

John and Joanne Pantuso Early Lay Salvatorians

John and Joanne Pantuso have one of the most unique stories of a “Salvatorian Journey.” On May 6, 1973, seven people made their commitment as Lay Salvatorians at Camp St. Charles near Baltimore. These newest Lay Salvatorians were Joe and Judy Chamberlain, Barbara and Anthony Shettle, Cathy Perry and John and Joanne Pantuso.

John Pantuso started his Salvatorian journey as a Priest. He completed seminary studies at Divine Savior Seminary and Catholic University and was ordained a priest in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in DC on September 9, 1967. He was assigned to Salvatorian Center in New Holstein, Wisconsin.



In 1968, Fr. John asked for a dispensation from vows and from priestly ministry. He also noted that he had “fallen in love.” The dispensations were granted. John married Joanne America, and both stayed within the circle of Salvatorian friends. Soon they became involved in a renewed formal participation of the laity in the life of the Society. Modeled after the initial vision of the Founder – Fr. Francis Jordan – the “Salvatorian Associates” made a formal commitment to participate in the life and ministry of the Salvatorians. In time, the Associates were recognized by the international Salvatorian community as true “Lay Salvatorians” – and as equal members of the Salvatorian Family along with the priests, brothers, and sisters. John and Joanne had two sons, Joseph (“Joe”) and Robert (“Bobby”) who grew up knowing Salvatorians like they were part of one large extended family. While living in Maryland, the couple became involved in public housing ministry. They moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where they co-directed the Lay Salvatorian program as part of the national board, and they were involved in the Archdiocese’s Engaged Enrichment program. They were also members of St. Pius X Parish in Wauwatosa, a Salvatorian parish. Joanne taught kindergarten in Catholic schools, John worked as a writer and editor for several firms, including the Wisconsin Right-to-Life office and the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

In 1996, with their boys grown and on their own, John and Joanne answered the call to help revitalize an Arizona parish – the Shrine of St. Rita in the Desert in the Tucson suburb of Vail, by its new pastor and their good Salvatorian friend, Fr. Bob Wicht. John directed the parish’s adult education program and RCIA. Joanne established a pre-school religious education program and a parish outreach group. They both served on the Social Justice Commission in the Tucson Diocese which was very involved in USA-Mexican border issues and immigration rights. They also helped lay the groundwork for the first Lay Salvatorians in Tucson. Before long, the church was no longer just a “shrine” remembering the past, but a vibrant and growing parish. In 2000, at a joint gathering of the Sisters, the Society, and Lay Salvatorians in Milwaukee, Fr. Bob, Joanne and John, and fellow Tucson Salvatorian, Fr. Al Wagner, presented a plan for a possible joint-Salvatorian ministry, which would have greater outreach to the larger community and the diocese. Over the next year, after reviewing several plans that were offered at the gathering, the joint administrations accepted and adapted this plan, and it became the nucleus from which the Jordan Ministry Team would evolve. That ministry is still vibrant and active in Tucson today.

On May 22, 2002, Joanne died suddenly from a pulmonary embolism. John was prepared to spend the remainder of his life as his family's "desert grandpa." But a few months later, a conversation with another Arizona Salvatorian, Fr. Mike Kendall, brought up an interesting possibility. Bolstered by Fr. Mike's story of a California priest who had returned to active ministry after the death of his wife, John began to think more and more about the possibility. He discussed it with his children. He discussed it with the Society's leadership. The reaction from family, friends, and fellow Salvatorians was overwhelmingly positive. John knew he'd eventually have to "discuss it" with the Vatican. When he did, like any interaction with Rome, they didn't respond with a resounding "yes," but they also didn't say "no." That, in itself, can be a good sign! By the Fall of 2003, the pathway was cleared for John to re-enter the Society and take some refresher courses at Sacred Heart Seminary in Hales Corners, Wisconsin. He renewed his vows on August 14, 2004. He served a term as the province's Director of Communications. He spent time working at the Society's Motherhouse in Rome, redeveloping the community's international website and publications. And on February 29, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI authorized a decree reinstating John to active ministry as a priest.

On March 15, Fr. John presided at Mass for the first time in decades, at the Salvatorian Motherhouse Chapel in Rome. In July, he returned to the USA and ministered as Associate Pastor of both St. Pius X Parish in Wauwatosa and Mother of Good Counsel Parish in Milwaukee. In 2009, he was named pastor of St. Andrew's Parish in Sparta, Tennessee, where he served until his retirement in 2015. He returned to the Tucson area and helped out at Most Holy Trinity Church, a Salvatorian parish.

Fr. John had experienced several episodes of heart-related illnesses over the last several years. Nevertheless, his death on April 26, 2019, was sudden and unexpected. He will be remembered for his genuine warmth and kindness, his humor and wisdom, and his stories and life-lessons that would get sprinkled into conversations when you least expected it. Over the years, he had also developed a keen understanding of computers and technology, and he became nearly everyone's "I.T. guru" before the term was even invented!

