

Faith, miracles and the "mystery priest"

By [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#)

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By now many of you have read about the man in the black shirt and white collar (not a black collar, as some reported with a hint of eeriness) who showed up at a terrible accident in Missouri this month.

He appeared, prayed and anointed the young victim, Katie Lentz, and then apparently disappeared as quietly as he had come. When emergency personnel and police tried to identify the be-collared one, he could not be found in any of the pictures taken at the scene.

I admit it. As I read this story, days after it happened, I got a little emotional. What a great parable, not to mention a hugely feel-good story. God really does work in extremely mysterious ways, and, in a world starved for miracles, it's lovely to see one happen. Besides, the fellow was, let's admit it, right out of the clergy office of central casting (and you didn't know we had one?).

But it turned out this week that the mystery priest has a name: it's Dowling. Fr. Patrick Dowling to me and you.

[Here's a paragraph from the CNN article:](#) "The priest said there really wasn't any mystery to it, and he told a deputy before he left who he was. He took no credit for saving Lentz's life. He credited that to the calm of two highway patrol officers and a rescue team that worked 'harmoniously.'"

I'm guessing that some readers were a little disappointed that the ethereal visitor of our fantasies turned out to have flesh and blood. I know I was, a little bit.

But then I began to think of the occasions on which I have walked into a situation and, whether garbed in black or not, offered to pray with someone. It happened last spring, when rangers were searching for a runaway in a local county park. Clad in shorts and an old t-shirt, I surely didn't look like a member of the clergy (plus, inconveniently for some, I'm female). I confess that having those initials at the end of my title helps give me a bit more confidence.

Our culture, increasingly, might view clergy as cultural rather than religious figures—more and more Americans are growing up without any faith at all. That doesn't obviate our need for prayer. Proclaiming and challenging, serving and praying, clergy still have a role to play.

But the larger lesson of this story isn't about what it means to be a priest at an accident scene. It's about how God can use all of us. In a way, Fr. Dowling was doing what any one of us, whether collared or not, would (or should) have done in that situation. He saw a need. He stopped. He asked God for help.

There is nothing mysterious about that. The only puzzling thing is why more of us, including myself, don't do it more often.

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