

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Good Jesuit

April 3, 1988

On Sunday, Mom woke me up in time to attend the 10 am mass, so I could finally see the cool new Jesuit. If she hadn't, I would have slept until 10:30. "I can't go because I'm deaf and heat sensitive," she said. "That church gives me a woozy head every time. But you need to go."

"By myself?" The odds of Dad and Leo accompanying me were slim to none.

"Put on some nice clothes."

I dressed in beige cargo shorts and a red Hawaiian shirt and walked the mile to church. Walking at a steady clip, I approached the no-frills, Protestant-looking church with the red-brick, Bauhaus architecture on the corner of Bradley Avenue and Willowbrook Road. I went through the row of glass front doors and entered the dimly lit interior. A twelve-foot-tall crucifix dominated the brick wall behind the altar. Nailed to the cross was a loincloth-covered Caucasian Christ, bleeding from an open wound in his stomach. His head was arched up in agony, his eyes misted over, his mouth slack. I sat in the cherry wood pew just in front of the altar. My Dad was a front-and-center seat guy, and I inherited his preference. I had poor vision — even with my glasses on — and liked to see what the heck was going on. Also, the very front row was the one place in the church I was guaranteed to not have to sit next to anyone. I had arrived with only a few minutes to go before mass started. The church was about two-thirds filled, mostly by Asian and elderly white parishioners, plus two or three young Irish and Italian women in their late teens. There were surprisingly few children or middle-aged parishioners. In a few months, word would get out about this charismatic, loveable Jesuit, and this mass would be filled to bursting with children and a surprisingly racially diverse crowd of adults. Proto-Pope Francis had arrived.

My first look at the new Jesuit came when the entrance procession led him to the altar, and he turned around to greet the parishioners. Father Jack Stańczyk had a weather-beaten, all-American, John-Boy-from-*The-Waltons* look: blonde hair, blue eyes, and silver, wire-rimmed

glasses. An experienced innocent, this fellow had been through the mill and somehow managed to come out the other side of repeated tragedies a decent human being. During the first few minutes of the mass, Father Jack gave no hint that he was about to play the trickster. Mass-as-usual played out much as one might expect. However, when homily time arrived, a mad gleam reached his eyes, and he shouted, “And now for something completely different!”

Father Jack scurried up to the oak-colored lectern. “I have good news, my brothers and sisters: Monsignor Tobin has gone golfing at Baltusrol in Springfield, New Jersey! He’s left me unsupervised! This means I can give you the kind of homily I’ve always wanted to!”

Unnerved, the congregation stirred.

Oh, this is gonna be good.

Father Jack assumed a temperate, well-mannered air. “As a college cinema studies professor, I’ve always loved film soundtracks.”

Ooooooh!

He continued, “I’ve always found it captivating watching film characters going through their lives unaware that their actions are accompanied by non-diegetic music scored by the likes of Max Steiner, Bernard Herrmann, and Rachel Portman. When I have funny thoughts like that, it never takes me long to wonder what kind of theme song I would like for my life.” John Williams’ theme to Christopher Reeve’s *Superman* started playing from every speaker in church. Hilarity, confusion, disapproval, and joy spread amongst the parishioners. The theme trailed off.

“I know, I know,” Father Jack beamed. “I’m a legend in my own mind. Still, a healthy self-image is a good thing if you don’t take it too far.” He pointed at us as a collective. “I invite you to do the same. Cultivate a healthy self-image. I’d like you all to ask yourself this question: if a movie were made about your life story, what would your theme song be?”

Ennio Morricone’s Days of Heaven suite, I thought. *Or all Ennio’s scores together.* (In more recent years, I’ve toyed with “Chevaliers de Sangreal/503” by Hans Zimmer, plus the pop songs “Hombre Religioso (Religious Man)” by Mister Loco and “The Mighty” by Sting.)

Seeing the parishioners exchange confused, bemused, and shy glances, Fr. Jack held up a finger. “Remember, your choice of main theme doesn’t have to smack of Wagnerian heroism. You could go for carnivalesque, comic, or sentimental, like the Nino Rota score to a Fellini film.” On cue, the theme to *Le Notti Di Cabiria* piped into the church, then faded. “We drift through life, tired and beleaguered, putting no thought or feeling into our actions. But what if we imagined the music we might make every moment of every day with each of our interactions?”

I wasn’t sure where all this was going, but the man had my attention. Fr. Jack continued, “When we feel out of control of our own lives and its music score, here’s one thing to consider: whatever may be going on, God only writes beautiful, loving music for us. He doesn’t write theme songs for us that suggest we are the villains of our lives, or that we are fundamentally unlovable. God does not write Darth Vader’s *Imperial March* for any of us.” The iconic villain theme from the *Empire Strikes Back* lasted long enough to be recognizable before going away.

Fr. Jack’s tone became serious. “It is fashionable in modern American Christianity for priests and reverends, both Protestant and Catholic, to emphasize all the ‘very good, very practical’ reasons why certain people should be expelled from the Church. They harp on why so many of us are damnable creatures, unworthy of God’s love. Why? Usually because they’ve violated some form of sexual taboo, or because they are a member of the wrong faith community. Who does God slam the Great Green Door of Heaven on? We hear much on EWTN and the 700 Club about all those whom God has abjured. God does not love people who are gay, or who have been divorced, or had abortions. God does not love those who are Jewish or Moslem or — Heaven help us all — Democrats! God hates all sinners.”

Wow, that took a grim turn. We’ve traveled a long way from the Superman theme.

Fr. Jack paused for effect, waiting to see how many of the parishioners expected him to either validate fundamentalist Catholicism or politically hang himself challenging it too vociferously. “This is just my humble opinion, but it seems to me that anyone who suggests that God turns his back on any of us is not speaking for God. Our

God is the God of love. His only son, Jesus Christ, is the Prince of Peace. Jesus of Nazareth was the gentle carpenter who gave up his life out of love for all of humanity. This Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, commands us to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ He commands us to love ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies, equally, with all our hearts, minds, and souls. Jesus demands that we leave no room for hate in our hearts and minds: no room for hating God, ourselves, our neighbors, or our enemies. For Catholics, hatred is verboten.

“If you ever hear a voice telling you to hate others, silence that voice. If you ever hear a voice telling you that *you* are worthy of hate, silence that voice. Tell it to get behind you, the way Jesus told Satan to get behind him. If you hear that voice coming at you from the radio from a so-called fire-and-brimstone preacher, turn that radio off. Get that voice behind you. If you hear a voice of hatred from a politician, get that Satanic voice behind you. In fact, please offer serious consideration to voting against it, because that voice doesn’t deserve political power to reinforce its bad intentions. Under no circumstances is a voice of hatred the true voice of God. Remember, God loves you just as He loves your neighbor. God is not about hate. Anyone who claims to be speaking on God’s behalf when speaking hate is a fraud!”

Amen. This homily is starting to get to me. I was not used to feeling emotions in church. I was not used to feeling anything but boredom, guilt, and shame. I had felt much the same way throughout my Thursday night training for Confirmation. Yes, Miss O’Sullivan was pretty and liked me, but her main goal was to make us all feel self-loathing for every time we stepped wrong. She also goaded us into feeling self-righteous fury whenever we observed another step wrong. Fr. Jack’s words stirred in me emotions that I had not felt when Miss O’Sullivan spoke, felt in any mass before, or felt *anywhere* before. He was using the language of hope, love, forgiveness, charity, and peace. These were not the dominant ideals or emotions of the 1980s in general, nor were they the dominant ideals or emotions of 1980s Roman Catholicism. Fr. Jack had approached me with a giant hacksaw, ready to free my heart and brain from the invisible iron maidens they had been imprisoned in. I looked about the room for signs of Miss

O'Sullivan, wondering if my newfound love for Fr. Jack represented some form of infidelity. And yet, as the song went, if loving Fr. Jack and his message was wrong, I did not want to be right.

Fr. Jack continued. "We are all the heroes of our own lives. None of us is the antagonist. We may make mistakes. We may fail. We may even deliberately harm ourselves and others. And yet, we are not evil, in our hearts. Even when we commit one of the seven deadly sins — or, more accurately, succumb to one of the seven deadly tendencies — God is never far away. God is always rooting for us, hoping for us to rediscover their opposite numbers: the seven virtues. Think of the times when we find ourselves depressed and unloved. We indulge in gluttony, and try to fill the lonely, painful void within ourselves with endless amounts of food. In the process, we poison ourselves with sugar and fat. During those moments, God urges us to love ourselves, take better care of ourselves, and eat with temperance. When we fall into obsessive, possessive, violent lust, God cheers us on to help us discover a more chaste love: one that recognizes the full humanity of the person we feel drawn to. When we hoard and indulge in solitary acts of greed, God reminds us of the joys of charity. God reminds us the connections we make with others through selflessness, generosity, and loving human interaction. When we fall into sloth, God reminds us that diligence is what saves us from losing the burning spark of passion and inspiration within. When we find ourselves consumed with wrath, God liberates us from the debilitating, self-destructive fury by helping forgiveness descend upon us. When we learn to hate others out of envy, God urges us to count our blessings instead. When we take too much pride in our self, God reminds us that being prideful is the first step towards alienating yourself from everyone else in life. Humility is the first step towards mending broken relationships."

I leaned forward in rapt attention. *Is this homily as good as I think it is?*

"Don't confuse God's voice with the voice of the devil," Fr. Jack said. "They can sometimes sound the same. Here's how you can tell the difference: The devil's main goal is to convince us all that we are fundamentally unlovable, and that all of humanity is one great big pile of manure. Anyone who tries to influence you on behalf of the

devil will speak in those terms. They'll try to convince you that you are pond scum, as is everyone else. Do not internalize this voice. Reject it. 'If the devil taunts you with your past, remind him of his future.'"

Fr. Jack paused for the light laughter. "But how are we to recognize God's authentic voice? If he sounds like a caregiver instead of a warrior. If he grants forgiveness for the unforgivable instead of acts like a hanging judge in a Western. God is a healer. God is a teacher. God is there to inspire us to be better people and get the most out of being alive. God is not here to smite us, mercilessly, for every flaw, real or imagined. God will never turn his back on you just because you made one mistake, or have one small, blemish on the white handkerchief of your soul. God loves us, despite our imperfections. On some level, God loves us because of our imperfections. There's something lovable about losers. Let's face it: We're all losers. All of us. But we are adorable losers. Sometimes, we may be tempted to think, 'God cannot love me because I'm too fat. God loved me when I was thin, but I gained five pounds, and that's four pounds too many, so I've fallen from grace. Nobody could love a fatso like me! Not even God.' Let's imagine the same train of thought attached to gaining fifty pounds, or a hundred, or three-hundred pounds. The result is the same. When we think in those terms, we feel our heart break. As we dwell on these thoughts, we allow ourselves to be mired in a quicksand of self-destructive thinking. God loved you five pounds ago. God will love you five thousand pounds from now. To quote the bard, Sir Mix-a-Lot, '*Cosmo* thinks your fat, but God ain't down with that.'"

The parishioners who knew the song "Baby Got Back" chortled. The other parishioners had lost the thread of the homily too long ago to be concerned about missing this one joke.

"God loves you. And if you think, 'God won't love me because I'm gay,' remember that Jerry Falwell may not love you because you're gay, but Jerry Falwell is not God. God loves you. God loves soldiers who have killed others in war, married people who have had affairs, and women who have had abortions. We are all ugly sometimes. We all do ugly things sometimes. But God loves us. God loves everything about us."

I frowned. *I don't know about that one. That may be going too far.*

God loves everything about Phil McCracken? Mr. Orlov? Tony Nocerino? The mullet math guy? I hope not.

Fr. Jack paused one final time, ready to begin his summation. “And that is the most important point I want to make, my brothers and sisters. If there’s just one thing you take away from this homily, I’m hoping that it is not that I played the *Superman* theme when the Monsignor was away playing golf. (Though I will admit that I did that to get your attention.) What I’m hoping you remember is: God loves *everything* about you and is cheering you on with inspiring John Williams music. God hears the joyous strains of the *Superman* theme whenever He thinks of you.” The priest gestured expansively. “Do you know what God loves about all of you?”

Silence.

Father Jack sighed. “You’re supposed to yell, ‘Everything!’” Embarrassed, he cleared his throat. “Okay, okay. I know this is a Catholic Church and we don’t like to make a sound.” Some self-conscious laughs came back to him. “Yell ‘Everything!’ like we’re in a charismatic Protestant Church where they know how to make some noise. *What does God love about you?*”

“Everything!” roughly half of the parishioners yelled back. One quarter of the remainder spoke the words without yelling them. The rest remained obstinately silent.

“And do you know what God loves about your friends and family?” Fr. Jack asked.

“Everything!” slightly fewer parishioners replied.

Fr. Jack wagged an admonishing finger at the crowd. “I think I’m losing some of you, but we are going to go with the hardest one to admit: What does God love about your enemies?”

Reluctantly, a handful of parishioners yelled back, “Everything.”

“Nothing!” One heckler roared. “God does not love my enemies!”

“But God loves you, sir, for yelling that just now,” Fr. Jack called back, inspiring more scattered laughter. “God loves your enemies, too. And He expects you to treat your enemies like the brothers and sisters that they are. We are all children of God. We need to remember this, especially when we are mired in bitter feuds. Do you feel justified in hating yourself because you are ‘too sinful’ to be in God’s good graces?”

You are wrong. Do you feel justified in condemning others because they don't 'deserve' a place at God's table? You are wrong. Do you feel that you can hurt other human beings because their sinfulness makes them not fully human? That's your anger talking. That's your pain. That's not reality. You may not love your enemies, but God certainly does, and you are not in charge. God is. God has the final say in who is worthy of love, not you. When you wake up in the morning and look yourself in the mirror, there are times when the voice of the devil will tell you that you are worthless. You may hear the same thing from angry political voices on the radio. These voices of propaganda either accuse you of being evil or invite you to scapegoat others as evil. Blame *them* for all your problems. No matter where or when or how you hear a demonic voice tell you that all people are unlovable, do not listen to it. Whether it is a priest or politician, your own manic depression or over-inflated superego, or the very devil himself, say to yourself, 'God loves everything about me, and everything about us all.'

"Every day that you interact with another human being, whether you feel like kissing them or punching them or just steering clear of them, remember that they, too, are children of the Lord. If any of them look like they are suffering, that they are hating themselves right now, then you need to do everything in your power to say to them, directly or indirectly, 'God loves you. God loves everything about you.' Show them that love. Be an instrument of God's love. Make the world a brighter place. For when you love yourself, and love God, and love your neighbor — including your enemy — you are making beautiful music. It may be a non-diegetic soundtrack, but it is a glorious one. Far, far more beautiful than any film score the great Ennio Morricone could compose. That is why I say to you all: 'Go forth and make beautiful music in the name of God!'"

Wow. Father Jack, I want to be just like you when I grow up.