

I Am Your Brother Joseph, by Tim Unsworth and *Bernardin*, by Eugene Kennedy
reviewed by [Judith Anne Testa](#) in the [July 1, 1998](#) issue

By Tim Unsworth, *I Am Your Brother Joseph: Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago*.
(*Crossroad*, 156 pp.)

By Eugene Kennedy, *Bernardin: Life to the Full*. (*Bonus Books*, 345 pp.)

Reading Tim Unsworth's unpretentious but intriguing little book is like listening to a colorful raconteur. Unsworth's memoir is a rambling, chatty, touching, sometimes humorous tribute to an extraordinary man. Although the author describes his anecdotes as the "small change" of Bernardin's Chicago years, he provides some fascinating revelations.

Unsworth begins with Bernardin's announcement in August 1996 that the cancer for which he had undergone treatment a year earlier had returned and was terminal; then he doubles back to the original surgery. The second chapter dips back even further, to relate how Unsworth and Bernardin got to know each other.

This engaging tale involves a chance meeting at a DePaul University commencement in 1976. It continues with Bernardin's waspish response to an open letter Unsworth published in 1982 addressed to the as yet unnamed archbishop of Chicago, and finally with a deliciously nervy dinner invitation issued to the new cardinal by Unsworth's wife, who happened to be sitting next to him at an archdiocesan committee meeting. The result was an annual dinner visit by Bernardin to the Unsworths' home, as well as a friendship between the two men. Although Unsworth describes getting to know the cardinal as "a heady experience," it was not one that turned his head. The book radiates the author's affection and regard for his subject without becoming adulatory or cloying.

Unsworth's formal manner, use of telling anecdotes, and inclusion of first-person incidents warms what could have been a rehash of well-known material, since the media covered the cardinal in detail during the weeks before and after his death. Unsworth's stories build up a picture of a warm, funny, modest man who was intelligent, shrewd, subtle and deeply spiritual. The author also characterizes the cardinal as a bit of a fusspot, capable of being "terminally prudent," "vague" and

“pedantic.” He refuses to turn his subject into a plaster saint.

Some of the book’s funniest anecdotes probably originated with Bernardin himself--they are typical of his gently self-deflating humor. Others, more serious, show aspects of Bernardin that may come as a surprise--perhaps even a shock--to many readers. One such story concerns Bernardin’s 1987 mention to a group of resigned priests that he too had several times thought of resignation, a most surprising admission from a man whom the priesthood seemed to fit like a glove. Although it would be interesting to learn what lay behind these personal crises, and how Bernardin resolved them, Unsworth offers no further details.

Despite Bernardin’s public defense of the Catholic Church’s refusal to ordain women, we learn from Unsworth that late in his life the cardinal had a change of heart. He told Sister Donna Quinn, a strong advocate of women’s rights, “I personally favor the ordination of women,” adding that “this is not the time.” Even if made in private and with such a qualification this is a real bombshell. It would have been helpful if Unsworth had included the context in which Bernardin made the comment and, even more important, his source for such a controversial statement.

The chapter on Bernardin’s last days opens with an affirmation of how much this man who so serenely accepted death enjoyed being alive. The author relates how Bernardin relished good food and wine, liked being recognized for his achievements, and enjoyed wearing stylish clothing. Unsworth describes Bernardin’s “almost child-like glee” at being chosen to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the pleasure he took in telling his friends about it. The author informs us that for the cardinal’s occasional excursions in nonclerical attire he wore elegant, beautifully tailored clothes. These and other details help create a warmly human portrait.

Even in his final chapter on Bernardin’s wake and funeral, one of the most publicized in Chicago’s history, Unsworth offers new or little-noticed details. Without speculating on the cardinal’s motives, he notes Bernardin’s decision to include the Windy City Gay Men’s Chorus among the groups providing music at his wake. Describing Monsignor Kenneth Velo’s funeral homily, which moved most listeners to laughter and applause, Unsworth observes that the front row of cardinals and senior bishops sat in stony silence, shocked by such a spontaneous outpouring of joyous emotions during a funeral liturgy.

The author also mentions the unique instance of a group of Reform rabbis conducting a Jewish memorial service in Holy Name Cathedral. He quotes Rabbi Byron Sherwin, who declared: "Had there been more people like [Bernardin] during the Holocaust, there would be many more . . . Jews alive today."

Here and there throughout his book the author uses the present tense when referring to the cardinal. This may be due to careless editing, but it gives the odd sense that, for Unsworth, Bernardin is still alive. Although Chicago now has a new cardinal-archbishop, Unsworth's endearing portrait should keep Bernardin's memory green.

Eugene Kennedy's reissued life of Bernardin is both more ambitious and more problematic. While Unsworth's friendship with Bernardin enables him to draw an affectionate and touching portrait of the cardinal, Kennedy's longer and closer relationship with Bernardin seems to have inhibited him from presenting his friend in all his complexity. When the book first came out in 1989 under the cumbersome title *Cardinal Bernardin: Easing Conflicts--and Battling for the Soul of American Catholicism*, the subject was still alive and Kennedy might be forgiven his adulatory tone. Now, however, the late cardinal's life deserves a more nuanced treatment.

The only changes in the new edition (which one suspects was rushed into print) are a new title and the addition of a final chapter on the last eight years of the cardinal's life. To do justice in one chapter to the events that crowded those years is impossible, and in any case much of this is the same material that Bernardin covered in his memoir, *The Gift of Peace*.

On the face of it, Kennedy is uniquely qualified to write about Bernardin. A former priest who holds a doctorate in psychology, Kennedy was also Bernardin's friend for 30 years--crucial decades for American Catholicism.

Kennedy has an eye for historical detail and a novelist's ability to construct compelling dramatic narratives. In addition he is a brilliant analyst of both Catholic Church politics and the instances in which clerical and secular politics intermingle. The strongest aspect of the book is Kennedy's picture of the society and the church in which Bernardin grew up, entered the priesthood and rose through the Irish-dominated ranks of the American hierarchy to become the first Italian-American cardinal.

The author's analysis of what he calls the "ecclesiastical bloodlines" that connect the careers of various prelates is fascinating. We get a clear sense of how this hidden but powerful clerical old-boy network functions and how the youthful Bernardin--intelligent, hard-working, dutiful and discreetly ambitious--benefited from it.

Another strength is the treatment of Bernardin's forays into politics, always a touchy issue for a Roman Catholic prelate. Kennedy notes how Bernardin, a shrewd politician himself, learned to avoid being co-opted by either conservatives or liberals. He shows how in the "abortion wars" Bernardin remained committed to the prolife position but worked to broaden his church's stand in a way that would prevent its prolife activities from falling into the hands of right-wing extremists. Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" helped change the terms of the national debate on abortion. He obliged his own church and other abortion foes to confront a glaring internal contradiction: they could not oppose abortion while remaining indifferent to the loss of human lives through war, poverty and capital punishment.

Despite these strengths, the biography has serious weaknesses. The trouble lies with the author's eagerness to make Bernardin a saint. The image that emerges is attractive, but as flat as a holy figure on a mass card. The flesh-and-blood Bernardin, a man of mysteries and shadows as well as light, is absent.

Kennedy tries to get around his reluctance to deal with Bernardin's inner life by insisting that the cardinal's personal and public lives were identical. Although understandable as an assurance that the cardinal was no hypocrite, such a claim obscures the important distinction between the private life and the inner life. Many people confirm that Bernardin's private behavior conformed to his gracious public image. But reducing the cardinal to a pious cliché, a simple soul whose inner life was no different from his public persona, does not do justice to his complexity.

Kennedy briefly notes the "conversion" Bernardin underwent in the mid-1970s, the religious equivalent of the classic midlife crisis and surely of psychological interest. When some younger priests confronted the busy archbishop of Cincinnati with his allegiance to bureaucracy over spirituality, the result was a major rearrangement of Bernardin's personal priorities. The author merely makes the fuzzy observation that the experience inclined Bernardin "even more to the purification of the vibrations and resonances within himself."

That a man keeps his appetites under control, as Bernardin did, is not the same as lacking them, as Unsworth's biography makes clear. The ironic part of Kennedy's extreme discretion is that Bernardin himself could be startlingly uninhibited in offering glimpses of his inner life. Though Kennedy never mentions it, an astonishing instance of Bernardin's public candor occurred in 1983, when the new cardinal gave a talk to a group of Chicago priests. Along with revealing his experiences of anxiety and loneliness, Bernardin also admitted: "I must come to grips with my sexuality and what it means to me as one who has committed himself to celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom."