

CHILD ABUSE

"To tell you the truth, Sue, I felt like slapping the guy."

"You're kidding, Jane ... you mean, in front of the kids?"

"Yeah, I've never gotten so angry at a priest in my life. More than half those kids are nine and under. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind after Mass but he was talking to three nuns and I just left before I said or did something I'd regret."

"... probably a good thing," Sue chuckles.

The gentleman in the burgundy golf shirt at an adjacent table stops stirring his coffee. Looking at the speaker, a frown creases his face. Turning toward them, he speaks in a gentle but curious tone.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing your conversation," he says. "You wanted to slap a priest? At mass? Can I ask why?"

Eyeing the man warily, Jane hesitates. "With respect, might I ask why you would be interested?" she asks, caution in her tone.

"I'm sorry ... didn't mean to eavesdrop. I'm Father Bob Scanlon. "I'm the pastor of St. Katherine's, and it's just what you said seems a bit jarring. Guess I'm not used to that sort of sentiment,

...especially at Mass."

Hi, Tony here. It's Wednesday morning here at Sam's Bistro. The sun's bright, temperature in the 70's and Father Bob is waiting for Jim Morton, Ace Martinson, and Reverend Paul Jacobson. They're getting together for a round of golf at a course at Lake Remington; about an hour west of the city. Wednesday is his day off as it is with Reverend Jake, and today's too nice a day to pass up.

Seems two ladies at the next table have taken him by surprise. From the look on his face, I'm guessing he wants to understand just what kind of bee got under Jane's bonnet. Knowing Father Bob, he'll get to the bottom of it ... in his own charming way of course.

What do you say we listen in?

"You're a Catholic priest?" Sue asks, warily eyeing the priest's attire.

Seeing her skepticism, Father Bob, chuckles. "My day off," he says, gesturing to his golf shirt. "I'm meeting another minister and a couple fellas for a round of golf."

Nodding, Jane smiles. I think the pastor at St. Cecelia's is a golfer too."

"Father Bill Davidson ... know him well. The man spans a mean Spalding."

"You play golf with Father Bill?"

"Several times a year, when we can find time in our schedules."

"Let me guess, he doesn't wear his clerical clothing on the course either."

“Yea, Bishop Richardson frowns on it. Says it’s too hard on the backswing when he tries to hit a driver himself.”

“What, do all priests play golf?” Sue asks, laughing at her own question.

“Only when we’re not on the lacrosse field,” chuckles the priest. Sipping his coffee then setting his cup down, he cocks his head slightly.

“Let me ask you a question if you don’t mind. What were you referring to when you said you wanted to slap the priest?”

“Well, I wouldn’t, really,” Jane says, a flush of embarrassment rising in her cheeks. “It’s just that I was at the Friday morning children’s mass at St. Cecelia’s elementary school. My little girl, Kimberley, is in the third grade and it was her first day back after having the flu.”

Sipping her coffee, she continues.

“Anyway, the priest ... I think he’s the new assistant pastor there ...”

Father Dan Robbins...?” Father Bob, asks.

“... Right, Father Dan. Anyway, he was giving a little sermon and he started talking about how we all must look in the eyes of God. And he used words like evil, ugly, sinful, and wicked. And it made me angry; this man standing in front of the children and describing them like that.”

“We work so hard to build up their self-image,”, what with all the bullying, name calling, and nastiness they have to deal with every day,” Sue says, joining the conversation. “You know typical kid’s behavior at that age. And here, where we’re hoping to get some help

from a respected figure like a priest, he's piling it on. It's hard enough combatting the stuff kids hear from their peers; the last place we need it coming from is a priest no less."

"I'm sorry the kids were subjected to that," the pastor says, shaking his head slowly. "It's something my assistant and I try to guard against at St. Kate's. I have to say I agree with you ... well not about slapping Father Dan ... but about your disappointment."

"Then why do some priests talk like that to the kids?" Jane asks, a tiny smile of relief brightening her face.

"Well, it comes from a misplaced emphasis on how we relate to God and how God relates to us. So many people, some priests included, put an inordinate emphasis on man primarily as a sinner in the eyes of God. I believe, that's wrong, and there's a much better way."

Breaking a cinnamon roll in half to share with Sue, Jane looks at the priest, a nascent touch of respect in her eyes.

"You mean, kind of like saying to a child, 'you're a bad boy' when they've done something wrong, rather than, 'you're a good boy, but you've done a bad thing.'"

Sipping his coffee, again the good pastor smiles.

"I think you understand perfectly. It's the way many people define others ... and themselves, when you come right down to it."

"Define?"

"Yes, define."

"I don't know if I follow ..." Jane says, her words trailing off.

"Well, teachers need to remember the foundation of all teaching is that God made mankind in His image. True, man fell short, sin entered the world, and the destiny for which we was originally created was withdrawn. What didn't change, however, was that image in which man was created; and God's constant embrace of it. Sin may have changed man, but it did not change God. He may see our sin; He just doesn't define us by it."

"And neither should we?" Jane asks. "You're saying God's vision of mankind remains the same in spite of man's disobedience?"

"Exactly. Man's action, in the eyes of God, did not nullify the nature in which he was created because of the worst two minutes of Adam and Eve's lives. If it did, there would have been no cross, no Calvary, no Easter, and no hope."

"And that is what you mean when you use the term, define," Sue asks. "That God does not define man by his sinfulness, but by the nature in which we were originally created?"

"Again, exactly," smiles St. Kate's pastor. "Not by our failings and sins. That's the mistake your priest made in talking to the children."

Pausing for a moment, Father Bob sees the rest of his foursome coming down the street. Turning back to the two ladies, he continues.

"We must teach right and wrong; sin and its consequences are a reality and the church can't condone it. But your concern is well taken. Its teachers must not define people by the fact that sin and its consequences are part of our lives."

Father Bob finishes his coffee as Pastor Jake, Ace, and Jim Morton walk through the door.

“All the priests in the diocese meet several times a year with the bishop,” he says to the ladies in parting. “Next time I’ll have a gentle word or two with Father Dan. He’s young, just out of the seminary, and I think Father Bill and I can help him to see things a little differently.”

“Oh, and your words just might have helped make him a better priest.”

An impish gleam lights up the pastor’s eye as he looks at the two ladies. He chuckles, and winks.

“Just don’t smack him too hard, next time you see him...”

Our God is not the Wizard of Oz meets Santa Claus meets the Cookie Monster as too many people picture, or portray, Him. A cosmic ogre, endlessly foiling man’s desires; silently saying, ‘look but don’t touch,’ ‘touch but don’t feel,’ ‘taste but don’t savor,’ ‘desire but don’t obtain.’ Or even worse, a constantly disappointed Father, ashamed of his children who are repeatedly told they are evil, selfish, or wicked. Often by well-meaning folks.

No. The exact opposite of that vision is how God sees every man, woman, and child. He sees a precious creation, a child made in His image and likeness, with whom He desires to live eternally.

The Creator didn’t make evil, and to define a child, or anyone else for that matter, as such is to ignore the Creator’s intent ...

... and tear at the very heart of God.

Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.

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