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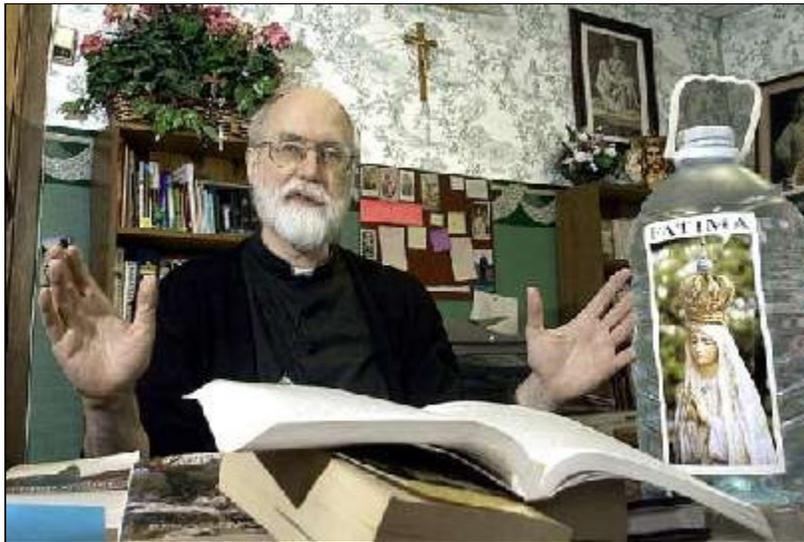
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- [Obituaries](#)

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- [TV Times](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Graduation Tab](#)
- [Home Decor](#)
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Father Nicholas Gruner is at odds with the Vatican over its handling of the Fatima message. The Fatima Center, where Father Gruner is based, is Fort Erie's fourth-largest employer.

Photo: Mike DiBattista, The Review

A message of hope, despair

Father Gruner spreads his message from Fort Erie base

By **JOHN ROBBINS** Review Staff Writer
Local News - Saturday, November 12, 2005 @ 02:00

FORT ERIE – People with an above average knowledge of geography know Fatima as a little town in Portugal, a popular stopover for travellers taking a European vacation.

There's a Catholic shrine there, where pilgrims and tourists from all over the globe mingle.

Many Fatima visitors have come to see the site where the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said to have visited three young children almost a century ago. Others come in search of a cure for what ails them.

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Some 5,000 kilometres to the west, in another small town, the name Fatima has an added meaning.

In Fort Erie, Fatima is a small cluster of almost nondescript buildings on a quiet road not far from the town’s commercial district and the Peace Bridge.

Many residents know it as the place founded by that TV priest, Father What’s-His-Name with the white beard and black robes.

In Fort Erie, Fatima is an industry – the town’s fourth largest employer – a place that, at one time or other, hundreds of locals have counted on to earn their daily bread.

But to Father Nicholas Gruner – and millions of believers who have tuned in to hear him over the past 20 years – Fatima is something much more significant: It’s a message of hope and despair, a warning and a promise, a vision for restless and dangerous times.

Fatima, according to the man who has gained the reputation of being one of the most controversial clerics in the Roman Catholic Church today, is a matter of life and death, salvation or damnation.

“Why Fort Erie?,” says Gruner, seated at a round table in a small, clean but cluttered office, inside Building 4, a warehouse-like structure at the Fatima Center’s Kraft Road site.

There’s no extravagance here. Furnishings are minimalist, the decor dated. Shelves are crammed with books and papers. One of the books, Fatima Priest, is a biography of Gruner.

On a table nearby, there’s a transparent plastic jug filled with water from the shrine at Fatima.

Gruner’s longtime associate, Coralee Graham, a warm and friendly woman, sits quietly behind a corner desk. Another priest, a visitor from the United States, joins Gruner at the table.

Gruner takes a few seconds to ponder the question put to him by his interviewer, before answering in a soft-spoken voice.

“It was providence,” Gruner said. “God opened that door.

“Ultimately, you’re led by different things in life.”

Gruner was born in Montreal’s Westmount district May 4, 1942. He studied at McGill University and the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, in Rome. He was ordained a priest in August 1976.

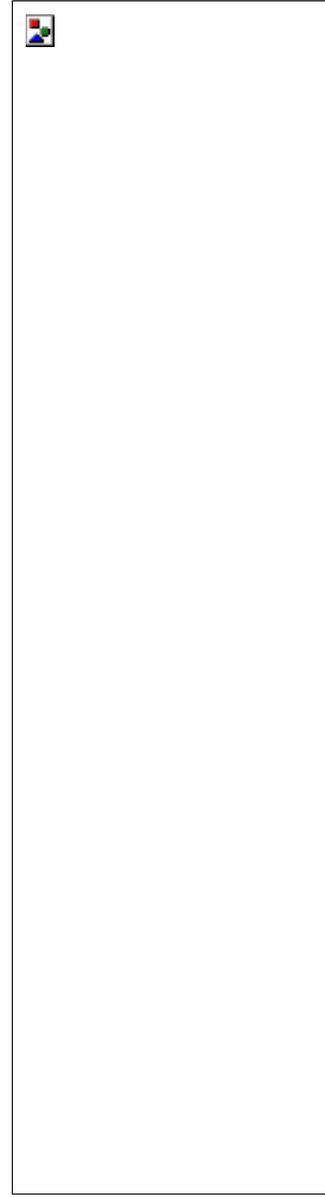
Two years later, Gruner began travelling across Canada with a statue of the Virgin Mary, which had been blessed by Pope Paul VI.

The statue, which served as a tangible link to Fatima for those who couldn’t afford a pilgrimage there, attracted huge crowds wherever Gruner brought it.

It was during that same period Gruner, living in Ottawa, published the first edition of the Fatima Crusader magazine.

In 1984, a small group of Niagara-area residents interested in assisting Gruner in his ministry convinced him to move to Fort Erie. The following year, the group set up shop in an old factory that had been uninhabited for 10 years. The roof leaked and the place was a mess.

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Money was scarce and for Gruner, who was working 18 hours a day anyway, the factory became his home. Speaking with The Review this week, Gruner said little about himself or his personal struggles over the years, preferring to use the time to talk about the Fatima message.

A later interview with Graham was needed to fill in some of the detail. She recalls travelling to see Gruner in Ottawa, and how surprised she was when she saw what an austere life he lived.

“He opened the door of the fridge in his apartment, and we could see there was nothing but a bowl of rice and an open can of tuna,” Graham remembers. “He offered to share lunch with us anyway.”

Living at the factory in Fort Erie, life was even more spartan – even for a Catholic priest who had taken a vow of poverty. Despite invitations from supporters who offered to put him up, Gruner insisted on living on his own.

“He moved in without heat, without a shower, without a stove,” said Graham. “He could have stayed at a hotel, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Whatever money was coming in (from donations), he wanted to use it to get out the message to the people.”

When Gruner developed a serious chest infection, his worried parents purchased a small house next door for him to live in.

“Some people have this idea that people in our business have diamond rings and other expensive things,” Graham said with a chuckle.

“That’s not true with us.”

On first meeting Gruner, it’s hard to imagine what’s so controversial.

By today’s standards, he could be considered a conservative, traditionalist priest, who clings to a number of customs and practices most familiar to Roman Catholics old enough to remember the church before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s.

He says his daily Mass in Latin. He insists on distributing Communion bread, which Catholics believe is the actual body of Christ, on the tongue – not in the hand. A black cassock gown is his usual work-wear.

But for a priest clothed in the vestments and steeped in the practices of an age of Catholicism that in some ways no longer exists, Gruner has done what his church has been slow to do: He has embraced and mastered modern forms of communication – radio, television, the Internet – allowing him to bring the message to which he has devoted his life’s work and ministry, to a global audience.

That’s not to say Gruner, apart from his ministry’s direct appeal for money to support its work, has much in common with the stereotypical image of a Sunday morning television evangelist.

There’s no waving of arms or bibles. He doesn’t raise his voice or screech into a microphone. In Gruner’s studio, there’s no huge choir to back him up.

There’s nothing about his tone or demeanour that strikes one as radical.

It’s the message – rather, his interpretation of the Fatima message – that Gruner said rankles church authorities and has made him the victim of personal attacks and attempts to silence him.

“There are Pharisees in the Vatican,” Gruner said. “There are people in the Vatican who don’t want to say the (Fatima) message comes from heaven, because they’d have to follow it.”

That the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to three young Portuguese shepherd children on successive occasions in 1917 is a commonly held belief among many Roman

Catholics.

That the church itself has authenticated the visitations, isn't in question – a fact attested to by the numerous parishes that bear the name Our Lady of Fatima, and by the many references to the events at Fatima by popes right up to the present day.

The significance of the message Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said to have transmitted to the faithful, the church and the world at large, is a different matter.

Central to the Fatima message, Gruner said, is this: Mary promised world peace with the "consecration" of Russia, whose "errors" continue to spread around the globe.

Many faithful believe Pope John Paul II fulfilled Mary's request more than 20 years ago when he performed a special blessing over the world.

Gruner disagrees.

Unless the consecration is done properly, Gruner said, mankind will have much to suffer.

"This might sound to (some) people like it's a small thing," Gruner said pointedly. "It (the consecration) is very important.

"It's about whether we will have world peace or the annihilation of nations."

The so-called "third secret" of Fatima is an especially contentious topic, and one Gruner hasn't shied away from talking about.

For years, he pressed the Vatican to release the text of the third part of the Fatima message, a carefully guarded secret for most of the last century. When it was finally released by the Vatican in 2000, the Fatima Center quickly branded the church's statement and its official interpretation of the secret a "whitewash."

Gruner relies on his own extensive research, and that of others who hold similar views, to support his contentious claims. Regardless of what people think of him, Gruner asks only that skeptics and critics focus on the Fatima message.

"It's not about me, whether I'm a great guy or a bad guy," Gruner said. "It's about the truth.

"If I'm wrong, show me the evidence. What I'm saying is the truth as best as I know it."

No newspaper article could convey the full story of Father Nicholas Gruner and the Fatima Center, nor explore in depth the sincere and strongly held beliefs of millions of Catholics around the world, whether from the viewpoint of those who agree with Gruner or the perspective of those don't.

For those inclined to take a closer look, there's plenty of material to work with. Believers like Gruner have made certain there's no shortage of commentary.

Since those early days in Fort Erie, the Fatima Center has grown and so has Gruner's audience. The Fatima Crusader magazine has a quarterly circulation of 500,000 copies.

The Fatima Center, expanded to include offices outside Canada, produces the television program Fatima: The Moment Has Come, and the radio program Heaven's Peace Plan. A one-hour documentary, Heaven's Key to Peace, received a national airing on Vision TV last December.

As for Gruner, when he's not in Fort Erie, he's travelling the world giving lectures and promoting the work of the centre. He has no plans to retire.

Asked if he believes church authorities will ever come to see and accept the Fatima message as he interprets it, Gruner believes it's only a matter of when – and what perils will befall the world in the meantime.

"My mind tells me they won't get it in time," Gruner said. "My heart tells me to keep going."

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