

100 Summers: Camp Stella Maris – 1926 to 2026

Chapter 13 - Father John DeSocio: Faith in Motion

Father John DeSocio's life has never been one of idle searching, but of determined finding. Born in Corning, New York, and raised in Elmira, with summers spent in Hammondsport on Keuka Lake, his path to priesthood shows a man intent on pursuing meaning - listening carefully for guidance, yet never waiting passively for direction.

A graduate of Notre Dame High School in Elmira, John studied chemistry at Corning Community College and St. John Fisher College before joining Eastman Kodak as a research chemist. It was disciplined, purposeful work, but something deeper called to him. By his late twenties, he began seminary studies at Becket Hall - St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester, where his analytical mind and spiritual curiosity found new direction. He was ordained at thirty-one - his life already reflecting the blend of intellect, humility, and conviction that would mark his priesthood.

Over the decades that followed, Father John's ministry carried him far - through parish work in Greece, chaplaincy at Ithaca College, formation and leadership roles, diocesan service alongside Bishop Clark, and service as a Navy Reserve chaplain that included both the 9/11 recovery and deployment during the Iraq War. He also served as Vice Rector at the American College in Leuven, Belgium. Yet one of the earliest crucibles of his vocation - and a wellspring to which he often returns - lies not in a cathedral or classroom, but at Camp Stella Maris on East Lake Road along the eastern shore of Conesus Lake.

A Camper's First Freedom

In 1957, a young John DeSocio arrived at Stella Maris for his first real time away from home. That camping experience brought with it a welcomed mixture of independence and belonging - a sense of being rooted even while discovering who he was becoming.

Though his recollections of that first week are hazy, two names have never left him: Father Paul Freemesser and Father Jack O'Connor, seminarians whose mix of faith and fun left an enduring impression. Their example - serious about faith but never solemn in spirit - would later become his own model for leadership.

The Summer of Agnes

By the summer of 1972, seminarian John DeSocio returned to camp as Waterfront Director. By that point, he also brought with him a Water Safety Instructor certification, eight years of lifeguarding experience, service as Assistant Manager of the Center Street Pool in Elmira, and the practical leadership skills of an Eagle Scout. That June, as he prepared for the season, Hurricane Agnes struck the Finger Lakes, delaying the start of camp and reshaping his first summer in leadership.

The Catholic Courier later reported: “Because the camp is on high ground, there was no damage,” said Father Joseph D’Aurizio, Director of Catholic Charities. “Some counselors had to pull the dock out of the water, but everything is in good shape now.”

Father John recalls that night vividly. Awakened by Joe Morsch, the camp’s caretaker, he joined seminarians as Joe directed them to stabilize the waterfront - first filling rowboats with water on the dock to keep it from floating, and later pulling boats and dock sections fully ashore as the lake continued to rise. They worked through the dark, moving section after section to safety, guided by lantern light and Joe’s terse instructions.

When camp finally opened, it was with a renewed spirit of order and care. John established formal Red Cross safety protocols, rebuilt the waterfront layout, and emphasized teamwork and accountability - qualities that would shape generations of Stella Maris counselors to come.

Sister Mary Clare Russer: The Dominican Nun Who Saw Him Clearly

One afternoon that summer, while raking seaweed alone on the beach, John noticed a woman walking down from her family’s nearby cottage. She was dressed in the white habit of a Dominican nun and introduced herself with a gentle smile: Sister Mary Clare Russer. Her parents, Max and Eleanor Russer, had purchased the land on which Camp Stella Maris was built decades earlier.

At that moment, John - tanned, shirtless, and wearing only a Speedo, the standard lifeguard attire of the time - felt acutely underdressed, instinctively taking refuge behind the rake in his hands. Sister Mary Clare, however, was completely at ease. She greeted him with an untroubled calm and steady presence, moving through the moment with a maturity that, in retrospect, perfectly foreshadowed the depth and grace of the relationship they would share for years to come.

“You don’t know me,” she said, “but I’ve known you. When you entered seminary, your name was given to me to pray for.”

Those words struck him deeply - simple, direct, and full of grace. Over the years, their friendship blossomed into a lifelong spiritual partnership, one he later likened to the relationship between Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross - marked by shared depth rather than direction.

In the years that followed, John moved from seminarian to deacon, and then, rather than proceeding directly to ordination, stepped away for a year of prayer and solitude at a Thomas Merton - inspired retreat in Quebec. Only after that time of quiet discernment did he return to the diocese and, on March 3, 1978, was ordained a priest. At his ordination, Sister Mary Clare gave him a gift - a red priest’s stole embroidered with a snowflake-like

symbol identical to one that regularly appeared to him during prayer at the retreat. She could not have known.

When John later mentioned the coincidence, she simply smiled.

The image resonated deeply with him, especially given traditions among Inuit and Sámi peoples, whose languages hold many words for snow - each reflecting subtle distinctions of meaning and experience. He never claimed to know whether the moment was coincidence or something divine.

But Sister Mary Clare's intuitive faith, and the peace that marked their first meeting, became a quiet thread through his life. She passed away in 1995, but her influence on Father John - like her prayers for him as a seminarian - endures.

Joe Morsch: The Quiet Strength Beneath the Surface

Among the enduring figures of those years, none loomed larger than Joe Morsch, the camp's caretaker from 1947 to 1984 - a tenure that began the same year Father John was born. A man of immense integrity and few words, Joe embodied both the toughness and tenderness that formed the soul of Stella Maris.

During work week before the 1972 season, seminarians were installing docks when one forgot to tighten a bolt on the bracket connecting the dock section to its post. When Joe stepped onto the dock, it gave way - nearly sending him into the water while wearing boots and work clothes. Joe made his displeasure known, hurling a wrench toward the seminarians - less in anger than in firm insistence on care, safety, and workmanship.

That summer and summers that followed, Father John often worked with Joe in the fields of the Morsch farm, which bordered camp near today's parking lot and upper ballfield. One day, while the two were working side by side, Joe discovered he had lost \$400 in cash somewhere in the field. John was astonished by how calmly Joe responded. "It's just money," he said quietly, and returned to work.

Not long after, John again witnessed Joe's quiet devastation when officials informed him that he had overplanted his allotted acreage and would be required to destroy the excess yield. The order upset Joe deeply - not because he had broken a rule, but because he had intended that extra crop for families in need.

Watching Joe's reaction left a lasting mark on John. It was the rare moment when silence carried more moral clarity than words ever could.

Joe's principles, humility, and quiet strength became a kind of compass for John's own leadership - proof that faith can live fully in the labor of one's hands.

Armando Toppi: Finding Home

In 1973, a wiry and athletic 18-year-old named Armando Toppi arrived at camp - brought by a parish connection from Rochester. By the end of his time at CSM that first summer he begged to stay on, pleading with staff not to send him home. "He didn't want to go home," Father John remembered, sensing that CSM offered Armando something: safety, purpose, belonging.

During Armando's first summer, John arranged purposefully private, individual swim lessons for both Armando and Stevie Morsch, meeting with each of them quietly during lunch breaks, when the waterfront was empty. The privacy mattered; both were embarrassed, and the early lessons focused simply on floating and self-rescue. In short order, Armando turned vulnerability into confidence - and even profit - betting other counselors money that he could jump from the tower and make it to shore, then collecting his winnings with a grin. It was a funny, telling moment: an early glimpse of his wit and resilience. Beneath the bravado, though, was a young man CSM had begun to transform.

In a 2006 Catholic Courier story commemorating Stella Maris's 80th anniversary, Armando reflected that his life might have followed a very different course had he not found camp. "It set me on the right path," he said - a sanctuary that shaped both his character and calling. More than fifty years after that first summer of 1973, he remains a living bridge between CSM's past and present, giving back to the place that gave him so much.

Ray Tette: The Turning of an Era

In 1974, Father John hired Ray Tette, another seminarian, to help strengthen the waterfront and deepen camp's spiritual program. Ray's early contributions included introducing cabin prayers and helping build a new culture of reflection and intentionality within the camp day - one that balanced fun with formation.

By 1977, as the Diocese of Rochester encouraged a transition to lay leadership, Father John and Moe Tierney urged Ray to consider stepping forward. Supported by Bishop Hogan and later Bishop Clark, Ray accepted the challenge - ushering in a new era for Stella Maris that would last for the next two decades.

From the building of Abraham Bridge to the successful realization of much of the master plan that hung in Ray's office, Father John later took quiet pride in having recognized Ray's potential early on. He does not take credit for what followed; he is simply proud that his trust in Ray's leadership proved well placed.

The Night the Camp Ran Across East Lake Road

Among Father John's favorite memories from those years is the infamous "Alien" skit - a story that still makes him shake his head and laugh.

During an evening campfire, a Senior Counselor arranged for a series of mock radio announcements to play over the camp's loudspeaker system - audible from the beach - describing a meteor falling toward the Finger Lakes. No one involved knew the full plan; each person knew only their part. At the climax, counselor Rick Gary, wearing a black wetsuit covered in lake weeds, emerged from the water, playing the part of an alien creature.

A counselor yelled, "Stand up and move back!" but in the excitement, campers heard only, "Stand up!" In an instant, campers bolted from the waterfront and tore across East Lake Road in the dark.

Miraculously, no cars came. Staff sprinted after them, pulling kids from bushes near the chapel, calming the terrified, and tackling a few who had armed themselves with burning sticks. "Head Counselor, Peter Clifford, was furious," Father John said with a laugh, "but everyone remembered it forever."

Between Sister Mary Clare, Joe, Armando, Ray - and even that night of chaos - each story from those years speaks not of solemnity, but of the vibrant humanity that defines Camp Stella Maris: A place where laughter, faith, and growth coexist without contradiction.

The Spirit That Endures

Looking back, Father John sees a single thread running through it all: A willingness to do the work that needed doing, to listen deeply, and to let grace do its quiet work. His attentiveness to others - Sister Mary Clare Russer's quiet faith, Joe's dignity, Armando's transformation, Ray's calling - mirrors the very heart of Stella Maris itself.

"I've always believed," Father John says softly, "that God puts us where we're needed most - if we're listening."

Time has moved on, faces have changed, but the current that runs beneath those stories still flows through Stella Maris: The current of purpose found through service, of friendship shaped by shared work, and of grace discovered in paying attention.