

## Transubstantiation Blues

Father Esparza coughs, not hearing Father Teague's question as the two men emerge from the darkness of the prayer chapel and blink in the sunlit courtyard. The younger priest is still feeling his way. He speaks without assurance, and too softly for a man of Father Esparza's age. Teague is freshly minted seminary product, all green and scholarly with the potential to be a capable shepherd of the Holy Saints parish, but as Father Esparza recalls from a line in an old showtune, "He doesn't know the territory!"

Father Teague now seems to be repeating his question, but Father Esparza remains distracted. An old man has caught his attention. Gordon Worley, a fixture of the church for decades, has no more than a few years on the elder priest. He looks short but strong in a charcoal suit rubbed shiny at the joints, helping his wife Maureen up the curb of the crowded parking lot. Despite the age of the clothes, a crisp collar and smartly knotted tie make him look the very picture of Sunday Best. The bright morning puts a sheen on his bald crown. Billows of white brow shade his dark eyes. He does not smile, but whispers something soft and kind to his beloved as she totters alongside to take his arm. She matches him in modest dark blue dress and pearls. Their generation still holds that a dignified entrance is the crucial first part of worship. Father Esparza wonders where that idea went. Without conscious effort, the old couple set their pace to the toll of the big tower bell inviting the faithful. With the subtlety of an old-fashioned gentleman, he checks his stride to allow for her shuffling gait. They move in perfect rhythm up the cobbled walk, eyes lifted to the great rose window in serene expectation. If a golden word were emblazoned on every heart, the word on this man and woman would be DEVOUT. Father Esparza catches himself wondering whether, without a career spent in holy vestments, he would

have grown naturally into a person of such manifest wholesomeness.

Holy Saints Cathedral is the grand stone Colossus of Midtown. Father Esparza knows how it looks to the hundreds filing in from the overflow lot. The two dozen archways on the far end of the courtyard swallow the slow-moving crowd in great gulps. The aged make their way with determination. The young put on grudging reverence like too-tight slacks. Parents fight to quiet and un-muss their packs of children. The children yammer and jitter out the lingering effects of too many Halloween treats. Even so, the Solemnity of All Saints has already begun. Father Teague appears to be pressing on with his barely-audible inquiries, but Father Esparza only gives him nod after abstracted nod, playing the soft-headed elder as a cold hand of anticipation gives his heart a faint squeeze. Everything will be clear to the junior priest in time.

As the feast day falls on Sunday this year, there are more than the usual number of fair-weather visitors. Many mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers and so on have cajoled their grown and semi-grown offspring into coming along when they would rather be nursing milk-rich coffee in bed, discussing the likelihood of ham and eggs for lunch. He tries to imagine the younger people as they looked several hours ago, at one of a thousand boozy costume parties. Father Esparza spent Halloween with his mother, who clings to life despite the ailments giving her so much dull, constant pain. She does better at night, and they shared a pleasant brandy and coffee with an after-dinner showing of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. After she fell asleep, the father helped himself to a straight brandy and watched the second half of a film about a masked killer causing mayhem in a hospital. He harbors a secret fondness for tawdry suspense and cheap special effects. He also has trouble sleeping when a cough sets in.

Another familiar face emerges from the crowd. Gloria Visconti is an elegant lady of a certain age, a generation younger than the Worleys. He has never known her to miss a Sunday

mass, at least not since her divorce twenty-odd years ago. On top of that she makes two or three a week, often appearing in business attire on a long lunch. For some reason he cannot recall just now what she does for a living. At her side is a pretty young woman that the priest recognizes as her daughter, Veronica or Violet or maybe Rose. Hers is a less frequent face around the church. Her hair is a shade off natural color, perhaps the remains of a party costume. She looks a touch hung-over, which Father Esparza remarks not with disapproval but with empathy. The young man she leads by the hand is a stranger. He does not look entirely unchurched, but Father Esparza bets he will saunter heedless past the font and take his seat without genuflecting. An old clergyman can spot a Protestant by the gait, the almost- but not-quite-certainty of himself, the stopping short a moment too long at the unfamiliar parts of the mass. He is bound to stumble at the Nicene Creed.

Father Teague registers surprise as his forehead and collar break into sudden sweat, not from his nervous demeanor but owing to a sudden rush of warmth as they pass through the side door to the church. At the sight of the fire he looks dazzled and, to Father Esparza's grim satisfaction, more than a little alarmed. An alcove devoted to racks of votive candles takes up most of the rear wall. The collective glow has nearly the same effect as a roaring fireplace. Once their eyes adjust, Teague notices the softening stubs of wax in a variety of colors, from blue to orange to forest green and more. The wall above the candles is a stone mosaic, actually a very old feature of the church that many must assume was styled to look that way. The foreground is a row of oval cameos meticulously wrought in colored pebbles, showing the ancient beatific faces of saints. Each face is outlined on a field of its own distinct color, corresponding to the colors of the candles. One of the most common questions thrown at Father Esparza by visitors regards the veneration of saints. He typically replies along the lines of "wait and see," believing the fruits of

saintly patronage and prayer speak better for themselves than any intellectual rendering of the concept. He finds the colored ranks of candles a touching illustration of personal faith, and of the worshiper's connection to the divine. As the sage old drunk says in one of those drive-in horror pictures, "There's them that laughs and knows better." He watches Gloria Visconti light a furtive candle as fellow church women mob her daughter and the young beau, cheeping about how lovely and grown up the daughter has become since they last saw her in church. The priest cannot tell to which saint Gloria's candle is lit, but he could make a guess or two if pressed.

The blazing narthex only hints at the atmosphere in the sanctuary. The rather Gothic shift in tone from the building's fairly modern exterior takes some people aback. Under a high vaulted nave the dusky wood pews are full of well-groomed penitents. All heads are bowed, all tongues held. Old, young, singles and families, every possible Catholic type is accounted for. Long-legged braziers burn in the corners, throwing spidery shadows over the gathered and giving off pungent scents of atonement. Firelight tints the clean cream and alabaster wall drapings. The choir members sit like new statuary, thanks not only to immaculate marble-colored robes but also to their uncannily rigid poses. In the crucial moments of the mass Fathers Esparza and Teague, distinguished from the choristers by various cloaks and stoles over their liturgical white, will look just as stony. Most people expect more joyful attitudes on a feast day, but the group apprehension is reasonable. Old ways pass into modern times only with a fair amount of friction. At times Father Esparza envies the unenlightened age of superstition. His chosen profession, for one, must have been a good deal easier.

The only figures with any real look of vitality are the beautifully carved saints, high along the walls in elegant niches. Even from below their scale is impressive. Each one stands over six feet high, greater in size than the most imposing parishioner. For those accustomed to more

compact and reassuring icons, the magnification of saints and angels beyond the human dimensions invokes due spiritual awe together with a vague sense of unease. This is not to deny the beauty of their artifice. Several are scarred and twisted in poses of agony, their faces captured in states transcending righteous wrath and the rapturous anticipation of paradise. Others are gentler, stooped in submission, but even these have one ferocious quality. Their eyes seem to burn from within, the spark imbued by an artist of some genius. The rudest among them looks ten times as alive as anyone offering prayers to them. Ten sit along the main aisles, and the sanctuary branches off into wings at the front where more might sit visible to the organist and choir. Great care and expense went into sculpting them, then lighting them just so, and they are more lively and terrible on this day than any other.

The Blessed Mother oversees all, suspended on an ornate gantry over where the congregation will gather to take the host. Her expression is meant to show sorrow for the sins of the world, but the artist capture a vengeful glimmer that has seldom been put on any Madonna before her. Farther up, on the back wall above the altar, the broken Savior hangs on his cross. He has the only peaceful countenance of the bunch, though it seems a peace born of mortal exhaustion and despair.

The processional seems to swell up from the ground, bearing the priests and holy retinue of staff wavers and standard bearers like a shallow current. Often he can pick a familiar face from the congregation as they turn to watch, but for now all thoughts are on fervent and ceaseless prayer. The bright majesty of the opening hymn, "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones," gives Father Esparza the brief sensation of a king entering court. One glance at the figure of Mary looming above humbles him right back out of it. Fearing another bronchial fit, he only mouths the hymn as he walks. Beside him, Feather Teague looks this way and that in apprehension. He has

attended fewer than a dozen Holy Saints masses, and never before has there been such a tremor of anxiety among the flock. The choristers are in good voice for the day, but through long familiarity Father Esparza can hear their nervous lilt and faltering notes.

A feeble hand, no stronger than a breeze, brushes against Father Esparza's robe, and turning to look he sees a sallow woman. There is pain in her eyes and the marks of some recent illness on her brow. She begs him silently for a special blessing, a scene from a medieval tableau where the wretched beg favors of the holy in open streets. Or like a pop star trying to move through a frenzied crowd of fans. He manages to touch the tip of her reedy finger before being swept along in time with the hymn. Other eyes seek him, asking his intercession for unspoken griefs and sins. He feels a shiver go up him. Father Teague extracts his wrist as gracefully as possible from the grip of a young lady expecting a child. He mutters something in a soothing tone, stopping her from placing his hand back on her belly. Already the carefully wrought order of worship shows signs of breaking down.

Everyone settles down a bit when the priests reach the front and begin their invocations. The ushers patrol the sea of expectant faces, specially instructed to maintain peace and intercept anyone bolting for the front. These people know the routine as well as any deacon or priest, but the peculiar nature of the day taps a primal fear of being overlooked or ill dealt with. They fear that with so many voices raised, only those who demand special attention stand a chance of satisfaction. No argument Father Esparza has tried over the years can combat this mindset. It is a matter of human instinct.

The first reading comes from the Revelation of John, a stark portrait of the apocalyptic landscape as seen by the redeemed who gather before the throne of judgment. It shocks them all into appropriate silence, and Father Esparza has nearly let his guard down by the second hymn. It

is one of his favorites, “Blest Are The Pure In Heart,” but then the rising animation of the congregation begins running at odds with the cheerful song of praise. Parishioners are pushing their way to the ends of the aisles, hoping to inch closer to the altar and take the sacrament before their neighbors. Children are picking up on the anxiety. They whine and squirm against their mothers. Father Esparza’s eyes drift upward to the beautiful rose window. On its inside is a protective grid of iron railings, mounted on the advice of the board of deacons. That Father Teague has not yet commented on this feature shows how much he has left to learn.

By the time Father Teague gives the Gospel reading, the place is getting unruly. Ushers, tired of urging those standing in the aisles to sit, focus on those becoming actively disruptive with their cries for mercy and favor. Father Esparza signals his fellow priest to speak up and ignore the ruckus. Near the back, he sees a handful of people slipping out the exits, quaking with fright and emotional overload. They cross themselves with repentant shame, but clearly do not feel up to the scene that will follow.

As Father Esparza struggles to make his homily on the Beatitudes heard, he spots the first hints of movement from above. He signals the acolytes to bring out the incense early. The folks in the pews are not the only restless ones. He rattles off a tangent about the Mount of Olives, watching the two young altar boys haul the smoking cauldron on the golden chain between them. It is a special preparation, noxious and peppery in contrast to the usual sweetness of offertory incense. Its secrets is kept in apocryphal texts not freely available. He expects the smoke to play hell with his cough, but ever since the mass began he has felt an extra measure of strength in his voice. The congregation, liberally fogged by the ministrations of the altar boys, rub their eyes and try to suppress their coughing. Father Teague sneezes, watching with some alarm, but Father Esparza gives him the sign to stay calm as he wraps up the homily. There is no more delaying to

do.

They begin the order of communion, blessing the host as the chimes ring for the miracle of transubstantiation. Father Esparza's keen senses pick out the fleshy scent creeping from the basket that held bread a moment ago. The acrid copper smell in the chalice pricks the nose so that not even Father Teague can miss it. The elder priest bids the shoving crowd to come forward at last, to eat of the flesh and drink the blood, and to continue the prayers to their chosen saints.

The first three rows of pews have emptied when the first heavy shadow passes over. Saint Michael, mighty archangel and protector of those in battle, leads the charge as expected. Whirling his deadly sword, he makes a sound like an airborne invasion. Saint Silvia, patron of expectant mothers, is first to challenge him. Swooping from underneath with all the passion of the prayers burning in her name, she swipes with a hard hand to check Michael's flight. They slash at each other, snarling. While she has the upper hand, mothers in all stages of pregnancy rush at the priests, begging personal blessings. Meanwhile the wives, brothers and families of soldiers at war push past to have themselves blessed.

Saint Cajetan of the unemployed and Saint Regina of the poor attack Saint Raphael. A gash opens in the side of the archangel, nothing serious for a patron of healers, and he defends himself savagely. Below, those troubled by grievous illness nearly brawl with those who lack funds for their care and the means to get any. Saint Eurosia, invoked against deadly storms and a figure of particular concern during a record year of east coast hurricanes, soars too close to the fray and topples from her flight pattern. In frenzy she nearly snatches up the tenors from the choir, but the spicy haze of protective incense checks her. With the cry of a scalded thing she claws her way up the wall, scoring the expensive inlay bordering the walls. Father Esparza expects her to hang or hover there, but in her fury she punches right through the ceiling. Wood



and plaster shower down from the yawning hole as Eurosia vanishes into the sky. Father Teague, his instinct coming at the right time, rushes to shepherd others out from under the falling debris. Father Esparza keeps focus as best he can, continuing to deal out communion to those who have not fled in terror. The younger priest topples as a piece of ceiling beam strikes him on the head. His chalice goes tumbling, the blood of the lamb spattering the heels of those retreating.

Hardy Saint Deicolus, invoked against childhood sickness, whirls in Irish fury against the pestilential world. His indignant rapture is a cyclone without a path, drawing in other saints for pummeling when they pass too near. Those mothers-to-be who lean this year on Saint Silvia will find him a fierce champion in years to come. Saint Tatiana, patron of students, moves to spar with him. They tear at each other savagely until the contest reaches a bruised and bloody stalemate.

When it seems that chaos will swallow the church alive, a blood-chilling harpy shriek brings all beings, human and otherwise, to a stop. The Blessed Virgin, possibly full of grace but filled with dangerous fury too, spirals downward from her perch. The lesser saints make way for her lest they be blown aside like dry leaves. She lashes out at Deicolus, hovering close at hand, and sends him scampering. Then holy Mary beats her wings, blowing the incense clear in great puffs, so that the saints may come down, their frenzy abated, and tend to their frightened charges.

The young man, the one Father Esparza sized up before the mass, lies prostrate in the towering shadow thrown by Saint Agnes of Rome. Her eyes and fiery tresses glow with their own light. His young lady kneels beside him, looking penitent. Mother Gloria stands her ground, though in an attitude of great respect. The great virgin martyr, pungent with blood and sweat and the dust of Roman antiquity, surveys them. Any Catholic, any heathen, any fool with one good eye might guess that this is a woman whom pagan's fire would not burn. Agnes is patron saint of

the betrothed, which is surely why Gloria lit candles in her name. She hopes Agnes will either approve or deal the boy a scorching rebuff. When the saint lays her hands on the prone couple, the touch is so gentle that Father Esparza feels tears. He is not too old and unsentimental to appreciate a true blessing. Agnes turns away, Saint Pharaïldis following close behind her. The blessed old dame of Ghent is more wizened and severe. Her leathery bosom heaving from hard battle. She protects the abused and troubled in marriage, no plush job on the spiritual battlefield, and shoots the young couple a warning look. The saints of the cathedral, even those limping and bloody from the melee, offer hands of comfort to those who invoked them. Soldiers' wives weep on the rosy arm of Saint Michael. Only Saint Eurosia is absent, perhaps flown away to battle the big storm over Florida hand to hand. Saint Anthony of Padua takes the doddering elderly to his breast, soothing them as though they were children. Catherine of Siena takes a moment of rest on the altar steps, looking winded and sorrowful.

By the time the wailing ebbs to a soft irregular chorus of moans, the saints are in their high places once more. They flex their stiffening joints. Those who have added to old scars rub the fresh marks of combat. They twitch their wings, letting loose plaster fall away before folding them out of sight under robes and cerements. Their faces are hardening already. With its purpose achieved, the life imbued by mass adoration dissipates quickly. The braziers begin to sputter out as the sky brightens, casting rosy glory through the elegant window. Despite the precaution of iron railings, one good-sized pane has been smashed out. The light rays from the damaged roof and the broken window meet on the floor before the altar. Now it is the silent savior's turn to descend. On the ground he is every bit the towering figure that the saints were, but his aspect is mild where theirs was fierce. He is all gentleness in the wake of the storm. He moves among the terrified, laying massive hands upon them with a tenderness only those who see will understand.

The healing begins. Without the need to give a sermon or one of his famous parables, the kind yet melancholy Son of Man makes the faithful whole. Wounds close. Those badly injured find their bodies restored. Some who were lame find their steps easier. Some who were feeble have newfound strength. Some remain unchanged. None are left bleeding or maimed by the fury of battling saints, but not everyone is fully restored. Some are appointed to bear their present pain. Their time to be cured will come later, or not at all. They are free to accept this judgment, or not, as they will.

Of the small number trampled in panic or struck dead by falling stones, most are recalled to life. A fallen child, wept over by her kneeling father, stirs as if from sleep. One of the redeemer's better known talents, true, but those looking on make small sounds of amazement. A few are denied resurrection, loved ones huddling around their prone forms in fresh grief. In the face of Christ there shines empathy for their hurt, but also a promise.

Father Esparza sees young Father Teague sitting with a dazed expression, as though he cannot remember where he is. Whether he was only stunned by his injury, or slipped for a few moments into death and revived in divine mercy, Father Esparza did not see. Whether Father Teague would know or not is a mystery, but when the time is right they will have a full discussion of the day's events. With any luck Father Teague has come to some understanding of his duties, rather than further confusion.

Saint Joseph, settling in his high roost, shades the permanently departed with his wings. He is the patron of holy death, his final blessing an assurance that the departed, young and old, were taken with a purpose in mind. Let those who weep find comfort in it, or not, as they will. As the savior turns away, pulling himself up with powerful scarred arms to mount his cross once more, Father Esparza notices the old couple, the Worleys. They slouch in one of the front pews,

arm on loving arm. Their heads hang, hers backward and his against his shoulder, but there is nothing grotesque about them. In death each wears an expression of blessed ease. They came in unwavering faith, bearing a life of joy and also of hardships, each with a share of illness on pain on the account, and Father Esparza is certain that this was the end for which they prayed. Would Father Esparza dare admit to Father Teague that he nursed a slim hope of falling under Saint Joseph's shadow today? He is not so old, really, but not the healthiest horse in the paddock anymore. Now he will have to hear the test results from his doctor after all. By Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest, he will be lighting candles of his own to the physician saints, Raphael and Luke and any others who come to mind. Whether his prayers are made of thanksgiving or of desperation, he will know soon enough. He knows that no prayer goes unanswered, but answers come in several forms. As the Gospel of Cable Television teaches us, "Results may vary."

When time seems to have stopped, the organ takes up the recessional, a real corker for the occasion by that old Anglican jokester William Walsham How.

*For all the saints, who from their labours rest...*

As the clerical procession passes into the narthex, the old priest resists the urge to count which have snuffed out. It is too much like calling the score of a sports match. He thinks of the battered Saint Catherine, champion of jurors, and predicts a slew of disappointing verdicts handed down in the next few months, despite her valiant effort.

Some leave the church walking, leaping and singing praises as in the scriptures. Others trudge silently away in sorrow. The only steady voice in earshot belongs to a mockingbird in the old courtyard oak. It keeps harmony with the fading organ recessional. A sharp, rhythmic pounding breaks the peace. A swarm of workers fans out across the church roof. Father Esparza had them waiting with their ladders for the closer of services. They will not do any heavy work

on the holy day, only patch the hole with a tarp to keep the weather out. There is no telling what Saint Eurosia might bring back in her wake. It is dizzying work, but Joseph is the patron of day laborers as well as the dying. Father Esparza trusts that the saint is not too concussed to look after them.

Outside now, Father Teague has wandered off somewhere to sort out his thoughts. Father Esparza is over his petty disappointment at having survived another Solemnity. All in all it seems to have gone well, for some at least. He is conscious of the fresh air in his lungs, and though he feels a fresh tickle in his throat as he breathes deeply, he is better able to bear it with the hard work of the day finished. He hums a jazzy hook from Van Morrison, a song about All Saints' Day in fact, and though he cannot recall the words just now he has all of a sunny afternoon, and a whole year after at least, to remember them.