

## Sanctuary

In the middle of the night car doors slammed shut and the sound of hundreds of feet crunching through frozen snow could be heard across the church parking lot. The thermometer dove below zero on this Christmas Eve in the early 1950s in upstate New York. On this night of nights my family always stayed up late and got ourselves off to church for Midnight Mass, the first Mass of the morning on Christmas Day. It was never clear to me ... nor probably to any of us ... why we observed the tradition. But it wasn't the only odd practice I would wonder about while attempting the Catholicism of my forefathers. We were preparing for a lifetime of swallowing hard and saying reverently, "It's a mystery," as we continued our drive toward the goal posts of heaven.

None of this story is meant to imply my two brothers and I were angels as we tried to make an occasional home run and figure out the necessary theology to get on Heaven's scoreboard. Being a Catholic at age 10 required a degree of balance between believing everything I was told and at other times accepting I had to figure out some things for myself.

For example, although the reason now escapes me, during that Christmas season of my tenth year in this vale of tears it became important to me to figure out the practice of Sanctuary.

Somewhere in my Catholic elementary school education I heard that if you were being chased through the streets in the Middle Ages by civil or church authorities, or even by an aggrieved husband, you were advised to get yourself into a church so you could claim sanctuary from retribution, at least for a while. Or you could keep running if you believed justice was just a word in those days. Sanctuary was enshrined in law in England from around 600 to 1600 A.D., but it was not clear if you could be anywhere within the outside walls of the church or specifically inside the actual sanctuary part of the church near the altar. Either way, I was pretty impressed by this thousand year lapse of discipline, especially since I had never heard the nuns allow anything remotely similar at Our Lady of the Doldrums in South Utica. You couldn't run next door to the parish church after school to escape detention.

Although some in our family were rather blasé about adherence, my little brother and I were True Believers who kept to the old traditions. We derided everyone who didn't believe what we did and held ourselves accountable for even the smallest acts of disobedience, except for a once weekly plenary dismissal of personal responsibility when we showed up for Confession and announced "the Devil made us do it."

And so it was no surprise Mike and I took advantage of the lengthy sermon during Christmas Eve's gruesomely long Midnight Mass. Our mirth bubbled over as we tried out one-liners for the trial scene in our upcoming Neighborhood New Years Play, "Manger Animals Meet Brown Franciscan Alien Sisters." When Dad grabbed Mike by the ear and threatened to hug him to death, the two of us were ready to challenge Our Father, as we referred to him in his presence when we wanted to get his goat. We pointed out that a little laughing was certainly not as bad as the animal noises we made last year when seated near the manger. These were performed as realistically as possible so that nearby worshipers began to wonder if any of the cattle in the manger scene were real.

We also found ways to acoustically amplify our bodily functions while Father Fartslubber brought us all up to date on the latest from the Vatican in their unending quest to stamp out everyone's night life.

"Just how has it come to be," Mike and I now asked each other, "that Our Father should swat us while we are supposed to be safe here in the sanctuary of Holy Mother The Church?"

"I'm sure our Catechism would be of help," said Mike.

"Amen, Brother," I replied. "Question 4,381 of the Baltimore Catechism, subpart VIII, paragraph 2 says: 'Would Holy Mother The Church ever lie to us?'"

"And the answer?" said Mike.

"Probably she would not, but Caveat Emptor," I said.

Behind us old Mr. Kennedy who ran the liquor store listened to this exchange with a look of horror growing on his face. It was said that his son went away to become a priest, but no one ever heard from the young man afterward. Therefore it became one of those popular boyhood beliefs the Kennedy kid was in jail doing 25 to life for murdering a showgirl.

Dad smiled and whispered, "Sanctuary doesn't apply this morning because we didn't chase each other in here. We all came in of our own accord."

I took a deep breath. "So," I said, in my self-appointed role as Neighborhood Child Legal Advocate (my advertising jingle was 'Naughty or Nice, For a Quarter You Can Call Dave Twice,') "if

next week Mike and I decide to skip church, what do you suppose will be our sanctuary status then?"

"I haven't deliberated long enough to render a polished opinion," Dad said evenly. "But I can guarantee you'll wish you never heard of sanctuary if you don't come to Mass."

"Yes, Sir. I got it, Dad. Turns out Mike and I will be available."

Fifteen minutes later we stood at the invitation to "Pray, Brothers" and then knelt for more prayer from the missal. Soon the Mass reached the Consecration of the bread and wine. The small hand-held altar bells jingled and the priest offered up the bread by raising it to heaven. From everywhere around us short whispered prayers began to softly dribble from the lips of fervent worshipers. In a voice beyond a whisper, but loud enough to be heard twenty to thirty feet away in the quiet church, Mike intoned in a voice deeper than normal, "Ogee Fatogee."

Sitting between Mike and Dad I saw my father's big arm shoot across my field of vision. One end of it connected with Mike's ear and pulled the boy bodily across my lap where he was stuffed down in the narrow space just beneath Our Father's elbow.

Later Mike said he thought he'd spoken Latin. He had watched a Tarzan movie and the natives all said "Ogee Fatogee" when their new king ascended the throne. Tarzan, an illiterate Zulu dilettante, asked what the phrase meant.

"All Honor to You, Sahib," came the answer.

Mr. Kennedy approached us after church as we crunched our way back across the brightly lit parking lot toward our car.

"You've got quite a bit on your hands with those two boys in church, John," he said to Dad, an old fellow Knight of Columbus.

"We make do," said Dad. "Mary works so hard with the boys all week." With a chuckle, he added, "I gave her Christmas Eve off."

"Might be better for her soul and for the boys' behavior if she came along to help you control them at Mass."

I heard my father's jaw grind shut. He was no pushover, but he was indeed a nice guy and respectful of his elders, including Mr. Kennedy. He looked the man in the eye but otherwise didn't respond. Everyone became quiet.

Mike lifted his face and stared up at the old man.

"Ogee Fatogee," he said as a winning smile crept across his face.

"Esprit de Corps," I added.

"Una lucha entre el pasado y el futuro," said Dad, recalling Fidel Castro's definition of Revolución.

"Muy bien," I said.

"Ya Wah Bong," said Mike.

"Ya What Who?" Mr. Kennedy asked.

"Chinese Jingle Bells," said Mike. He and I began to softly sing, "Ya Wha Bong, Ya Wha Bong, Ya Wha all the way."

It appeared to me Mr. Kennedy was impressed. Or in any event stunned. He looked down at two angelic faces gazing up at him and then twisted his head back to Dad, who stood no more than 36 inches from his nose.

"Merry Christmas to you all," said Mr. Kennedy, but his eyes were on only my father as he backed away slowly, a step at a time.

"Please," he added, "extend my good wishes to your wife." He turned and rapidly sped off in the direction of his car.

"He's afraid of us," said Mike.

My father laughed. "More likely he's afraid he'll catch something from us."

"Why didn't you slug him, Dad?" I asked.

He glanced at me to see if I was serious. He relaxed and answered me.

"Sanctuary," he said. "We're in church, right?"

"Actually, Dad, we're out on the sidewalk," said Mike.

Sanctuary isn't always about four walls," he said. "Sometimes it's nothing more than giving a person a second chance."

Not all of Dad's bits of wisdom stuck in my memory, but that one did.

My father was a pretty astute guy, a wise man who thought about his reactions to things before he let his reaction go too far. As a beneficiary of all his wisdom, I should have grown up almost perfect. But lucky for both of us he was ordinary as well as special. Lucky for me, I'm as much a product of his failures as his successes, leaving me blessedly normal.

Mike, on the other hand, became a genius.

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