

Messenger

Our Catholic household was led by my father, St. John the Divine, as we boys called him as he got older. We had no pets, but Grandma lived with us. She was a Protestant, the only Presbyterian us kids had ever met. For all we knew, she was the only non-Catholic within miles of our of working class Irish and Italian neighborhood. An older brother said that's why she had her own bedroom.

Only God knew what Grandma thought as she watched us march to the beat of an old drummer in Rome. She kept her thoughts to herself, mostly, and consulted her Dream Book. Resembling an old bible, the volume had gold edging and a black leather cover. It seemed to accompany her everywhere. In deference to our love for The Saints, she said her book was dedicated to Saint Sigmund. When Grandma infrequently came to Mass with us, she'd bring the Dream Book along and read it, right through the Consecration. "It's a scandal, Mary," my father said. Mom replied that it was only a venial sin. The old woman didn't care what either of them thought. I saw her spunk, but years would pass before I understood her message.

Grandma revered the rugged individualism of her Scots Presbyterian heritage, along with its simple liturgy, and saw Catholicism as a chaotic mess of medieval superstitions. As practiced by Americans in the 1950's, that assessment would have been fairly accurate. She endured the arcane customs for the sake of my mother, whose father Grandma had married many years before. After my grandfather's death, the old woman came to live with us in a neighborhood so Catholic she may have felt behind enemy lines. But Grandma remained unmoved by the Roman spirit. No one had tried to tell her what to do since Grandpa threw in the towel and died.

Grandma's style of religion emphasized an independence of spirit and a definite aversion to centralized management. Presbyterianism didn't have a Vatican. For her grandsons, however, our Church specified how to live every aspect of our lives. We ran to Masses, said rosaries to the Virgin, checked our movie plans against those indexed by the Legion of Decency, polished our Miraculous Medals, dusted the Pope pictures on the living room walls, had our throats blessed during Lent, threw palm leaves over the battalion of crucifixes throughout our home, considered advice from the myriad of Catholic publications arriving daily in our mailbox ("orders from HQ," I heard Grandma say under her breath,) and dressed the Infant of Prague statue in his ever-changing liturgical colors as he stood atop our television set and watched over Milton Berle and all the other Jewish

comedians of the era. Proppy, as we called him, must have thought he was in the Catskills at a Borscht Belt resort. At the nearby parish school, nuns and priests kept us on the narrow path of catechesis and religious nonsense, very little of it relating to God.

For instance, the church told us to have lots of babies, and as soon as we could, but of course after marriage. Whenever any family in our parish was mentioned in school, the NUMBER of children was always included, with a slight frown for only one child and a big smile if the number approached a dozen. As a third grader, I was quite impressed. So I dutifully trotted home from school and told Mom she should have more children.

"What?" she said, "where did you hear that?"

"In school, Mom. Sister Liquida said good Catholics have lots of children. So I think we should, too."

Grandma, sitting at the kitchen table, retreated into her Dream Book and began to silently read.

My mother threw a look across the kitchen that told me I was on thin ice. It suddenly occurred to me that a nine year old should not presume to give his mother advice on family planning.

"How many more brothers," my mother asked, "do you think will fit in that bedroom with all of you?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"Look, Mom," I said, "I'm not much on details, I'm just a kid."

"I'm aware of that, David," she said.

"I guess I'll mention it to Dad," I said. "He's a nuts and bolts sort of guy and he'll know what to do."

"Yes," she said, "he'll know what to do."

"And if Dad thinks that"

"OK, that's enough!" she said, her voice beginning to rise.

"Mom, I'm just the messenger."

She left the kitchen then, stepping rather smartly. I looked over at my grandmother to see if she would offer some comment, but she appeared engrossed in Saint Sigmund, slowly turning the pages. Then she looked up at me.

"Maybe," said Grandma, "you should carry a little horn with you when you make an announcement."

"What announcement?"

"The Angel of The Lord declared unto Mary," she said.

My little brother was born six months later.

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