

Altar Boy

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The first time I heard Latin, I remember thinking how beautiful the language sounded. Add the Kyrie to the Latin, toss in some incense, and I was hooked. I wanted to be able to say those words. Incense wafting from Father Shanley's censer. Mrs. McCarthy playing the organ and singing the Kyrie. And perhaps most important to me, wearing the cassock and surplice. I loved the look of that long black robe and the beautiful, white, angel-winged surplice.

I began studying to become an altar boy in the third grade. Any boys interested in becoming an altar boy received a little card with all the things written on it that you had to say. *Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam. Et quare tristis incedo, dum affligit me inimicus?* I still remember lots of it. It sounded so wonderful coming out of my mouth. We had to memorize that card and then try out at the church in front of Father.

The church, St. Mary's, was a tiny, white clapboard building, square and with a single steeple, a short spire, and one bell. It was beautiful. There were two rows of mahogany pews, a narrow center aisle, with the stations of the cross in relief against the walls on the outside aisles. The air was sepiá. The windows were stained glass. It

was dark. A small rack at the front of the church held 40 or 50 votive candles which flickered perpetually in the half light. I used to really love lighting a candle. There was something both liberating and sanctified about it. I think it had something to do with holding the candle-lighter to an already lit candle, setting a tiny flame free, and then replacing that flame on an unlit candle, while saying something like “God bless Zia Rosa.” My mother told me I always had to say a prayer for somebody . . . Zia Rosa, Uncle Dan, or Gramma Cirone. Somebody. I guess just lighting a candle, without the prayer was kind of half-baked and missed the point of the whole thing. Like I said, I didn’t really “pray,” but I said something. What I remember most is how awesome I thought it was to light the candle. It was fun. And it even felt a little spiritual in a way I didn’t quite understand yet.

It was fall when altar boy tryouts happened. Maybe late October. The church was right across the street from the school. We walked together, the seven or eight of us trying out, and as we crossed the street in the chilly fall air, nervous and excited, we tested each other, ready to try to become altar boys. I remember Anthony, Tommy, and Mikey. I remember opening the church’s front door. It squeaked and reverberated and popped with a faint echo that murmured through the empty church. Father Shanley was standing on the altar looking big and impressive and a little scary. He told us, in a deep, echoey voice, to come up to the front, kneel, and wait for him to begin. I was nervous, but I clearly remember being more excited than scared. He stood before each of us in turn, choosing random sections of the Mass. And in his big, chanty voice he’d sing *Dominos vobiscum*. And I’d say *Et cum spiri tu tu o*. Father would chant, *Introibo ad alteri Dei*, and I’d say *Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*. It was cool, Father kind of singing his part and listening for us to answer him. I nailed it. I had that stuff indelibly etched on my brain. I had the Latin down pat.

It seems to me that Father came the very next day to tell us who “made it,” who would now be the new altar boys. I was among the boys who had made the cut, and I was scheduled to start the next Sunday. I recall being paired with an older altar boy, one who knew his way around the altar during Mass. Kevin Dwyer, one of my idols.

He would motion to me with his eyes, or whisper very, very quietly what we were supposed to be doing. I was a little nervous at first, but in no time I was as comfortable walking around the altar as I was walking around my house. There was really nothing to it. Know when to ring the sanctus bells, know where to be on the altar when Father needed you. Bow after everything you did. It was pretty easy, and I really liked it . . . most of the time, though admittedly, the older I got the less exciting it was. It had started to feel a little more like a job. I was training the new kids now. And the cassock and surplice that I had so loved when I was a kid, was really, really small for me. It came about halfway down my shins, and the surplice was a tad too tight. But there was no way my mother was buying me a new one. I was halfway through 8th grade and she wasn't going to waste the money when I'd be getting out of there pretty soon anyway.

I was sure that I had the best cassock of any of the altar boys. All of their cassocks either zipped up the front or buttoned. But mine? Mine was new-fangled high tech. Mine was Velcro! I certainly thought I was very, very sharp. No one else had a Velcro surplice but me, and getting out of it after Mass was simple—one pull and I was out. Of course, it also invited mischief, too. Once in a while, if we were in the sacristy getting ready for Mass, the urge would overcome one of the guys and they'd grab the front of my surplice and just tear it open with that loud Velcro sound, thinking they were being really amusing. And it was pretty funny, too. Sometimes. Other times I wasn't in the mood for screwing around.

Like I said, by 8th grade the surplice was pretty small, but I wasn't getting a new one. It was my last year. And speaking of my last year, when I think of all the ways between 3rd grade and 8th grade that I had gotten into trouble, I never once got into trouble as altar boy. Maybe it was just because I liked doing it. Maybe it was because Father Shanley just wasn't as nuts as the sisters were, and instead of looking at me as a bad kid he just looked at me as kind of a funny kid. I liked that about him. I knew he actually liked me. I could tell. And that helped to make being an altar boy fun.

I had to serve weddings, funerals, stations of the cross, and the occasional Requiem High Mass. I really liked the High Mass, the

pageantry, the chanting. It was awesome. But I think my very favorite was The Stations of the Cross. All during lent we would be assigned days. There was a list put up on Father Shanley's office wall, and we were to check it. We'd usually have to do one full week every day after school. And I didn't mind it one bit. In fact, I liked it a lot. Like I said before, the stations were carved out of wood and were in relief on the inside walls of the church, seven on one wall and seven on the other. Serving the stations during the week was nice because usually there would be only one or two people in the whole church, so it was all dark, and especially echoey because it was nearly empty. And I liked following the story. I always got these funny, kind of sad/good feelings during the stations, especially the 9th, 10th, and 11th, when Jesus falls for the third time, all beaten and bloody and exhausted. And then they rip his clothes off, and he's all cut up and bruised and now everybody can see that awful sight. And then, worst of all, Jesus is nailed to the cross. Don't get me wrong. I remember being moved and really interested in every station, but those three really got to me. Serving the stations always made me feel closer to Jesus than any of the other things I did as an altar boy. I think because it's such an incredible story and it's impossible not to be moved by it. For all the screwing around we did, nobody screwed around during stations. Nobody. It was too serious a thing. Too sad a story. All the stuff that happens to Jesus on that walk . . . like when he meets his mother right after he fell down the first time. That's really sad. And it's such a relief when Simon of Cyrene helps him for a minute. I always felt a little at ease then, too. And I don't know why, but it always got me when Veronica comes out of the crowd to wipe Jesus' face. If I was actually going to cry during stations that would have been when.

And when stations were over I'd have to walk home. It would be getting dark, and it was cold, and I felt so good. I felt Holy. Close to Jesus. But you know, the closer I got to home, the colder I got, and the sadder. I knew that whatever good Holy feelings had gotten into my body during those quiet, sad Stations of the Cross would begin to fade away and my thoughts would be taken over by anxiety and worry about what would happen to me when I got home. Some days

I'd get in trouble at home because Sister thought it was necessary to call my mother and tell her about the bad things I was doing in school. I wonder if she'd still call if she knew what trouble I got into after she called my house; I wonder if she would still have called. I kind of think she would. And if it wasn't Sister calling home, it would be something else. Maybe my mother had gotten into it with my father, and since he wasn't there I was the next best thing. Or maybe nothing specific had happened. We'd just get into some argument over something stupid and that would be that. The fight was on. Maybe I didn't dry the dishes dry enough. Maybe I set the table wrong. Maybe I complained when she told me to take out the garbage. Who knows? It didn't take much, but whatever it was, it completely erased that nice warm Stations of the Cross feeling I had when I was walking home in the cool dusk air.

Most of my time at St. Mary's I just felt like the bad kid who was always in some kind of trouble, causing problems, and getting punished. But during Lent, even though I probably didn't act like it, I always felt pretty good. Kind of holy and sure about how I felt about Jesus and glad He was around to help me. But those kinds of feelings really only happened during Lent, and mostly when I served the Stations of the Cross. Before and after Lent, it was the same antics, and the same perpetual battle with the nuns who were convinced that I was the worst kid to ever march through the holy halls of St. Mary's.

When I think about it now, being an altar boy was probably the best thing I did at St. Mary's. I never felt pressure to behave. I just behaved. And I really think my behavior had to do with Father Shanley's treatment of me. It wasn't that he treated me differently from the other kids. No. It was that he treated me just the *same* as the other kids. And he wasn't afraid to laugh. And he liked to smile and joke around with us. And when it came time to serve Mass with him you just felt good about it, you wanted to do it, you didn't feel like doing anything wrong. You even got to know how much wine and how much water to pour from the cruets into Father's chalice. We were really young, but we weren't stupid. We knew for sure that Father liked the wine. I remember so clearly. Father would hold out

his chalice and I'd pour in the wine, and not just a little wine, but the whole, entire cruet. Then I'd try to pour the water in, but the minute I tipped the cruet Father would push it away with his chalice with a loud *clink!*, so that maybe, *maybe* one drop of water got in. Yeah, like I said, we were just kids, but we knew without a doubt that Father liked his wine and he wasn't about to mess it up by diluting it with a lot of water. We all thought it was pretty funny.

Even going to confession wasn't terrible. I mean, I'd be nervous thinking about whispering my sins to Father Shanley in the darkness of the confessional, but I did it. I'd wait outside the "booth," rehearsing my confession, and when whoever was ahead of me came out, I'd head in. There was always some kind of exchange between the forgiven and the waiting sinner. Mark probably rolled his eyes and smirked. Billy made the "I don't know" gesture, arms out, palms heavenward, a shrugging of the shoulders. And of course Mary Lennit and Elizabeth Edgerton had to position themselves in a pew just outside the booth, very close. That way, if they were extra quiet, they might hear me, hear my sins, and give me these looks when I came out. I hated that, but I had to go in.

I'd pull back the curtain, which always reminded me of a shower curtain, which is, I suppose, a pretty good metaphor for it. You went in kind of dirty and came out nice and clean. If I listened carefully, I could hear the person on the other side repeating their sins. But I also recall trying not to pay attention; there were some things that were still sacred to my young self and eavesdropping on someone else's screw-ups was one of them. Then I'd hear Father slide the wooden window cover closed with a *thwack!* Wait a beat. And with a swoosh he'd slide open the one in front of me, and there he would be, shrouded in half-darkness, and looking gauzy and Holy behind the screen. He never looked at me, either. He would be staring straight ahead, his head tilted toward me, right hand over his brow. And then I'd begin.

I liked the idea of the pact between Father and me. I knew that Father Shanley knew stuff about me that no one else knew, and the fact that, after Confession he still joked around with me meant that all those sins I told him about didn't amount to much of anything.

Especially because I'd been forgiven. Yes, after Confession, Father was still my friend.

And a funny thing about Confession. I remember . . . it must have been 3rd or 4th grade . . . those days when our "sins" were minimal but our fabrications about them monumental. We would be out in front of the church waiting to go into Confession. We would talk about what our sins were and what we were going to tell Father.

"What did you do?"

"I don't know. I guess I lied."

"Yeah, me too. And I answered my mother back."

"Yeah, and I stole a pack of gum from Prospect Drug."

"How about the Lord's name in vain?"

"Oh yeah. Lots."

And so there it was. *Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession. I answered my mother back eleven times. I stole a pack of gum. I took the name of the Lord in vain eighteen times. I lied seven times.*

And "the lie" sin was always saved for last so that in case any of the other sins were just made up because when you're in 3rd grade, let's face it, there's pretty slim pickings in the sin department, the "lie" would cover any untruths you may have just told the priest and they'd be erased through Father's forgiveness. Confession. Done. Clean slate. I could die now and be sure to get into Heaven, at least for the next few hours when the sins would inevitably start to pile up again.

So yeah. For all my troubles. For all the anxiety and beatings and punishments, none of it ever came during those times when I was being an altar boy. Those were good times. I wasn't in any trouble. And I always felt a little holy, a little closer to Jesus. And, oh yeah, I had my beautiful white surplice and my Velcro cassock.

