

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

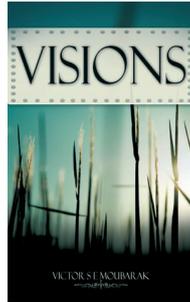
GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT
Stories in the life of Father Ignatius



By Victor S E Moubarak

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

Also by Victor S E Moubarak



“VISIONS” (ISBN 978 1 60477 032 2).

“VISIONS” is a fictional story of three children who see an apparition of the Lord Jesus on their way to church. They tell their priest, Father Ignatius, about it; and pretty soon news spreads throughout town.

People react to the news in different ways. Some readily believe; others mock and scoff in disbelief, whilst some react violently towards the children and their families.

Parishioners seek guidance from Father Ignatius whereas the Church seeks to hush the whole story in the hope that it goes away; whilst Jesus appears again and again.

“VISIONS” challenges readers to ask what they would do in a similar situation – as Christians, as parents or just as onlookers.

A vibrant tale of supernatural events, with a fast-paced storyline and strong believable characters, “VISIONS” is a challenging must-read Christian book for everyone ready for a reality check on what they actually believe.

“VISIONS” is available from all good bookstores and on the Internet.

I pray that God blesses each one of you dear readers, old and new, and may He be with you and your families always.

Victor S E Moubarak

www.holyvisions.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION

Father Ignatius is a character from my first book “VISIONS” published in paperback and available from all good bookshops and from the Internet.

Following the publication of “VISIONS” I wrote several stand-alone stories about Father Ignatius which were published individually. Each short story is a vignette in the life and times of a Parish priest and none of them are from the book VISIONS”; which has its own plot as you will have read above.

This book, “GOD’S HUMBLE SERVANT” is a selection of the short stories from my Blog. I hope you enjoy them.

Victor S E Moubarak

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SINS AND CONSEQUENCES

Father Ignatius often attended the questions and answers sessions organized by one of the parishioners to encourage members of the congregation to learn more about their Faith.

At one of these sessions the conversation turned to sin and the consequences of sin.

Father Ignatius explained:

“Jesus recognized our sinful nature when the Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. Of course, she had sinned. But what Jesus had to say about the situation was more significant than the sin she had committed.

"Jesus knew full well that according to the law of the time she had to be stoned to death.

"Jesus was of course no stranger to challenges like these from His enemies. They wanted an opportunity to trap Him into disobeying the law and a reason to arrest Him. On a different occasion He was challenged into healing a sick man on the Sabbath and disobey the law. But Jesus saw beyond the law, because He Himself was the law, being the Son of God. His love and compassion for the man was reason enough to heal him there and then, even if it meant doing so on the Sabbath. Jesus asked whether any of them would leave their wounded animal to suffer on the Sabbath because the law did not allow them to work.

"Christ's enemies lived by the law of their ancestors. They hated Him not because of His apparent disobedience of the law, but because He dared to say He was the Son of God.

"But He believed in love, compassion and mercy. He was love. He came into this world because of love to redeem us and reconcile us with God our loving Creator.

"No doubt, seeing this sinful woman at His feet, Jesus remembered His mother who years previously would have been accused of a similar sin. Here was a young woman, un-married and pregnant and deserving punishment from society. What is worse, she claims that her pregnancy is Divine and she is carrying the Son of God. Blasphemy at the very least and deserving punishment according to the law.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a while to allow his words to sink in. Then he continued.

"So what is Jesus to do with the adulterous woman before Him? Did He pick up a stone with the rest of the crowd?

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"He challenged her accusers to throw the first stone if they had not sinned themselves in one way or another.

"In doing so, He pointed the finger at us to remind us that we too are sinners, in need of confession, forgiveness and redemption from our sins. There's a veiled hint there of what He will go through for us. His arrest, false trial, torture and Crucifixion just to redeem our sins. All done because of love for us.

"And when all the accusers left the scene, Christ forgave the woman and told her to sin no more.

"Sadly, in this world, forgiveness is rarely given without a price to pay. There's often the demand for a punishment, retribution and revenge.

"And there's also the hidden price of sin. For every sin there is a victim who suffers the consequences."

Father Ignatius stopped once more as he often did when making a point.

"Christ never said that sin does not have any consequences. Whilst we may seek and obtain God's forgiveness the consequences of our sins are very real for others to bear and suffer."

At this point someone asked why when someone sins God allows others to suffer the consequences; for instance when infidelity results in divorce and suffering for the innocent spouse and children. Surely consequences should befall the sinner not other victims.

The priest cleaned his glasses from imaginary dirt; a trick which he had perfected to gain him more thinking time.

"I'm not going to second-guess God and His reasoning," he replied. "As I said just now, most often our sins have consequences not only to us but also onto others. Perhaps we should bear that in mind when we decide to sin.

"A few years ago a young lady came to see me with a problem. About a year after marrying another Catholic she discovered that he had been married before and had been divorced. He had kept that secret from her.

"She quite rightly felt totally betrayed and could no longer live with him. Yet at the same time she knew that Christ taught against divorce; and said that anyone who divorces and marries again commits adultery.

"In any case, she felt that by forgiving her husband, if that were at all possible, and remaining with him, she would be guilty of helping him commit adultery against his

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previous wife.

“What was she to do? She could hardly be expected to remain married to him.”

“Gosh,” said a parishioner, “what did you do?”

“Well, I passed the problem to the boss” chuckled Father Ignatius.

“Two bosses actually. First I asked God to help in prayer.

“Then I discussed the matter with the bishop. Eventually, after a lot of consideration on the part of the Church, we allowed an annulment of the marriage.”

“So, you ignored Christ’s teaching and divorced them all the same,” challenged a questioner.

“I can see what you’re saying; but we priests are humans just like you, and there are times when we have to consider the realities of life and try to resolve a dilemma as best we can.

“The wages of sin may well be death; but they’re also a cause of major headache to us priests everywhere, as well as having serious consequences to the innocent victims left in sin’s wake! So think on before you sin.” concluded Father Ignatius.

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CAN'T BUY ME LOVE

Father Ignatius was in his office awaiting the arrival of James in order to prepare the annual financial accounts for St Vincent Church.

When James finally arrived, over an hour late, the pot of coffee prepared by Father Ignatius had already gone cold, and half the biscuits had been eaten by the impatient priest.

He said nothing as he noticed right away that James was very upset about something. His eyes were red as if he'd been crying, his hands were shaking and he was unusually silent compared to his normal jovial outgoing personality.

James sat in the large armchair next to the large window overlooking the town.

“Do we have to do this today?” he asked.

“No ...” replied the priest, “the accounts can wait for another time.”

James hesitated at first then mumbled, “She left me Father ...”

“Who ... what do you mean?”

“Sophie ... she left ... we broke up. We had a row and she said we're through ... she prefers to be with another man at her work.”

The priest said nothing but silently prayed for a few seconds or so.

“I told her she was getting rather too interested with that guy at work. She said what if she was. We argued about it and she said she does not want to be with me again ...”

“I love her Father ... more than I've loved anyone before ... we were to get married ... and now she's gone ...”

The priest poured a glass of water and gave it to James.

“Why do bad things happen to me? I'm a good person. Why does God allow this to happen to me? Why can't He make her love me just as I love her? I'd do anything for her ... I love her so ... why doesn't God make her love me?”

“I'm sure you don't mean that,” said the priest calmly.

“What do you mean?”

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“I’m sure you don’t want God to make her love you. If for instance He were to do as you wish, would you really want that love?”

James looked puzzled as the priest continued.

“Love should be freely given and not forced in any way. You say you love her, and seeing the two of you together, I believe you do. You gave her your love and in doing so you became vulnerable, as we all do, when we give of ourselves to others. Your love was freely given. And if you love her as much as you say, you should allow her the freedom to return that love ...”

“You mean let her go? Even though she’s making a mistake by being with that man?” asked James.

“I don’t know about letting her go ... but she should decide for herself what to do.

“Let me tell you something ...

“God would have saved Himself a lot of bother if He created a race of robots all pre-programmed to obey His commandments and do His will.

“But He loved us so much that He gave us the gift of choice. He set us free to either love Him back in return or to turn our back on Him.

“And as you know, many turn their backs on Him and choose to mock Him, not believe in Him and go the other way. His heart must hurt to breaking point when He sees this happening; but He allows it to happen because He loves us.

“He wants our love for Him to be freely given, without any pressure whatsoever. Christ the shepherd is forever seeking these lost sheep and encouraging them to return to the fold. His work is always hampered by the devil and his alternative agenda.

“The greatest gift we can give our Lord is to use our Free Will to love Him back. Use our Free Will to freely submit to His will.”

James said nothing, but seemed much calmer now.

“I don’t know whether the two of you are meant to be together ...” continued Father Ignatius, “but give it time. Let her go freely ... keep in touch every now and then. If you get the chance, apologize for your jealousy ... seek her forgiveness for not trusting her enough ... but leave her free to decide James.”

The accounts were never completed on that sad winter morning; but James left the priest’s office a little more composed and certainly calmer than before.

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About thirteen months later Father Ignatius married James and Sophie at St Vincent Church. He is now due to baptize their first born son next week.

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ON HIS KNEE

Father Ignatius approached the pulpit and in his clear crisp voice he started his Sunday sermon:

“Although Heaven is mentioned often in the Bible there’s one instance where we have a glimpse of a description. In today’s reading from John 14:2 Jesus says: ‘In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.’

“Let’s think about this for a moment. Is Heaven a building somewhere in the sky, or wherever you perceive it to be, with many rooms as Jesus said? Or is it something or some place totally different?

“I suspect that Jesus used the description of a house because He wanted an example that his listeners could relate to. The people of His time were used to seeing palaces and mansions; so describing Heaven as a building is quite an apt description which they can come to terms with in their minds.

“Better than saying Heaven is a state of being where our souls float freely in the presence of God and His angels. Would Christ’s contemporaries understand that I wonder?

“So a large building it is; with many rooms of course.

“Presumably the multiplicity of rooms is to ensure that our Lord keeps all the denominations separately to avoid their incessant arguments and so give Him some peace and quiet in His Heavenly domain.” said Father Ignatius jokingly.

“Why is it” he asked, “that we seem to spend so much time as Christians arguing about the details that separate us rather than rejoice in the Divine facts which unite us?”

“One God, one Son of God, the Lord Jesus, and one Holy Spirit sent to help us and to guide us back to our Creator.

“That’s our fundamental message of Christianity” Father Ignatius declared clearly.

After a short pause, he continued:

“People today have different interpretations of what Heaven must be like. Some believe it is a physical place with buildings and a big Pearly Gate. Others see it as a state of consciousness where our souls enjoy God’s presence. In reality, we really don’t know what it’s like but we believe it exists because our Lord told us so.

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“Think about it for a moment or two. What do you think Heaven is like?”

He paused again to give his parishioners time to reflect.

“You know Someone asked me the other day whether there are animals in Heaven. She wanted to know whether her loved pet dog will be with her there.

“Well, I don't know about that ... Imagine animals in Heaven ... I'd hate to come face to face with the Sunday roast admonishing me for what I had done to it !!!”

Father Ignatius waited for the laughter to die down then went on:

“Some time ago, I came across another description of Heaven.

“Imagine for a moment that when we die and meet God, He will sit us on His lap like a loving Father sits his little child.

“And then He will show us our life all over again, exactly as we have lived it. Just like a movie.

“There, sitting on God's knee, we will see all the good and the bad we have done. We will be reminded of all the opportunities we missed when we could have helped others less fortunate than ourselves. We will re-live all the hurt we have caused to others by what we have done or said, whether intentionally or not.

“All our sins will be there on a big screen for us to see and remember once again. Even those secret sins which we kept hidden to ourselves; never confessed, and never forgiven and absolved.

“And as we see our life once again, there, on His lap, will be our own Heaven or our own hell.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a moment to allow the message to sink in. He then went on in a more soothing voice:

“Now imagine if it were really so ... Imagine that one day you will be seeing your whole life once again as a movie ...

“Imagine also that you are a famous Film Director ... what a marvelous opportunity you have right now, within your grasp, to make sure your own personal movie will have a happy ending!!!”

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FUTURE FORETOLD

The fair was in town once again with all its amusement stalls and tents pitched in the park opposite St Vincent Church. The lights were shining bright on the big wheel, the round-about and other rides, whilst the music blared for miles around.

Father Ignatius was in the church's car park when he overheard some youngsters talking loudly:

"I've had my fortune told by Mystic Matilda. She looked into the glass ball and it turned all full of smoke inside."

"What did she tell you? You're a loser and will always be a loser ..."

And somehow, just these words, a snip of an overheard conversation became the basis of Father Ignatius' sermon on Sunday.

He approached the lectern and asked: "Did anybody here go to the fair last night?"

A few nods and yeses greeted his unusual question.

"I hear there was a fortune teller there. Did anyone go to check their fortune?"

Not many volunteers this time.

"Interesting thing telling peoples' future ... it's all nonsense of course; but then you all know that, don't you?" asked the priest with a smile.

"Let's suppose for a minute that it is not nonsense at all. Let's suppose that the fortune-teller in the park opposite can really tell your future.

"Let's suppose Mystic Matilda, for that is her name I believe, can really foretell your future and it is really accurate every time. Every little detail of it. And unfortunately for you she predicts a bad future.

"She says that you'll lose your job within six months. You'll suffer a terrible painful illness. You'll have an accident ... I'm sure you know what I mean

"And you're certain the fortune-teller is always accurate and these things will happen. There's no escaping your fate. How do you feel about that?"

Total silence greeted his piercing question; so Father Ignatius pointed to the children sitting up front, "How about you ... you look very intelligent to me. Can anyone tell me how you would feel if you knew your future will be bad?"

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A young girl raised her hand and said, "I'd feel terrible and very frightened."

"Yes Louise ... you're right. You'd feel terrible and very frightened indeed. You'd be terrified and most likely want to change your future at all costs.

"Now let me tell you about someone who knew His future well in advance. Probably from the age of twelve; just the same age as you sitting here up front. When He was found by His parents in the temple in Jerusalem.

"He knew then what was going to happen to Him all His life. He knew He would be betrayed by His own follower. He would be arrested. Beaten, spat upon, mocked and tortured. A crown of thorns put on His head. Made to carry His own Cross and then die a most horrible painful death Crucified between two thieves.

"He knew all that throughout His life. Being human He must have shared the same human emotions we have. He would have been very frightened and terrified just like young Louise said.

"Being human He most probably had nightmares about His whole future. How often I wonder as a young teenager did He wake up in the night having seen His future in His dreams. Can you imagine how terrible this must have been? Knowing what would happen to you and there's no escape?

"Daily His future must have been on his mind. Just seeing the terrible suffering that He had to face must have been in itself a daily torture for Him. All that evil that is to come His way at our hands!

"But did He give up? Did He try to run away from it? Did He try to change His future?

"When He prayed in the garden before His arrest the devil did tempt Him. Jesus did ask God His Father to make it all go away ... but then accepted His terrible terrible fate just for us.

"He was both God and man, and as man He suffered all that pain and that horrible death on the Cross, just for us."

Father Ignatius stopped for a few seconds, then continued.

"And now I want to address you mothers ... how would you feel if you knew for certain what would happen to your children? Your loved ones. And you were told for certain that the future would be terrible for them.

"Can you imagine for a moment how Mary felt throughout her life?

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“She knew from the moment she presented the baby Jesus in the temple when Simeon told her sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart. She knew then what would happen to her Son.

“Can you imagine that? Raising a little child, hugging Him, loving Him and caring for Him. Teaching Him to take His first faltering steps, teaching Him to talk, feeding Him and looking after Him every day like a devoted loving mother does.

“And knowing every moment she does these loving things what is to happen to her precious child. Knowing every detail that is to happen to Him. How did she cope with her own Cross to carry throughout her life?

“Not only did she carry this terrible pain in her heart throughout her life, but she lived to witness it as well. For she was there, at the foot of the Cross, when her Son breathed His last breath. She held His dead body in her arms. My heart breaks just thinking about it”

The priest stopped for a while and silently thanked our Lady for accepting her ordeal on our behalf.

“Now what are we to learn from all this?” asked Father Ignatius in a soothing voice.

“Our future is uncertain; we may be concerned, frightened even, about what is to happen to us and to our children. The financial situation in this town is in a very bad state with many losing their jobs. Prospects are none too good, and it is understandable if we sometimes feel a little apprehensive and doubtful.

“Let us learn from Jesus and Mary and take courage. God was always with them and at no time did He abandon them. Nor will He abandon us.

“When we're feeling anxious and worried let us turn to Mary and ask her help. Let's implore her to come to our aid. She has lived through terrible times and she'll know exactly how we feel. And I'm certain she'll console us and help us to go on; just like she did all those years ago.

“Let's honour her right now by reciting the Hail Mary ...”

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COCKTAIL QUEEN

Father Ignatius was washing his car in the church's car park one afternoon when he was approached by a young lady wearing a low-cut T-shirt, a short skirt, and knee-length boots.

"Are you the priest that works in this church?" she asked.

He was still wearing his white collar and replied, "I am the Parish priest. How may I help you?"

"Can we speak privately please?" she asked again.

Father Ignatius put down the bucket of water and invited her into the Parish house. He sat at his desk in his office and she made herself comfortable in the armchair by the window.

After a short silence she said, "This isn't easy for me ..."

"Take your time," replied Father Ignatius gently.

"Don't know where to start"

"Start at the beginning ... what can I do to help ..."

"I serve drinks at the Bitten Apple Night Club ... I'm a barmaid ... they call me Cocktail Queen ..." she interrupted.

The priest nodded and said nothing, encouraging her to go on.

"Have you been there? The Bitten Apple ... just by the cinema?"

"No, I've never been there ..." he answered calmly, and wondering where all this is leading to.

"If you ever want to go let me know ... I can let you in without paying the entrance fee ... get in at the back ..."

"Well ... that won't be necessary ..." hesitated Father Ignatius, still wondering what this young lady wanted.

"I'm not a bad person you know ... people look at me and think I'm a bad person ..."

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"I'm not here to judge you," he answered, still remaining calm to help her say what she had on her mind.

"This is very difficult, but I have to tell you because I believe in God and all that ..."

she stopped for a few seconds and sighed. He let her pause for a while until she continued, "I'm pregnant ... there I said it!"

"That's good news ... isn't it?" he said with a smile.

"A nuisance more like ... it'll interfere with my work ... and my boy-friend is mad about it. It'll be Christmas soon ... and a right present he's given me ..."

"I see ..."

"Well he said we should get rid of it ... he is willing to pay and all ... I was wondering whether God would forgive me if I got rid of it ...because I can't give up work you see ..."

"You're asking me to condone the killing of a living human being; because that's what it is you intend to do," said Father Ignatius sternly.

"I'm asking for forgiveness" she said, "I was brought up Catholic years ago as a child, although I don't go to church now ... I'm too busy you see ... I was told if you confess your sins the priest has to forgive you ..."

"It doesn't work quite like that ..." he said hiding his temporary loss of patience.

"You can't ask for forgiveness for something you're about to do. Something which you know is wrong; and yet you intend to do it all the same."

"It's either that or I lose my job and lose my boy-friend. Then where will I be?"

"You do realize what abortion is Miss, do you not?" he asked gently trying to calm down the situation before it got out of hand. "It is the ending of a life. It is not a matter to be considered lightly and in a cavalier way as you and your boy friend seem to think. I do not believe that it is right, and I must advise you against it in the strongest way possible. I urge you to re-consider what you're intending to do ..."

She looked at her watch and interrupted him once again, "Do you think if I go to another church the vicar there would forgive me?"

It was obvious that she was not listening and that her mind was made up. All she needed was re-assurance from the church, or any representative of a Deity she happened to vaguely believe in, that what she was doing was right.

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“I doubt that you will find any vicar or priest who would ...”

“I’ll have to go now,” she said looking at her watch again, “I’m on at the Bitten Apple in half-an-hour ...”

“Before you go, just wait a second ... I’d like you to get in contact with these people if you can. They may be able to help you. They will talk to you about your pregnancy, but I must tell you, they will never agree to you having an abortion. On the contrary, they will help you see what a gift you have living within you right now ...”

“Whatever ... I’ll think about it ... I don’t think they’ll help ... I just have to get rid of it ... I’m not into having babies and all that ...” she said taking the card from his hand and making her way out.

As he saw her leave Father Ignatius prayed silently for that living human being threatened with death before breathing his first breath.

All that happened some months ago and the priest never met the young lady again ... until yesterday.

He was at the supermarket and about to pay for his purchases when the cashier recognized him. She told him that the baby is six months old now, and that she gave up work at the night club and was now working at the supermarket and living with her boy-friend, the baby’s father.

As he drove away the priest praised God for saving the unborn-child and prayed that maybe ... one day ... this young family may get to know and love the Lord.

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THINK MANNERS

Sometimes events coincide together, almost by conspiracy, only to accentuate something which you knew already but had kept at the back of your mind.

Father Ignatius went to his usual supermarket this morning and as he approached the door the customer immediately in front of him let go of the door which swung shut in the priest's face.

It was obvious that the man saw Father Ignatius behind him as he looked back on entering the store; but he just didn't bother to hold the door open.

Father Ignatius on the other hand, entered the supermarket and held the door open for the old lady following him. She entered, followed by a young woman pushing a pram, then two teenagers, then a young couple, and then two men talking with each other.

None of them acknowledged him standing there or thanked him for holding the door open. They walked past him and totally ignored him.

He found a trolley and started his shopping.

A few moments later a young man coming up one of the narrow aisles bumped his trolley with his; and continued on without apologizing.

Whilst buying his favourite ginger marmalade a short lady came up to him and asked: "Could you pass me that jar of honey up there? I can't reach."

He handed her the jar which she put in her trolley and walked away.

At this, the priest stopped for a moment of contemplation as he saw her turn in a hurry down another aisle.

"When I was young ..." he thought to himself, "my mother always insisted on me saying please and thank you whenever I needed something ... yet neither this lady nor any of those people coming through the door said thank you, or nodded, or even smiled ... and that young man who hit my trolley didn't bother to say sorry ..."

And at that point his charitable nature came to the fore as his train of thoughts continued, "I bet none of these people are bad people ... they don't set out in the morning with the express desire to be nasty or rude ... they're just too busy and so rushed with the many things they have to do that they forget about the little niceties of life ... unlike me ... who only works on Sundays and have little else to do the rest of the time ..." he chuckled to himself.

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His thoughts then turned to the ten men healed by Jesus of a skin disease. Only one came back to thank Jesus.

“Where are the other nine?” asked Jesus.

“Perhaps they’re too busy doing their shopping ...” thought Father Ignatius to himself, “... and I bet the five thousand who were fed by Him didn’t bother to thank Him or pay for the food either ...”

On his way back to his car the priest witnessed an unusual event which pleased him no end.

A man drove by, parked his car, got out of the driving seat and walked to the other side to open the door for his wife.

The priest couldn’t believe his eyes.

He approached them quietly and with a smile said: “I’m so pleased to see that chivalry is still alive and doing well ...”

“Chivalry has nothing to do with it mister ...” replied the wife, “the car door on my side does not open from inside!”

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SOMETHING FOR ME TO EAT

It was five days before Christmas, Father Ignatius drove into the car park and was about to enter the Parish house when he noticed a man standing by the Church door. He walked up to him and the man asked: "Have you got something for me to eat?"

He was in his fifties perhaps, although he looked much older. Unshaven, wearing dirty clothes with tears down the pockets, an open shirt revealing skin that had not been washed since who knows when, and shoes with no socks.

"I'm not from around here ..." said the man, "just got off the train ... I hid amongst the cattle and no one saw me ..." he continued with a grin revealing missing teeth.

The smell of his clothes certainly testified to the fact that he slept amongst cattle, thought the priest.

"I think you're in need of a good warm bath ..." he said without thinking, "follow me ..."

He took the man into the Parish house, led him to the bathroom and filled the bath with hot water. He then brought a large plastic bag and asked him to put all his clothes inside it. "I'll try and find you something new to wear. We'll have to throw your old clothes away ..." said the priest as he left him to it.

He then looked through his own wardrobe and found a few bits and pieces which he no longer needed; and complemented these with other items of clothing donated by parishioners for the monthly jumble/rummage sale.

Half an hour later the man was clean and dressed, minus his shoes. The priest noticed that his toe-nails had not been cut for ages. So he sat him down, went down on his hands and knees and cut his nails for him; for it was obvious the man could not even bend down and do this for himself.

He then took him to the kitchen and prepared a lovely meal of fried eggs, bacon, sausages, black pudding and fried bread. Followed with coffee and toast and marmalade.

It was getting rather dark by mid-afternoon when the man finished eating; so Father Ignatius got him in his car and drove him to the St Bernard Shelter for the Homeless at the other side of town.

On his way back Father Ignatius could not get the man out of his mind. "What a miserable place this town is ..." he thought to himself, "high levels of unemployment

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... businesses shutting down ... people losing their jobs and their homes even ... I wonder how many are sleeping rough this Christmas ...”

His thoughts then turned to his parishioners. “This is definitely the poorest Parish I’ve been assigned to,” he thought as he drove home, “I wonder how many of our old folk will have a miserable Christmas ... sitting at home with little if anything to eat ... Miss Fletcher for instance ... seventy years old and all alone ... and the Palmers ... both in their eighties ... and Mr Sanders ...” and the names kept coming to mind as he drove mile after mile.

When he reached the Parish house he was determined to do something about the old folk in his congregation. He decided to invite those whom he knew to be alone and with little money to a Christmas dinner at the Church hall.

He rushed to his office and started by writing a list of people he’d invite. A few minutes later and the list ran to twenty-seven people, all elderly, all poor, all of them he knew very well would spend Christmas day alone in their homes with little to celebrate.

He then started another list of what would be needed to prepare a lovely Christmas meal and to his dismay it totaled over £100.

And his dream was shattered in an instant. Where was he to find such a large sum of money? The Sunday collections hardly amounted to twenty pounds or so a week and every penny was needed for the up-keep of the church, the Parish house, the car and sundry other expenses.

He decided to stop thinking about this project. Doomed before it even started. Thankfully he had not shared his thoughts with anybody. Not his fellow priest, nor the housekeeper.

He looked at the clock and went to church to celebrate evening Mass.

The next morning there was a large brown envelope in the letter box with Father Ignatius’ name written on it in large letters. It had been hand-delivered as it did not have a stamp or postmark. Just his name in bold capitals.

He took it to his office and on opening it he found it contained £150 in bank notes.

There was nothing to signify who had sent it; but it was obviously for him as the envelope had his name clearly written on it.

He did hold his Christmas party for the old folk that year; but he never found out who sent him the money.

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This happened many years ago when Father Ignatius first arrived at St Vincent Church. Since then he has held a Christmas party for the old people every year; with money donated by various rich and not so rich parishioners.

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CONFRONTATION FOR FATHER IGNATIUS

Father Ignatius sat down in his compartment and prepared for the long journey ahead. It was one of those old fashioned trains with separate compartments seating eight people per cubicle facing each other. Luckily, this compartment was empty so the priest took out his book and started reading. It was dark outside and it had begun to snow.

Just as the train started pulling out of the station a man in his thirties entered the compartment and sat opposite the priest.

“It’s cold outside ...” he said blowing in his hands to keep them warm.

“Isn’t it just!” smiled the priest.

The man crossed his arms to keep warm and started to tap his feet gently. Father Ignatius ignored him and continued reading.

A few moments later the man got up and started fiddling with the heating control in the compartment. He turned it to the left, then again to the right, and then he put his hand against the air vents.

“I’m sure these controls are only here for show,” he said, “they don’t work at all. They put them here to make you think you’re in control. But you’re in control of nothing on these trains I tell you!”

At this precise moment the train must have crossed a point as it tilted slightly off-balancing the man who fell back into his seat.

Father Ignatius bit his lip to stop him from laughing.

“Eternal damnation ...” cursed the man ... followed by “oops ... sorry ... I shouldn’t have sworn ... you’re a priest aren’t you?”

“Yes I am,” replied Father Ignatius.

The man sat down peevishly for a few moments, rubbing his hands against each other to the sound of the train moving slowly on the rails. Clackety clack ... clackety clack ... clackety clack.

“So you’re a priest ...” declared the man after a few minutes silence. It was obvious that Father Ignatius was not meant to read his book right now. He looked up and smiled.

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“So what would you say to an atheist like me?” continued the man.

“I would say nothing and continue reading,” said Father Ignatius.

“Would you not try to convince me that I am wrong?”

“No ... I wouldn't.”

The man frowned. “Why is that? I thought you priests are meant to preach to people like me ... and try to save us ... that's your job.”

Father Ignatius closed his book and put it away. He took off his glasses and started cleaning them.

“In my experience,” he said “people like you don't need convincing. You already know you are right.”

“How's that?”

“Do you believe in God?”

“No. Of course not. I've already said so.”

“And that's precisely what I meant ... you are so sure that there is no God that there is no point in convincing you otherwise. Somehow, you have proved to yourself a negative. There is no God. And no amount of discussion or debate will change your mind.”

“I'm certain of it,” declared the young man, “there is no such thing as God.”

“I admire your Faith,” smiled the priest, “ironically, you have more Faith in your belief than many Christians I know have in their belief that God exists. You'd be surprised how many live in doubt and confusion about their Christian beliefs.”

“There you are then ... at least we un-believers have no doubts ...”

“Doubts aren't such a bad thing ... it is possible to believe in God and have doubts too ... doubts help you question your beliefs and in certain circumstances can even strengthen your Faith ... God has given us the luxury to doubt. To question, to analyse, and to think. And then to come to the conclusion that He truly exists.”

“So you've proved to yourself that God exists?” asked the man.

“No ... God proved it to me. He found me willing to take a chance ... keep an open mind and dare to believe without any proof at all. And my first faltering steps into

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believing were rewarded ... in time ... by enough evidence for me to be certain of God's existence and His love for us."

"Wow ..."

"Wow indeed," continued Father Ignatius, "all it takes is your courage and willingness to step out in blind Faith and want to believe ... He'll provide the proof you need in due course. You must dare to believe. Dare to lose control."

"What do you mean?" asked the man sitting opposite the priest.

"A few minutes ago you tried to make that heating system work. You turned the knob one way and another and you felt totally out of control. You said as much ... you're in control of nothing on these trains ... those were your exact words."

"That's right ... I've never known any of these systems to work ..."

"When you think about it," continued the priest, "there's very little in life you are really in control of.

"You're on this train, but you don't control what time it leaves the station, what time it arrives and what speed it travels.

"You don't control the state of your health. Anything could happen to alter it; an accident for instance could totally change your lifestyle.

"You don't control whether you'll remain in your present job permanently, or if you're self-employed whether you'll continue to be successful.

"You don't control your marriage, if you're married that is. Anything could happen to you, your wife and children ...

"You may try to influence these things by your behaviour but you do not really control the outcomes."

"But ..." hesitated the man, "someone is ultimately in control. The Government for instance ..."

"No ... not even Governments or authorities ... there are always things that happen which are beyond their control. They may plan for them, try to influence events, prepare for all circumstances ... but they're not in control.

"Only God is in ultimate control of everything which happens in this world and in the whole universe.

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“Whether you believe in Him or not does not alter the fact that He controls everything and everyone. He controls with ultimate, unconditional and total love.”

“This is my stop approaching ... I have to get off now ... I'm sorry I was so rude earlier on ... I promise I'll look further into this ... you've certainly given me something to think about ...

“I like what you said ... Dare to believe without any proof ... Dare to lose control ... I might give it a try ...”

The man excused himself and left the compartment.

Father Ignatius smiled and then started praying for him.

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WHEN DISASTERS HAPPEN

“We interrupt this program to bring you a News Flash ...” blared the radio in the kitchen.

Father Ignatius stopped his cooking for a minute and listened attentively. There had been a train crash not far from where he lived. Somehow the train was de-railed and fell down a steep embankment into a nearby river. There were a number of casualties as well as many injuries.

The priest rang the emergency number given by the radio announcer to enquire how he might help. He was asked to go to the local hospital to donate blood, and also to help comfort some of the not seriously wounded.

An hour or so later he was consoled that many of the town's folk had responded to the appeal and a long queue had formed to donate blood.

That disaster had shaken the town's morale badly. Father Ignatius decided, unconventionally as it might seem, to make the train crash the subject of his sermon on Sunday.

He approached the lectern and said: “Let us pray for the victims and the injured of the train crash which happened a few days ago; as well as for their family and friends.

“This train crash has come as quite a shock to all of us, especially as it comes so close to the tragedy last week when a bus driver lost control of his bus and killed several school children walking on the sidewalk.

“When such disasters happen, some of us get a little confused and ask why God made it happen. Some even blame Him for the disaster believing that a loving God should have prevented it.

“I say ... Praise the Lord!”

Father Ignatius paused for a while to allow the murmurs in church to die down.

“I can see from your faces that some of you think I've gone mad,” he continued.

“Father Ignatius has lost his marbles ... he is a few Hail Mary's short of a Rosary ... his little grey cells have turned to ashes ... and whatever other metaphors you wish to make up to describe my sanity or lack of it.

“Of course I recognize and I'm deeply shocked by the terrible tragedies that have befallen this town in the last few days. Especially when we consider as well the severe

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economic crisis we're living through and how it is affecting many families facing loss of work and income. And how misery tends to enjoy company and has visited many local communities lately.

"Please don't misunderstand me ... when such disasters happen we must help in every practical way we can.

"But I also wish to ask you to consider this ... Where do you think God is when a disaster happens?

"Is He hiding behind the settee cringing in fear at what is happening in the world today? How it's all gone wrong and He can't handle it anymore?

"Or is He still in control of all that is happening in the universe?

"When we praise Him, we're not doing so because of the disaster, but because He is still in control of this and every situation.

"In doing so, we acknowledge His greatness, His omnipotence and that His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

"By praising Him, no matter what the situation, we somehow open a channel for His grace to shine upon us and, if it is His will, a good outcome will result from a bad situation.

"The alternative of course is to rebel and blame Him for the bad situation that befalls us. And where will this lead us I ask you?

"How dare we ... insignificant minuscule little creatures that we are ... how dare we question His will and in so doing distance ourselves from His love and mercy?

"Of course we're hurt and shocked by what has happened recently and we're confused. We wouldn't be humans if we weren't.

"But I urge you, having prayed for the victims and their families and friends, having helped practically where we can, let us now stand and confidently praise the Lord that He is still in control of everything."

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FATHER IGNATIUS AND POLITICS

There's always a fine line, almost invisible, where a priest should get involved in politics or stand back and keep his nose out.

Father Ignatius was well aware of that, especially in this desolate town which had suffered more than most in the economic downturn, with unemployment higher than the national average and poverty affecting a large number of the population harsher than ever before.

The situation was exacerbated by the news of the closure of a local factory employing many of his parishioners. The workers and their families were devastated. The effects of the dismissals of employees would be felt by the whole local economy as their spending power is reduced. The unions were up in arms and encouraged strikes; which of course would solve nothing in the long run. Parishioners turned to Father Ignatius, perhaps hoping for Divine intervention and some sort of miracle to save their jobs.

Father Ignatius decided to address the matter head on, even though he risked being accused of playing politics. He stood up at the lectern on Sunday and said:

“I have often wondered whether as a priest I am a man of God, serving Him on this earth, or whether I am a man of politics, serving my community.

“Or perhaps a bit of both.

“I am well aware of the difficulties facing many of you by the factory closure announced this week. I know full well the extent of hardship which this community has undergone in the past few years.

“One of you said to me the other day that life is a series of failures punctuated by disappointments.

“I repeat ... a series of failures punctuated by disappointments.

“Is this what God wants for you?

“Does He want to see you struggle and fail and to endure life every inch of the way until death relieves you of your suffering?

“I think not.

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“God wants us to enjoy life as best we can; as simply we can ... even in our poverty, our ill-health, or old age ... God wants us to rejoice and find a glimmer of hope in every situation ... for without hope there is nothing.

“I have asked myself what God wants me to do in this situation. Am I to get involved in politics and speak out about decisions taken by those in authority? Or should I keep quiet and try to help you as best I can on an individual basis?

“Jesus faced a similar dilemma when asked about paying taxes. He did not hesitate to state clearly His opinions on the matter. Christ lived in very political times. His country was occupied by the Romans. Several people saw Him as a new ruler come to overthrow their oppressors. The Pharisees and Sadducees saw Him as a threat to their positions and authority. Yet, He was not afraid to speak out, especially when He saw wrongdoings and evil in society.

“I believe that today there are times when a priest must speak out when he sees something wrong contradicting God's Word and His teachings. Like abortion for instance and Government's legislation on the matter.

“It would be remiss in such situations for a priest to say nothing and look the other way.

“I believe the financial situation we are all facing has now gone beyond party politics. There seems to be no right or wrong answer in sight, at least not to me, a simpleton in these matters.

“The factory closure will affect many of you and I cannot add much to the debate by pious statements and opinions. But at the very least, I offer my services in any way possible ... perhaps as a start, by calling a meeting here at the church center on Monday for all parishioners affected ... let us discuss calmly the various issues facing us and see whether there's anything we can do ...”

And that's precisely what happened. The meeting clarified the extent of the problem. Father Ignatius led a small team of employees to seek a solution and, to cut a long story short, together with his contacts in town with several banks, he managed to put together an employee-led buy-out by some workers backed by financial loans from the banks.

The factory was saved, some but not all jobs were saved, and the newly born business took the first faltering steps towards a promising future.

Father Ignatius' tentative steps in getting involved in local politics were rewarded with success; small as it may be. Not by anything he had done, but by his unflinching Faith that he would be led by the Holy Spirit to say and do what is right.

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FATHER IGNATIUS VISITS THE CELLAR

The basement under the church had been emptied of the junk which had accumulated over the years. Some young volunteers had painted the walls and ceiling of the three reclaimed rooms and corridor, and an electrician had connected the whole downstairs to the mains electricity.

The intention was to turn two rooms into meeting rooms and the third into a small kitchenette allowing people to make a cup of tea and prepare refreshments.

Father Ignatius ventured downstairs to check on progress.

Tom was alone busily tiling the floor. He had chosen pink and white tiles to match the colour of the rest of the room.

“Things are improving down here ...” commented Father Ignatius as he stood by the doorway.

“They sure are ...” replied Tom turning down the volume of his radio a little.

“Are these tiles already fixed?” asked the priest.

“Yes ... some are already cemented in and they’re drying out nicely ... these others over there I’ve yet to cement ... why do you ask?”

“Well ... pardon me for saying so Tom,” hesitated Father Ignatius, “those tiles over in that area by the wall are not very even ... some are a few millimeters higher than the others ... enough that you would notice them from here where I’m standing ... and they seem to have been placed haphazardly, rather than full square side by side ... eh ... forgive me Tom, perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned it ...”

“Oh don’t worry Father ... no one will see them ... I’ll be putting the kitchen cabinet here over them ... so no one will know about my careless work ...” chuckled Tom.

“Jesus will ...” replied Father Ignatius quietly.

“Why ... is He a works inspector now is He?” chuckled Tom again.

“Tom I’m very grateful to you for volunteering to do this work ... this basement would not have been transformed so beautifully if it wasn’t for all you volunteers working together, clearing the old stuff that was here, painting the rooms and corridor and doing all this work ... maybe I shouldn’t have said anything ... please forgive me ...”

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“Oh don't go away Father ...” replied Tom as he got up from the floor to stretch his aching back, “if they're that important to you I'll fix those tiles again ...”

“It's not that Tom ... I was just thinking ... many people go through life enduring their job from day to day and treating it as a means to earn a living – and no more. I know you're doing this for free ... and I'm grateful to you and the other workers ... but you know what I mean ...”

“And as time goes by, so does the pride people have in their work. They just do it as a job, and inevitably their standard of performance deteriorates.

“I feel that somehow this is an insult to God ...”

“Hein?” mumbled Tom.

“Hear me out Tom ... Whatever job we have to do in life, whether it is an influential position of power, a lawyer, doctor or a skilled worker using our hands to do something, like a factory worker for instance ... surely our duty is to do the work properly ... to the best of our ability. To give the task in hand all the attention and skill that we possess.

“As Jesus was growing up He worked with His father Joseph as a carpenter. Can you imagine Jesus making a table with a wobbly leg?”

Tom shook his head.

“Then why should we?” asked Father Ignatius, “Whatever task we have been given to do – let's make sure it is not wobbly.”

Tom smiled silently.

“I'll tell you what I'll do” continued Father Ignatius, “I'll leave now and I will not return until you have permanently fixed the kitchen cabinet over that area there. Only you will know whether those tiles have been fixed properly or not ... only you will know whether the hidden tiles under the cabinet are uneven and haphazardly laid down ... or not!”

“Jesus too will know ...” said Tom jokingly as the priest walked up the stairs out of the basement.

“That's true ... but I promise not to ask Him!” chortled Father Ignatius.

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WORRY AND DOUBT. PEACE AND CERTAINTY.

It was a lovely Spring evening, quite bright and warm for this time of year, when Steven Milliner, the Youth Club leader, decided to take the children to the park opposite St Vincent Catholic Church for some fresh air and exercise.

Most of the boys had gathered with two Club Leaders at the far end of the park to play football. The rest of the children stayed in the playground area and played on the swings, the slides, round-about and seesaws; supervised by a couple of Leaders and Father Ignatius who'd turned up to help.

The priest sat on a bench and kept a watchful eye when he was joined by Tony a young volunteer who helped at the Youth Club every now and then.

"Could I ask you something Father?" he said hesitantly as he sat down.

"Fire away ..." replied the priest.

"How is it that you priests can be so strong and steadfast in your Faith. You and Father Donald are so saintly and you preach on Sunday so well ... I mean, do you ever have doubts?"

Father Ignatius smiled. "If only you knew ..." he thought silently.

After a moment or two Father Ignatius spoke gently.

"Well ... Father Donald may well be saintly I suppose ... as for me ... hmmm ... what makes you think I'm saintly?"

"You're always so calm Father. Nothing seems to rattle you. And your Faith is so strong ..."

"Well Tony ..." Father Ignatius said after a short pause, "priests are human beings just like everyone else. Just because we wear a white collar, or have been ordained as priests, does not make us Saints. Of course we have doubts every now and then ... perhaps not as much or as often as other people, but we are no less immune to the attacks and temptations of the devil.

"A person's Faith depends on a lot of factors. We all have different levels of Faith ... if I can put it this way. Some people have a strong Faith in the Good Lord and can withstand no end of suffering and hardship ... others fold at the first stumble ..."

"So, if you do have moments of doubts Father, how do you fight it?" asked Tony.

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“Prayer ... constant prayer,” the priest answered, “one of my favorite prayers is what the man in the Bible said to Jesus. ‘I believe Lord; help my unbelief’. Look it up in Mark 9:24.”

“Yes Father ... I remember reading that ...” Tony replied.

“Priests are no different to anyone else,” continued Father Ignatius, “some have strong Faith indeed, living Saints as you call them ... whilst others do struggle sometime, just like anyone else.

“Anyway ... why do you ask? Having any problems?”

Tony hesitated a little before replying.

“Well ... sometimes I have doubts ...” he said, “... and yet at other times I feel totally certain about my Faith. I believe and totally trust in God, especially when all is going well in my life.

“I suppose the problem is that I don’t trust myself to believe enough. It’s as if I should believe and trust more ... yet it does not seem or feel enough. I doubt myself in what I believe. Do you understand what I mean?”

Father Ignatius said nothing for a while as he cleaned his glasses.

“Look at that seesaw over there ...” he said finally, “Do you see how one child at one end is up in the air one moment and then down again the next, whilst the other child in turn is up in the air? And then the first child is up again ... and down again ...

“Life is a bit like that sometimes. You have at one end of the seesaw Worry and Doubt; and at the other end Peace and Certainty.

“Sometimes Worry and Doubt are in the ascendant and together what powerful adversaries they make! We start questioning our Faith. We ask ourselves ‘What if I got it all wrong? What if there is no God at all!’. We worry about our family, our friends, our finances and worldly goods. I’m sure you can imagine what it’s like.”

Tony nodded silently.

“But at other times, especially after prayers or Bible readings, the seesaw tips the other way and Peace and Certainty are up in the air. We remember the many times God was there for us when we needed Him. And the many situations He saved us from and helped us through.

“It’s at these times that we know for certain that He exists alright, despite what others might lead us to believe.”

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“That’s a good analogy,” said Tony quietly.

“I suppose we can’t control the up and down movement of the seesaw,” continued Father Ignatius in his calm voice, “that’s what it was designed to do. But with constant prayers we can ensure that Peace and Certainty are there high up for all to see in our lives for as long as possible.”

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IT IS WRITTEN ON THE BLACK BOARD

Once again Father Ignatius was teaching Catechism to the 5th Form at the local Catholic School. They were discussing the Commandment about respecting one's parents and as one would expect the youngsters had plenty to say about that.

"It's alright to have to respect our parents," said a young girl, "but surely they should respect us too?"

"I suppose I understand," replied the priest reassuringly, "can you elaborate on this?"

"Well ..." she hesitated, "I am fifteen years old and I don't think I should be told what time I have to be home by ..."

"What does anyone else think?" asked Father Ignatius.

"I agree ..." replied another young girl, "my parents are just the same. They insist I'm at home by 9.30; can you imagine that? 9.30!!!"

"It's their way of exerting power" said one of the boys, "my parents always think they know better ..."

"That's right ..." added another lad, "my father has banned me from visiting the disco in town. It's not fair!"

The priest let the youngsters vent their frustrations for a few minutes, and then he got up from his desk and moved towards the blackboard.

This had the desired effect of shutting them up for a while. He then picked up a piece of chalk and wrote on the board in big letters:

"IT'S NOT FAIR"

And proceeded to sit down once again.

After a few seconds silence he said in a soft voice, "I've heard many of you say it's not fair just now ... do you agree?"

"Yeah !!!" said one or two of them.

"I can understand that ..." continued Father Ignatius, "from your perspective it may seem not fair that your parents impose certain restrictions on you. Perhaps it's because the reasons for the restrictions have not been explained to you ... but no matter for now.

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“I would like if I may to explore the statement ‘It’s not fair.’ Can we do that do you think?”

They nodded in agreement. They had a lot of respect for his kind approach and the way he sympathized with their situation.

“No one has ever said that life is fair” continued the priest, “or meant to be fair even.

“What we perceive as fairness in our eyes may not be so to someone else.

“I visited a few of our parishioners in hospital yesterday. There was a young boy of twelve with an incurable illness. That’s not fair ... the chances are he will not make it to his next birthday and his parents were totally distraught.

“I also met the family of a man in a coma. He had been injured in a road accident and has been unconscious ever since. No one knows when or if he will recover. The family is now short of cash and they may well lose their home. That’s not fair.

“Every other day or so, I hear of someone in our Parish being made redundant, and losing their job because of the current economic situation. They’ve done nothing wrong and they’re now on the street. That’s not fair.”

He stopped as he noticed one of the girls upfront getting a little tearful.

“What I’m trying to say ...” he said gently after a short pause, “is that I sympathize entirely with you. You see your parents actions as unfair, yet perhaps you miss the point that they do what they do out of love for you. It is because they care.

“I had similar problems with my parents when I was young. My father was a farmer and as you’d expect he brought vegetables fresh from the land home for dinner. And like many a young child, I hated vegetables. Especially spinach ... it looked like boiled grass!”

They laughed in unison.

“But they made me eat my vegetables ... it’s not fair!”

They laughed again.

“And talking of fairness ...” went on Father Ignatius, “I read that an innocent man has been falsely arrested, beaten up and tortured, and nailed to a Cross to die.

“Now that’s really not fair.

“You can read all about it in the Bible.”

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He paused again to gauge the situation before continuing.

“So whilst I understand how you feel about your parents and the way they restrict you sometimes, I urge you please to accept it in obedience for the sake of Jesus who did so much for you. And still does.

“Is that a deal?” he asked with a smile.

And as always, his gentle loving empathy gained him their respect and sincere appreciation.

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MARY CRIES

Father Ignatius was in his office when George came running in.

“Father come quick” he gasped in between breaths, “the Virgin Mary is crying”

“Calm down George ... take a deep breath ... now tell me, what is going on?”

“The statue of the Virgin Mary, in church ...” said George, “it is crying. Come and see for yourself”

The priest left the Parish house and followed George across the car park and into the church. By the left of the altar there was a large statue of Our Lady high on a pedestal. Father Ignatius had sat there in the front pew many a time reciting the Rosary.

As he approached the statue, Sonia, who was there with George and others cleaning the church in time for Sunday spoke first.

“Hello Father,” said Sonia, “this is really weird. We were cleaning around here when I looked up at the statue and noticed her cheeks were wet. I thought I was seeing things ... but look ... doesn't it seem wet to you?”

The priest looked up, and true enough; the statue's face seemed to glisten in the light.

“George ...” he said, “there's a small ladder in the garage. Would you mind getting it please?”

Moments later Father Ignatius climbed the ladder gingerly to get a closer look. And for certain, there was a little moisture on the statue's face, just beneath the eyes and on the face. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the statue dry.

“It's probably condensation,” he said as he got off the ladder, “it sometimes happens in old churches. Condensation builds up and turns to moisture on a cold surface.”

The situation was quickly defused and the volunteers got back to cleaning the church.

That evening, as Father Ignatius sat on the front pew to pray the Rosary he looked up and sure enough the statue was moist again on the face. He looked carefully standing on a nearby chair and was convinced that, somehow, the condensation, or were they tears, had built up once again. Only on the face of the statue.

The mysterious incident did not happen again. He checked the following day several times and all seemed back to normal. Or so he thought.

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Because somehow the local paper had got hold of the story and placed it on their front page, having also obtained a picture of the statue in question.

“VIRGIN IN TEARS” read the headline in big letters.

It quoted various un-named parishioners who said they had seen the Virgin Mary cry and suggested a miracle had occurred.

By itself, the newspaper article was a small story in a town where nothing ever happens. Yet the priest felt he needed to address the issue quickly.

On Sunday he approached the pulpit and said:

“I am sure you have all read the article in the press about the statue of Our Lady over there.

“And no doubt you want to hear my views on the matter. So let me tell you now categorically that in my view I do not know.

“I do not know whether this was a build up of condensation or whether they were tears as some people believe. I can only tell you that this happened a few days ago and has not happened again since.

“But I think we should consider this.

“Has the Virgin Mary good cause to cry? I ask you.

“When she looks down on us what does she see? Does she see pure believing loving hearts, or hidden lies and hypocrisy?

“What is the state of Her Son’s Church on earth these days? Have His words taken roots and flourish abundantly in our hearts and in our lives? Or do we just pay lip service to our beliefs and wear Christianity as a badge rather than a Truth?

“There is really nothing more we can say about the events here a few days ago. Whether we witnessed a miracle or whether the moisture on the statue was just a natural occurrence will remain a conjecture for some time no doubt.

“But one thing is certain. That event has given us all an opportunity to look deeply within our hearts and ask whether we have given cause for Our Blessed Mother to weep.”

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JOKING ASIDE

Father Ignatius was watching a comedian on TV. He was mildly amusing at first, and then suddenly, his jokes turned to religion.

Now Father Ignatius usually turns off the TV, or switches to another channel, when people ridicule Christianity. This time, however, that inner voice within asked him to hang on a minute.

The comedian was talking about prayer. He said that some people ignore “that nice bearded man in the sky” most of their lives and turn to Him screaming for help when things go wrong.

The audience laughed.

Father Ignatius wondered whether they were laughing at the description of God, or the fact that some people ignore Him until disaster strikes in their lives.

The comedian went on with another limp joke about how people pray.

“Some get down on bended knees and repeat the same prayers over and again like parrots; praying the Rosary for instance.”

The comedian imagined God sitting on His throne dividing people into categories. All those who prayed repeated prayers He put on one side. Those praying the Rosary He gathered all together, and then, through His omnipotent ability to control time, He would synchronize them all so that they recited the Rosary in unison.

The audience reacted by laughing inanely in harmony.

Father Ignatius got up to switch off the TV.

At that point the comedian had changed the subject to the Eucharist and what Christians believed.

With the TV safely off Father Ignatius sat down again and pondered.

“What a sad state of affairs we’ve come to,” he thought, “when a comedian has to mock Christianity for a living; and he finds a ready audience reacting to his every joke.

“If a member of that audience was a Christian, it would prove very difficult indeed, if not impossible, to stand up and protest.

“That person would himself become the object of ridicule and provide ample material for the comedian to continue his act.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“And why should the TV Company even wish to broadcast such material knowing full well that it would offend someone watching at home.”

Father Ignatius reflected on what the comedian had said about prayer; which as it happened was the subject of the priest's sermon that coming Sunday.

“Of course God does not need our prayers,” he thought.

“He does not need them in the sense that He is not in any way diminished or left wanting if we did not pray.

“But like any loving parent He is happy when we keep in contact. He likes to hear from us from time to time. When we ask Him for our needs.

“He likes us to tell Him how we feel from day to day. To share our worries and concerns, or our troubles when the road ahead is somewhat difficult.

“He also likes to hear about our joys and moments of happiness when things are right.

“The odd ‘Thank you’ every now and then would not go amiss either!”

Father Ignatius jotted a few notes down in his little book.

“And of course,” thought the priest to himself, “praying to God means listening to Him as well as speaking to Him. It is after all a two-way conversation.”

As for repetitive prayers ... that comedian may well poke fun at them, but Father Ignatius saw nothing wrong.

He did after all pray the Rosary daily, sometimes more than once a day.

“It helps me concentrate and focus on God,” he said to himself, “... and as everyone knows, men are not good at multi-tasking. So reciting the Rosary helps focus my mind!” he chuckled.

Yes, all in all, that comedian gave him a lot of material for his sermon on Sunday.

As for mocking God and Jesus, “there's nothing new there” thought the priest.

“Jesus was mocked and laughed at many times throughout His Mission on earth and during His arrest, trial and Crucifixion.

“He took all the hatred and ridicule with Him on the Cross.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“A few jokes from a TV comedian would not harm The Almighty at all; and could perhaps lead someone to experience the love of Christ by just prompting him to learn more.

“The certainty, however, is that the comedian would be reminded of these jokes when he’s face to face with his Creator.”

Father Ignatius smiled.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

STARK REALITY

John and Fiona were very distraught parents. They stayed behind in church after Mass and asked to see Father Ignatius.

He suggested they wait until everyone had gone, and eventually he came back in the church from the car park, having seen the last of the parishioners leave.

The couple were sitting up front next to the statue of Our Lord. Father Ignatius joined them and said jovially, “how are you both? And where is Lea today?”

“It’s about Lea that we want to talk about Father,” said Fiona.

“She doesn’t want to come to church any more ...” added John, “she’s met some new friends and they’re leading her astray ... she says church is boring ... and she wants to do her own thing ...”

“And you feel there’s nothing you can do about it ...” continued the priest.

“That’s right Father, the more we argue with her the more she becomes stubborn ...”

“That’s understandable ...” said Father Ignatius gently, “parenting is not that easy despite what many people might think ... and despite what the experts would tell you to do ...”

“In reality, there’s nothing you can do about it ... your daughter is old enough to do what she wants.

“As they grow up, children want their independence ... Lea may get in with bad company, as you say ... she may go totally off the rails ... get into real trouble ... and there’s very little a parent can do.

“I don’t mean to sound harsh ... and I sympathize with you and what you must feel ... but in reality we can only live our lives and not the lives of others.

“We may try to control other peoples’ behavior, through persuasion, pleading or downright force ... but success depends on a number of factors and to a large extent the other person should be willing to alter their behavior to what you wish it to be ...”

“This isn’t helping much is it?” asked the priest quietly as he prepared them to understand the situation.

“Do you mean we do nothing?” asked Fiona holding back her tears.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“I didn’t say that ...” continued Father Ignatius.

“I wonder how Mary and Joseph felt when they lost Jesus when He was twelve ... they looked everywhere and were concerned about their young teenager ...

“But in reality ... they had no need to worry did they? Perhaps they should have trusted God a little more ... maybe they did, and I’m judging them too harshly ...”

“What exactly are you saying Father?” asked John.

“Do you trust God?” was the direct reply from the gentle priest.

“Eh ... yes, of course ...” mumbled John.

“OK ... let’s consider the facts ... you say she met some new friends ...”

“Yes ... she’s left school now and she is at college ... she’s made new friends there ... they’re OK I suppose ... but they’re not Christian and she feels she’s becoming independent by not going to church.”

“And does God know about this?” asked Father Ignatius.

The couple were stumped and said nothing. The priest continued.

“I suggest you let her be. If she doesn’t want to go to church, don’t make an issue of it!”

“But ... it’s mortal sin!” exclaimed Fiona.

“It’s her mortal sin ... not yours,” said the priest, “besides, let’s assume you can force her to get to church every Sunday, and she does attend against her wishes, and sits there fuming and cursing under her breath ... would that make you feel better? Would it be a bigger sin do you think, than not attending church at all?”

“So you’re advocating we do nothing? I’m surprised at you Father” said John getting a little angry.

Father Ignatius smiled.

“That’s the second time I’ve been asked whether I’m suggesting you do nothing ... and I repeat, I did not say that.

“I suggest first of all that you trust God, and I mean really trust Him that He has a hold on this situation and He is in full control. Can you do that?”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

They nodded silently.

“Good ... then I suggest you don't force her to come to church on Sunday ... or even mention it. Just come by yourselves as you always do ...

“If you do so already, continue with your family prayers. Before meals ... evening prayers or whatever prayers you say together as a family ...

“She may or may not join you ... leave it to her to decide.

“Lead by example ... if you really trust in God you will hand over your daughter to His care. If you stumble and wobble and if your Faith falters you will set her a bad example; and you'll give her proof that your own Faith is only skin deep.

“She is free to decide what she wants in her life. It's a gift given to all of us by God. Not to be restricted or controlled by any one else; this is what you'd be doing, albeit with good intentions, if you force her to go to church.

“Pray for her, like you've never prayed before. Ask God to protect her, to guide her and to bless her.

“Praying is not doing nothing; it is the most positive action we can take.

“She may well return to God in due course, or she may never do so ... it's a risk we all have to take with our loved ones. But it is their choice to make ... no matter how hard or how painful it is for us to watch and to accept.

“We can only live our lives, not that of others. Let us be a living example to others rather than pay lip service to it.

“I'll visit your home perhaps a little more often than I usually do ... and let us pray that God will one day soon welcome her back as He does any prodigal child.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

60

Father Ignatius was very observant. He knew most of his parishioners by name and he noticed their moods, habits and behaviors and he reacted to them according to circumstances.

One early evening he came out of the Sacristy and he noticed that Mrs Holingsworth was arranging the flowers on the Altar and by the numerous statues of Saints around the church silently. She usually hummed her favorite hymns under her breath whilst working; but not today.

“Everything OK Denise?” he asked with a smile.

“I suppose so Father,” she replied glumly, “I was just thinking that’s all ...”

“That’s what I like about women,” he joked, “you can multi-task ... we men cannot think and work at the same time ...” She said nothing.

“Is there a problem I can help with?” asked the priest tentatively.

“Well Father,” she replied as she stopped cutting the stems of the flowers to make them the same size, “I’ve received a letter from my doctor ... and it upset me ...”

“Do you wish to talk about it ...” he asked gently.

“It’s nothing serious ... the doctor said that as I am now over 60 she invited me for a medical check-up ... just as a precaution ...”

“Well ... what’s the problem ...” asked Father Ignatius, for once missing the point entirely.

“It just brought it back to me Father ... I am 60 ... or rather I was 60 four months ago, and I told no one about it ... I’d put it at the back of my mind ... and now here’s a letter reminding me once again of my age ... I mean ... who wants to be 60?”

“I’m sure there are many people under 60 who hope to reach that age some day ...” said the priest gently, “and there are many others over 60 who wish they could turn back the clock ... but that’s not the problem is it Denise?”

“Well Father ... I look at my life and wonder ...” she stopped for a while and bit her lip, “my dear husband used to say that I will be as beautiful when I’m 60 as the day he first met me ... we married when we were 20 you know ...”

“I’m sure you are as beautiful as you were then,” he said trying to comfort her.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“Oh Father ... are you allowed to say beautiful to a woman ... you being a priest and all ...”

“I didn't realize that some words are forbidden to priests ...” said Father Ignatius jokingly, “all right, I take it back. I am sure you look as you did when you first met Daniel ... in fact he is looking down from Heaven right now and he agrees with me ...”

She smiled finishing the flower arrangements on the Altar, and packing the debris of stems and wrapping papers to throw away.

“Look Denise ... we all get at some point in our lives when we look back in fondness and look forward in trepidation perhaps,” said Father Ignatius calmly, “this is only natural. It is part of our human emotions.

“The trick though is not to dwell too much on the past or dread the future. We should trust Jesus to see us through what is to come ... just as He did in the past, even though we were not aware of it ...

“We should aim to live for the present ... and live it as fully as possible ... that's what God wants for us. He wants us to enjoy life ... not endure it in dread and trepidation ...”

“Thank you ...” she said managing another weak smile.

“You know Denise ... there are many people spending their lives staring at tomorrow rather than living today. You know the kind ... people who have their favorite set of teapot, cups and saucers made of the finest china ... yet they do not use it ... they keep it for a special occasion ... or their favorite dinner plates and cutlery or whatever ... and they still wait for that special occasion ... for the day when the Queen or the Pope might visit perhaps ...”

Father Ignatius smiled and then went on.

“But I can assure you that the Queen or the Pope will never visit your house ... they are far too busy ... so enjoy your tea set, cutlery or whatever you have right now ...

“Don't fret about your age ... or what the future might bring ... celebrate your achievements today, and move forward hand in hand with God.”

He stopped again to gauge her reaction.

“Do you know what I do when I'm feeling a little down?” he asked her.

She shook her head silently.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“I go across the road and get some freshly fried fish and chips from the shop opposite. Nothing makes me feel better ... and it improves my waistline ...

“In fact that's where I'm going right now ... Mrs Davenport has asked me to get some fish and chips as she was too busy today to prepare supper for Father Donald and I ... Care to join the three of us for a fish supper ... with salt and vinegar?”

“Yes please ...” she replied smiling broadly.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

MEETING JESUS

It was a very hot summer's day. The sun was bright and not a cloud in the sky.

Father Ignatius was in the Sacristy preparing for Sunday Mass. He asked one of the Altar servers to open all the windows in church to cool it down a little and he resolved to keep his sermon particularly short to spare his congregation, the very young and the elderly especially, from staying indoors for too long.

The previous Sunday a teenager had fainted during Mass because of the heat, and the considerate priest did not want a repeat performance this Sunday.

Father Ignatius had also devised his own make-shift idea to cool down the church a little by inventing his "Ignatius Air-Conditioning" system, as he called it.

The previous night he had asked Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, to place four large bottles of water in the freezer. By the morning, they were frozen solid and as hard as rocks.

The ingenious priest then brought two electric fans on pedestals and stood them on either side of the Altar facing the congregation.

In front of each fan, a few inches away, he placed two bottles of solid ice and switched the fans on. The warm air whizzing past the bottles cooled down a few degrees by the time it reached the congregation.

He was well pleased with his invention that he left the Sacristy for a moment to check it was working all right, when he heard a commotion at the back of the church, in the area they called the welcoming lounge.

"That's not very welcoming ..." he thought as he walked to the back of the church to investigate.

There were two young ladies there wearing very low cut T shirts and equally minute shorts. One of the ushers, an elderly gentleman who always wore a three piece suit and tie to come to church, no matter the weather, had taken it upon himself to object to the girls attire and refused to let them enter the church.

"But it's very hot ..." pleaded one of them, "what's wrong with what we're wearing?"

"You're not coming in like that ..." replied the overheated usher getting redder in the face by the minute.

They all stopped talking as the priest approached them.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“Welcome ladies ...” said Father Ignatius with a smile, “it’s good to see you here ... you’re new here aren’t you?”

They nodded.

“It’s always nice to see new people coming to church ... now what’s the problem?” he asked looking at the usher and the girls in turn.

“He doesn’t want to let us in dressed like this ...” said one of the young girls.

“Hmmm...” said Father Ignatius, “if you were to meet Jesus in person, would you dress like this?”

“No ... perhaps not ...” they mumbled in unison.

“What makes you think He is not in church today?” continued the priest gently.

“Maybe we’ll come again next week ...” said one of the girls as they left.

And they did come again ... and again ... and they’ve been welcomed ever since.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

It was Friday once again and Father Ignatius was at school with the youngsters at Catechism class. They had just read the passage in the Bible about Jesus in the desert and the temptations of Satan.

“Very strange story this ...” said a young boy, “why didn’t Jesus just punch the devil on the nose and send him flying through the air?”

The girls laughed and some of the boys joined in.

“Yeh ...” said one, “Krunch ... Kerpaw ... just like Batman would do ...”

“Jesus would have won for sure ...” said another.

The priest tapped the ruler gently on the desk to attract their attention and restore order. Once they’d settled down he said quietly,

“Actually ... what Tom asked was a very intelligent question.”

“Wooo ...” said a girl.

“That makes a change,” said a boy, “Tom having intelligence ...”

Father Ignatius waited a few seconds and then went on,

“When Jesus came to earth He came as a human to share humanity with us so that we can accept Him and learn from Him. He was born a human baby, grew up a human and shared every emotion we share as human beings.

“Imagine for a minute if He came like a God, which He was of course, and still is.

“Imagine if He suddenly appeared like a superman or a batman or such other fictional heroes.

“With obvious powers like flying, super strength and the ability to do all the things we see in the movies. The people of the time would have been in total awe of Him and would have obeyed and followed Him just out of fear or wonderment.

“His very presence would have commanded universal obedience, respect and fear.

“Hardly free choice - is it? People would have followed and obeyed Him because He frightened them into it.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

The priest stopped again to let this image sink into the children's consciousness.

"But instead," he continued, "Jesus came on earth as a human.

"He humbled Himself as a baby born in poverty in a stable. Grew up with the poor and the down and outs ... not as a king.

"As a human He felt every emotion that we feel. Sadness at the death of Lazarus ... pity for the ill and poor ... hunger pains when He fasted in the desert ... and every other emotion we go through ... including temptations.

"In the desert Satan tempted Him with human temptations ... If you are God's Son as you claim you are jump from this temple. Turn these stones into bread. Why don't you worship me? I can offer you much in return.

"I suspect that if chocolate had been invented at the time ... Satan would have tempted Him with this too."

Everyone laughed.

"And Satan tempts us too ..." continued Father Ignatius gently, "not just with chocolates and other worldly temptations ... but with distractions aimed at leading us away from God.

"Are there not times when, like a bright light in our head, we ask ... Is this all real? Is there really a God out there? Jesus? Life after death? And all the other things we're taught at Catechism or read in the Bible?

"What if it is all a big lie ... and there is no God at all ... or an after life?

"Now I hope these temptations don't cross your minds too often. But they certainly will at some stage or other in your lives.

"Satan is always there; ready to put these and other thoughts in our minds to lead us astray.

"And you know something ... The closer we come to God the harder the devil will work to lead us away from Him.

"There is no point in him tempting someone who doesn't believe in God ... is there? So he turns his attention to us.

"And that's why Christ had to be tried by Satan. So that He could share our experiences as a human ... but, most important; to be an example to us all on how to fight back these temptations. Through prayer!"

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

The priest paused once again.

“Every time He was tempted Jesus prayed to His Father for help.

”He was tempted yet again before He was arrested. He asked Himself and His Father ... Can all this pass me by?

“Then, in prayer, He obeyed God and said; Not my will, but Yours.

”What a great example for us all to emulate! Not my will, but Yours.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Father Ignatius waited for a few seconds after reading the Gospel in church on Sunday.

“Let us remind ourselves of what Mary read in the second reading today,” he said, “To have Faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.

“There are times in life when events hit us from nowhere and our Faith takes a real knock. Bad health maybe, or loss of a job or something else and we say ... why is this happening to me? I'm a good person. I go to church regularly and love God. Why does He do that to me?

“But St Paul, who is said to have written this letter to the Hebrews, is quite clear in what he says ... to have Faith is to be sure and certain of what we hope for and what we cannot see.

“And he had good reason to lose Faith ... he was not in good health, he'd been arrested, beaten and imprisoned many times for preaching about Jesus, he was shipwrecked and bitten by a snake. He could have said at any time ... enough of this ... I might as well give up and go back to making tents ... which was of course his trade.

“But he didn't give up. His Faith remained strong. He continued preaching despite all adversities.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a while then continued.

“Jesus said that if we have Faith as small as a mustard seed we can say to a mountain move and it will move ... or to a mulberry tree uproot yourself and plant yourself in the sea and it will do it.

“Can you imagine that? We don't have any mountains near us ... but there's Ben Nevis in Scotland and Mount Snowden in Wales. Can you imagine standing there at the foot of Ben Nevis and saying ... hey you Ben ... I command you to move over there!

“And to have so much Faith in what you have said that you know for certain it will happen? You wouldn't be frightened of making a fool of yourself in front of everyone else! You'd shout your command out loud to the mountain knowing full well that it will obey you.”

He paused again for a while and took something out of his pocket.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“I have here a mustard seed ...” he said raising his hand, “can you see it?”

“Of course not ... it's so small that I can hardly see it myself ...

“Suddenly, this tiny mustard seed has never seemed so big ... when it comes to asking a mountain to move.”

He stopped again and put the seed back in his pocket.

“But Jesus was not exaggerating when He taught us to have Faith.

“On His way to Capernaum Christ met a Roman Centurion whose servant was very ill. He asked Our Lord to help the servant, and when Jesus made His way towards the house the Centurion said ‘Lord, I do not deserve that you come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed’

“Can you imagine the Faith of that Centurion? A Roman officer who was no doubt tasked to keep the peace and had probably persecuted Christ's followers in his time and kept them under control ... Yet, this very man had so much Faith in Jesus that he knew that one word from Him and the servant would be healed.

“Can you do that I wonder? Can you have so much Faith in God that you know for certain that He will see you through whatever crisis you are facing? Or does your Faith crumble when adversity strikes?”

He stopped yet again to punctuate his sermon and to gauge the discomfort of the congregation.

“My dear friends ...” he continued, “I am no Saint ...

“There are times when my Faith falters too ... I am as weak as any of you and at times that mustard seed I carry is as large as Ben Nevis itself.

“God knows that ... He knows the amount of Faith we have in Him and how it varies in the good and the bad times ...

“And yet He loves us all the same.

“A man came to Jesus once and asked Him to heal his son ‘if you possibly can ...’

“Note the hesitancy in the man's request. He was not as certain as the Centurion ... he said ‘help us if you possibly can ...’

“Jesus replied, ‘If you can? Everything is possible for he who has Faith.’

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“To which the man replied, ‘I do have Faith, but not enough. Help me to have more!’

“Jesus took pity on him yet admired his honesty and healed his son.

“We too dear friends ... should never be afraid or ashamed when our Faith is weak to say to God in all honesty.

“I believe Lord; help my unbelief”.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

LET HIM DIE

Father Ignatius was a member of the Doctors and Patients Consultative Committee at the local Hospital.

The Chairman of the Meeting welcomed all present and said:

“Thank you for attending this Meeting which we have arranged to discuss a matter on which the Hospital Board has asked for our views. Over the past few months there have been a number of premature births in this hospital and, as you would imagine, it has proved a very difficult and emotive issue for both the medical staff and parents to deal with.

“Let me introduce Doctor Farmington who will address us for a few minutes on the subject in question.”

The doctor stood up and explained about instances when babies are born prematurely, some as early as twenty three weeks into pregnancy. He explained that despite medical advancements and efforts made to save the infant, in the majority of cases, those who survived, had severe physical and mental disabilities throughout life.

These disabilities, sometimes painful, resulted in the child leading a very difficult existence dependent on others and on constant medical attention, with no hope of ever being cured to lead a normal life.

The doctor also explained that often, the very intervention by medical staff to save the baby, created medical risks which would adversely affect the infant in later life; for example brain damage, infection and so on.

The dilemma facing the medical profession was whether it would be more humane to let such premature babies just pass away peacefully rather than condemn them to a difficult and often miserable life.

The doctor was followed by a Senior Social Worker who went on to add that in a large number of cases, where the baby was saved despite the severe disabilities, the strain on the family was such that marriages frequently ended in divorce causing further pain and heartache to everyone involved. Furthermore, in many cases any other children in the family suffered too because of the extra attention and resources afforded to the disabled child by the parents. Often one or both parents had to give up work to look after the disabled child putting further pressure on the families' finances.

The debate went on as to the limited financial resources available by families and the State to assist in such cases.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

One or two parents at the meeting maintained that disabled children are well-loved by their parents and are central to their families despite their disabilities. They talked about the sanctity of life and how they, as parents, had the right to decide on medical intervention and not the medics or anyone else.

“You’re very quiet Father,” said the Chairman of the Meeting, “Although I might guess on your views ...”

A few people laughed.

“By guessing my views, you may well save me the agony of having to decide on this ...” replied Father Ignatius.

The Meeting fell silent.

“I fully appreciate the difficult decisions that have to be made by all concerned in such cases as premature births ...” continued the priest.

“It is true of course that where the medics intervene, using their great skills, the results more often than not are a disabled child unable to fend for himself throughout what could be a long life.

“As we’ve heard, this puts a great strain on all concerned and marriages often break-up as a result inflicting further pain on the whole family.

“Understandably, the parents in such cases want everything possible to be done to save the child, and they cling to faint hope that all will turn out well. This is Faith indeed, albeit in reality, as we’ve heard, in most cases it is misplaced Faith since the surviving child is permanently and severely disabled.

“Yet, we must remember, that in these traumatic few moments when a decision has to be made, the parents are acting without any medical knowledge or facts whatsoever, and they base their decisions to save the child on pure loving instincts.

“Faced on the one hand with definite medical and statistical evidence of the outcomes of intervention, and on the other hand on parental love, hope and faith ... how are we as a society to decide on this terrible dilemma?

“Who are we, I ask, to play God and decide to condemn a human being to a life of misery for themselves and those around them?

“If a child is born pre-maturely, extremely so in some cases, is this not a sign that the mother’s body has rejected it because there is something wrong with it? By intervening are we not interfering with the natural course of events?”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

The doctor and the Social Worker smiled sensing the argument going in their favor. Father Ignatius stopped for a second or two as he often did to focus peoples' attention.

“Let me invite you to consider something else,” he continued.

“There are instances where babies are born after their full pregnancy term, yet, they are born with severe difficulties; like a hole in the heart for example ...

“What do the medics do then? Do they reject them as faulty and let them die?

“Or do they do their utmost to help these young lives who sometimes, they too, grow up with disabilities?

“So I ask myself, what is the difference between a child born pre-maturely and another born after its full term? Why should one benefit from the skills and expertise of the doctors and not the other?

“Our skills, whatever they are, are God-given. We've done nothing by ourselves to achieve what we achieve.

“A skilled doctor for instance owes his skills and aptitude to assimilate and use knowledge to a Higher Being. This applies to all of us.

“And as such we owe that Higher Being, God, a duty to use our skills, whatever they are, for the benefit of humanity.

“Rather than ask whether the doctors should intervene in the case of pre-mature babies, why don't we ask God to intervene? Don't we trust Him enough?

“My views, Mr Chairman, if you've guessed them correctly ... are that the doctors should do their best with the skills and expertise at their disposal to help these young lives ... and then leave it to God to intervene as to the quality and length of life which transpires as a result of their efforts.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

A HELL OF A QUESTION

There are times when children ask us questions which make us stop and think. Our answer needs to be well thought out and considered before our mouth is engaged into action.

Father Ignatius was at the local Catholic School for his usual Catechism class. This is what happened when a ten years old girl asked him her question.

“Father ... is it OK to pray for those people in hell?”

The priest took off his spectacles and cleaned them of imaginary dust in order to gain some thinking time.

“Why do you ask?” he said gently.

“Well ...” she hesitated, “we pray for the souls in purgatory so that God forgives them and they go to Heaven.

“Why don't we pray for those in hell? They were bad when they were alive but now they are dead they are in hell for ever. I feel sorry for them!”

“It's good of you to feel sorry for them,” replied the priest, “it shows a charitable spirit ... it shows you're very kind and considerate.

“But we must remember this. No one goes to hell by mistake.

“As you say, these people were bad when they lived and they had plenty of opportunities to be good and to do what God asks. They had many chances to repent and ask God to forgive them and to do good. But they disobeyed, time and again, and they turned their back on God.

“God is merciful and He forgives ... but He is just too. Those who are in hell have sent themselves there by their behavior.”

Another child raised his hand and asked a question.

“But Father ... Sister Josephine when she was here yesterday, she said that Jesus told us to love our enemies. He said to God to forgive them when they put Him on the Cross.

“The people in hell are the enemy of God. Why does God not forgive them? Does He not love them?”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

Father Ignatius prayed silently for inspiration before answering.

“Of course He loves them” he replied after a short pause, “God loves everybody because they are His creations. I suspect He even loves those in hell and He is very sad that they are there.

“But there are times in life when people put themselves out of God’s loving nature.

“Let me explain it another way.

“Suppose your parents bought you a puppy for your birthday. You love that puppy very much and you play with him every day. But as he grows up he becomes a little threatening and he growls at everyone. One day he bites your hand. And he continues with this bad behavior to the point where you can’t come near him in case he bites you again.

“For your own safety, and that of others, your parents decide to take the dog away and put him in a Dog Rescue Shelter where he’s looked after by other people.

“It’s the same with us. God loves us all when we’re born and we’re babies. But as we grow up, some people turn against Him and become bad. No matter how often these people are told to do good they never ask God to forgive them and they continue to do bad things all their life.

“When these bad people die they go to hell because of what they have done ... God still loves them. Just as you love your dog in the Dog Shelter!

“In fact I believe God grieves for those in hell. He’d rather the place was empty and we were all with Him in Heaven. But some people put themselves in hell by their bad behavior.”

“So do we pray for those in hell or not?” asked the original questioner.

“There is nothing wrong with praying,” Father Ignatius replied, “God will listen to your prayers, as He does all prayers, and will respond in an appropriate and just way. When you pray, say to God how sorry you are that there are people in hell, and ask Him to help you be good all your life.

“Every one of us, young and old, like me, must always pray that we do not give God reason to grieve by behaving badly and ending in hell.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

GUESS WHO'S IN HEAVEN

Johnny said to Father Ignatius, "Father, I had a funny dream the other day!"

"I could do with a good laugh," replied the priest, "tell me about it."

"Father, I dreamt I was in Heaven and Graham, my worst enemy, was there too!"

"What's so funny about that?" asked the priest.

"Father, you don't understand," continued Johnny, "Graham is an evil conniving cheat who'd sell his own mother if he could make a fast buck! He's the last person I'd expect to see in Heaven."

"Well, let's assume this is not a dream," continued Father Ignatius as the two men walked round the church grounds, "Let's say it's for real."

"You died and went to Heaven, and there, sitting on a cloud playing the harp is your old nemesis, Graham."

"What do you feel about it?"

"As I said," protested Johnny, "the man is evil. I'd probably warn St Peter in case Graham cheats him out of his catch of fish!"

Father Ignatius smiled. "Would you think that God made a mistake in letting him in?" he asked.

Johnny hesitated and did not answer.

"Do you remember the parable about the rich man who had a vineyard?" asked the priest. "The rich man hired some people early in the day to work in the field. Then again he hired more people a bit later on. And again in the afternoon, and also one hour before the end of the working day."

"The rich man in this parable represents God and the vineyard is Heaven. God is the only one who decides who is to enter Heaven."

"We have no say in the matter. Although we often pretend to know more than we actually do. You'd be surprised how many people there are ready to serve God in an advisory capacity."

"The different times of the day represent when certain people get to know God and to follow His word."

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“Some people do so early in their lives and get to love Him and obey Him throughout their lives. Others get to know God later in their lives; and some only get to know God at the end of their lives just before dying.

“Of course, the temptation is there to ask why should I be good all my life when I can suddenly say sorry and accept God at the end. But there is no guarantee that this will happen is there? And God knows whether a final acceptance and repentance is genuine or not. Or just an insurance policy cashed in at the last minute to avoid the other place.”

“Does it matter?” interrupted Johnny, “Does it matter if the final repentance is genuine and the individual is truly sorry for what he has done, or whether it is a final act of despair to avoid going to hell?”

“Good point,” replied the priest wisely, “but one best left for God to decide since He owns the vineyard and we have no say in the matter.

“The fact remains, that when you see Graham in Heaven you should rejoice that at some stage in his life he found God and was deemed worthy by the Almighty to enter Paradise.

“As for you, who has been called to work in the vineyard early in your life, your job here on earth is to be an example to others so that they may see in you something worth following, worth knowing and worth loving. As a good Christian, you should be the recruitment officer for God and lead others to Him”.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

FOCUS ON GOD

Once again Father Ignatius was taking the Catechism class at the local Catholic school. The fifteen year olds were often quite challenging and their questions certainly merited careful consideration and were always answered honestly; no matter the subject under discussion.

This particular day was known by the class as "Free Day". They could ask the priest any question on any subject and he attempted his best to answer them.

A cheeky young lady put her hand up eagerly and Father Ignatius motioned her to speak up.

"It must be difficult being a priest Father," she started hesitantly, "I mean ... you can't do what you want. You can't go on a date like ..."

The whole class laughed.

Another girl sitting next to her chirped in "Or go in the woods in the park with your girl friend".

"Oooohhh!!!" said some girls.

"That's right," interrupted a boy, "priests can't go riding motorbikes fast, or have tattoos and all these things we do. They always have to be saintly and walk around like angels."

Father Ignatius remained silent and tapped the ruler gently on the desk to attract their attention and get them to settle down.

He then said, "A man goes to the doctor's and complained that his whole body hurts wherever he touches it.

"The doctor frowns and replies 'That is not possible! Show me.'

"The man pushed gently his left shoulder with his finger and then screamed in agony. He then pressed on his elbow with his finger and cried even more in terrible pain. He touched his knee and cried even louder. And then again he touched his ankle and the pain was just as excruciating.

"Everywhere he touched made him cry in great pain. 'It hurts all over, doctor,' he said, 'is it serious?'

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“The doctor replied, ‘Not really, your finger is broken.’ ”

The whole class laughed in unison.

Father Ignatius waited until they'd settled down and then continued in his gentle voice.

“Sometimes we get too fixated on the wrong things. Just like the man in the joke.

”That’s when we fail to focus on the right priorities in life. We allow our outlook and our earthly vision to be blurred by the many distractions which this world has to offer.

”Life becomes a series of goals set, targets to be met and achievements aimed for. And we miss the obvious point.

”Set your hearts on the things that are in Heaven, where Christ sits on His throne at the right-hand side of God. Keep your minds fixed on things there, not on things here on earth.”

Colossians 3:1-2.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

GOD AND LOGIC. LOGIC AND GOD.

Harry was a practical man. Pragmatic, calculating and very very logical. He always thought things out thoroughly and his conclusions were logical and well worked out.

One day he asked Father Ignatius if he could spare some time for a chat. The always approachable priest took Harry to his office in the Parish House and after a cup of coffee and biscuits he encouraged him to speak.

“It’s something I’ve had on my mind for years Father,” started Harry, “I’ve never actually confessed it at Confession, which might be a sin in itself I suppose, but it still keeps niggling me at the back of my mind. So I’d assume this chat is a Confession in itself.”

The kindly priest smiled and nodded to encourage him to continue.

“Years ago,” Harry said, “someone hurt me very badly. It totally changed my life, and even today, my circumstances and my life are the result of that person’s action towards me.

“That person then moved on to another town far away and we haven’t seen each other since.

“I believe I have forgiven that person. Truly and honestly forgiven them in the sense that I do not seek any retribution, revenge and nor do I bear any ill will whatsoever towards that person. Even though, as I said, my life is still affected by what that person did. I even pray for that person sometimes, would you believe Father!”

The priest smiled and said nothing.

“But I tell you in all honesty Father,” continued Harry, “I hate that person. I don’t wish that person bad as I said, but I don’t like that person at all. I still get angry at times, thinking at what has been done to me. Even though I forgive again deep in my heart I still hate.

“That person never asked for forgiveness. And the likelihood is that the person doesn’t even care for forgiveness.

“Does my private hate negate ... wipe away my forgiveness?”

Father Ignatius said nothing for a while; then, cautiously he said.

“When we forgive, our forgiveness should be total. Without any conditions and given in love.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

Harry interrupted.

“Yes I understand that. And strictly speaking Father I have forgiven totally. But how can I possibly love a person who has totally changed my life for the worse; and that of others too?”

“My hatred, as I call it ... my anger towards that person ... is a private hatred and a private anger within me. The person does not know about it and is not harmed by my personal feelings in any way.

“That person has moved on to another life and doesn't even care about forgiveness.

“How can a personal feeling, which technically speaking does not harm another person, be considered a sin? Surely God can't accuse me of harming that person?”

Father Ignatius waited a while and then replied, “You say the person does not know nor cares about your forgiveness, and is therefore not harmed by your private thoughts and feelings towards them.

But ... is your sin against God perhaps. In that your forgiveness is not total since you hold some hatred back?”

“But Father ...” Harry continued, “I have done my utmost best to forgive totally in that I wish that person no ill-will whatsoever.

“I just can't help disliking, and sometimes hating that person.

“Surely God knows how I am made up as a human. He created me and He gave me all these emotions we humans share.

“Dislike and hatred are such emotions. God knows very well that my hate is borne from anger and perhaps unhealed hurt and a sense of injustice within me. God gave me all these feelings and He can't possibly blame me for reacting naturally to what's happened to me.

“If my hatred resulted in harm and revenge towards the other person, then I understand it's wrong.

“But my private hatred hurts no one. Neither that person, nor any one else, knows about it so how can it possibly hurt them or be a sin?”

“If anything, the hatred is hurting me as it burns inside me ... but I can't help it. It's the way I'm made.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

The priest prayed silently for a few seconds. He understood that the man was still hurting badly and yet, Harry used his impeccable logic to reason that his private feelings were no sin towards man or God.

“Let’s look at it another way” said the priest calmly, “you’re right Harry in saying that your private hatred is not physically or in any other way hurting the other person.

“You’re also right in saying that your hatred is an emotion given to you by your Creator together with all the other emotions we have as human beings.

“But God also gave us the emotion and power to love. In fact Christ told us clearly to love one another; especially our enemies.

“So by hating the other person, however privately, you are denying them your love. You can’t love and hate at the same time.”

“So is it a sin?” Harry interrupted again, “because I can’t help how I feel about this person. No matter how I try. I bear no ill-will as I said, but I just can’t like or love the person as you suggest!”

“I understand ...” Father Ignatius said gently, “the world has seen many evil leaders do many evil things over the years. It is not always humanly possible to love them and forgive them as Christ did on the Cross.

“He is God ... and we are not.

“But at the very least we should try as best as we possibly can to forgive wholeheartedly, even though, in human terms, our hearts can’t always genuinely love as He commanded.”

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

THE FEAR OF GOD

Father Ignatius waited until the congregation sat down and then he started his sermon.

“We often read in the Bible about people fearing God, and the fear of God. And that’s an issue which I would like to address today.

“What is meant by the fear of God?

“Do we fear that unless we obey Him and do as He commands He’ll send thunder and lightning from heaven and destroy us and our cities? Like in Sodom and Gomorrah?

“Or perhaps He would allow illness and terrible things to happen to us because we failed Him in some way or other?”

The priest stopped for a few seconds to gauge the mood of the congregation; and then continued.

“There are, of course, many kinds of fear. If a tiger were to suddenly enter this church we would all fear for our lives and we’d run out from every available exit. Most of us would even forget to genuflect as we rushed out of the building.”

The congregation laughed.

“But that is not the fear I speak of ...

“If we believe that our God is a loving, caring fatherly God, whose only wish is that some day we all join Him in Heaven; then what is there to fear?

“Our fear is not, and should not be, a fear borne of the possibility of punishment and retribution. A fear that, unless we do as He says, we’ll end up in hell and eternal damnation.

“That is not the fear that God wishes for us. After all, He gave us the choice to love Him or not.

“Sadly, many do not either love Him or fear Him. And they seem to be thriving all right! He has not punished them or turned them into pillars of salt! In His loving nature, He has allowed them the luxury to choose as they wish.

“So ... what fear is there for us then, who proclaim to believe in Him and to love Him?

“It is the fear of hurting Him.

GOD'S HUMBLE SERVANT

“I repeat ... the fear of hurting Him. Just as when we have a loving father or mother who do the utmost for us; and they set their standards and values to teach us how to grow up as decent, kind human beings. We, their children, follow their rules, through gritted teeth perhaps, just because we love them and do not want to hurt them.

“That’s the kind of fear we owe our God, our Creator and our loving Father in Heaven. The fear of hurting Him. The fear of disappointing Him by our behavior. A fear borne out of respect for Him; a fear nurtured by true love given to Him freely just as He has loved us.

“Not a fear of what He might do to us. But a fear of hurting someone who loves us.

“Remember ... even the devil fears God. But he fears Him in a different way. He fears Him because he knows Him very well. The devil certainly knows God better than any of us does; because he has met Him face to face.

“And yet, having been close to God and experienced His love, the devil chose to disobey and strike out independently on his own. He thought he could do better than love and follow his Creator.

“And God’s loving nature let him go. He did not punish him and destroy him once and for all. He just allowed him to walk away free out of Paradise.

“It is that very act of rebellion by the devil which resulted in death for all of us. We were not destined to die, but to share Paradise for eternity with God. But the devil in his destructive, impudent rebellious nature has upset what was meant to be and his sin resulted in us undergoing death.

“God our Creator favors life. He created life. In order to redeem us and save us from death, He loved us so much that He sent us His only Son, Jesus, so that we may have life, and have it to the full.

“All we have to do to receive this eternal life is to accept Jesus as God’s only Son, our Savior, and to fear the possibility of ever hurting Him again by our behavior.

“God will never send us to hell. It is we who choose to go there by our way of life; and by choosing the devil instead.”