it was a demeaning term, worse than 'waif'. No, I would accompany them on the first steps of their journey to their new life in their new country. I would open doors, take their hand, lead them through, and set them free. I decided at once that, in subtle ways, I would deinstitutionalize this place. And then I wondered, what would become of me?

Not long after I arrived at the Camp, I was summoned by Fr. Bryan Walsh to the headquarters of the Pedro Pan Operation in Miami. It would be my first meeting with the director of this mammoth effort, which would eventually rescue 14,000 youth from the oppressive regime in Cuba. I would attend an "orientation" to learn about the program, and tour the camps and other local facilities caring for thousands of "Cuban refugee children". I arrived in the evening. Fr. Walsh escorted me to my room. He said, "Be downstairs for seven o'clock Mass. You will be my server. Good Night". I repeated the words to myself, hoping that I had misunderstood him. Be his Mass server? After all, I was 30 years old, not 15.



1st file Francisco Fuentes 2nd file

1 J. Chan

2 Lopez Amador

3 Jose G. Gaudin

4 Alberto Lopez

5 Apacuro, Manuel

6 Madrid Mrs

7 Thomas J Aglio

8 Juan Pacheco (mexico)

9 Dominguez

10 P. S. (100)

11 Henry

12 LOPEZ MAZA

13 Lopez's Son

14 Ramirez (Gallardo)

15 Jose Lopez

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18

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1 Guillermo (Rosa)

2 GERMANY ALVAREZ

3 Ruben Alvarez

4 Emilio Mann

5 Gabriel Dargos

6 E. Sorensen

7 Edmund Rey (Acito)

8 J. Suarez

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Did this man actually realize what he was asking? The anxiety about language barriers had struck me again. (This was prior to the Second Vatican Council. Mass was still said in Latin.) I thought about the boys back in the Camp and their language struggles. I did not sleep well. Fr. Walsh appeared for Mass wearing a red chasuble vestment. Yikes! That is the color worn for Mass on the feast days of the martyrs who died for their faith. I thought, this is not a good omen for me. I knelt beside him at "the foot of the altar". He spoke: "*Introibo ad altare Dei*". (I will go to the altar of God). I prayed that the Holy Spirit would whisper my responses to me. And suddenly the words came forth from my lips: "*Ad deum, qui laetificat juventutem meam*". (To God, who gives joy to my youth). At once, I knew. If I can get through this, I can also communicate with the boys at the Camp.

And thus it began. I performed the mundane tasks of the job. I maintained records, reviewed budgets, devised procedures and projects, and sorted countless papers, files and reports. I fulfilled roles as counselor, confidant, and rarely as disciplinarian. I was accountable to the Diocese, answerable to the Archbishop, and responsible for the smooth operation of the Camp. Despite the large number of residents in the Camp, we had a very small staff, unlike the large number of personnel working in some of the similar facilities in the Miami area. There were no more than eight or nine of us at any point and several were part-time. I was one of a team whose other members had narrow responsibilities for essential services. Although they performed admirably, I observed that they saw themselves as one small part of the big picture. They were geared to the group, not to the individuals.

I would be the *hub*,
not a *spoke*,
on this *wheel*
of opportunity...

I vowed not to take that approach. I would be the hub, not a spoke, on this wheel of opportunity to unconditionally accept and love these boys as my own. My goal was to get close to them, to display by my behavior that I was safe, and had their best interests at heart. I was not their coach, not their teacher, not even their friend. It was imperative that they would grow to trust me, since I already knew that the success of my last task at the Camp depended on that. I often thought about what their parents in Cuba would want me to be for their sons. Hence, slowly, I became *PADRE SECUNDO* (second father) to dozens of teenagers. It was an awesome responsibility. Like the boys, I struggled.

The clock ticked. Time passed. The process had begun. The boys knew little of what was in store for them. And I knew way too much. I had to prepare them for an event that I could not yet share with them. It was as though I was working undercover. It was all for the best, but the period of transition would be difficult, full of unanticipated developments, and fraught with obstacles to easy fulfillment. Much would happen before the day of reckoning several months away when they would bid each other farewell and depart these premises. It was clear to me that I would not be a spectator in the bleachers watching them play the drama of their life. I would be on the field with them, shoulder to shoulder pushing to victory. I recall being asked by one of the boys, "What do you do, when we are at school?" Little did they know!



Chapel in the Manor

Along the way during those months, there were numerous events which were part and parcel of life in the camp. One day, we had a major fire on the grounds. The pine needles burned hot and fast. Rumors abounded about how it started. The *alarma de incendio* was sounded and the local volunteer fire department down the road responded. But the "bomberos" were the boys and me, armed with hoses, brooms, and shovels. For the boys, it was a welcome diversion, and mostly carefree excitement. For me, it was fright that the entire Camp could incinerate. They laughed. I scowled. And then, I joined in their delight that they had prevented a catastrophe. I needed not to have worried. They were of one collective mind to save their home. It was always like that; all for one, one for all.

At another time, chicken pox broke out and claimed several victims. The little infirmary in the Manor was full to capacity. Our part-time nurse was busy for days on end tending to their needs. In all, more than twenty boys were infected as it spread. Some cases were serious. We purchased calamine lotion in very large quantities. More than once, a boy would whisper to me, " I am really itchy 'down there', and I don't want the nurse to put that stuff on me there". I taught them how to do it themselves. The building of their trust in me was taking hold.

Then there was the visit to the Camp by Archbishop Hurley. He came to administer confirmation to many of the boys that Spring. Our live-in priest, Padre Jaime Lara, was nervously busy with all the arrangements and preparations for the event to be held in the chapel in the Manor. I attempted to instruct the boys on their behavior during the Archbishop's visit.

The orders were: maintain proper decorum, keep your voices down, do not speak unless spoken to, and above all, address the Archbishop as: "YOUR GRACE". (That episcopal salutation, no longer used, was rare even in those days when most bishops preferred the expression "Your Excellency"). The Archbishop was a man of small stature, but he displayed a strong presence. I was about to meet my ultimate boss for the first time. By reputation, he was serious, formal, and authoritative. Even before he arrived, I was intimidated by him. His black Pontiac came into view, a young priest at the wheel as his chauffeur. The driver greeted me as he stopped in the driveway close to the Manor. The boys gathered, curious and attentive. The driver opened the door of the car and the archbishop emerged with a faint smile on his lips. Suddenly one of the boys approached, and with raised voice exclaimed, "Hi Grace, How's it going?" I was absolutely mortified. I wanted to disappear. The priest-driver winked at me which eased my pain somewhat. There would be recriminations later.

After the ceremony, the archbishop asked me to walk with him. We took the path away from the Manor. He removed his signature straw hat and repeatedly twirled it a foot in the air as we strolled. He was gentle and soft-spoken. My fears were allayed as I listened carefully to his brief message. He confided that he would soon announce the plan for me to place all the boys in foster homes at the end of the school year, and close the Camp. He added, " I have heard great reports about your work here. An important assignment awaits you in Orlando at the conclusion of your responsibilities here." A chill ran through me. *Mis hijos* were about to be separated from each other, and I would be separated from them. The secrets would soon be divulged. Reality jolted me. My great task was near. Like them, I struggled.

There were countless mischievous incidents and events during those months. I imagine that these boys, now grown adults, take delight in recalling them. They can report on: "stealing the kitchen", contraband cigarettes, pranks with snakes, mysterious disappearance of deodorant, "escapes" from the grounds, late for the bus, homework chicanery, pool infractions, and much more. Mostly, I appeared to ignore these issues unless any involved serious risky behavior. Little was out of my line of vision. Condemnation and retribution were not conducive to my goal of building a deep trust level with all these rambunctious youngsters. So, I left the discipline to others. Sadly, it occasionally resulted in bamboo switches across the backs of the legs.

In the winter months, all the boys travelled to Jacksonville to Bishop Kenny High School. It was a long daily bus ride. A few recent arrivals attended a local adult education class instead. It was not suited to their needs. Not many concessions were made for the Cuban students at Bishop Kenny. Everything was in English, sink or swim. It was remarkable to witness the improvement in their language skills. Most had arrived from Cuba knowing no English. It was a struggle for them. They would agree that they had to learn this new language, if they were to survive here. However, once out of the classroom, they reverted to Spanish.

I was experiencing a similar language struggle. I connected with their frustrations and challenges. I arrived knowing very little Spanish. So, I began a bluff. I pretended to have the ability to communicate with the boys in Spanish. They were told they had to speak only English to me in order to learn it faster. I understood some of their speech in Spanish among each other.

A few facts about 1962

John F. Kennedy was President.

The first WalMart store opened in Arkansas.

The United States Navy SEALs was established.

Gas was 28 cents per gallon.

Average cost of a new car was \$3100.

Average annual income was \$5500.

and:

Pope John XXIII excommunicated Fidel Castro.

Cuba and the Soviet Union signed a trade pact.

The Organization of American States
suspended Cuba's membership.

Soviet Union sends arms to Cuba.

U-2 flight over Cuba takes pictures of
Soviet nuclear weapons.

The Cuban missile crisis began.

The United States bans all Cuban imports and exports.

Cuba releases the last of the participants
in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Occasionally, I commented in English about what I heard in Spanish. Soon they believed that I actually knew their language, but chose not to use it for their own good. In reality, I was seriously working to learn Spanish. However, I never spoke it. On those rare occasions, when I needed their attention or compliance, I would shout sternly: *callate la boca, ven aca rapido, or silencio*. All those months, the phrase that I uttered more than any other was "*hablen ingles*"! Most of them believed I was bi-lingual. The truth would be revealed later.

Periodically, I went to Jacksonville to shop for items the boys needed. For some inexplicable reason, deodorant was always on the list. I never figured that out. J. C. Penny granted me a discount to purchase large amounts of socks, T shirts, and underwear. It was like a party when the items were distributed. The dorms were rather drab. Row after row of bunk beds had monotonous coverings. On the spur of the moment while shopping one day, I arranged for the purchase of new cheerful bedspreads for all the boys. There was a great delight of surprise at the arrival of these multi-colored, sturdy, *cubrecamas*. The buzz-word in the camp all that week was *cubrecamas*. I caught myself asking: *¿Te gusto las cubrecamas?* (not calling them 'bedspreads'). I broke my own rule of no Spanish.

When the boys were not in school, my voice, always in English, echoed in the various parts of the wide expanse of the camp grounds.

Frequently heard exclamations from me included:

You did what? We need to talk.

Hey, you kids, get off that roof!

What happened to the deodorant I just bought you?

NO, you may NOT drive my car.

How could you lose your eyeglasses?

Why are you still awake?

I already told you. LATER!

What were you thinking?

Of course you have to do your homework.

Where were you all morning?

How come you are barefoot?

The dreaded day arrived. It was time for me to inform the boys that they would be leaving each other soon to go to foster families throughout Central Florida. Their bond would be broken. There would no longer be safety in numbers. Their interdependence was over. Their crutch for survival was destroyed. It was like a radio or TV announcer saying: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin". I prayed that my efforts at preparation for this day had worked and that they would trust me to do what was good for them. The hush in the room gave way to murmurings, and then to animated conversation. Questions abounded. I answered in English and they understood. The language barrier was diminishing. Immediately, another of my responses in Latin, as the altar server, popped into my head: "*Spera in Deo, quoniam adhuc confitebor illi: salutare vultus mei, et Deus meus*". (Trust in God, I will still give praise to Him, my savior and my God.). My performance at this point was crucial. It was essential to do this properly, with my heart as well as my head. I had to do it right for their sake. I had to do it right for my sake.

Some had anticipated this interruption in their camp status-quo. Others thought it would never happen. A few considered it to be a welcome adventure. A couple sought ways to avoid it. Then, in the end, one by one, they all came to grips with the inevitability of this new challenge. The boys were dealing with their 'here and now'. I was dealing with their tomorrows. Many fulfilled my dream when they said: " If you say that this is good for us, we believe you". I felt a rush of fulfillment. Perhaps I had meaningfully touched their lives. They had certainly touched mine. Still, I wondered, What will become of them? What will become of me?

Within days, this carefully orchestrated plan began to unfold. Letters to the parishes throughout the Diocese asked for pulpit announcements about the need for foster homes. The *Florida Catholic* newspaper headlined the story and assisted in the recruitment of foster families. Catholic Charities social workers in Jacksonville, Tampa, St. Petersburg, and myself in Orlando conducted detailed home studies to submit to the State of Florida for licensing the foster homes . The response was positive beyond our wildest dream. I visited every prospective foster family to give my final approval. Some offered to take two boys. The boys who wished to go in pairs selected their own partner. With my knowledge of the boys as individuals, not as a group, I began the long task of matching them with foster parents. For years, I visited the foster families until every boy was released from the program.

School ended. The last days were fast approaching. It was a time of great ambivalence. Those going to foster homes knew their destinations. They were noticeably quiet. Some seemed to cling to me more than before. The mood in the Camp was somber. I imagined that they were reliving their last days in Cuba. Had I sufficiently prepared them for this?

These lyrics from a song popular in the early sixties
seem appropriate now:

Memories

*Memories, pressed between the pages of my mind,
Memories, sweetened thru the ages just like wine.*

*Quiet thoughts come floating down,
And settle softly to the ground,
Like golden autumn leaves around my feet.
I touched them and they burst apart with sweet memories,
Sweet memories.*

Peter Hoff

The night before their departure from the Camp, I rang the bell for the final time to assemble them in the hall. It wasn't like their first encounter with me. Now they didn't silently stare at me. The frowns and the scowls on their faces were absent. No longer was I a stranger. I stood before them and looked out at the crowd of teenagers seated in rows before me. I shivered and recalled our first meeting. Long ago I had shed the necktie. I asked the Holy Spirit again to land on my shoulder and get me through this difficult good bye. My first few words came slowly. There was a hush in the room. I stuttered a bit, regained my composure, and then delivered my message, **in Spanish**. I exclaimed my love for them, thanked them for what they taught me, wished them well in their future, and bid them farewell. *Te amo. Vaya con Dios.*

They rose from their chairs and began a rhythmic clapping -- two claps followed by four claps in rapid succession, followed by shouts of "ALYO ALYO". (That is the proper pronunciation of my Italian name. My family uses the Americanized version of Aglio with a hard 'g'. The boys knew better). The chant reached a crescendo. I cried, and some of the boys cried. The catharsis was remarkable. We had completed our journey together. Again, I pondered: What will become of them? What will become of me?

Departure activities were punctuated with expressions of sadness and anticipation. The boys hugged one another and stalled their separation. They approached me to express their goodbyes, and contrary to their prior restraint, touched me returning my embrace. Many bid their farewells to me in Spanish. Some were leaving for a happy reunion with a member of their extended family. The rest were headed to their new families as close as Jacksonville, or as far away as Sarasota, Tampa, Melbourne and all the places in-between. A few changed foster homes a short time later. Two came to my home, one for a short time, the other for almost three years.

...they reflect on our
sojourn in Switzerland...

The Camp would become a retreat center and a gathering place for other diocesan events. Later, a large church was built close to the Camp for the new St. John del Rio parish. The boys would finish their education, leave their foster homes, and become professionals and tradesmen. As young adults they gradually assimilated into the American lifestyle. They became husbands and fathers and good neighbors. They relocated all over the country. They gave me cause for great pride. A half a century later, in their mid-sixties, they reflect on our sojourn in Switzerland and the challenges and struggles of those trying days in Camp St. John.

I would establish a new Catholic Charities in Orlando. I served as its Director for forty years as it grew into the largest multi-function private social agency in Central Florida. I became the *PADRE PRIMERO* of nine *hijos y hijas* and fifteen *nietos y nietas*. The struggles with the Cuban *hijos* helped prepare me for that. And, oh yes, I became an octogenarian.

On this fiftieth anniversary of those experiences, it is revealed what became of them, and what became of me. However, I still do not know what nickname these men call me. Perhaps it is better that way. *Ciao*.

Thomas J. Aglio

September, 2012

Letter mailed to the boys after the camp closed

June, 1962
Camp St. John
Switzerland, FL

My Dear Boys,

These last days here have been very difficult and lonesome. The staff and I have worked very hard to clean the dormitories and close Camp St. John. Our work, however, has been useless and without motive since all of you are no longer here.

Now, everyone has gone and I am alone, writing these lines in the study hall. The camp is silent. The television screen is blank. The kitchen is dark. Each and every room is vacant. I do not hear familiar voices. The radios are not blaring. The telephone does not ring. The pool is calm. The basketball court is deserted. The Casa Verde is hidden and quiet. Everything is silent and vacant and this saddens me a little because I feel we have invested much into this camp and now everything has ended.

Yes, we all have completed a significant chapter of our lives, you much more than I. All of you know the part you have played. I have tried during these months to serve you, guide and instruct, love, and understand you and, finally, to return you to your families or to entrust you to new parents. To those of you who have been reunited with your dear parents, I extend my best wishes and I hope that this reunion will be a happy occasion. Perhaps I will never see you again, but I will think of you frequently. Good luck in all of your efforts.

For those of you who are getting used to a new environment with other people, a new way of life, I ask you to continue to have patience and courage. You have been strong and courageous under adverse conditions. That is why I have always and will continue to admire you. You have been subjected to suffering very early in your life and you have been able to survive these whirlwinds in an admirable way.

I am proud of all of you and fervently hope that your behavior in the coming months will be such that I can continue to be satisfied with each and every one of you. For me, you have been like my children and I am grateful for the respect you have shown me. I hope that you will respect and love your foster parents the same way.

I assure all of you that your intentions will be remembered fervently in my prayers. May God permit that our prayers be heard quickly and that in a little while you will not be separated from your loved ones and from your homeland. God willing, Cuba will once again be yours and we will see the restoration of Christian principles, of peace, and prosperity.

Maintain with firmness the virtues and the truths you learned in your childhood and keep them like treasures forever. Be good Catholics, practice your faith with sincerity and conviction.

Now, I too must leave our beloved camp. I will take with me many pleasant memories. With great sadness, I will ring the bell for all of you, one more time.

God bless you.

With all my love, Thomas Aglio

Thomas J. Aglio



... then

now ...

