

## Divine Intercessions at 28 MHz

*Pater Noster,*

*qui es in caelis...*

That was how Monsignor Camille Laurent had prayed the *Our Father* since his time at the seminary. He prayed it constantly in Europe during World War II. He prayed it in the sacristy before Mass. Before meals. And he prayed it before taking his sister's phone calls on Sunday evenings.

“So, he gave you the title of monsignor?”

“He meant it as an insult.”

“How can the monsignor title be an insult?”

“Jean, he had already taken my parish away from me. This new title only makes me look ridiculous.”

“I'm just grateful he didn't let you go to Vietnam. How could you ask for such a thing?”

“That would be a big improvement over my present circumstances.”

When he became a priest in 1936, Camille thought being 28 years old at the time was pretty mature. He had already done quite a bit of living and felt ready for the priesthood.

In the seminary he hungered for mastery of the Magisterium, Apologetics, and Church History. At the seminarians' Saturday evening gatherings, he could not resist arguing about the problems of Aryanism or the ongoing utility of the Latin Mass. He felt ready to take on the unmarried life, and never wavered in that belief.

During World War II Father Camille volunteered to be an army chaplain. They assigned him to a group of mechanics who repaired armored vehicles on the field. The days could be spent hearing confessions from sunup to sundown, or frantically nursing dying men in the hospitals, or ducking onto the ground as bombs howled overhead. What terrified him most were the screams of the German 88 mm artillery guns. He had never felt more alive before or since.

Overcome with his experience in Europe, he wrote *Manus Christi in Bello* (The Hand of Christ in War) upon his return and sent it to the bishop. It led to an audience with Pope Pius XII, who awarded him with the cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*. The medal and accompanying letter hung on his office wall.

Unfortunately, nothing could have prepared Father Camille for how diocesan priests were marooned in their own parishes. Nor was he ready for the raw use of ecclesiastical authority. Caring for the flock became nothing next to money and power. As the years passed, he became disillusioned and forgot the original inspirations for his vocation. Idealistic initiatives, such as his attempts to revitalize the ancient rites of Holy Week, only isolated him more.

He had made a couple of good friends at the seminary, but one left for the missions in Venezuela. The other died. Camille pushed aside his nerdy affection for theology and focused on surviving as a priest.

The faithful stopped coming to vespers. Then they pulled back even from Mass, and he grew tired of worrying about them. It certainly did him no good. He let the church take care of itself. He still held the line on the sacred liturgy. The musicians started asking him to allow folk music, but it was meaningless tripe, really, a fad. An insult to the faith. He would have none of it.

The parish blamed him for the school's closure. The parents took it hard when he rejected the board's three choices for principal. He chose an economical candidate, who would still be getting paid twice as much as him.

Young people had changed from the time he was a boy. He was not ready for that sixth grader's insolence when he visited religion class. Father Camille limited his exposure to children afterwards.

And that Father Bennett. They sent that man some place for rehabilitation, and then assigned him to a parish in north county with warnings to keep him away from children. Camille did not hear much about him, but he suspected everyone still talked. He was left to carry on while questions about the clergy became heavier. Were they tending the flock, or was it all just institutionalized blasphemy?

Father Camille's personal refuge remained in the beauty of the ancient rites, the poetry of the lectionary and the spiritual wealth within the church's enduring traditions. Unfortunately, even devotion and ritual were becoming lost in a vast deluge of guitar music for children and vapid slogans designed to stir emotions, not enlighten faith. Standing up for reverence and veneration only got him betrayals from all sides.

By the time of the bishop's visit for his parish's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Mass Father Camille was as lost as the church had become aimless. He knew of other pastors who resorted to brutal methods for obliging their faithful to help during such occasions, but he would not do such things. The pews were only half full. Only three of the acolytes came. The musicians were entirely absent except for the paid director and cantor. The office manager had to fill in for the procession. It was not

long afterwards he was informed in a bloodless letter from the bishop's vicar general that he would be "pastor emeritus," and some thirty-something fellow would take his place.

Where else but the Catholic Church would they not only humiliate a priest, but chain him to his place of his humiliation? A few spoke freely about how badly they thought Father Camille had done as pastor, but ultimately everyone ignored him. He became a ghost in his own parish. The bishop rejected his request to serve in Vietnam and then made him a monsignor.

Monsignor Camille still tried to look at the bright side of things. One advantage of his life was the one-minute walk from the presbytery (where he lived) to his office. The new secretary, Mrs. Sanchez, took some getting used to.

"Good morning, Monsignor Camille."

"Good morning, Mrs. Sanchez."

"How's your week going?"

"Fine—uh, what's that big bandage taped to your neck?"

"It has ginger root, Father."

"Ginger root?"

"Yes, ginger root."

"And why do you have ginger root on your neck?"

"Because I have a crick in my neck."

"And the ginger root is supposed to help?"

"My neighbor, Mr. Golind, swears by it."

“Ah.”

Everyone in the parish seemed to be caught up in the strangest of conceits, both spiritual and physical. Was anything sacred anymore?

The monsignor had managed to cling to his office throughout all the changes. He preferred it to his own bedroom. Upon opening the door, the scent of candles reached out and pulled him in. Cherry wood bookcases lined all his walls, along with replicas of paintings by Giotto. He kept Palestrina low on the record player. Throughout the many *glorias*, *agnus deis*, and *kyries*, the intricate harmonies formed a blanket around him.

The monsignor got special assignments for the diocese. A study of the proper age to confirm young people (that issue, yet again). Ways in which they might increase offerings during the bishop’s annual fund drive. Impact of guitar Masses on church attendance.

He was selected as postulator for a possible saint; one of the diocese’s own people. They even had a team of doctors investigating a miracle.

Danuta Kowalski had been sick. The whole of St. James, a parish in the foothills, had been praying for her, especially the parish’s Legion of Mary. Instead of approaching the standby saints, such as Saint Therese of Lisieux or Saint Peregrine, they appealed for the intercession of a new servant of God, Margaret of Isperia.

Danuta’s breast cancer was advanced. The doctors were trying experimental medications on her, terrible poisons, really. She lost all her hair and became a skeleton.

The Polish community helped. One morning, entirely unexpected, she woke up healthy and strong. The Legion was insisting the miracle had been through the intercession of Margaret of Isperia. A report from the doctors was imminent.

This Servant of God was one of the Serrano people and lived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. No one really knew how she had heard of Catholicism, let alone became so devoted to it. Her conversion angered her family, and so she sought refuge at the Benedictine convent in San Bernardino. She died at age 33 after having written “A Little Book on Holiness.” Theologians were saying it was an inspiration.

The bishop began pushing hard on this one. Just his style. He had been ignoring this cause when it was just a few women in a remote parish making some noise. Then the wealthier parishes joined in with activities like the fund-raising golf tournament. Finally, his Excellency put Monsignor Camille on the assignment with every hint to make something happen quickly.

Danuta spoke in halting English when the monsignor interviewed her at the hotel where she worked as a maid. She wore a scarf around her head. Her eyes were small and surrounded by creases. Her cat eyeglasses were worn at the corners. Her cheeks had a sagginess, as if suctioned of all vitality. Her head was round, her skin, splotchy. She was thankful to Margaret of Isperia and expressed overwrought gratitude to the parish’s Legion of Mary.

St. James’ parish was nestled into the upper hills of Granada Heights. The monsignor had to pass through a winding drive before he saw the church itself. A ten-foot-high statue of Saint James stood in the rotary by the entrance. Flower beds with a species of agapanthus he had never seen thrived in artfully arranged beds that crisscrossed the parking lot. A fountain with a statue of Jesus walking across the water dominated the office foyer.

Monsignor Camille thought he would be speaking to their three leaders during his appointment. Instead, they ambushed him with about fifteen zealous members. They knew all about Margaret's life, her writings, and of her service to the native peoples of San Bernardino. Their president walked him to the exit afterwards. "We are confident you are just as driven in spreading Christianity as we are," she said as they shook hands.

The next day, a Mr. Greg Henley, a neighbor of Danuta, called. He wanted Monsignor Camille to interview Danuta's son. Everyone, including the boy's eighth-grade teacher, discouraged such a meeting. They described Tomek as "withdrawn," and "special," and "likes math." They made it a foregone conclusion that no helpful information would come from such an interview. The monsignor was content enough to dismiss him as well. The members of the Legion were quite forceful about Tomek's irrelevance.

So, when Mr. Henley called and suggested a meeting with Tomek, the monsignor reluctantly agreed. Mr. Henley offered his classroom in Jeffers Middle School as a suitable venue. Mr. Henley had no connection to St. James Parish.

The school was quiet on the Monday afternoon after the students had left. Monsignor Camille followed Mr. Henley's directions to a classroom across from the basketball courts. He knocked and pushed his way into a bright room with the two already there, waiting.

Tomek had a round pale face which seemed to be attached by accident to the top of his gangly frame. A pair of horn rim glasses (a style the monsignor remembered from the 1950's) sat high on the bridge of his nose. Behind those glasses peered squinting eyes which were either on the floor or darting about, as if anticipating being blindsided by a bully. The boy followed Mr. Henley in a plodding gait, head down, and clung to two notebooks.

“How’s your mom, Tomek?” Monsignor Camille asked.

Tomek looked up only for a moment. “Okay.”

The monsignor shook hands with Mr. Henley, who indicated the seat at his desk. “Tomek has a story about what happened the evening before his mother had her recovery. He has minute-by-minute documentation from his ham radio logs. Go on, Tomek. Show Monsignor Camille the logs so you can explain it to him.”

Tomek, eyes fixed to the floor, came round to where Monsignor Camille was sitting, set down a spiral binder, and pulled back pages with the following appearance:

<b>Date Time</b>	<b>Station</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>His RST</b>	<b>My RST</b>	<b>Emiss Type</b>	<b>Power Watts</b>	<b>QSO End</b>	<b>Other Data</b>
05/25 /1970								
19:49	WA0SRQ	28.019	599	579	A1	100	19:55	Mark, Austin, Minn
20:03	W0RZX	28.080	579	579	A1	100	20:10	Troy, Waterloo, Iowa
20:14	WB4FTS	28.035	579	579	A1	100	20:18	Vic Belam, Maltland Flor

Monsignor Camille easily recognized columns like “DATE TIME.” The other headings he could not be sure about.

“Explain to the monsignor what it means, Tomek,” said Mr. Henley.

“This is my radio log,” said Tomek, eyes still on his shoes.

Monsignor Camille peered over his glasses. “How long have you been a ham radio enthusiast?”

“I got my license a few months ago, sir.”



“So tell me what these different columns mean.”

Tomek looked at Mr. Henley, who nodded. “Just start at the first column, Tomek.”

The boy began. “The first column gives the date and time of the QSO...”

“QSO? What does that stand for?”

Tomek looked back at Mr. Henley.

“QSO is not an acronym,” the teacher explained. “It’s a ham code that means a radio contact.”

“And what does HIS SIGNALS RST and MY SIGNALS RST mean?” the monsignor asked, readjusting himself in his chair.

Tomek lifted his face. His eyes were dark and hollow but burned with an earnestness as he latched onto the monsignor’s gaze. The boy had the kind of face to whom one might say, “Be good, study hard and respect your mother,” with no doubt he would do it.

“That’s how good the signal is,” Tomek said. “If my QSO is coming in well, I give him a 579, or even a 599. If he’s not coming in clearly, I give him less. And he tells me how well I’m coming in too.”

As he interviewed Tomek, the monsignor pulled back a few times so he could have a better look at this boy. Almost entirely of his own volition Tomek had learned enough about electronics to solder fixtures and communicate in Morse code. “Good for you, son,” the monsignor said.

“Learning all those letters. Was it hard?”

“No sir,” said Tomek, straightening himself up. His eyes brightened. “But I can only do thirteen words a minute.”

Mr. Henley intervened. “Tomek did well enough in his ham radio exam that they awarded him with a General Class license instead of a Novice Class. With the General Class license, he has considerably greater privileges.

Thirteen words a minute sounded like a lot to Monsignor Camille and earning such an advanced class license seemed like quite an achievement. What a remarkable boy.

The table’s final column mentioned countries like Grenada, Jamaica, and Venezuela. “You can talk to people in the Caribbean? This is really far.”

Mr. Henley explained. “This was after Tomek switched to a directional beam antenna, so he could point it and reach further.”

The following pages showed contacts with hams in Europe, Africa, the South Seas and even Asia. The antenna direction had a big effect on whom he could contact.

Monsignor Camille came to the final row of the log.

<b>Date Time</b>	<b>Station</b>	<b>Freq</b>	<b>His RST</b>	<b>My RST</b>	<b>Emiss Type</b>	<b>Power Watts</b>	<b>QSO End</b>	<b>Other Data</b>
07:52	EA7EPA	28.047	599	599	A1	100	08:15	Eladio, Spain

“Is this QSO with Eladio in Spain the one you wanted to tell me about?”

Tomek nodded.

“Show him your notes,” said Mr. Henley.

Tomek opened the other notebook. It had “Lab Book” on the front cover. Tomek’s name was printed on the front in large block letters.

“I’m still not very good,” Tomek said. “I need to write what I hear and what I’m about to say.”

“Why don’t you show Monsignor Camille your notes from the night before your mom got better?” said Mr. Henley.

Tomek paged ahead in his log. “I was transmitting late. I wasn’t sleepy. My mother had been in bed all day.”

“Why are all of the contacts up the California coast?”

“Because I pointed my antenna that way.”

Tomek turned the page.

EAB177 DE WA6SGI GM TNX FER CALL  
UR RST 599  
NAME IS ELADIO  
QTH IS SEVILLE SPAIN

UR RST 599  
NAME IS TOMEK  
QTH IS SAN LEBERTO CA

“Okay, Monsignor Camille said, trying to use his head. Someone named Eladio answered your call. He was—from Spain?”

“Yes sir.”

“In Spain at that very moment?”

“Yes sir.”

“But you just told me your antenna was pointed up the California coast.”

Mr. Henley spoke up. "It is possible to work someone in Europe, even with the antenna pointed up the California coast, but it gets even stranger, Monsignor. Let Tomek continue." He turned to the boy. "Go on, Tomek."

Tomek pointed at the next few lines on the log.

<p>HW R U ? WHY ? VERY SICK?</p>	<p>SAD MY MOM IS SICK CANCER MY MOM HAS NOT BEEN GETTING OUT OF BED SHE HAS NOT BEEN EATING SO I AM WORRIED SHE LOOKS SO THIN MY DAD IS DEAD SO IF MOM DIES I DO NOT KNOW WHAT I AM GOING TO DO I AM SO WORRIED AND ALONE I DO NOT HAVE ANY FRIENDS ONLY MR HENLEY IS NICE HE HELPED ME LEARN HAM RADIO AND THE PEOPLE FROM THE POLISH CENTER ARE NICE TOO BUT I STILL NEED MY MOM AND I STILL FEEL ALL ALONE</p>
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The monsignor felt a pressure growing behind his eyes.

"You transmitted all of this?" he asked Tomek.

"Yes sir."

He read Eladio's response.

I WILL SEE WHAT I CAN DO  
TOMEK PLEASE GET SOME REST  
PLEASE BE AT PEACE  
I WILL SEE WHAT I CAN DO TOMEK  
TNX FER QSO GOD BLESS

TNX FER QSO

That was the last entry on the log.

“What happened then,” Monsignor Camille asked Tomek.

“I fell asleep,” he said.

“Right there by your radio?”

“Yes sir.”

“And when did you wake up?”

“My mom woke me up the next morning. She wanted me to eat breakfast.”

“Breakfast? She'd made you breakfast?”

“Yes sir.”

“She was out of bed?”

“Yes sir.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I ate breakfast.”

“And how was your mother?”

“She was well.”

“Walking around and working in the kitchen?”

“Yes sir.”

“How did she get well so fast?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who is Eladio?”

Tomek looked at Mr. Henley, who began. “That call sign marked on the log, EA7EPA, is documented in Spanish amateur radio records as belonging to a ham named Eladio Betancourt. The records also show he died, however, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1961, of tuberculosis at the age of 16. There has since been no record of any QSOs of that call sign... until now.”

The monsignor looked up at Mr. Henley, then turned to Tomek, then he returned his gaze to Mr. Henley. “You’re telling me that a boy who has been dead for 10 years did this ham radio call with Tomek?”

Mr. Henley held up his hands. “We’re only giving you the evidence, Monsignor.” You will have to make the decisions.”

Monsignor Camille felt like a flock of sparrows fluttered out of his chest. He asked if he could have the logs as evidence, and Mr. Henley held out some Xeroxes.

The monsignor stood to collect the copies, and Mr. Henley also stood up. This news about Danuta's miraculous cure would have a devastating impact on Margaret of Isperia's cause and would be unpleasant to report. Now they would have to find some other miracle for her. A lot of people, including the bishop and the St. James' Legion of Mary, would not like this.

And what about this Eladio boy? No one had ever heard of him. Was he with God? Should some sort of cause be made for him? This would mean starting from the very beginning. Seeing if he had any cult, getting records of his life, or any of his writings. And the church did not have many child saints.

Mr. Henley and the monsignor shook hands. Then Tomek approached. His grip surprised Monsignor Camille with its self-assurance. Tomek's eyes filled with focus. "Thank you for coming Monsignor Camille."

"And thanks for participating in my investigation, Tomek. You've been very helpful."

Neither Tomek nor Danuta would want any trouble regarding the miracle, and Monsignor Camille did not want to push them into any controversy either. Tomek was able to attend the parochial school at St. James because of a special grant for poor students. A St. James parishioner owned the hotel where Danuta worked. The two were a couple of poor foreigners in an upper-class parish that was accustomed to getting what it wanted.

Monsignor Camille did not doubt that Margaret of Isperia should be a saint, but this miracle did not seem to belong to her anymore. He felt a strange wave of satisfaction as he evaluated the significance of this new evidence. Then he felt disgusted. With the bishop. With the faithful. With himself.

Still, there was something about this Eladio boy. Maybe Eladio was not meant to be a renowned saint. Maybe that was not his purpose.

He read through Tomek's log. He could not imagine how this Eladio could ever get a cause going. And would Eladio really want to get a poor Polish mother and her son in trouble, to say nothing of a reclusive monsignor? Camille sat down on his bed and stared into space.

*Pater Noster,*

*qui es in caelis...*

It was like preparing for one of his sister's phone calls, but he was not dreading her call. In fact, he wanted to talk to her. But it was only Monday, and she would not call for another six days.

And then the most obvious thing slammed into his idiot skull. He felt like a tiny child learning how to walk. He could call her. Yes, of course, he could call her.

She answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello."

"Hello, Jean."

"Camille?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Oh. Is everything okay?"

"Sure. Everything is fine. Why do you ask?"

"Oh. It's just—well, never mind. It's good to hear from you. How was your day?"



“It was fine. I was investigating a miracle attributed to this Servant of God and it has me thinking.”

“You’re investigating a miracle? That sounds exciting. And do you think it was a real miracle?”

“Yes.”

“So, you think this person will become a saint?”

“Uh, maybe. The thing is, I don’t think she did this miracle. I think someone else did.”

“Somebody else did the miracle?”

“Yes. But I might still have to say this particular person did the miracle.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a lot of pressure to forward this woman’s cause.”

“That’s crazy.”

“You think it’s crazy?”

“Of course I do. If she didn’t do the miracle, then she shouldn’t be canonized for it. And you shouldn’t bow to pressure to forward her cause. You are a monsignor, after all.”

“Oh yeah. I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. Is nothing sacred?”

“Don’t ask me that question.”

“Well, I don’t even go to church anymore, so I’m not really one to talk. But I’ve always admired your own spirituality, Camille. And if you don’t think this Servant of God did this miracle, then you shouldn’t allow her to get credit for it.”

“Okay. That sounds right. And, uh, thanks.”

“For what? I thought I was being a pain in the butt.”

“Thanks for being there.”

“Sure. Anytime, brother.”

They talked about her grandchildren for a little while, said goodbye, and hung up.

Monsignor Camille was not going to say Margaret of Iperia was behind the miracle. Nor would he expose Danuta or Tomek to any of the investigation’s repercussions. In his report he was going to move to delay, indefinitely. It was his prerogative as postulator to do so. He did not care what kind of retribution the bishop might rain down upon him, even if it meant being transferred to the poorest parish in the diocese. Even if it meant being assigned to minister at the county jail.

The next morning Monsignor Camille was assembling his report and steeling himself for what could follow. At 11:00 o’clock he got up, stiff and sore, to go to the men’s room. As he returned, he noticed a letter in his box. It was from the lead doctor assigned to investigate the miracle. He pulled out the envelope, slit it open and read.

*Dear Mgr. Laurent,*

*The team of doctors, which is composed of oncologists and specialists from universities and cancer treatment centers from around the country have reviewed the data, the X-rays, the scans, and all other records of Danuta Kowalski’s treatment. We have concluded that her recovery was*

*due to a new experimental drug. At first, the drug pushed Danuta's health to the brink. In the future we will advise against using such high concentrations. But it turned out to be singularly effective in reducing the size of her tumors, especially those that had metastasized. We have referenced other similar cases and found comparable results for this kind of cancer.*

*What's more, the cure is not complete. Even though Danuta's tumors have been greatly reduced, there are still significant traces of cancer in her body. She is not completely cured and will require ongoing treatments. We can explain Danuta's recovery and so it is not a miracle.*

*The team of doctors and I realize this was probably not the answer you were hoping for, but after much deliberation, we could not, in good faith, present any other conclusion.*

*Sincerely,*

*Alan Madison, M.D., Ph.D.*

Monsignor Camille closed the letter and leaned against the wall. He saw Mrs. Sanchez. She was standing on her office chair, which had wheels on the bottom. Did she not care whether she broke her own neck? She was reaching up to the ceiling, fiddling with a device that had wires and strings and shapes of fruit on it.

“Mrs. Sanchez. What in heaven's name are you doing?”

She did not divert herself away from her task.

“I'm installing this mobile into the ceiling.”

“A mobile with fruit?”

“It relaxes me as I work.”

The monsignor turned away and headed back to his office. He closed the door and leaned back against it. He tried to let out a sigh. Instead, a laugh burst out of his chest. He must have stood there for five minutes, laughing. He was sure others could hear through the walls. He hobbled over to his desk and sat down, still chuckling, and his stomach started to feel sore.

The investigation was about to hurt many vanities, including his own. But just as it hurt, so also did it liberate. It was as if someone had opened a door, letting in cold air and piercing light, bracing him, letting him breathe.

He flipped the LP on his record player. As he wrote the final draft of his report, he listened to Palestrina's *Missa Tu es Petrus*. The interweaving voices had a broad, open sound, reminding him of a time early in the seminary when they went for a retreat in the San Gabriel mountains. He had joined a small group hiking up an isolated path. They had to watch for mud, but the sun was glorious as it burst through the parting clouds. He felt so powerfully called and eager to engage the world on that day.

He knew Eladio's purpose and who was really being saved. It was the monsignor's secret. Only his.

He finished his daily *Our Father* in a new way now:

*Gratias tibi, sancte Eladio*

*Gratias tibi sancte Eladio.*

*Gratias tibi, sancte Eladio.*