

Bended Knee

The power blinked out last night, just as I was reading an article on how to make my dog behave. I quickly said a short prayer for any victims in the car crash that had just taken down the wires and left me in the dark. And when the local sirens began to wail a few minutes later, I dittoed the firemen attending the accident scene. It's a silly little habit I brought with me down the long road from my Catholic School education. But one never knows. Maybe it was beneficial to the firemen. Maybe it kept me from over reacting when the damned dog nabbed the leftover pizza in the dark.

When the sirens went off near our small elementary school in South Utica in the 1950's, kids would quickly say a little prayer. The more ostentatious students would bless themselves with the sign of the cross. A few years later at the Catholic high school downtown, located across the street from the central fire station, numerous alarms each day made fervent displays impractical. Except on one memorable occasion, when my friend Hank turned reverence into an art form.

Hank was a kid who always pushed the limits, and making himself obvious was a part of his nature. He was the baby of his family, a great athlete and a good looking kid who would have had much better luck with the girls if he had possessed more common sense. For myself, the great revelation of my sophomore year was that while young women loved virile and handsome men, they would often settle for brains over brawn. And that was revealed to me while reading Darwin, not Aquinas.

Anyway ... midway through our sophomore year, Hank decided to stress-test the new nun in our morning Latin class. The previous teacher, Old Sister Mordantia, had fallen over dead in the convent from a stroke the week before, causing each of us to wonder if we had contributed to her demise. "Quickly taken home to Jesus," was the way the Sister Principal worded it at the assembly held the next day. "Struck dead by a just God," was what most of us thought. The usual outrageous legends concerning her death had already passed around the school. My favorite had her falling face first into her dinner plate when told purgatory had been cancelled.

Our new Latin teacher appeared young and fresh, despite her medieval clothing. Arriving on the train the day after Sister Mordantia's funeral, Sister Lily may have been the only nun available to send north from the Mother House in Baltimore. Her southern accent was light and lilting, unlike that of the older nuns whose voices mimicked the Road Gang Deputies in "Cool Hand Luke." And you could tell Sister Lily just loved kids and was very comfortable with them, causing us to wonder if she had very much classroom experience.

There were no sirens during her first day's Latin class. But the next morning, just as the class in unison practiced the second declension of the noun "amicus," the sirens across the street wailed to life while we were progressing from the accusative to ablative case. A girl on my right blessed herself, slowly pushing in on each breast as she did so. Well, at fifteen years old, that's the way it seemed to me.

On my left, Hank got out of his seat and stood up. He slowly blessed himself, doing it backwards, starting with a loud thump of a fist on his chest, then punching each shoulder, and lastly whacking himself in the forehead with the back of his hand while clucking his tongue once, as though he'd forgotten something terribly important. Then, he genuflected down to the floor on one knee, sprang back up and finally plopped into his seat. A courtier to Queen Elizabeth couldn't have done it with more flair. The class declension dribbled to a stop. Sister Lily sat slack-jawed at her desk, staring at the boy. Hank began to turn red, cleared his throat and adjusted his necktie.

"Young man," said the nun, "what did you just do?"

"Pray for the fire victims, S'ter."

"And must you genuflect when you pray?" she asked.

Hank seemed flummoxed for a reply. I tried to help him.

"It is the highest form of reverence." I said, without a clue as to where to go from there. I was just giving my friend time to come up with something.

The nun rose to her feet and walked down the aisle to stand between myself and Hank, who now appeared flustered. And silent.

"Well," she said, "this is certainly fascinating. I have never heard of that practice."

Sister Mordantia taught it to us," Hank said, finally finding his voice. "It is a superlative prayer of intercession."

"Yes," I opined, thankful for a creative lead. "God bends an ear when we bend a knee."

"How poetic!" cried Sister Lily, but I noted a hint of sarcasm, and my antenna went fully up.

"That's right," said Hank, "It's called Sister Mordantia's Last Prayer of Genuflection."

"It may be how she died," I said, trying my damndest to steer this conversation away from us, but possibly not thinking too clearly.

"Really!" cried Sister Lily, her voice a bit shrill. I knew I'd gone too far now. "This is just absolutely fascinating," she continued. "The entire class should hear this. Stand up, boys. Come up front and face the class."

We could do nothing but follow. I would blame this episode on Hank for the rest of our high school career, despite my shoveling us in deeper.

There comes a time in the midst of throwing the bull when a decision is made to either pull up short, laugh and admit you're fooling, or go for broke with that straight face you use to tell your mother you won't be home late.

Turning to the class, I took a breath. I have never in my life, then or now, been able to resist an audience. I began with an admission, a feint to allow me to change the story. "I may have misstated some of the details," I said. "Sister Mordantia did not die while praying her favorite Prayer of Genuflection. Well, not exactly." A nice hook. "Father Nicoletti told me how it happened on that cold night this past Tuesday." This was a bold stroke of genius on my part, because Father Nicoletti, the assistant pastor, was a bullshit artist from the word go, and I handily shifted the blame to him with this move. And if it was a good story, he'd never deny it.

"I'm told wonderful old Sister Mordantia expired while bringing a basket of food to a poor family in our parish."

"Really, Mr. Griffin," said Sister Lily, "I happen to know"

"Yes, really, Sister. I'm only repeating what Father Nicoletti told me in the strictest confidence" ... and here I promised God I would buy the priest 3 packs of those rotten little cigars he smoked if the man backed me up and took ownership of the story ... "but since I'm forced to go public, I'll just have to bear the brunt of Father Nicoletti's anger when he hears I told the class." This was a bit over the top, since the priest had never known an angry moment in his life.

"So, I suppose the good sister tripped while carrying the food basket?" said Sister Lily with a return to sarcasm, and I wondered if she might be trying to help me. Not trusting her, I headed off in another direction.

"Actually," I continued, "Sister Mordantia had gone to see Father Nicoletti at the rectory for an unscheduled confession."

"She must have done something really awful!" Hank interjected, with a bit too much enthusiasm.

"He didn't tell, of course," I quickly said while jabbing Hank in the ribs with my elbow. "It may have been only her heightened sense of holiness. Anyway, while they were talking, a phone call came in for emergency food. Of course, Father Nicoletti isn't allowed out at night."

"Wait a minute," said the nun, "why can't he go out at night?" "I'm afraid I just can't break TWO confidences in one afternoon, Sister. If you WILL forgive me."

It was a perfect touch, and she knew it. She let me continue. "So it was left to Sister Mordantia to brave the storm and the cold, the high winds and lightning and snow and the crazy downtown drivers. She took the food basket from the priests' pantry to the poor starving family on Lansing Street." "And then?" said Sister Lily. "We've got three more nouns to decline here this afternoon, if you don't mind"

"Sister Mordantia returned to the convent, but the elements had taken their toll on her poor wasted body." Sister Mordantia had weighed in excess of 200 pounds. "She died coming back in the convent doorway, where she collapsed down on one knee, but was held upright when her Rosary beads caught on the doorknob. She was left hanging there on bended knee for quite a while, even as the cold air swept in through the door and cooled the convent. The other nuns just assumed she was genuflecting. She genuflected a lot. So, Sister Mordantia died with her Rosary beads on. So to speak."

The classroom was completely silent, the students waiting for the nun to react. Sister Lily was completely silent, but her eyes said she was thinking hard, maybe of the seven zillion chores she would give me in retribution for this display of complete dishonesty, if such an outlandish story can be considered dishonest..

Never able to abide silence, I added, "If the sirens were blowing a second alarm, even with snow beginning to cover up Sister Mordantia as she lay in the doorway, the sisters might not have"

"That's enough," said Sister Lily. "Return to your seats, gentlemen. Class, we will continue with Amicus in the Ablative case. Hank, if you get out of your seat again before the bell, I'll impound your shoes for the rest of the day. David, go to confession at your first opportunity."

Sister Lily never mentioned the incident to me afterward. Father Nicoletti accepted the cigars with a frown, the first I had ever seen on his face. Hank and I, on the other hand, told and retold the story among our friends, laughing until even we tired of it.

"Why do you think we got away with the story, Hank," I asked him when I was home for a visit after many years.

"Because it was true," he said. "What? Never in a million years!!"

"Well, close enough," he said. "Mordantia was a little crazy. We kids weren't the only ones who had to put up with her. The night she died she went out to the liquor store and came home drunk with half the bottle gone. She keeled over in the doorway and hit her head on the slate floor. Died right there. Blood all over the place. The police thought there'd been a murder. Everyone hushed it up."

"Holy cripes," I said. "Where did you hear all of this?"

"I bowl with Father Nicoletti," he said. "He said to tell you a whopper for him the next time I saw you. He's still mad at you for getting him in trouble with Sister Lily."

I probably haven't mentioned that I could never stand Hank's laugh.

copyright 2009, David Griffin

The Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY
www.windsweptpress.com