

## HOLY ORDERS

Father McKelvey woke up with a hard on. He stretched and then lay still, his hands folded across his belly, savoring the moment. There had been a time when this would have been an occasion for alarm, a test to avoid the temptation to satisfy himself. How many times had he battled fiercely with prayer, to not think of the young mothers kneeling for communion, to not think of the magazines confiscated from the student lockers? That was all past. The priest closed his eyes and thanked the Lord for this momentary kindness.

Neil McKelvey, O.F.M., shaved in the dark to avoid having the reflection in the mirror preen itself. Old Monsignor Duffy at the seminary had labored to knock the vanity out of the young men in formation. “Boys, there are grandparents who are soon going to be calling you Father,” he said. “When they look at you they want to see the robe and not a movie poster. It is children who should be seen and not heard. Better for a priest to be heard and not seen.”

Neil had become used to being told he didn't look like a priest. When he first entered the seminary, his uncles and cousins hedged their congratulations to his proud mother. They looked at the wave in his auburn hair, the cleft in his strong chin, and his liquid brown eyes – bedroom eyes Aunt Miriam called them – and wondered among themselves, was something wrong with him? “If I looked liked him back then, I'd be out getting all the tail I could,” said Uncle Clarence. Thirty years later, the women of the Legion of Mary

folding the altar linens shook their heads the same way and giggled at the mention of Father What-a-Waste. For his part Neil joked wryly about his brown Franciscan robes and what must people think of a man wearing a dress. He didn't say there were times it was a blessing to be wearing a shapeless robe that concealed what was going on underneath it.

The friary was one side of a brick duplex six blocks from the church, far enough away that suddenly repentant sinners could not find their door for drunken midnight confessions. Brother Bernard sat across from Neil over breakfast toast and coffee in the silent pre-dawn moment before the birds and traffic stirred. Bernard was a cartoonist's model for the jolly friar – his robe hanging tentlike over an expansive stomach, his bald head ringed by a black tonsure, every other sentence punctuated by a chuckle. All he needed was birds and squirrels landing on his shoulders and he could be a statue for the brothers of the Order of Francis, Minor. But this morning he wasn't laughing. "Leno had another priest joke last night," he said. "And it wasn't even a funny joke. All he had to do was say altar boys, and the audience started laughing. When is all this going to end?"

Neil sighed and shook his head. He was the pastor; he was the person who was supposed to have an answer ready for every occasion. He looked across the table at his ordained brother and had nothing for him. Bernard was not one who followed headlines. Bernard was happiest in the garden, he was the one fluent in Spanish, the one who managed the choir. His smile was a constant fixture - until now. Neil was grateful for the company of

Brother Bernard. The six months Bernard had been away in rehab had been hell. It had taken courage for Bernard to stand up in front of the congregation and tell them he was taking a retreat to deal with his use of alcohol. One of the occupational hazards.

Reflexively Neil recited some of the lessons they knew by heart, that the followers of Christ would be reviled, how the Master Himself had been mocked and spat upon, that their mission was not for themselves but to serve for the greater glory. “Seek not to be consoled but to console. Seek not to be understood, but to understand,” he recalled the prayer of St. Francis. Neil glanced over at Bernard’s closed eyes and his fleshy jowls rippling as he nodded, his hands pressed together beneath his chin. If only I had as much faith in my own words, he thought.

The moment of contemplation was broken by the cell phone vibrating at Neil’s waist. All the transition moments of life – baptisms, weddings, the last moments in the hospital, funerals – needed a priest standing by. Life was a blur of daily Mass and Sunday services, extra ones in Spanish now, confessions and counseling, the school with a million-dollar salary to handle, and always the pager on his belt at the ready whenever one of the flock encountered a moment of crisis - be it a traffic accident or a request to bless candles. For the next fifteen hours he would have a steady stream of faces in front of his, all seeking comfort or forgiveness, donations or advice, or an opportunity to trip him up. A raft of overnight emails waited in the trailer that passed for a parish office behind the church, and the secretary would have noons and evenings filled with speaking engagements and committee meetings. Today it was the downtown bankers.

There were fifty-seven Baptist churches in High Point, a couple dozen other Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Pentecostal churches, plus two synagogues. And one Catholic chapel, a stucco box built to seat two hundred and now serving a parish of six times as many. Together the United Ministries of the Central Piedmont sponsored a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, a food pantry, and, secretly, a clinic for migrant field hands. All the things that served people who weren't likely to be bank customers. And so it fell to the outsider from up north to give the pitch for the annual pledge drive. For this occasion Neil had changed from his chocolate Franciscan robes to civilian garb, a polo shirt and slacks. Catholics were rare enough in the Carolinas as it was, there was no point in being seen as a freak show. The men dabbing at their lobster bisque and looking at their napkins weren't listening, and Father McKelvey wasn't listening to himself either. He stopped and looked around and the smattering of hand clapping lasted only a couple of seconds. A bald man with tufts of white hair above his ears and a Masonic ring on his pinky stood up.

"Reverend," he said. "With all respect. We read the news here, we see the stories from Boston, Chicago. Altar boys. Children. You know what I'm talking about. You folks run a school here. Now don't get me wrong, I'm sure you fellows are just fine. But some folks here aren't so, ah, open-minded as us here. People wonder, you know."

There it was again. Neil felt suddenly tired. He walked through his recitation once more. Nobody was more devastated by these revelations than the good clergy, the vast majority.

There was no trust they held more precious than protecting the students at Sacred Heart. His voice rose. All these stories coming out had happened twenty or more years ago. Now there were safeguards, now there was psychological screening before men were retained in training. His face was flushed and he could hear his voice starting to crack.

The businessmen looked at their watches and hurried back to their offices. The pledge forms remained untouched by the doorway. Neil's hands were shaking as he eased the Corolla onto the freeway from the downtown exit. This had not been the plan. This could have been a moment for grace, and he had failed it. There was a message about forgiveness and reconciliation that could be made, but these men were not prepared to hear it. Neither am I, he thought. He and his brother friars had signed petitions asking for the resignation of bishops. The weak and disturbed men who went through the seminary 50 years ago, who emerged as adults without ever maturing, those he could forgive. But not the people who kept them on, who shuffled them from church to church to cover a scandal. Better to close their eyes than endure bad publicity. It was intolerable!

Neil realized with a start that he was gripping his steering wheel hard and driving over the speed limit. He drew a breath and slowed into the right lane. What was he thinking? He would need to confess this presumption. This very afternoon he would be teaching that judgment comes from God and not from man, that to be forgiven we must ourselves first forgive. How to explain these concepts to second-graders?

First Communion would be on Mother's Day in May, and Mrs. Horner had drilled her class all year memorizing the Seven Sacraments. Before they could join the banquet at the Lord's Table, they needed to learn how to say their first confession. For the final hour of school Mrs. Horner marched her class into the chapel. The children walked down the aisle in double file with their hands held palms together, thumbs crossed, fingertips pointed up to heaven like little steeples. Father McKelvey sat on the steps at the foot of the altar so that he would be even with the 24 pairs of eyes peering back from the front rows of pews. In the back two other pairs of eyes looked on, mothers from the Parent's Council. Orders from the bishop – no adult was to be left unobserved in the presence of children on church grounds.

The second-graders were always his favorites. Old enough to be inquisitive, but still too young to be cynical or sarcastic, they clambered around him at the playground and giggled at his toes protruding from his sandals when he made classroom visits. Today was supposed to be solemn and serious, but Neil could never maintain that air for long with this group. Everyone called him Father, he thought, a man who never would be a father. Had he chosen a different road, had he given up the calling in favor of Barb Nolan, he might be a grandfather now. Instead every year he was now like a great-uncle to twenty times as many.

Neil grinned and scanned the fidgeting crowd in front of him. The most important thing was to relieve any fears. Such a contrast with his own boyhood, where the first glimpses of a priest had been the back of a forbidding figure facing an altar and chanting in Latin.

His classmates had lived in terror of the nuns robed chin to toe in black veils, and they in turn were in dread that Father might criticize them. Neil had not been the only one to wet his pants the first time he was led to the darkened confessional booth.

“Of course you can always pray by yourself,” he said. “But when you really want to say something to God, you come here to God’s house. And when you talk to me in confession, you really are talking to God. Mrs. Horner told you, the priest is just like a telephone, relaying the message. We don’t tell you that you are bad, we don’t judge you, and we know that God always is ready to forgive you, no matter what. We might give you some advice about how to get along, but we never never can tell anybody else what you say. We all have to make a solemn promise.”

“What if we can’t think of anything we did wrong?”

Neil stroked his chin and looked over the top of his glasses. “From what I’ve heard, that is not going to be a problem for this group.” The children giggled and tumbled out of the pews when they heard the dismissal bell from the schoolyard. Mrs. Horner stayed behind and handed him a folder filled with sheets of construction paper covered with crayon.

For half an hour Neil sat with Bernard over plates of ravioli the Legion of Mary had dropped off. Leftovers from their monthly meeting the night before. Neil would have liked a glass of Beaujolais, but in solidarity with Bernard he sipped ice water. Tonight Bernard would be leading a rosary during a visitation at the Hispanic funeral home and it

was Neil's turn for hospital visits after the monthly meeting of the finance committee. And now the vibrating pager announced the widow DiCastro was calling with some distress.

It was after nine o'clock when Father McKelvey rang the doorbell at the DiCastro mansion. The cotton hosiery business had been kind to the immigrant's son, and Angelo had been one of the founding members of the parish. This mission of consolation might also touch on the subject of a fitting memorial. The folks on the building committee already had some ideas.

"Fa-ther Mc-Kel-vey," a woman's voice sang out his name to the tune of Eleanor Rigby. The door swung open wide and Monica DiCastro presented her cheek for a peck. She gestured and ushered the priest into the candlelit living room. Her black hair was swept up on the sides, framed by her diamond earrings. After six months the bereaved widow had grown tired of black dresses and black lace headscarves and tonight she was wearing a turquoise gown with a daring front.

"May I get you anything? Coffee, tea? Maybe a glass of wine?" She swayed slightly as she gestured with the glass in her hand.

Father McKelvey noticed the bottle of Chardonnay was only a quarter full and held up his palms. Good thing she didn't offer Scotch. He sat at one end of the overstuffed sofa,



across from the recliner that still bore Angelo's heavy impression. "How have you been, Monica? You said you were feeling distressed. Your sister and parents are all well?"

Monica sat at the other end of the sofa. "I am bearing up as well as I can, I guess. It all still feels like such a shock." She had been practicing the sigh and resolved half-smile for five months and waited for the expression of condolence. Father McKelvey said nothing. Monica DiCastro was still in her early 40s, a quarter century younger than her late husband. Angelo had had a triple bypass before he married Monica. It couldn't have been that much of a shock.

Monica said her family was fine, Angelo's kids from before were fine, everything was fine. Fine, really. As if she expected someone to suggest otherwise. It was time to get on with life. Yes, she knew that. But only. But only.

"Father Mc- oh, please, we don't need to be so formal. Neil." She let his name hang in the air. "It gets so lonely sometimes. Surely you of all people can understand that. How one can feel so isolated, so alone. I try to imagine how it is for you. The late nights, no family. That isn't right, it's so cruel."

Neil gave a short laugh. "If you could only see. I am so surrounded by people, there isn't a moment even to think about being lonely."

“But that’s different. People come to you because of your kindness, your understanding. They come to you because they want something. They want you to perform their ceremonies or fix their lives. People want to be around you because they think it will make them holy. They all want to take. How many people come to you because they want to give?”

“And why did you call me?”

Monica DiCastro looked up and smiled. She had moved to the middle of the sofa and turned to face him. “Oh, you got me there. Yes, I confess, I wanted the company. I wanted a friend. But I thought, you might need a friend too. Am I right, Neil?”

“Thank you, I know you are being kind. There are so many people here who have been kind. We feel like we have friends everywhere we turn. Is it what you call Southern hospitality?”

“Oh Neil. There are acquaintances, and there are friends. Don’t you tire of people seeing you as a symbol, as someone they have to act differently around? You aren’t just some machine for people to dial up blessings. You are a man too. A living man, with emotions and feelings. You need someone to appreciate that too.”

Now she was sitting right next to him. Another button on her gown was unfastened, and the topaz pendant on her necklace swayed in front of the deep cleft. Neil had been sitting

with his hands on his knees, and half rising, she took his hands in hers. She brought her face within a foot of his, and her voice turned husky.

“Yes, you are a real man. A handsome man too. Has anyone ever told you that?” She gave his fingers a squeeze. “It’s okay to be human. We have all this talk about love. What does that mean? Isn’t that the great commandment? Why should you not express it?”

There she was, directly in front of him, looking into his eyes. Her lips were parted, he could smell her hair. She drew her shoulders together, opening her neckline even more. There was a glimpse of ripe pears hanging from the branch, with a topaz pendant nestled between them. Monica drew their joined hands closer to herself.

Father McKelvey stood up slowly and Monica followed, reaching her mouth upward. He had seen this before. Women offering to dance at cocktail parties, giving a fellowship hug at parish council meetings or even leaving Sunday mass, and adding a little extra to see if there was a reaction. The trick was how to exit gracefully without a sermon or an argument. He held his elbows locked at his side, placed one of her hands over the other, and held them between his, above and below.

“Monica.” He held her eyes for a moment. “Look at you. You’re positively smashing. It’s good you’re getting back into life. I have no doubt that before long people are going to be beating your door down. If I were in a different business you might see my flaws

more easily. The woman who thinks I'm Mr. Right would find my first name is Always." He waited for her to smile, then he squeezed her hands again and released them. "Here, I've been keeping you up too late. I really must let you rest now." That was the way. Don't judge or preach, no blame, no lessons. Later when she was alone she could give herself the lecture and feel foolish.

He drove back to the friary slowly, the scent of Monica DiCastro's hair still fresh. He found himself humming the refrain from Eleanor Rigby. All the lonely people. Where do they come from? Could Monica be right? How many priests did he know who had left the calling for that more tangible comfort? How many people besides his brothers could talk to him as a person, swear or laugh or flirt, without worrying about being inappropriate in his presence? Or without thinking he was a pervert or a eunuch? All the lonely people. Where do they all belong?

It was past eleven when he returned to the unlit friary. He could hear Bernard snoring from his room next to the kitchen. Another eighteen-hour day. Maybe he would have a glass of milk before he went to sleep. He flipped on the light above the sink and tiptoed over to the refrigerator. There, like a proud grandparent, Bernard had taped one of the sheets of construction paper from the folder. On the left was a crowd of little stick figures, each with a name underneath in crayon. Figures mounted on triangles with feet sticking out the bottom were girls, two stick lines with feet were boys. From them a line wandered shakily to a large figure in the center, a lopsided head with black circles for glasses and an expanse of brown scribbles overlapping the borders of a robe. Two stick

arms held a telephone beside each ear of the oversized head. One was connected to the shaky line to the children, the other to a line that wandered to the upper corner of the page, to a cloud bordered and shaded by every color in the crayon box. Yellow sunbeams radiated out of the cloud and a bird shape filled with white, clearly drawn by an adult hand, glided under the cloud. At the bottom of the page, below the sandals splaying out from underneath the brown robe, was the crayoned name Father Kneel.