

THE CELESTIAL SLOT MACHINE

“Hi, Orville, nice sweater. Is it new?”

“That it is, Bob ... treated myself to it at Gino’s.”

...“‘Bullets’ give you a good deal?”

“You know, Vince special ordered it and altered it at no charge. I’d say with all the attention he paid to it; the price I paid was more than fair. Besides, it was free money anyway.”

Breaking into a smile, the priest leans back in his chair. “Free money? Tell me, how do I get in on that deal?”

“Join us next time at the new casino at Riverwalk.”

A hint of surprise lights up Father Bob’s eyes. “Let me guess, you’ve been betting your retirement checks on the roulette wheel?”

“Well, if it works ...” the colonels says, laughing.

“So, I should put the down payment on the new rectory on red seven?”

“Try black twenty-eight.”

“How’d this trip come about?” the pastor asks, chuckling at Mr. K’s response.

“Well, several of us were looking for something to do when ‘Pretzels’ suggested a trip to the Casino. None of us had been to one in years. Last time for me, I was in the service ... on leave in Monaco.”

“I take it you enjoyed yourselves.”

“Immensely ... and a few of us, myself included, walked away with a few extra bucks.”

Mr. K pauses, an impish look on his face. “But with all the prayers I heard at the tables, it made me realize something.”

“Oh yea, what’s that?”

“That if God answered all prayers, he’d never get out of a casino.”

The remark brings a hearty chuckle from the priest, and a mild look of confusion from the colonel. “It wasn’t that funny, Bob?” Orville deadpans.

“I know. It just reminds me of an old joke.”

“And that is?”

“What’s the difference between people praying in a casino, and praying in church?”

“I don’t know, what?”

“The people in the casino are serious.”

Hi, it’s Tony Baggz. It’s an early summer evening and we find ourselves on Mr. Orville Krankus’ back porch. Just the colonel and Father Bob, a pair of rocking chairs, a bottle of twenty-year-old Australian port and two crystal snifters. The colonel was working in his garden and when he saw the priest out for an evening stroll, he invited him over for a nightcap. It’s peaceful and quiet, the colonel’s prize roses are in bloom, and their perfume is delightful.

Seems some of the gang visited the new casino at Riverwalk. Now, none of the gang are heavily into gambling. Oh sure, there's the weekly nickel-dime Council financial meeting; the floating poker game, where winning fifty cents, known humorously as "five large" is a windfall. And Reverend Randall enjoys watching the ponies run and has been known to occasionally put a couple bucks on his favorite in the Kentucky Derby. But that's about it. So, I think the priest is a little surprised at the gang's sojourn into the "valley of sin" as the more radical protesters took to calling the casino when it was built. But knowing these two, this evening's observations on the roulette wheel and the blackjack tables promises to be a bit more mellow.

So ... what do you say we listen in?

"Do I hear a note of dissatisfaction in your congregation?" Mr. K asks, a twinkle in his eye.

"You're warm, Orville."

"I thought I detected a little ennui."

"Well, not the regulars, at least most of them. It's the person who's angry because God isn't answering them how and when they want. To them, God's a celestial jackpot, and they're there for a quick payoff."

"And coming up snake eyes? I assume."

Nodding, the priest chuckles, sips his wine, and continues.

"I remember one young woman whose mother had cancer. She prayed her mom would get well and when she didn't and passed away, she said she couldn't believe in a God who was deaf."

"Interesting way to put it," Orville says.

“She kept asking ‘Where was God’; all the while getting angrier and angrier. Then she left, and, for some time, I didn’t see her again.”

“What happened?”

“Her husband came down with a serious illness. I saw her one Sunday after about a year had passed, and she told me about him. The doctors were doing everything they could, but progress was slow. She said although she still was angry, she realized there was no place else to turn. So, she came back to see if she could work through her feelings. It gave us a chance to talk.”

“About?”

“The nature of sickness, suffering, death, those things.”

“What did you say to her?”

“That God was with her mother, and now with her husband. That her mother and husband ultimately belong to God and in the end, He is the one in control. An idea difficult to accept for many of us.”

“And her reaction?”

“Skeptical, naturally.”

“So how did you handle that?”

“I told her, if she cared to, to look at the crucifix over the altar and understand it reminds us God Himself embraced suffering and death. He understands our anguish, our helplessness, loneliness, and abandonment.”

“Her feelings?”

“Ambivalent, but at least a lot less angry. I pray she works through it and I think she will. It’s a tough sell because the final answer is not always here and now.”

The colonel sips his wine, a reflective look in his eyes. “For her sake, I hope her husband gets better,” he says softly.

“Actually, Orville, I saw her last week and he’s making some progress. So, there’s hope.”

“Good.”

The conversation lapses for a moment. Lowering his snifter, a rueful smile wanders across the Colonels face. “Gotta admit, Bob, I’ve often seen God that way myself.”

“What way?”

“As some kind of celestial slot machine.”

“How so?”

“Well, when Betty was sick, I asked God to heal her. Well, he didn’t, and I was angry he didn’t dance to my tune. Even now, I occasionally feel that way. Sometimes I just can’t help it ... guess you think that’s terrible.”

“Not really. I’d imagine everyone, in the early stages of belief, view God in some such manner. I think it’s natural. Understanding grows as we mature.”

“You’re being generous, aren’t you Bob,” the colonel chuckles, a quizzical look in his eyes.

“I don’t think so. I imagine everyone, even the most faithful, have wondered why God often remains silent in our moments of need, or pain, or despair ... it’s simply human. I’d say it only becomes wrong when we choose to stay stuck in that anger and refuse to look further for the truth.”

Extending the bottle, Mr. K refreshes Fr. Bob’s glass.

“The world’s a noisy place, Orville ... it doesn’t have much room for God nowadays and sometimes, the only thing He can use to get our attention is pain and suffering. A wise man* once said something like, ‘sometimes the only way the Good Lord can get into some hearts is to let them break.’ After all, look how full the churches were after 9-11.”

“Amen to that,” the colonel says softly.

“The key, and I know it’s difficult at times, is to understand Christ reconciled mankind through entering into the joys and trials of life, and ultimately pain, suffering, and death ... and in the end, overcame it. To show us he understands; He was there and experienced it all. And, He is with you if you open yourself to Him. And if one is faithful, in the end, all will be made right.”

“And that’s where the answer lies, Bob?”

“Honestly Orville, yes. In the ability to say, ‘thy will, not mine, be done’ ...

... and mean it.”

God parted the Red Sea for the Chosen People. He didn't eliminate their problem, but he afforded them a way through it. A favorite thought of mine.

In times of pain and suffering, why is God silent? "Why," as many cry, "don't you answer me Lord?" The late Pope John Paul II answered the question. His answer, simple; because God already has revealed everything necessary for man's happiness. In the Torah, the sacred writings, and in Jesus Christ, the answers are there to be found.

God is not, as many picture Him, a celestial slot machine; a jackpot to be hit. Rather, He is an eternal Father, steadfastly present in His creation. In the best and the worst of times. The "valley of the shadow of death" as the Psalm calls it.

It's a matter of faith to accept that God is in charge. And if one lives by God's love, His light, and His law, no matter what, in the end one will find oneself beside still waters, green pastures, and in His house, forever.

Living one's life on that premise ...

... is no gamble."

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.

*Fulton J Sheen – American Catholic Archbishop (1898 – 1979)

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