

THE ADVENTURES OF FATHER IGNATIUS

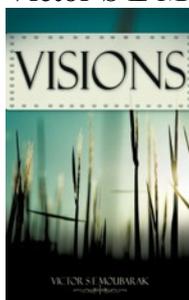
The Adventures of Father Ignatius



Victor S E MOUBARAK

THE ADVENTURES OF FATHER IGNATIUS

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. It is also available in Kindle, Nook and other electronic versions.

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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VISIONS

The priest's house was built next door to St Vincent Church high on a hill overlooking the old town. Father Ignatius stood by the window in his office and from his vantage point he looked down pensively at the old buildings hugging close together and sharing in common poverty.

Ever since June, Helen and Tim, three children from the local Catholic school, had said they'd seen Jesus in the park, news of the vision spread fast around town. In a place where nothing much happens except loss of jobs and business closures, such a story united people in holding differing opinions about the event.

Some readily believed, seeking hope amidst hopelessness. Whereas others, already consumed by bitterness and despair, could only rejoice in the twisted belief that the story may yet prove to be false.

Father Ignatius faced a personal dilemma.

“Could it be ...” he asked himself as he looked down the street, “that our Lord would visit such a poor place. Just like He did in Bethlehem all those years ago?”

He had known the three children and their parents for years. They were good children, well raised by their parents. The girls sang in the choir, whilst young Tim served as an altar boy.

“Not the kind of children who would lie about something like this”, he thought to himself. “Not about something so important.”

He turned back into his office and looked at the picture of Jesus of The Divine Mercy hanging on the wall.

He thought of Blessed Faustina.

“Did they doubt you too?” he asked under his breath, “you were only sixteen when you saw the vision of Christ.”

Read the rest of the story in the book “VISIONS” by Victor S E Moubarak. The short stories which follow are stand-alone vignettes depicting various episodes in the life of Father Ignatius. They are tales in their own right and are not taken from the book “Visions” which tells the story of what happens when Jesus appears in a town not ready to receive Him. I hope you read and enjoy “Visions” as much as it pleased me to write it.

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GATEAUX ANYONE?

After Mrs Barker's funeral, Father Ignatius went to his office and sat at his desk. He picked up the Prayer Card dedicated to her and looking at her photograph, staring back at him, his mind wondered to times past. He smiled to himself.

Father Ignatius was a good priest, he cared for his parishioners dearly and often spent time visiting them at home, or in hospital when they were sick, or at the local Catholic schools.

He remembered how once he had visited Mrs Barker at her home and she offered him coffee and gateaux. She called them gateaux because she had spent some time in France in her youth and had worked in a patisserie. So she prided herself at her little creations.

She had served two of her cakes in little plates and having poured the coffee, she realized she'd forgotten to bring out the sugar. She excused herself and went back to the kitchen.

Father Ignatius was holding the cup of coffee in his hand, and before he could do anything, Mrs Barker's dog came in, picked up the priest's gateau in its mouth, and ran in the corner to devour it.

When she came back in Mrs Barker said: "Finished your gateau already Father? Shall I get you another one?"

He politely declined and felt embarrassed at his apparent greediness.

As happens on such sad occasions, one's mind wanders to the past and seeks pleasant stories perhaps to alleviate the pain one feels for having lost a loved one.

Father Ignatius' thoughts wandered from one parishioner to the next. He brought to mind the Hendersons; a lovely young married couple with a three years old child.

When he visited them recently he was surprised to be asked by Mrs Henderson to take off his shoes.

"We have a young child Father," said Mrs Henderson, "and it's more hygienic to keep shoes off the house."

The priest smiled politely and prayed that he hadn't a big hole in his socks as he slowly took off his shoes. His prayers were readily answered.

He entered the living room where the child was playing with his father. As he made his way to the armchair near the TV, Father Ignatius accidentally stepped on a Lego brick lying on the floor.

The pain was excruciating !!! So sharp and severe that he felt it again right now as he recalled the event in his mind. He remembered tears welling up in his eyes.

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He kept his composure and did not let on to what had happened – but since that painful visit he always considered these toy bricks as instruments of torture dating back to the Spanish Inquisition.

His thoughts were free-wheeling now as he recalled one more occasion when he visited another parishioner, Mrs Granger, to return a book he had borrowed.

It was a windy day as he drove to her house, out in the country. Approaching the front door he noticed that it was open. He rang the bell and waited for a while. No response. He rang the bell again when he heard his name being called from the back of the house.

He made his way to the back garden and did not see her at first. But then he heard her cry: “Up here!”

And there she was, half-way up a large oak tree, standing on a thick horizontal branch clasping another branch tightly with both hands for fear of falling.

“Could you put up the ladder please Father?” she asked.

He picked up the ladder lying flat beside the tree and held it in position as she slowly and gingerly made her way down to terra firma.

He was too polite to ask what had happened when she said with a smile: “I went up there because the cat was stranded and was too afraid to get down.”

“Where’s the cat now?” asked the priest.

“Oh ... it got down and ran away as soon as I got up there. Then the ladder slipped and left me stranded instead!”

His eyes caught Mrs Barker’s photo once again and he said a silent prayer for the repose of her soul. Her voice reverberated in his head; “Finished your gateau already Father? Shall I get you another one?”

He recalled his long departed mother and prayed for her too as he remembered her favourite saying:

“Always make time to laugh Ignatius. And remember what made you laugh. At times of hardship and sadness you’ll draw strength from those fond memories of happy times.”

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FATHER IGNATIUS IN COURT

Father Ignatius knelt at the front pew just by the statue of Our Lady and read the letter once again. Tomorrow was the day when he had to go to Court; there was no escaping that fact. He put the letter back in his pocket and took out his Rosary and started praying.

The following morning he offered Mass early and focused his private prayers on the day ahead. He said his goodbyes to Fr Donald and Mrs Davenport the housekeeper and explained that he did not know when he'd be back, or indeed whether he'd be back that evening.

He decided to walk to Court, about a mile away from St Vincent Church, which gave him plenty of time to pray another Rosary.

He showed the letter to an attendant at the door and he was led into a large room, dimly lit, and smelling of stale tobacco smoke. He was asked to stay there and await instructions.

In the following hour or so the room slowly filled as more people were brought in one at a time and left waiting, just like Father Ignatius.

They were advised not to talk with each other, and most obeyed and spent their waiting time reading books or smoking to the point that you could now see the smoke floating in mid-air around the dirty brown lampshades, and tobacco stained curtains.

Eventually an officious looking individual, tall, thin and with a tiny moustache came in and asked for their attention.

He explained the various procedures involved in being a member of the jury. He thanked them for their attendance and said that, depending on the case they were assigned to, it is possible that they would not be returning home that evening. In which case they would be taken to a hotel where they would stay the night, and every night, until the case was over.

Eventually, Father Ignatius and eleven other people were called by name and led into the Courtroom where they were asked to sit on the Jury's benches.

It had already been explained to them by the officious Court clerk that before they are to be sworn in as members of the jury both the prosecution and defending lawyers had the right to object to certain individuals from sitting as jurors. They need not give any reasons for their objections.

And sure enough, as soon as the twelve were seated, both teams of lawyers got into separate huddles to talk in whispers. Eventually a lawyer from each team approached the judge who, after listening to them, passed a piece of paper to another Court official.

Father Ignatius heard his name called and he was asked to leave the Courtroom. A young pleasant lady then asked him to go home as he was no longer needed. She said

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with a smile, “Please don’t take it personally ... it sometimes happens that a person is not accepted as a member of the jury ... thank you so much for responding to our invitation ... have a nice day!”

“Don’t take it personally ...” the words rang in his head as Father Ignatius made his way back to the church. How could he not take it personally? Someone had taken objection to him. Why? Is it because of his age? Is it because they wanted a better balance on the jury between men and women? If so, why not pick on another man to leave? Why him? Why not someone else?

The questions buzzed round his head like a swarm of bees flitting over a bed of flowers searching for nectar. But his thoughts were far from sweet ... more tinged with the bitterness of rejection.

As he arrived at St Vincent he concluded that perhaps he’d been rejected because the prosecution lawyers, seeing his clerical collar, surmised that he’d be overly lenient towards the defendant.

“That’s it ...” he said to himself, “they think I’m too soft and too forgiving ...” And that thought helped soothe his hurt feelings.

Weeks later he heard through a solicitor friend of his that he had been rejected by the defendant. Apparently, he had suffered at the hands of a priest years earlier and he felt he wouldn’t get a fair hearing from Father Ignatius.

Father Ignatius was deeply hurt on hearing this news. To think that an individual had been so profoundly scarred by a member of the clergy ... someone meant to represent Our Lord and to portray His love and caring on earth!

That evening Father Ignatius offered a special Mass for that un-named defendant, a man he’d hardly seen for more than a few minutes in Court; yet a man who would haunt his conscience for the rest of his life.

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THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

Father Ignatius spent the early years of his priesthood in Rome, so he was quite fluent in Italian, although he had no opportunity to use his linguistic skills in St Vincent Parish. Until last week that is.

One of his parishioners, a wealthy businessman, invited him to a new Italian restaurant for lunch and to discuss the proposal to refurbish the church hall and Parish house.

It was a nice little restaurant beautifully decorated in Italian style resembling a typical fisherman's cottage you'd find in Naples. Although the menu was mostly fish, you could still order a nice pizza or your favourite spaghetti or ravioli.

"We've refurbished and decorated this place" said the proud businessman as they sat at a table near the window.

"It's beautiful" said Father Ignatius, "I hope you won't decorate the church hall in the same style though ..."

And so the conversation progressed throughout a lovely meal with the sound of Italian music playing softly in the background through hidden speakers. The priest recognized Domenico Modugno singing *Volare* and Mario Lanza's version of *Torna Sorriento*. It took him back to happy times spent in Rome and Turin.

But that was not the only Italian that reached his ears that day. He noticed that from time to time the efficient waiters spoke to each other in their native language and commented on the customers sitting at table. Sometimes their comments were quite complimentary and pleasant, whereas at times they were quite rude and certainly inappropriate in his presence ... if only they knew!

At one point he heard them speak about him.

"That man at table six is a priest," said a waiter to another, "how can he afford to eat here? I thought priests were meant to be poor ..."

"Don't you recognize who's with him?" replied the second waiter, "he's the contractor who decorated this place. I bet he's paying ... you'll see ..."

"Just as well ..." said the first waiter, "the priest looks poorer than a church mouse. I bet he hasn't a penny on him ..."

Father Ignatius smiled at himself and said nothing; except continue his conversation with his host.

When the meal was over, and just as they were leaving, Father Ignatius turned to the two waiters and said in Italian, "Grazie molto. Arrivederci."

Three simple words, uttered in perfect accent, which spoke volumes to those they were addressed to. You should have seen their faces!

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STOLEN TREASURE

St Vincent was the only Catholic Church in town so Father Ignatius' parish covered a wide area including the countryside around the town.

Because he was such an approachable priest it was not unusual for parishioners to either visit him unannounced to discuss a problem on their minds, or indeed to phone him and expect him to jump at a moment's notice. As happened last week.

He was about to settle down near the warm fireplace with a nice cup of hot chocolate and to listen to his favorite classical music when the phone rang and interrupted the London Orchestra.

"Who could it be at 10 o'clock at night?" asked Father Donald.

"It's Mrs Montague ..." replied Father Ignatius, "she's just had a break in ... she's totally distraught and frightened and hasn't even phoned the police ... she phoned us instead ..."

Mrs Montague was an elderly widow in her seventies who lived alone in a small cottage in the countryside. As Father Ignatius jumped in his car and rushed to her home, Father Donald phoned the police.

The priest could see the police car parked outside the house as he finally arrived at the scene. They had made a search of the property and the garden and found no one.

Apparently Mrs Montague was asleep in her armchair in the living room and was awakened by the barking of Rupert, her little dog.

Someone had broken into the kitchen and had plenty of time for a quick search and for making quite a mess. The kitchen door was closed so the little dog could not get to him. Eventually, the burglar must have run away, perhaps disturbed by her Guardian Angel. Luckily, he didn't enter the living room and attacked the old lady, or worse.

"Have they taken anything?" asked the policeman.

Mrs Montague was too confused to even give a coherent answer. She looked around the kitchen, with everything strewn everywhere, and eventually realized that a small metal box was missing.

"They've taken the biscuit tin ..." she cried, "oh no ... not that ... I can't live without it ... not the biscuit tin."

"What biscuit tin?" asked Father Ignatius.

"A metal tin ... it was that big ... an old biscuit tin I kept here in this drawer ... it's gone ... my life is all gone ..." she broke down in hysterical tears and was helped to a chair by Father Ignatius.

"Did it contain any money, or jewellery?" asked the policeman.

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“No ...” she replied as she calmed down a little, “it contained all the love letters my husband wrote to me when we were courting ... I read them often to remember him when I’m lonely ... and photos taken when we were young ... I miss him so much ... I’m so frightened and lonely since he died ...”

The two police officers made another quick search of the house and eventually left. Father Ignatius managed to hammer a few pieces of wood on the broken window to secure it for the night. As the elderly lady was far too distressed to be left alone, Father Ignatius decided to spend the night nodding off in the armchair, whilst Mrs Davenport, his housekeeper, came over too to provide her with moral support.

The following morning, whilst Mrs Davenport was preparing coffee for the workers who came to fix the window and secure the house, Father Ignatius, prompted by some unexplainable feeling, made another tour of the garden.

There under a rose bush he found the missing biscuit tin. No doubt the intruder found it full of worthless papers and discarded it in his hurry to escape.

Worthless papers to him, but a whole life in a box to an elderly lonely widow.

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DIVINE DETOUR

It was Christmas Eve, early evening, and it was already dark. It was freezing cold with blinding snow still falling and winds making driving conditions perilous to say the least. Weather warnings on the radio advised people to stay at home.

Yet Father Ignatius was on the road. Driving back slowly towards St Vincent Church determined to be there to celebrate Midnight Mass.

He had been away the previous few days and had planned to return home early on Christmas Eve; but the bad weather held him back. Missing Midnight Mass was out of the question for the determined priest, and as he set off on his journey home the skies were dark and the roads were clear; until suddenly he was caught in a snow storm and had no alternative but to proceed onwards towards his Parish church.

The shortest way home was through treacherous country roads, which he knew well, yet never drove on in such conditions. As he turned a sharp bend on the road he noticed just in time a fallen tree blocking his way. He managed to brake in time and avoided hitting it or sliding out of control into a ditch.

He had no option but to reverse carefully and take another way home.

A few miles further on, just before entering a village he saw a car crashed against a tree. He stopped to help.

He'll never forget the sight that greeted him.

There in the driving seat was a man covered in blood. He was breathing heavily and still conscious.

"Can you move?" asked the priest, fumbling for something to say.

The man shook his head, then slowly mumbled "my leg ... trapped ..."

"I'll go for help ..." said Father Ignatius.

"No ... my wife ... she's gone to the village ..."

The priest decided to wait with the injured man until help arrived. He got a blanket from his car and covered him to keep him warm. He tried as best he could to place another blanket on the man's chest to stop any bleeding from a wound which, although not clearly visible in the dark, was obvious by the bleeding.

It was still snowing and Father Ignatius was freezing. Yet he stood outside the crashed car leaning through the broken driver's window, trying his best to comfort the driver.

In between heavy sometimes gasping breaths, the man noticed Father Ignatius white collar and asked, "Are you a church minister?"

"I'm a priest," said Father Ignatius.

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“I’ve never had time for people like you ...” said the man, “I suppose I’ve never been able to believe ... I tried mind you ... but just couldn’t believe in God ... Jesus ...”

Father Ignatius said nothing but prayed silently.

“Do you think it’s too late ... you know ... can I believe now ... or at least try ...”

“It is never too late to put your trust in God. Just accept Him in your heart, right now, as best you can. Tell Him you believe in Him.”

The man breathed deeply once or twice. “Yes ... I do want to believe, if He’ll help me do it ...”

“Can I baptize you?” asked the priest daringly.

“Ah ... it hurts more now ... yes ... do as you say ... tell your God I’m sorry ... tell Him to forgive me for any wrong I’ve done Him by not believing ...”

Father Ignatius quickly prayed with the man consciously sitting there and baptized him.

As he made the sign of the Cross on the man’s forehead he heard him say “Is that it? ... that was painless ...” as he forced a smile.

Father Ignatius held his hand and waited for a further twenty minutes or so, praying all the time, and speaking with him until an ambulance and a police car arrived almost simultaneously. He remained conscious throughout, breathing ever so heavily and obviously in great pain.

Father Ignatius eventually drove to the village and phoned a worried Father Donald from a small shop which was still open. He stayed there for an hour or so by the fire to warm up a little and, determined as ever, decided to continue on his way home.

He made it for Midnight Mass all right, but he was too tired and almost frost bitten to celebrate Mass. He sat at the front pew, by Our Lady’s statue, praying for the crash victim.

He learnt a few days later, from the man’s wife, that he never made it to the hospital. He died in the ambulance on the way there. It was then that Father Ignatius remembered that had it not been for the fallen tree blocking his way, he would have got home much earlier and avoided the accident altogether. Obviously, God wanted him to go to the man’s aid.

A tragic Christmas in human terms, perhaps. But a joyous one in Heaven, welcoming a new soul.

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UNEXPECTED CORRESPONDENCE

Father Ignatius was enjoying breakfast when Father Donald came in holding a letter.

“Only one for you today ... and it’s from the USA judging by the stamp.”

Father Ignatius frowned, “I don’t know anyone in the States ...” he mumbled.

Father Donald chuckled as he poured himself a cup of tea. “Maybe it’s from Hollywood. They probably want to make a film about you ...”

The older priest was not amused. He opened the letter and read:

“Dear Father Ignatius,

“You’d be surprised how long it took me to trace you down. I contacted almost every bishop in England. I hope this letter finally reaches you.

“I’m Johnny Nottingham. Do you remember me?”

Father Ignatius mumbled ... “Johnny Nottingham ...”

“What was that?” asked his fellow priest.

“Johnny Nottingham ...” repeated Father Ignatius, “a young rascal I knew years ago when I first became a priest. He was always in trouble ... I warned him that one day he’d end up in prison, or at the very least have a police record ... eventually, he met up with a young girl named Florence and I married them ... they left town soon afterwards in a hurry and I’ve never heard of them since ...”

“What does he want?” asked Father Donald.

“You’ll never believe this ... he emigrated to the States years ago and has become a successful businessman. He is still with Florence and will soon celebrate their Silver Wedding Anniversary ... doesn’t time fly? He has invited me there ... he insists I come ... let me read this bit ...

“I mean it Father. You have been a great influence on my life and we would really love to have you visit us for our celebration. All expenses paid. Just say the word and I’ll get the plane ticket rushed to you.”

“Sounds marvellous ...” said Father Donald enthusiastically.

“No way ... America is such a long way away ... I’ll reply politely and decline.”

But Father Donald would not hear of it. He insisted his fellow priest took up the offer.

“It’s only for a week Ignatius,” he chuckled, “not enough time for me to sell your church and run away with the money ... I promise you the church will still be here when you return ...”

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Father Donald can be quite persuasive when he puts his mind to it, and weeks later Father Ignatius was on his way to New York.

He was met at the airport by a chauffeur driven luxury car and was taken to one of the best hotels in the city. In his room there was a large basket of fruits welcoming him to New York signed by the Nottinghams.

That afternoon, the chauffeur took him to the Nottingham's magnificent mansion where he met Johnny and Florence and their children and grand-children.

They looked after him all week and took him to many tourist places of interest, including a baseball game one evening.

"I never understood a thing about it" joked the priest, "but I enjoyed the game all the same".

Towards the end of his stay, on a Saturday, Father Ignatius took part in the renewal of their marriage vows, together with their priest, in the church the Nottinghams regularly attended.

As an added surprise, which he knew nothing about, he was asked to baptize at the same time the Nottingham's latest grand-child; named Ignatius after him.

On his way back on the plane, tears of gratitude welled up in his eyes as he remembered a life which started as if headed for disaster yet somehow, along the way, turned a reckless man into a successful Christian businessman.

"Praise you Lord," he mumbled as he closed his eyes in prayer.

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GONE MISSING

Father Ignatius was a kind and gentle priest, slow to anger and always jovial; and he always put his parishioners first. That's why most of them thought nothing of approaching him first when they had a problem, no matter the time of day or night.

Early one morning, before he'd even had time to have breakfast and prepare for morning Mass, the phone rang.

"Father Ignatius ... have you seen our Rosemary?" cried a frantic Mrs Butterworth.

"Eh ... No ... I haven't seen her ... not for a few days or so ..." replied the confused priest.

"Father ..." continued the voice at the other end holding back the obvious tears "we went to wake her up for school and she was not there. Her bed hasn't been slept in ... Jack is out looking for her ... we don't know where to look ... we phoned her friends ..."

"One moment Sally ..." interrupted the priest who called most of his parishioners by their first name, except the snooty ones of course! "One moment ... are you saying she left home last night?"

"We think so ..." continued the distraught mother sobbing her heart out on the phone.

Father Ignatius managed to calm her down a little and promised to be there immediately after morning Mass. And yet another of his days had been disrupted from the beginning regardless of whatever plans and arrangements he had made.

An hour or so later he was at the Butterworths. The parents were totally heart-broken and in state of panic. They did not know where their daughter was and whether they'd see her again. Had she left town, had she been abducted, is she safe, is she alive ... the questions followed each other each one depicting its own horrific ending to a terrible situation.

When the priest managed to calm them down the couple explained that they had an argument with their fifteen-year old the previous night and her father had told her to go to her room. That's the last they had seen of her and this morning they discovered that her room had not been slept in and she was nowhere to be seen.

The priest shared their agony deeply but he felt that he had to remain focused and clear-headed if he were to be of any help.

"Have you contacted the police?" he asked.

"No ... we contacted all her friends, our neighbours, and the school ... but not the police. Well ... we didn't know whether she'll just turn up as if nothing happened ... we didn't want to bother them ..."

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The priest looked at his watch and decided that it was perhaps time to contact the authorities, assuming that is that she's been missing since the previous night. He stayed with the anguished parents to give them moral support whilst the police asked them several questions and took a lot of details.

By late morning Father Ignatius decided to leave the Butterworths but promised to keep in phone contact every so often in case there was some news. Throughout the day he kept his promise with several phone calls and numerous prayers that the young girl might be found safely. But his every call found them more and more in despair as time passed and no news was heard of their missing daughter.

At about ten o'clock that evening, as he drove back to the church the car headlights caught a dark figure by the garage door. At first he thought it was an intruder, then he thought it was perhaps a homeless person sheltering there waiting for his return to beg for some food; an event which happened quite frequently in this poor and desolate town.

He approached the garage door slowly and to his surprise he recognized the young girl.

"Rosemary ... what are you doing here?" he said gently, "your parents are worried sick about you ..."

"Please don't tell them I'm here ... I can't face them just now ..." she pleaded.

"You look cold ... Come in ..."

He let her in and sat her by the fire, then proceeded to the kitchen to prepare her something to eat and a hot drink.

She had calmed down a little by the time he returned with a tray of food.

"Where have you been all this time Rosemary?" he asked calmly.

"I spent last night hiding in alley ways ... I was frightened but I did not want to go back home ... ever ..."

"This morning I went to the homeless shelter ... no body knows me there ... I told them I wanted to volunteer to help and they let me ... then I thought I'd come here ..." she sobbed.

"I'm glad you did ... your parents said you had an argument last night ... is that why you left?"

Despite her obvious distress and in between tears she managed slowly to tell him what had caused her to run away.

Quite by accident, she had discovered that she was not the natural daughter of the Butterworths. It seems that she was born in another town and was adopted there as a baby before they moved here to start a new life. They had told no one of the adoption

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and kept it a secret all these years until yesterday when she overheard her parents talking in the kitchen.

Father Ignatius listened calmly throughout and silently prayed for this family torn apart by love.

“Tell me Rosemary ...” he asked when she finished talking, “all the time you grew up with your parents, did you at any time suspect that you were adopted?”

“No ... how could I?”

“And you see my child ...” he continued soothingly, “that’s precisely the point I’m trying to make. You never suspected anything. And that’s because your parents brought you up as if you were their very own ... which in a lot of ways you are ... they loved you as if you were their own flesh and blood.

“They loved you so much that they did all they could to give you a good and happy life.

“Your loving mother has devoted her life to you. I know for a fact that she loves you very much ... how she used to worry when as a toddler you were often sick ...

“I remember a few years ago when your father lost his job, he was totally out of his mind as to how he’d be able to provide for you and your mother ... in some ways he reminds me of St Joseph. He adopted the baby Jesus as his own son and provided for Him as He grew up ...

“I was with your parents this morning, and they were out of their minds with worry. I’ve never seen them so distraught ... they didn’t know what to think ... where you were ... whether you were alive or ...

“Anyway ... I believe you know, deep inside, that your parents love you very much. I think they meant to tell you the truth some day ... but I suppose they never knew when is the right time to tell you. They were probably just as scared of telling you as you are now that you have found out the truth ... Shall we go and see them do you think?”

Eventually, after she could cry no longer, he drove her to her parents and witnessed the most loving reunion since the prodigal son returned to his father.

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LOST IN TRAFFIC

Father Ignatius was on his way to the big city. He hadn't been there for some years, and quite honestly, he didn't regret it. He preferred his gentle life in a small town Parish church to the hustle and bustle of the big city and the Cathedral. Anyway, the reality is that he hated driving in the big city where everyone seems to go at high speed and never give you a chance to think where you're going. Just point the car in one direction and drive – seems to be the maxim of the big city!

He had been invited by Father Gerard as guest speaker at their Youth Club. An invitation he had postponed many times mainly because of the driving involved; but he was now running out of excuses. He tried other modes of transport, namely the train as his only option; but this involved a long journey, changing trains twice, and costing a fortune. So driving it had to be.

As he approached the outskirts of the city he tried hard to concentrate and remember which turning he had to take to reach the Cathedral. He could see the large dome at the top of the hill and the golden Cross gleaming in the midday sun.

But the one-way system, and the detour he was forced to take through the park, meant that at one point he was required by the traffic system to drive away from the Cathedral; only to reach it by a circumvented route, which the town planners had devised with the specific aim of raising one's blood pressure and to teach you tolerance and patience no doubt leading to time off Purgatory.

“And to think that these town planners go to university to learn how to create such chaos ...” thought Father Ignatius as he concentrated hard not to get lost.

But as luck would have it, or was it the town-planners, he took the wrong turning at a junction and was compelled by the one-way system to drive even further away from the Cathedral. There it was in his rear view mirror getting smaller and smaller as he drove further and further away from his destination.

Eventually, he found a safe place to stop and asked a man for directions.

The man stood upright by the side of the car and looked forward in the direction the car was pointing. He scratched his head and mumbled something which the priest, sitting in the driving seat, could not hear properly or understand.

The man then turned round and looked towards the back of the car where Father Ignatius had just come from. He could see the minute Cathedral on the hill. He mumbled something else incomprehensibly and looked forward again.

“Are sure you want to get to the Cathedral?” shouted the man looking back up the hill once more.

“Yes ...” replied Father Ignatius hesitantly.

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“Only the Cathedral is so far away ... and difficult to get to in this one-way system ... I could direct you to somewhere else near here perhaps ...” continued the man in a loud voice to compensate for the traffic noise.

Father Ignatius did not reply, he waited patiently in the car and said a short prayer under his breath. Eventually the man shoved his head in through the open car window and said: “If I were you Father, I would not start from here!” then he walked away leaving the stranded priest in total astonishment.

Father Ignatius drove uncertainly on not knowing where he was going. A few minutes later he saw a taxi rank with a number of taxis parked there. He stopped his car and walked over to the first parked taxi.

“Could you take me to the Cathedral?” he asked the driver.

“Yeah ... sure ... jump in,” replied the driver.

“No ... I’ve already got a car, parked over there. You take me to the Cathedral and I’ll follow you!”

Unusual as it might seem, but that’s how Father Ignatius got to the Cathedral in good time for the Youth Club meeting.

He started his speech thus:

“What a terrible traffic system you have in this City of yours ...” a few people cheered and applauded in agreement.

“I got lost ... and I will need your help to drive out of the City again ...” A few hands were raised and one or two shouted “no problem ...” “we’ll help you out ...”

He smiled and thanked them. Then, as they calmed down a little he continued:

“I stopped to ask for directions to the Cathedral ... the man I asked was more puzzled than me ... he looked backwards from where I came ... and then forwards once or twice ... scratched his head and eventually gave up and said ... ‘If I were you I wouldn’t start from here!’ ”

The audience laughed.

“How lucky are we ...” continued Father Ignatius, “how lucky are we that Jesus never says ‘I wouldn’t start from here!’”

“No matter how sinful we are ... no matter what we have done in the past ... our evil deeds ... our wrongdoings ... our shameful history ... He always says ‘I forgive you.’”

“If we truly repent our sins, if we truly promise and try not to repeat them ... He readily forgives us ...”

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“He does not look way back where we came from and how we got into the terrible state we’re in now ... down-trodden and broken down by the weight of our sins ... He doesn’t say ... ‘if only you did not do this and that all that long time ago ...’

“No ... He is willing to start from right here ... at this very point in our lives ... regardless of our past and what we have done. If we accept our sins, repent, and promise not to repeat them ... Jesus will forgive us right now.

“Just ask any priest for an honest and truthful confession and that’s your starting point.

“And what is more ... Jesus will not walk away like that man did to me. But like the taxi driver He will guide you all the way, step by step, mile after mile, throughout your life, all the way to Heaven.

“And unlike the taxi driver, Jesus will not charge you a fortune!”

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ANCIENT PEOPLE

Father Ignatius was on his way back from a school trip to the museum in the big city with the young children from St Andrew's School.

The young seven-year-olds were a little boisterous and excited after their first school outing; and the six adults on the bus had their work cut out keeping them in their seats. When everyone was seated, Mr Foster, the Headmaster, took a roll-call to ensure that no one was missing.

As the bus made its way slowly through the busy traffic the children discussed amongst themselves their museum visit and the souvenirs they had bought from the museum shop.

A few of them sitting next to Father Ignatius discussed the various ancient exhibits they had seen from years gone by and asked him which were his favorite.

"I wouldn't say I had a favorite as such," replied Father Ignatius, "but I suppose it is impressive how many of these exhibits have survived all these centuries and how much we have to learn from ancient civilizations ..."

"Are you ancient?" asked a seven year old.

"I suppose I am ..." replied the priest with a smile.

Mr Foster smiled too, but said nothing.

"Will they put ancient people like you in the museum? And people will come to see you?" asked another youngster.

"Now that's a good idea ..." replied the priest, "do you think anyone would be interested?"

"No ..." replied another promptly, "old people are not interesting ... my grand dad is old ... he is 58 and he does not like burgers and milk-shake."

"Ah ... that's the ultimate test of antiquity," declared Father Ignatius, "being 58 and having a dislike for burgers and milk-shake!"

The children continued discussing amongst themselves and the priest started reading a book about Ancient Civilisation which he had bought from the museum.

About half-an-hour later he closed the book and looked up.

"Learn anything interesting Father?" asked Mr Foster.

"I suppose so ... whilst reading this book I've been thinking about our attitude to age and ageing ..."

"What do you mean?"

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“We seem to be in awe at something ancient ...” continued the priest, “we wonder at the pyramids, and ancient monuments and relics. We marvel at old paintings by the great masters ... and in this country we even have some buildings listed so that they cannot be altered or pulled down because of their historical architectural significance ...”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked the headmaster.

“Oh ... nothing wrong as such ... but I can’t help wondering how many old people here in Britain live alone. Their families having grown up and moved on, these old folk are rarely visited by friends or neighbours. Perhaps Social Security visits them every now and again ...”

“There are quite a few in our Parish you know ...”

“Yes ... it’s modern society I’m afraid ...” said the headmaster glumly, “people are too busy living life to care about each other ... or their old folks. Some are too eager to put their parents in an old-folks home ... too busy to look after them I suppose ... I can understand that ...”

“Can you? Some countries do in fact honor and respect their old people. Sending them to an old-peoples’ home is unheard of in those countries. They all live together in large families and the grand-parents have a lot to contribute to the family and the children’s up-bringing ...”

“But as you say ... it’s different here in Britain ... our modern lifestyles make us more interested in an ancient vase or similar relic than in human beings ... it’s such a pity we don’t value our old people as much as we value an old building ...”

“Perhaps the Government should have old-folks listed, just like buildings!” joked Mr Foster.

Father Ignatius smiled. “There’s one thing I’ve learnt from this book,” he said with a glint in his eyes, “you’d better make friends with an archaeologist ... because the older you get the more interested they are in you!”

The headmaster laughed and then added “Perhaps we can do something about it Father ... in a small way ... in our Parish that is ...”

“What ... have our old people listed by the Government or get them to meet up with archaeologists?”

“Can we not organize a group of volunteers from the church to visit lonely parishioners in our midst? Help them with the shopping perhaps, or with small jobs in the home or garden? I could get some of our older pupils to accompany the adult volunteers. It would help our youngsters no end ... teach them to respect and help their elders ... we could also involve the other Catholic school in town ...” And the enthusiasm of Mr Foster, which started from a conversation on a bus, soon turned into reality in a matter of weeks. And it’s still going strong in that small Parish community.

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MISSING CROSS

Evening Mass had finished half-an-hour ago and the congregation had long departed to their homes. Father Ignatius tidied up in the Sacristy and then entered the church and sat on the front pew, just where he normally sits by the statue of the Virgin Mary. He took his Rosary from his pocket and started praying.

A few minutes later he heard a noise from the back of the church. It sounded as if someone was trying to break into the collection box for the poor.

He got up and hurried to the back. "Is anyone there?" he shouted.

A figure ran out in the dark. He heard something crash to the ground and then he saw the back door open and slowly close again as the spring on the door pulled it shut.

As he reached the exit door at the back of the church Father Ignatius switched on the lights in the porch. He noticed that a small table which had various leaflets and pamphlets for visitors had been knocked to the ground by the escaping intruder. Papers and pamphlets were strewn everywhere.

More out of instinct than intelligent thinking the priest rushed out to the car park ... but he saw no one there.

Father Ignatius entered the church again and locked the door behind him. He was somewhat shaken by the whole experience and wondered what he would have done if the intruder attacked him.

He picked up the table and started collecting the papers and pamphlets from the floor. It was then that he noticed that the Crucifix which hung on the wall by the back door was missing.

He opened the door again, instincts taking over his actions once more, and got out. He looked aimlessly everywhere hoping against hope to find the missing Crucifix.

It was then that he saw Father Donald drive in and park his car in the usual place.

Days later, Father Ignatius was walking Canis the dog in the park opposite the church. News of the intruder had been mentioned in the weekly church newsletter and the Crucifix was still missing.

"It's probably been sold for a few pennies ..." thought Father Ignatius, as the dog stopped by a tree to sniff in the delectable canine fragrances deposited there.

At that moment the priest noticed two men approaching him. One was well built and about six feet tall and reminded Father Ignatius of a wrestler he'd seen fighting on TV. The other was slightly smaller and had a scar on his left cheek. They both wore hats and heavy overcoats. They stood about two feet away with their hands in their coat pockets. The giant one had a small matchstick in the corner of his mouth and said nothing.

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“Are you Father Ignatius from the church over there?” asked the smaller man.

“Yes ... I am ...” said the priest holding back the dog on a very tight leash.

“We’ve heard about the break-in you had the other day ... that’s terrible ...”

“Yes ... I suppose it is ...” replied Father Ignatius hesitantly, retreating a little to keep the dog from jumping on them. Canis growled once or twice as he pulled on the lead, the hairs on his neck standing almost vertically.

“I’m sorry someone stole the Cross your Holiness.”

“Eh ... it’s not your Holiness ... you address the Pope as your Holiness ...” corrected Father Ignatius and then quickly bit his lip as he remembered who he was speaking to.

“I see ...” continued the smaller man, “I know who stole your Cross ... rest assured your Holy ... rest assured Father Ignatius, that it will be returned to you ... with recompense ...”

“Thank you ... there’s no need for ...”

“Enough said ...” interrupted the smaller man, as both of them turned round and walked away to the sound of a barking Canis and a priest having difficulty controlling him.

As he arrived back to the Parish house Father Ignatius found a small packet by the church door. It contained the missing Cross and £100 in used notes in an envelope.

The following day two men called on Father Ignatius. They identified themselves as detectives from the local police force. He invited them in the visiting room and offered them tea.

“No thanks ...” said the senior one of the two, “we’d just like to ask you a few questions ...”

“How can I help you?” asked the priest.

“Yesterday evening you were seen speaking with David Garton and his henchman in the park ...”

“I spoke with two men ... that’s right ...” replied Father Ignatius.

“We’d like to know what they said ...” asked the junior detective.

“Well ... I’m not sure I can help you ...”

“Do you know who these people are?” interrupted the junior.

“No ... I’ve never met them before ...”

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“Well Father,” the senior detective said gently, “let’s say they are unsavoury characters ...”

“They may have confessed to the break-in which you had here the other day ... which by the way you did not report to the police ... that’s an offence you know ...” interrupted the junior officer again.

“Well ...” replied Father Ignatius calmly, “if they had confessed to anything, you know very well that I could not tell you about it ...”

“There is such a thing as withholding evidence ...” interrupted the junior policeman again.

Before Father Ignatius answered the senior detective spoke again gently.

“Well Father ... shall we leave it at that for now. You met up with Garton and Stones, you’d never seen them before yesterday evening, and you do not feel disposed to tell us what they said.”

“Yes that’s right ...” replied the priest.

“Good ... we won’t trouble you further. But should you change your mind please contact me on this number ... by the way I’m pleased to note that the missing Cross is back in its place ...”

Before the priest could say anything the detective continued, “shall we say you found it somewhere in the car park ... that would be accurate I think ...”

Father Ignatius nodded and the policemen left never to return again.

To this day Father Ignatius wonders whether he handled the situation well. He prayed about it often and he was clear in his mind that he should not have said anything to the police; not under those circumstances anyway. But should he perhaps have reached out to the two men in the park? Could he have said something that ... perhaps ... may have led them to experience the love of Christ?

The £100 was used to buy food for the old people in his Parish.

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HOW MAY I HELP YOU?

Father Ignatius was busily dealing with some paperwork in his office one afternoon when he was interrupted by the telephone ringing.

This in itself was not very unusual. Being an approachable person he was often contacted by his parishioners seeking advice about, or solace from, their troubles and worries.

Many a time his meals were interrupted by phone calls from someone or other in trouble; or his evenings watching his favorite football team on TV, or listening to classical music, were cut short by someone at the door in tears.

And as always, he would stop what he was doing and attend to the problem brought to his doorstep, or his telephone receiver.

So, this particular phone call in itself was not unusual; but what it was about certainly was.

Father Ignatius stopped reading the important letter from the Bishop and answered the call.

“Hello, St Vincent Church here. How may I help you?”

“Father Ignatius ... is that you on the phone?” said the voice at the other end.

“It certainly is ... who am I speaking to?”

“It’s me Father ...” replied the panicked voice.

“I see ... who is calling?” said the priest gently.

“It’s Eric ... I attend church on Sunday!”

Father Ignatius knew Eric well. A nice young man, about 19 years old, from a good family, and not known to have been in any kind of problem or trouble before. So it was somewhat unusual to get a phone call from him.

“Hello Eric ... how can I help you?” asked Father Ignatius.

“Father ...” hesitated the voice at the other end, “is it OK to have confession on the phone?”

“It’s a bit unusual ...” mumbled the priest quietly; thinking what could have led to this frantic phone call and such unusual request, “could it wait until Saturday?”

“No Father ... it’s urgent ... I am in London ... with some friends ...”

“I don’t understand ...” continued Father Ignatius, trying to be helpful to this soul in torment, “have you done something terribly wrong Eric?”

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“Yes Father ... I have sinned terribly ... and I need to confess ... please forgive me ...” said Eric obviously distressed.

“Alright Eric ... calm down. Take a deep breath ... now tell me. What is the matter? What have you done?”

At this point Father Ignatius said a silent prayer for the young man and asked God to help him say the right thing; and to come to Eric’s aid.

It was a habit the priest had developed every time someone sought his help or advice. Father Ignatius had learnt that a quick silent prayer for the one in need is often worth more than what he had to say on the matter.

He was really concerned for this young man on a day out in the Capital with friends. What could possibly have happened to warrant such a frantic phone call? What kind of trouble could he be in?

After a second or two’s silence Eric spoke calmly.

“I’m in London with some friends from college ... and we’ve just been to a strip club ...there were naked ladies. I know it’s a sin ... please forgive me!”

Father Ignatius did not know whether to laugh or to cry. He had imagined the worst; and hearing Eric’s so-called confession came more as a relief than a surprise.

“OK ... I understand Eric ... we’ll talk about it on Saturday ... consider yourself forgiven,” said a relieved Father Ignatius in the same gentle tone of voice, ensuring that it did not betray his true feelings.

“Oh thank you so much Father ... one more thing please ...” pleaded the young man.

“Yes Eric ...” continued Father Ignatius with the patience of a Saint.

“We’re going to see an adult film this evening ... can you forgive me for that too?”

Before the priest could answer, Eric continued down the phone.

“Can’t speak now Father ... my friends are coming ... I don’t want them to know I’ve been speaking with you. I’ll confess on Saturday ... Bye!”

And the line went dead.

Father Ignatius pondered on the difficulties young people face these days to uphold their Christian principles. Here is a young man, out on the town with his friends; in a strange place he’d never visited before. They decide to do something which he knows to be sinful yet, somehow, he is led by them for fear of speaking out and standing his ground.

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The priest sympathized with the young man's dilemma. It takes a strong character indeed not to be led by one's peers under these circumstances. And Eric was no such individual.

He was of course gentle with him at Confession on Saturday.

In the meantime, that phone call reminded Father Ignatius of a similar event which happened some months previously.

One of his parishioners, Mrs Simms, had told him that she had been invited to a wedding which was to take place on a Friday. She had seen the Menu for the Reception. Would it be OK, she asked, if she ate meat on that day? Would he absolve her in advance?

When the priest concurred with her, she asked with a smile: "Is it OK for my husband to eat meat too? Only he asked me to ask you on his behalf?"

Father Ignatius smiled as that thought crossed his mind and returned to reading the Bishop's letter.

From the ridiculous to the sublime.

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FOR WHOM NO BELL TOLLS

Father Ignatius tries not to get involved with politics or speak directly about politics. But what do you do as a priest when politics gets involved with you?

There he was one morning enjoying his usual breakfast of hot coffee and ginger marmalade on toast when Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, came in and put the morning mail on the table beside him. She then sat down at the table and poured herself some tea.

“Hmmm...” said Father Ignatius as he finished his breakfast, “that top envelope looks a bit officious to me. It bears the mark of the Local Authority. I wonder what they want.”

Moments later he sat at his office and opened the brown envelope first. It was a letter from someone who called himself “Senior Noise Pollution Engineer”.

“I wonder what a Junior Noise Pollution Engineer does;” thought the priest, “concern himself with whispers and murmurs perhaps.”

The main point of the letter was that the Local Authority had decided to stop St Vincent Church from ringing its bells on Sundays, weddings and funerals. In fact, to stop ringing the bells altogether.

Apparently this particular engineer had “carried out audiometric tests in the park opposite the church and it transpired that an excessive number of decibels had been recorded on several occasions when the church bells were ringing. The decision had therefore been taken to discontinue bell ringing altogether.”

The priest continued reading:

“Whilst the establishment in question has the right to appeal against this decision it is pointed out that this would be in vain unless there was evidence of extenuating circumstances as to why the practice of bell ringing should continue.”

“Where do they learn to write like that?” thought the priest as he prayed silently for God’s help and advice.

Having decided to appeal against the decision, Father Ignatius prayed daily whilst awaiting the day of the hearing, which was to take place at the Town Hall. In the meantime, he decided not to tell Father Donald or Mrs Davenport about the letter. Not for now at least.

On the day in question he arrived at the Town Hall and was led to a Conference Room on the second floor. There sitting opposite him, facing him across the table, were five stern faced people who would hear his appeal.

After a few polite introductions he was asked by the author of the letter what was the basis of his appeal.

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“Well ...” said Father Ignatius hesitantly, “I am not sure what you consider as extenuating circumstances, as you say in your letter, Mr Wall.

“St Vincent Church was built almost sixty years ago and it has rang its bells ever since. The bells themselves are about three hundred years old and were salvaged from a monastery which stood on that very site centuries ago. It is traditional to ring the bells on Sundays, weddings and funerals; also at Christmas and Easter.”

“Tradition is no reason for the status quo,” interrupted Mr Wall harshly, “where would we be if we relied on tradition? They’d be no progress at all; and we’d still have the horse and cart.”

The other bureaucratic robots at the table laughed quietly.

“What ... what I meant to say,” continued the priest politely, “is that people expect to hear the church bells. Has anyone complained, may I ask?”

“No one has complained ...” replied Mr Wall whilst the other men continued writing, “but then if we were to wait for complaints nothing would ever get done. We must be proactive in order to protect the public.”

This seemed to amuse the other four bureaucrats who no doubt worked for Mr Wall.

Father Ignatius was struggling.

“What I’d like to suggest ...” he continued, “what if we were to ask the people living near the church whether they think the church bells are too noisy?”

“We can’t expect the public to know what’s good for them ...” said Mr Wall authoritatively, “if we had to listen to the public then there would be no need for the Noise Pollution Department of this Local Authority. We are here to decide on behalf of the public; not to listen to them.”

The priest felt as if he was losing the argument. “This man is living up to his name,” he thought, “it’s like talking to a brick wall. He is determined to silence the bells at all cost. Dear God, help me!”

Father Ignatius took off his glasses and started cleaning them. He felt droplets of sweat building up on his forehead. He asked God silently for inspiration.

“It’s very hot in here ...” he said putting his glasses back on, “can we open a window perhaps?”

Mr Wall nodded and the man sitting at the end of the table got up and opened the window.

It seems that God was listening to His priest on that day. As soon as the window was opened the noise from the traffic outside drowned their speech in the room.

“Is it always this noisy?” asked Father Ignatius.

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“Yes it is ...” mumbled Mr Wall, “we can’t do a thing about it ... that’s why we keep the windows shut.”

Before the priest could say another word a train passed by the railway station next door.

Clackety clack ... clackety clack ... clackety clack went the train noisily for a full minute or so as its wheels rattled slowly on the metal rails. And for good measure, it blew its whistle as it left the station; as if to register its own personal disapproval of the bureaucrats sitting there.

As the noise abated a little, it was obvious that God had not finished yet.

Because at that precise moment the clock at the top of the Town Hall started to strike 12o’clock.

At this point the man by the window shut it quickly, but they had to wait until the last chime of the clock before speaking again.

“That’s a beautiful sound ...” said Father Ignatius, “I can hear it from my church and I often set my watch to it ...”

“Yes we’re proud of it ...” replied Mr Wall, “it’s a traditional chime and ...”

Father Ignatius smiled as Mr Wall realized what he had just said.

“Well... I think we can conclude this hearing ...” said Mr Wall firmly, “we’ve considered your case fully and it has been decided to withdraw the Local Authority’s Notice requiring St Vincent Church to desist from ringing its bells. Your appeal has been successful Father.”

The priest left the Town Hall praising God and floating on air ... and he hasn’t heard from Mr Wall or his Noise Pollution Department ever since.

... And the bells are still ringing ...

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FATHER DONALD TO THE RESCUE

It was just after ten o'clock at night when the phone rang. Father Donald got up to answer the call and then said: "It's for you Ignatius ... It's Carla Perkins ..."

"Dear Lord ... not again ..." mumbled Father Ignatius as he picked up the phone.

When he'd finished the conversation he said to his fellow priest: "Carla's husband has come home drunk again and became violent in a heated argument. He has hit her hard this time and she said she is bleeding from her mouth ... I'd better go over I suppose ..."

"You're not going alone?" asked Father Donald.

After a few seconds of waiting for a reply he went on, "Tom is a big man you know ... if he turns on you ..."

"Don't worry Donald," replied Father Ignatius "he wouldn't hit a priest, would he ... but just in case, I'd better wear my white collar just to remind him ..." he added with a chuckle.

Half an hour later Father Ignatius was at the Perkins' home. Tom was lying asleep on the settee whilst his wife was nursing a cut lip and crying softly whilst cuddling her two years old daughter.

Her husband's behavior had got worse over the past few months ever since he lost his job in the latest factory closure. To his credit, he had tried finding a job everywhere in town, even further away out of town involving daily travel by train, but he had been unsuccessful. He considered himself a failure unable to provide for his family and as a result spent a lot of time in the pub wasting whatever little the family received from Social Benefits.

He often came home in a bad way and somehow got into an argument with his wife. This, however, was the first time he'd ever hit her. It was totally out of character as normally Tom was a mild-mannered individual who wouldn't hurt a fly, as they say. But it shows the extent of his despair since losing his job.

The priest asked Carla whether she wished to spend the night with her daughter at the Convent. He could easily ring Mother Superior to arrange it. But she preferred to stay at home, not wishing to further upset her young child.

"He'll wake up in the morning and be all apologetic ..." she sobbed, "he always does that and can't even remember we've had an argument ... although this time my fat lip will serve as a reminder ..." she smiled weakly.

Father Ignatius stayed for a while and having ensured that she and her daughter were safe returned to his home.

On his journey back he prayed that God may intervene and help this family torn apart by a financial crisis not of their making.

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The following day at about midday there was a loud knock at the door of the Parish House.

Father Ignatius opened the door and Tom Perkins barged into the house and stood in the entrance hall, almost pushing the priest out of the way.

“Don’t interfere where you’re not wanted ...” he shouted at the priest.

Father Ignatius said nothing and maintained his calm composure in the face of the angry giant.

“You were round our house last night ...” continued Tom loudly, “are you interested in my wife? Is that it?”

“Don’t be absurd ...” replied Father Ignatius somewhat shocked at the accusation.

“If you come anywhere near her again I’ll knock your lights out ...” shouted Tom threatening the priest.

At this point Father Donald came out of his office having heard the commotion outside. He was a big man with a pronounced Scottish accent from his native Glasgow.

“And would you care to pick up a fight with me too?” he asked Tom in a quiet yet firm tone of voice.

Tom said nothing. Father Donald continued.

“I’m the same size as you Tom, and I reckon if I take off my white collar which can be a bit of a disadvantage I can take you on man to man as it were ...”

Tom remained silent.

“Or would you prefer to hit someone smaller than you?” asked Father Donald, “like your wife for instance ...”

At this Tom stormed out slamming the door behind him.

“Thanks Donald ...” said Father Ignatius after Tom had left, “the poor man is desperate ...”

“That’s no reason to behave like that ...” growled Father Donald proudly pronouncing every syllable to emphasize his accent.

“You wouldn’t have hit him would you?” asked Father Ignatius.

“No way ... these stiff white collars are too difficult to take off in a hurry” joked Father Donald as he returned to his office.

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Father Ignatius did not let it rest at that. Having prayed about the situation he set out to contact his many acquaintances in town and eventually, after weeks of searching, he managed to find Tom a job with a local builder.

It did not pay as much as Tom earned at the factory but it was a start to help him back on his way to regaining his self-esteem and confidence.

Tom was extremely grateful and very apologetic at his disgraceful behavior when he threatened his priest. His character changed overnight and he has not had one argument with his wife ever since.

And now he always looks down sheepishly whenever he meets either priest as he accompanies his wife and child to Mass on Sundays.

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GENTLE KIDNAPPING

Father Ignatius really didn't like visiting the nearby City, especially by car. So when he had to go for a Conference called by the Bishops at the Cathedral he took the train and then a taxi to the Cathedral.

The Conference itself was somewhat long and tedious with many people too fond of their voice and ready to hear it pronouncing pearls of wisdom ad infinitum. Father Ignatius took notes in order to report back to his Bishop when he returned to his Parish at St Vincent Church.

When the Conference was over Father Ignatius stood by an empty taxi stand and waited for a cab to arrive.

Within a minute or so a large black car parked by him and two burly men came out from the back seat.

"Would you please get in the car Father?" said one of them.

The priest hesitated, "This is not a taxi ..." he mumbled, "Who are you?"

"Let's not make a scene in public ..." continued one of the men politely, "please get in the car ... here's something to show our good intentions ..." and the man put his hand in his jacket inside pocket and pulled out a bunch of notes; "there's £200 here as a down payment ... now get in the car." And handing the money to the priest the two men eased him gently but forcibly into the car and sat one on each side of him; whilst the driver moved away quickly.

Still clutching the money Father Ignatius said, "What's going on here ... what do you want with me?"

"Relax Father ... just cooperate with us for a while and all will be OK ... put our little donation in your pocket and we'll give you another £200 when this is all over ... now if you don't mind; I have to put this over your head. Just as a precaution you understand. It won't hurt I assure you."

The man put a hood gently over the priest's head and tightened it round his neck to ensure he couldn't see.

"We won't hurt you Father ..." he continued gently, "you have my word, now please relax."

Father Ignatius had no choice but to sit there between the two giants whilst the car hurried in city traffic. At one stage the car stopped for a while, possibly at traffic lights, and the priest heard the sound of a church clock beating two quarters "it must be half past five" he thought to himself.

He tried to concentrate and listen carefully, but, not being familiar with the city, any sounds he heard meant nothing to him. However, he tried to recollect them in the

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order that they were heard; and he counted slowly in-between sounds to record the passage of time.

“We stopped for a few minutes at half past five ... then we drove until I counted about one hundred, then I heard the sound of an ambulance or police car, then I counted to two hundred and twelve when I heard the sound of a passing train ...” and so on went his thoughts.

The car must have joined a motorway or highway at some point or other because the priest heard nothing specific and felt the car pick up speed. This lasted for a long while when eventually he felt the car slow down as it drove over gravel for a bit and then stop. He then heard the sound of two barking dogs nearby. They must have been big dogs by the sound of it ... Alsatians or Dobermans perhaps.

He was led by his guards holding him by each arm over the gravel for a short distance, then up two or three stairs and into a building. There they stopped and took off his hood.

It took him a few seconds to adjust his eyes and see that he was in a splendid large hall of some luxurious building. There were magnificent paintings on the walls and beautiful chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. He was surrounded by several large marble statues and ornaments.

With both his bodyguards on each side he waited there whilst another man dressed in a black suit came out of one of the rooms on his left.

“This is not Father Bernard Breally,” said the man approaching him, “who the hell are you?”

“I’m Father Ignatius ...” replied the priest feebly.

“Are you Catholic?”

“Yes ...”

“I suppose you’ll do ... one priest is as good as another ... what happened to Breally?” he asked the two burly men.

“This was the only priest standing by the taxi place ... you told us to get the priest waiting for a cab and this is him ...” replied one of the men apologetically.

“OK ... take him over there.

“Father would you please mind waiting in that room and make yourself at home. You are not a prisoner here ... just our guest for a moment or two ... Help yourself to tea or coffee and biscuits; there’s a drinks cabinet in there too if you wish to have something stronger. There’s a rest room in case you wish to freshen up.

“And please ... don’t even think of escaping through the windows ... the dogs out there would tear you to pieces in seconds. I’ll be with you shortly.”

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Father Ignatius was led to a side room as richly decorated as the hall he'd just been in. He was left there alone for about twenty minutes or so, where he sat in a comfortable luxurious sofa and prayed silently.

Eventually the man who greeted him on arrival returned and asked him to follow him. He was led up the stairs of this palatial mansion and into one of the rooms.

It was a spacious bedroom as richly decorated as the rest of the house. In bed was a pale looking man sitting up surrounded by a few people. There was a young lady in a nurse's uniform and another middle-aged woman. Two other strong men stood guard by the door.

"Leave us alone ..." said the elderly man.

Everyone left the room silently and closed the door behind them.

"Come over here and sit down Father ..." said the man.

The priest approached the bedside and sat in a chair nearby.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you Father ... I needed to see Father Breally but my idiots got the wrong man. They tell me you're Catholic ... so you'll do I suppose. Do you know Breally?"

"No ... I don't ..."

"Well never mind ... he's a priest I knew long ago ... I've known him since we were Altar boys together. Then as we grew up I got into the wrong company whilst he decided to become a priest. Many a time he warned me not to break the law ... to leave my gang and get a good job ..." the man chuckled quietly and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief he was holding.

"Do you think if I followed Breally's advice I'd have this mansion and all my riches? I bet he is as poor as a church mouse ..."

"I haven't seen him in years. I was led to believe that he'd be at the Conference and that he'd wait by the taxi stand ... instead my men got you.

"So you'll do I suppose ... I need a favor from you!"

"What is it that you need?" asked Father Ignatius gently.

"I'm fifty-nine and I'm very ill. The doctor who was standing here doesn't think much of my chances ... I want you to forgive my sins and prepare me for Heaven ..."

"I don't understand ... why all this secrecy and why did you have me brought here?" asked Father Ignatius gaining a little confidence.

"Do you know who I am?"

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“No I don’t, I don’t even know where I am. Your men blind-folded me in the car ...”

“I’m sorry about that,” interrupted the man, and then after a short silence went on, “it doesn’t matter who I am ...”

“Suffice it to say that I don’t have a glorious past, but I guess you’ve already worked that out ... I haven’t always been what you’d call a good Christian ... not since the Altar boy days ...” he chuckled again reminiscing on his childhood.

“Don’t get me wrong Father ... Ignatius is it?”

The priest nodded silently.

“Don’t get me wrong Father Ignatius, I’ve never done anything really bad myself you understand ... but I’ve often asked my boys to do certain things for me ... I’m sure you understand what it’s like.

“Sometimes in my line of business you need to be a little forceful in order to be respected by your peers ...”

The priest said nothing and waited for the man to continue.

“So there you have it ... will you forgive an old gangster and get him to Heaven?”

“It’s not as easy as that,” replied Father Ignatius.

“What do you mean? My boys gave you a handsome donation which we’ll supplement with another one when you leave. What else do you want?”

“Confession is not bought with money ...” said Father Ignatius still holding his gentle yet firm tone of voice, “you may well confess your past sins and I may well absolve you of them ... but that in itself is no guarantee to entry in Heaven.”

“When I was an Altar boy I was told that a priest can forgive your sins and all is well again with God. That’s what Jesus said to His disciples to do ...” protested the man sitting up.

“Yes ... that’s true. But with Confession there should be true repentance and regret for what we have done. It is no point just confessing one’s sins and hoping that all is well.

“God is not an insurance policy. Providing we pay our premiums by way of Confession, Communion and attending Mass every now and then; our place in Heaven is guaranteed.

“It just doesn’t work like that ...”

“Tell me something ...” continued Father Ignatius gaining confidence all the time, “suppose you were one of the victims of the many things you claim to have done ...”

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how would you feel if you knew that the person who committed such crimes against you suddenly said sorry on his death bed, recited a prayer or two as a penance and got entry into Heaven?”

“What else can I do? My crimes are done and gone ... I can hardly turn the clock back ... You’ve got to help me Father ... that’s what you priests are here for isn’t it?” pleaded the man his hand shaking a little.

“I will pray for you ... and I will absolve your sins by the power given to me by our Lord Jesus ...” said Father Ignatius.

“But I will not give you a penance ... this is not a matter of asking you to say a Hail Mary and all will be well again ...

“I’ve never been in such a situation before ... and they never taught us what is an appropriate penance in these circumstances ...” Father Ignatius bit his lip, thinking he’d probably overstepped the mark.

The man laughed heartily.

“A priest with a sense of humor ... I like that ...” he said after a short pause.

Father Ignatius continued.

“I will leave the matter of final absolution in the hands of God, since only He knows your heart, your intentions and your genuine repentance.

“I will also leave the money your men gave me right here ... the Lord’s absolution is not for sale ... it is given freely by Him alone.”

Father Ignatius heard the man’s Confession and prayed with him for a while. He was then driven back, hooded once again, to the city and dropped at the railway station where he caught a train home.

Weeks later he read in the newspaper that the man had died. The papers had his picture, which Father Ignatius recognized, and they named him as an infamous gangster who terrorized the city for many years. The papers also said that he had left large sums of money in his Will to various charities and Christian churches.

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LOST IN BAD WEATHER

The gardens behind St Vincent Church stretched out for an acre or so. The land was part of a Monastery which stood there years ago which has long since been destroyed; although some ancient walls still exist outlining the perimeter of some ancient buildings.

The gardens were well maintained by a team of volunteers who had planted several fruit trees, flowering bushes and a vegetable patch which Father Ignatius and Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, use to plant beans, carrots, tomatoes and several other vegetables in season.

At a secluded corner of the gardens stood a large statue of Our Lady on a pedestal, surrounded by rose bushes and overlooking a small pond containing goldfish and several plant-life. Father Ignatius held many prayer meetings there in summer evenings with the youngsters from the Youth Club, followed by a barbecue and Praise singing by an open fire.

Beyond the church gardens a thick hedge separated St Vincent's property from a field leading to the hills and countryside.

Father Ignatius stood by the kitchen door one September evening at about six o'clock admiring the light rain as it drizzled gently through dark skies. It was that time of day when departing light met early darkness resulting in various shades of gray mingling with brown and golden autumnal leaves.

He looked out pensively and smiled to himself as he recalled lovingly his dear departed mother. Whenever it rained lightly as it did just now, she always used to say "the Angels have turned on the garden sprinklers in Paradise". He smiled again recalling to mind her many sayings which often involved Angels and Saints living happily in Heaven above.

His thoughts were cut short suddenly by the front door bell ringing. He opened the door and there stood a young man and two boys, one aged about twelve and the other slightly younger. They were wet all through as they tried to shelter underneath a small umbrella.

"Please sir, can you help us ..." said the man, "we believe our small dog has got into your gardens through the fence ... we were on our way home through the fields at the back and he escaped from his dog collar ... it's a bit too large you see ... can we search your gardens please?"

"What ... in this rain?" asked the priest incredulously.

"He's a small dog ..." said the older boy wiping his face of water and tears, "he won't make it through the night ... please mister, let us look for him ... we won't be long ..."

"Let me help you ..." replied Father Ignatius as he put on his coat and took with him a small dog collar and chain often used by his own dog Canis, "we'll also need a couple

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of electric flashlights as it'll soon get dark ..." he continued, handing a flashlight to the young man.

Moments later they were all out in the drizzling rain looking for the lost dog in the church's grounds.

The two boys ran here and there shouting "Bruno ... Bruno ..." in the hope that the lost creature may come running to them.

At one point, as Father Ignatius pointed his lit flashlight left and right, he thought he noticed some movement amongst the rose bushes around the pedestal on which stood the statue of Our Lady. He approached the statue quietly and got down on his hands and knees pointing the flashlight at the foot of the pedestal in the hope of finding the small dog sheltering amongst the bushes. There was nothing there.

He looked behind him, and discovered the young man and the two boys kneeling on the wet grass with their heads bowed low.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"We are praying ... like you ... so that Mary can find the dog for us ..." said the young man.

"She's got more sense than to be out in this weather ..." replied the priest gritting his teeth and wishing he was at home by the fire enjoying a hot cup of chocolate drink.

A few minutes later, after they'd been soaked right through, one of the boys found the dog behind a shed. They picked him up joyfully and he greeted them warmly shaking his little tail in delight.

The priest suggested they carry him home to make sure he doesn't slip through his collar again. They thanked him most profusely and left hurriedly through the side gate and onto the main road.

Father Ignatius made his way to the Parish House still carrying his dog's collar and chain which he had taken with him, and the two flashlights.

As he entered the house, totally drenched with muddy knees and wet trousers where he'd been kneeling, he was greeted by Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper.

"How come you took the dog for a walk without the dog?" she enquired looking at the collar and chain in the priest's hand, "and in this terrible weather too ... at least Canis had the sense to keep warm by the fire!"

Father Ignatius said nothing as he went upstairs to get changed. He wondered whether Jesus meant the Good Shepherd would go out looking for the lost sheep in all weathers.

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LOVING AND CARING

It was a special Sunday and Father Ignatius had been invited to celebrate Mass at the Hospital Chapel. The tiny church was full to capacity with nurses and doctors and other medical staff commemorating the 50th Anniversary of opening the hospital. The priest approached the lectern and said:

“I am very pleased to see so many of you gathered here today to celebrate 50 years of service which you, and this hospital, have given to the community.

“I would like, if I may, to read you three passages from the Bible. The first is from Luke Chapter 4 Verse 40.

“After sunset all who had friends who were sick with various diseases brought them to Jesus; He placed His hands on everyone of them and healed them all.

“This reading is from Matthew Chapter 8 Verses 2 and 3.

“Then a man suffering from a dreaded skin-disease came to Him, knelt down before Him, and said, ‘Sir, if you want to, you can make me clean’”. Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. “I do want to,” He answered. “Be clean!” At once the man was healed of his disease.

“And finally I like to read from Mark Chapter 7 Verses 32 to 35.

“Some people brought Him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged Jesus to place His hands on him. So Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd, put His fingers in the man’s ears, spat, and touched the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looked up to Heaven, gave a deep groan, and said to the man, ‘Ephphatha’, which means, ‘Open up’. At once the man was able to hear, and his speech impediment was removed, and he began to talk without any trouble.”

Father Ignatius paused for a few seconds and looked at the congregation.

“You will remember” he said, “that the woman who followed Jesus on the way to Jairus’ house only had to touch His cloak and she was healed.

“A few verses further on, we read that when news came that Jairus’ daughter was dead; Jesus walked all the way to the house and there He performed His miracle and raised the little girl.

“Have you noticed, I wonder, something common in all these stories we have read? They are written by different people; Luke, Matthew and Mark, yet they all record something in common. What is it?”

Father Ignatius paused yet again to allow the congregation to think.

“In all passages we read that Jesus touched people to heal them,” he continued.

“Jesus placed His hands on the sick. He touched them, and they were healed.

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“Now we know that Jesus was, and He is, all powerful. He could have clicked His fingers, or even thought about it, and the sick person would have been healed, if He wanted to.

“But He didn’t do that. He stopped and touched them instead. And they were healed.

“He really didn’t have to walk all the way to Jairus’ house. He could have said ‘Talitha, kaum. Little girl, I tell you to get up!’ from the very place He was standing and she would have been raised from the dead. But He did not do that. He walked all the way there and raised her up in the presence of her parents.

“And what we learn in all these stories is that Jesus really cared about people. He sympathized with them. He shared their pain and their worries and their fears and had compassion for them. He stopped and took time to speak to them. To touch them and to be with them on a one-to-one basis.

“He didn’t just raise His hands and a multitude of them were healed at once. He treated them as individuals and loved each one of them as individuals. They were important to Him and He made them feel worthy of His care and attention.

“And that’s what I would like to remind you dear friends.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a few moments yet again.

“Most of you gathered here are practicing in the medical profession. And I do know that you tend to get very busy ... I’ve been here visiting many times and seen you work very hard dealing with several emergencies at once.

“And being busy ... it is possible that sometimes you may deal with those in your care as just another patient, another case in the long list of cases that come your way.

“Please remember that the person lying there in the hospital bed, or waiting for medical tests, is a human being with fears, worries and natural foreboding of what is to come. If you can, spare a minute or two treating that person as an individual ... just like Jesus did all those years ago ... and still does today.

“And this thought applies to the rest of us as well ... those not in the medical professions. Counselors, lawyers, teachers ... and priests too.

“Oh yes ... I’ve known many priests too busy rushing from one Ecumenical Meeting to another to spend time with their parishioners ... I suppose I’m guilty of this sin too ... may the Lord forgive me.

“Whatever our profession ... medical or otherwise ... let us remember to treat those that God has placed in our way with love, care and compassion; just as Jesus taught us.

“No matter how busy we might be; let us never switch off our kindness dispenser!”

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HARDENED HEARTS

Father Ignatius came across some sad realities of life the other day. It was a dark and wintry cold evening when he was called out to visit an elderly parishioner at home who was very ill and nearing the end of his life. The old man's wife was there and a few other relatives all gathered around the old man's bed and praying and crying. In conversation the priest learnt that this parishioner had a grown up son living not far away. Although he had been warned about his father's poor health he had not come to see him. Apparently, father and son had not met or spoken to each other for years following a family argument.

Sadly, even though the son had not visited his dying father, the father in turn did not want to see his son.

The priest, in an attempt at reconciliation, made an effort to contact the son by telephone. But it was too late. By then the father had died.

The son never turned up to the funeral.

Father Ignatius' heart was at breaking point during the funeral. He remembered the fifth Commandment about respecting one's parents and the words in Our Lord's Prayer "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sinned against us". He wanted to say something about this during his sermon but decided that it was not appropriate at the time.

Instead he offered a private Mass for the whole family and prayed that the act of reconciliation may never again be so thwarted by entrenched self-indulgent righteousness.

(Based on a true story).

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SINGING FAST

Mrs Parfitt was always haughty and well to do, with an expression on her face as if she'd got a permanent bad smell under her nose. She was rather thin and very tall, which meant that she always looked down on people – quite literally. She was very proud of her achievements, and well she should. She was educated at the best private schools and was in a successful career when she married an equally successful local businessman.

Yet, despite her outer appearance of cold granite stone she had a heart of gold. She often contributed generously and secretly to any cause the Church was involved in and gave a lot of her time to singing at Mass on Sundays and on special occasions.

Miss Cartwright however was perhaps the exact opposite. She was youngish, short and ... shall we say ... well developed. She was always jovial and laughed a lot at the slightest thing. And when she laughed, her whole body would shake and wobble like an under-set jelly. She played the organ on Sundays and accompanied Mrs Parfitt's singing as she led the choir.

Father Ignatius was in the Sacristy tidying up when he heard loud voices emanating from the church.

He went to investigate the cause of the commotion only to walk into a heated argument between the two ladies in question.

Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, was arranging flowers on the altar with another helper and did not take part in the discussion.

“What is going on here ladies?” asked the priest calmly yet firmly.

“It is quite pointless practicing any singing Father if one does not have the facility of a competent organist!” said Mrs Parfitt in her very posh upper class accent.

“Are you calling me incompetent?” retorted Miss Cartwright bright red in the face like an over-ripe tomato.

“Well ... if you can't keep up with my singing ... what would you call that?”

“For your information, the organist plays according to the music sheet, and it is up to the singer to keep up with the music and not the other way round ...”

“Ladies ... please ... let us remember where we are ...” pleaded Father Ignatius, “you remind me of the cow, the chicken and the pig ...”

“Who are you calling a pig?” asked Miss Cartwright turning even redder in the face and wobbling like a strawberry jelly.

“I am calling no one a pig ... nor anything else,” said the priest gently, “let's sit down ladies and discuss this sensibly ...”

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At this point Mrs Davenport stopped what she was doing and encouraged her helper to come and sit with her in the front pew next to the two battling women.

Father Ignatius stood by the lectern resting his arm on it and said:

“There was once a cow, a chicken and a pig on a farm discussing the benefits of a good English breakfast.

“The cow extolled the virtues of good fresh cold milk poured over cereals, or used to make hot porridge. And then she regaled about the benefits of pure wholesome butter spread on toast, compared to margarine with all its synthetic additives. All in all, she was well pleased with her contribution to the English breakfast.

“The chicken explained how versatile her contribution could be ... poached eggs, scrambled, fried, soft boiled and so on and so forth ...

“The pig looked down and said nothing.

“ ‘Have you nothing to say about bacon?’ asked the chicken.

“ ‘All I have to say’ replied the pig, ‘is that you two are involved in the English breakfast; whereas I am fully committed!’ ”

Father Ignatius stopped for a few seconds; then he continued.

“I think we need to ask ourselves how committed we are to God when we visit Him here in church.

“It is nice of course that there are so many people willing to help with flower arranging, cleaning, playing the organ, singing and all the other jobs which exist in a church like this. I certainly couldn’t cope without all your help, and I’m very grateful.

“But is that what coming to church is all about? Being involved in the various jobs and events?

“Or do we come here to be fully committed to God? To thank Him for what He has done for us; and to receive Him in our hearts in the Eucharist.”

He paused again for a few moments and then went on.

“Did the disciples and the early church leaders worry too much about singing and who is to play the organ, I wonder?”

At this point, Mrs Davenport asked innocently “did they have electric organs in those days Father?”

The priest ignored the question and continued gently, “The disciples at the time were totally committed to our Lord Jesus Christ and were determined to spread His message to the point of death. And indeed, many died in pursuit of that commitment.

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“Even today ... there are many Christians throughout the world who meet secretly in each others’ homes to pray because Christianity is persecuted in their countries. Many are attacked and have died for being Christian. Do you think they worry whether they have enough flowers or the right music sheets?

“So let us come to church to be fully committed to God and not be distracted by other matters such as music, flowers and so on. Nice enough as they are, they are not the reason why we are here. Let us in all humility ask God what He wants of us.

“Let us say ‘Here I am Lord, it is I Lord. I have heard you calling me. I will go and do what you ask me ... if you lead me!’ ”

Father Ignatius stopped talking and slowly made his way back into the Sacristy.

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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.

“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 ...”

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“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?”

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.

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“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.”

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DOES INGENIOUS MAN NEED GOD?

Father Ignatius approached the pulpit and waited until the congregation had settled down before speaking.

“I was reading the other day about Isambard Kingdom Brunel. As you may know, he was a leading British civil engineer who lived in the 1800s. He was famous for building many bridges, tunnels, dockyards and of course the Great Western Railway; our first major railway. He also built steamships including the first propeller-driven ocean going iron ship.

“When I read about famous people like Brunel I never cease to be amazed about the ingenuity of man.

“And of course ... the ingenuity of women too.

“Mrs Davenport, our housekeeper, can create an outstanding meal which would make even Brunel envious, I tell you.”

Mrs Davenport, sitting upfront, smiled coyly.

“The point I am trying to make here,” continued Father Ignatius, “is that mankind is very inventive in every sphere of life ... engineering, construction, medicine, the arts such as music and the theatre and almost everything we set our mind to.

“And with our ingenuity comes satisfaction for what we have done, a little bit of well deserved pride perhaps, and encouragement to others to pick up what we have done and take it even further and progress it for the benefit of mankind in general.

“Certainly nothing wrong with that ... Until the devil steps in ...”

Father Ignatius paused for a while.

“And when the devil steps in, man thinks he is too clever by half. After all if we can build bridges, and tunnels and ships and planes, if we can gaze at the stars and planets and learn all sort of things from them, if we can heal all sorts of illnesses and study every aspect of life and genetics to the point of Creation itself. We become self-important to the point where we no longer need God. Or at least that’s what we think.

“How often do you read in the papers about famous scientists who proclaim in all certainty that God doesn’t exist? After all, these learned men have made many an important discovery and no doubt the world owes them much. So they are listened to and their pronouncements, on matters they know nothing about, are taken as gospel, if you’ll pardon the pun, and revered by one and all.

“As I said, the devil steps in and fills man’s mind with false self-importance. It reminds you of the serpent who said to Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree they would be like God. And they fell for his trick, as many do right now in their mistaken beliefs and self-importance.

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“Remember ... that first original sin by Adam and Eve was not just a sin of disobedience. It was a much more serious sin of self-importance. They wanted to be like God.”

The priest stopped once again to allow the congregation to think about his warnings.

“I often visit the local hospital,” he continued, “and I got to know a famous doctor there. He is not a Catholic, but he goes to church all the same ... he watches a different TV channel shall we say!”

The congregation laughed.

“We got talking the other day about religion,” continued Father Ignatius, “and I asked him how he reconciled his vast scientific and medical knowledge to his Faith as a Christian.

“He replied that his job was no different than a car mechanic’s.

“He had learnt over the years how different parts of the body work and function and how to fix them when they sometimes go wrong. Just like a mechanic follows the manufacturer’s instructions when he fixes or maintains a car, so does this doctor do the same.

“But then he added, ‘however, unlike a car mechanic, I do not have the full blue-print designs and instructions to work from. The manufacturer in my case, God the Creator, has decided to leave some things secret from us so that we never know about life and how it was created. Just as well I suppose ... or else we’d make a mess of that too!’

“So you see, no matter how clever we may become, no matter how ingenious and resourceful, there will always be matters that the Good Lord, in His wisdom, will keep secret from us.

“Pretentious and conceited we may well be; but not half as clever and almighty as He.”

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NOBODY'S CHILD

“Father we’ve got Tom home at last ...” said the voice at the end of the phone, “we’d be ever so pleased if you could come and meet him some time today ... we could also discuss the Baptism arrangements ...”

Father Ignatius put the phone back on its cradle and praised the Lord for answering long standing desperate prayers.

The call was from Gerry Hedge. He and his wife had been planning to start a family for many years. They’d been for several medical tests both at the local hospital and at a specialist hospital in London and had seen several consultants and various doctors over the years. They had even traveled abroad for special medical treatment and tests but finally they had to accept that they could not have children.

After the heartache and hurt slowly died down they decided to adopt instead. But even that was an event fraught with many difficulties. The Authorities made them jump through many bureaucratic hoops and checked and double-checked every aspect of their lives, relations and friends. They checked their annual income, future prospects, suitability for adoption, housing standard and so on and so forth for an interminable period of time.

Father Ignatius was asked to act as a character referee for the couple and he was interviewed in no fewer than three separate occasions.

And at last ... at long last ... they had managed to legally adopt little Tom and they had now brought him home.

Their joy was immeasurable and little Tom would indeed be loved as no child has ever been loved before ...

Father Ignatius left his office and rushed to the local shops to buy a little present for the new child in the Hedge’s household.

And that evening he was indeed well pleased and honored to visit the happy couple and be the first to meet their new son and to discuss the forthcoming Baptism arrangements.

As he parked his old car next to the sparkling new top of the range model currently driven by Gerry Hedge, Father Ignatius stopped for a while to admire the view.

He’d been to their mansion in the countryside many times, and had indeed enjoyed their lavish hospitality on several occasions, but surely never had he visited them for such a joyous and happy event as this time.

He walked slowly up the graveled path towards the front door and rang the bell. Moments later the door was opened by Stuart the butler who led him to the main living room.

Lana and Gerry Hedge greeted him warmly as he sat down in his usual arm chair.

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Little Tom was sitting on the floor facing the TV and listening intently. He was about one year old with light blond hair and the most beautiful face you could imagine.

Father Ignatius leaned a little forward in his armchair and handed Tom a little package containing his present, “Hello Tom ... look what I got for you ...” he said in his gentle soothing voice.

The little boy did not react whatsoever and continued staring at the TV set.

“He can’t see you Father ...” said Lana calmly.

Father Ignatius was taken aback at what he’d just heard and moved backwards in his chair still holding the package and looking at Lana in puzzlement.

“He is blind Father ... he’s born blind ... something to do with his mother’s addictions ...” continued Lana calmly.

“I see ...” said the priest, and quickly bit his lip at the inappropriateness of what he’d just said.

“He’s been at the adoption society since he was born ... and no one had ever even bothered to consider him ...” said Lana.

Gerry Hedge sat in the sofa saying nothing. Lana continued.

“I fell in love with him the moment I saw him ...” she said, “even though the staff at the adoption society tried to discourage us ... saying that he’ll require a lot of care and attention ...”

“We’ll make damn sure he gets all the care and attention he needs ...” declared Gerry sitting beside her, “he’ll go short of nothing I assure you Father ... we’ll make sure of that ... mark my word!”

“I am sure you are right ...” said Father Ignatius “and I look forward to having him as one of the Altar servers in due course ...”

“Ah ... but first we must discuss the Baptism arrangements ...” said Gerry standing up, “now what will it be Father ... a glass of French Champagne or the best 12 years old single malt whisky to ever leave Scotland?”

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IN HER HOUR OF NEED

Father Ignatius was in the Sacristy after morning Mass on Wednesday when Henry, a young Altar server, came in and said:

“Father I was off to school and I noticed there’s a woman at the back of the church crying loudly ...”

“Thank you Henry ... it’s good of you to tell me ...” said the priest calmly, “you go to school ... I’ll deal with it ...”

Moments later the priest entered the empty church and walked towards the back. He approached the woman and sat calmly on the pew a few feet away from her.

She raised her head and got up from a kneeling position and sat down. Father Ignatius had never met her before. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and stopped crying loudly. She looked at him and said:

“I’m sorry Father to make such a scene in church ...”

He smiled and said nothing for a second or two ... then he said gently, “If Jesus was here with you right now ... do you know what He would say?” She shook her head and wiped her nose with the handkerchief.

“He would say ‘Peace be with you’ ... those would be His first words as a start ...”

He stopped for a while, and then continued, “and slowly, His peace would be upon you and you would slowly calm down ... And then you would get to know, and realize, perhaps for the first time ... that He truly loves you and cares for you ...”

“Because Jesus loves us all ... individually ... each according to his or her needs ...”

“Even me?” she asked calming down a little.

“Especially you ...” continued Father Ignatius, “He cares for you as a child of God ... and no matter what hurts you right now, He shares that pain and wishes to help you relieve it ... all you need do is trust Him and speak to Him freely ... He will lead you to His peace as He has done to so many others ...”

“Thank you Father ...” she said, “that’s very helpful.”

“In the meantime,” continued Father Ignatius, “if there is anything I can do to help ... let me know ... when you’re ready of course ...”

“No thanks Father ... I think I’ve just witnessed Jesus’ presence ...”

And with that she left the church with a lighter heart.

She has been back to church every Sunday ever since ... and no one knows the reason for her upset on that day she first met Father Ignatius.

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UNWITTING DECEPTION

No matter how much one tries, there comes a time when we unwittingly do something that helps someone else in a deception; as Father Ignatius can well relate in this story.

Joanna Hill was a divorced woman of thirty something. She married young and had a son of ten living with her.

Just after her son was born, her husband went away with another woman, and eventually Joanna and Tim divorced in court.

Joanna came to see Father Ignatius with a problem.

“Father ... my ex husband Tim has been in touch and he wants us to meet gain. After all these years ... I haven't seen him or spoken to him for ages ... he hasn't kept in touch nor helped with our son's up-bringing. Now he wants to meet ... what do you think I should do?”

“Has he said why he wants to meet?” asked Father Ignatius gently.

“No Father ... he wrote a letter saying he lives in Manchester, which is some distance away ... and he wants to keep in touch. Be friendly like ... I really don't want him back in my life. But it's not right to keep our son from him ... although it would confuse him to see his father for the first time ever ...”

“I understand your difficulty ...” said the kind priest, “I suggest that if you were to meet him to take a friend with you. Don't take your son on the first visit. See how it goes and what Tim wishes to say.

“I also think you should meet him in a public place ... a restaurant perhaps.”

“Thank you Father ...” Joanna said, and then with hesitation, “the other problem is that Manchester is so far away, it requires two train changes and ...”

“I understand ...” repeated the priest, knowing full well that she could not possibly afford the train journey to Manchester, “a friend of mine runs a car-hire business, George Lomas, I'll have a word with him ... get in touch with him in a day or so ...”

A few weeks later Father Ignatius met Joanna at a coffee meeting in the Parish Center. He sat at her table and asked discreetly about her visit to Manchester.

“Oh it was wonderful Father ...” she said, her eyes gleaming brightly at the thought, “I went to see George Lomas as you said ...”

“He's such a kind man ... I told him my whole story ...”

“So he suggested that as he was going to Manchester himself that I should go with him.

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“We went in a flash car, some kind of limousine or such like posh car. It was chauffeur driven ... it was.

“I sat at the back with George, and at the front he had two well-built men in dark suits ... they looked like bodyguards, they were so big.”

She stopped to catch her breath and sip a little coffee.

“I arranged to meet my ex-husband at a restaurant as you said ... I asked him to wait outside.

“I arrived in this posh car ... you should have seen me ... like a proper lady I was ...

“The big man at the front came out and opened the car door for me ...

“Then the car drove away with George and the other bodyguard.

“My bodyguard stood politely at a distance whilst I talked to my ex in the street ... then he opened the restaurant door for me ... we sat at a table and the bodyguard person went to the bar ... keeping an eye on us all the time ...

“My ex was proper impressed I tell you. He didn't want anything in particular ... he just asked how I was and didn't even bother to ask about our son, or how he was. Luckily, I didn't tell our son that I was meeting my ex ... I didn't want to upset him.

“We just had a coffee at the restaurant ... which I paid for may I add. And then he said that he had to go ... he said he hoped to immigrate either to Canada or Australia ... hadn't made his mind up ... and thought he'd see me before he went.”

She stopped again for more coffee, and just as Father Ignatius was about to speak, she continued.

“When we finished the bodyguard man phoned somebody and the car arrived without George. We went to pick up George from some business meeting and as he'd finished early he took me round Manchester.

“We went to a lovely exclusive restaurant for a meal ... it was ever so lovely. I really enjoyed the day with George.”

“I see ...” said the priest pensively, “but your ex-husband must have got the wrong impression surely ... seeing you in a chauffeur driven car with an escort ...”

“I didn't give him the wrong impression Father ...” she said smiling broadly, “he asked who was the man accompanying me and I said ‘a friend’. Which strictly speaking the bodyguard was!

“He didn't see George in the car because of the dark windows ... but he asked whose car it was ... and I said ‘it belonged to a friend’ which is also true.

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“He said it was a great looking car and he was happy for me to have such good friends. I bet he was green with envy inside. But I did not lie did I?”

Father Ignatius smiled weakly and said nothing.

“Oh ...” she added, “George is such a nice man ... thank you for introducing us Father!”

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FATHER IGNATIUS, JOANNA AND GEORGE

A few months after Joanna Hill was unwittingly introduced to George Lomas by Father Ignatius, the couple fell deeply in love.

One evening they visited Father Ignatius in the Parish House, and after they had settled down to tea and biscuits George said:

“Father ... we have some good news. Joanna and I are in love and we would like to get married. We hope you’ll do the honours, so to speak ...”

“That’s good news for you two ...” said the priest gently, “but there’s some difficulty with me officiating at your wedding ...”

“I don’t understand ...” said Joanna somewhat concerned at the news.

“You are divorced Joanna ...” said Father Ignatius in his gentle voice, “the Catholic Church does not recognize your divorce ... you are still married and therefore you cannot marry again in Church ...”

“What do you mean?” said George, “she is properly divorced in Court ...”

“Yes ... that may well be so ...” continued the priest, “that’s a civil divorce, but unless the marriage was annulled by the Church she is still married ... the Church bases its teaching on the words of Christ ... ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her: and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery,’ ”

“But that’s crazy ...” interrupted George raising his voice a little, “are you saying that if I, as a single man never having been married ... if I go around with various women, you’d forgive me in Confession. But if she marries me you’re accusing her of the graver sin of adultery?”

“Joanna was married in a Catholic Church, this one I believe, to a Catholic man and her being Catholic ...” explained the priest still maintaining his composure, “this being the case ... and seeing that the marriage was not annulled by the Church, then she is still married ...”

“Hold on a minute ...” George interrupted again, not noticing for a moment that poor Joanna was wiping her tears silently, “you said she married in a Catholic Church ... so if she had married in an Anglican Church, or any other church, you would not have recognized the marriage ...”

“That is strictly true ...” said Father Ignatius, “if Joanna as a Catholic had married in an Anglican Church without the permission of the Catholic Church, and without the presence of a Catholic priest, then that marriage would not have been valid in the eyes of the Catholic Church. And in all probability she would have been able to marry again in the Catholic Church ...”

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“This is totally mad ...” said George getting a little angry, and still ignoring Joanna, “she married at 19 Father ... and divorced her husband when she was 22. She was a mere child when he walked out on her and left her holding the baby ... literally.

“That was over ten years ago Father ... At the time she hardly cared about the Catholic Church ... if truth be known ... and hardly bothered to seek an annulment ... assuming this would have been possible without a Catholic inquisition ...”

“George ... stop it ...” Joanna cried loudly.

“I’m sorry love ...” he replied holding her hand gently, “I hate to see the Church ... our Church ... mistreat you so ...

“I’m sorry Father for getting angry ...” he apologized to the priest, “but you can see our dilemma ...

“For whatever reason, regardless of who was innocent and who was at fault, this young couple in their early twenties divorced in a Civil Court.

“Is the Church seriously suggesting that Joanna cannot be intimate with a man for the rest of her life? Or else you’ll accuse her of adultery? Is that reasonable Father?

“Or do you want her to come to confess every time the two of us go to bed when we’re married?”

“Stop it ... stop it ...” Joanna cried loudly ... “this has gone too far ... I want to go home ...”

She stood up and made her way out of the room followed by George.

Father Ignatius followed them silently to the front door, not having the chance to explain himself or the Church’s position.

The couple married in the Civil Court three months later.

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FEAR

It was Friday once again, and Father Ignatius took the Catechism Class at the local Catholic School.

He noticed the children were somewhat subdued and not as perky and chatty as always.

“Is everything OK today?” he asked, “you have never been so quiet ... or am I going slightly deaf in my old age?”

They smiled quietly and said nothing at first, then one of them hesitated “have you not heard Father ... the school is being inspected tomorrow and we will all have to sit an English test and a Mathematics test set by the inspectors ... no one knows what is in the tests ...

“Our form teacher, Miss Farthing, said that if we don’t do well compared to the National Average, it will cause repercussions for the school and ourselves ...”

“I understand your concerns ...” said the priest gently.

“It’s more than concerns ...” said another pupil, “we’re afraid and worried out of our minds ... no one told us of these tests until a few minutes ago ...”

“And what have you done about it?” asked the priest maintaining his gentle tone of voice.

“What can we do?” replied another child, “we’ve been told they’re new national tests and even Miss Farthing doesn’t know what is involved.”

“All right ...” continued Father Ignatius, “let’s spend the next few minutes on these tests ... no Catechism class today ...

“First of all ... don’t let your fears guide you; but allow God to do so.

“You have all done various English and Mathematics tests before ... and these tests tomorrow, no matter how new and no matter how different, they will only involve material which you have already been taught. I doubt very much the inspectors will test material not on the national curriculum. The tests may be new but not the subjects which you have been taught.

“So do some quick revision ... nothing too long and too thorough ... just general stuff which you’ve been taught so far and do your best tomorrow.

“The reason you have been given so little time to prepare is deliberate ... the inspectors do this to test a whole class at a given point in time with no prior warning. They do this in every school ... so you’ll be no different to anyone else.”

He stopped for a while to check they’d calmed down a little.

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“And now, if I may ... a word or two about fear ...

“Often in life we are faced with seemingly insoluble problems. So our first instincts are to work hard at finding a solution ... we struggle ... we worry ... and we fear what may happen next.

“And in our fears and struggles we forget that God has the answer.

“There is no problem, however inconceivable it might be, which may come to us in life which God has not met before. And if God has met it ... He sure has the answer and the solution.

“I am not talking just about English or Mathematics tests here ... but any problems that you may face as you grow up and become responsible adults ... any problems at all ... faithfully hand them to God.

“Pray to God and trust Him to show you the way ahead. He wouldn't be an omnipotent all-knowing God otherwise.

“Our hesitation to hand over our problems to Him, is itself a problem of our own making – not His

“So I repeat what I said earlier ... do not let your fears guide you, but allow God to do so.”

He stopped as he physically noticed they'd regained confidence in themselves and their abilities. He led them in prayer that they would do well and allowed them to spend the rest of the afternoon revising English and Mathematics.

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NUN ON THE RUN

It was Friday evening and Father Ignatius was alone in the Parish House listening to his favorite classical music. He sat in his armchair by the fire, eyes closed, and with his hand slowly moving his index finger in the air as if holding a baton and conducting an orchestra. Just as the music reached his favorite piece of Verdi's Aida ... The Triumphal March ... just then, the front doorbell rang and interrupted his grand moment of triumph.

He jumped off his chair, switched off the record player and said sotto voce, "OK ... hold it there all of you ... we'll return to this piece presently ..."

He opened the door to be confronted by Sister Martha.

"I'm not interrupting anything?" she asked.

"Oh ... only Giuseppe Verdi ..." he replied.

"Yes ... I've heard him through the open window ... he's getting better under your leadership ... mind if I come in?"

He moved aside and let her in.

"Would you like tea or coffee ..." she said as she made her way towards the kitchen.

"Tea please," replied the priest as he walked back to the living room.

Sister Martha was in her late sixties yet she was as youthful and energetic as anyone half her age. She lived at the Convent nearby with a dozen other nuns, and she taught at the local Catholic schools. She often called in on the priests at St Vincent for a chat and a cup of tea on her way home, especially on Fridays when she stayed a little late at the school.

Moments later she entered the living room carrying a tray of tea and ginger biscuits; the priest's favorite, as she knew very well.

"Ah ... I didn't know we had ginger biscuits," said Father Ignatius, "I didn't find them earlier on when I looked ..."

"Mrs Davenport has shown me where she hides them ..." said Sister Martha pouring two cups of tea, "she told me if you'd find them you'll finish the whole packet ..."

A few minutes of silence later as they slowly sipped their tea Sister Martha was first to break the quiet.

"Ignatius ... have you heard about Sister Cecilia?" she asked.

"No ... I can't say I have ..." he replied, "what's the problem ..."

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“I am not breaking any confidences Ignatius ... she asked me to speak to you ... she’s already spoken to Mother Superior today ...”

“Sounds ominous ...” said the priest putting his cup down.

“Well ... she works at the hospital as you know ... she’s a nursing assistant there ... well, not to put to fine a point on it ... she’s fallen in love with a young doctor there ...

“She told me she doesn’t know how it happened ...” continued Sister Martha, “they got attracted to each other and she feels she can no longer continue her vocation ...”

“You say she spoke to Mother Superior?” asked Father Ignatius.

“Yes ... today. She told her she’d been thinking about this for about a month or so ... she wishes it didn’t happen but it has ... she wants to leave the convent and pursue a new life with him ...

“She told me that Mother Superior was very understanding and suggested that she leaves the Convent for another one down South to give her time to think ...

“But Sister Cecilia doesn’t think it will help ... she wants to leave her vocation altogether.”

“I see ...” said the priest calmly, “and you say Cecilia asked you to speak to me ...”

“Yes ... she wanted your advice ...”

Father Ignatius smiled weakly.

“The poor soul ...” he mumbled, “what advice can I give her Martha?” he asked rhetorically.

“When we decide to take up our vocation to serve the Lord,” he continued, “we do so after a lot of soul-searching, a lot of prayers, and a lot of training. It takes years as you know Martha ... this is perhaps deliberate to give us a chance to think seriously on what we’re doing and the commitment we’re undertaking ...

“Yet ... despite all that ... it does sometimes happen as in this case, that individuals can no longer continue their vocations and wish to leave. It happened some years ago to a priest I knew well ... he has left the church and is now married with a family of his own ...”

“It’s terrible ...” Sister Martha said quietly.

“I suppose it is ...” he replied, “as a Church we frown when people break their marital vows and divorce or separate ... and I suspect this is no different ...

“When a priest or nun break their vows and no longer wish to continue their vocations ... it is perhaps the same as couples seeking divorce ...

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“Yet Martha ... whilst I understand what people like Cecilia or that priest I spoke of are going through ... I cannot condemn them ...”

The nun looked up at him with a frown.

“I cannot condemn them, Martha ...” he repeated, “I agree that it is wrong to break the vows they made freely ... but at the same time ... who am I to stand in the way of true and genuine love ... if that is what’s happened in this case. I know it was exactly what happened in the case of that priest ... I knew him very well.

“He fell in love with a teacher ... he shouldn’t have ... but he did ... He wanted to leave the Church ... just like Cecilia ... He confessed to me ... it was heart breaking ... he told me he could not go on serving as a priest.”

“What did you do?” asked Sister Martha.

“I forgave him of course ...” replied Father Ignatius, “how could I possibly withhold absolution ... He was repentant and he knew that he could no longer serve as a priest ... even if he gave up his lover and was moved to another Parish ... He knew that he would not be a good priest and that deep in his heart he’d be a fraud ... He’d be serving against his will and would be cheating the Church as well as God Himself ...

“Yes ...” said Father Ignatius thinking back to that event in the distant past, “I forgave him and absolved him ...

“When we forgive someone else, we touch his very soul with the merciful love of Jesus Christ our Lord. How could I stand in the way of such love?

“Eventually ... the bishop let him go ... and as I said, he’s now married with a family.”

“What do you want me to say to Cecilia?” asked Sister Martha.

“Tell her that I’ll be praying for her ...” he replied, “tell her to think about what Mother Superior advised ... and that I’ll be always available if she wishes to have a talk with me ... How old is he?” he asked.

“Thirty ... last month!”

“She’s young and no doubt very frightened ...” said Father Ignatius calmly, “I believe that whatever we do ... our role is not to condemn but to forgive ... She is doing what she feels is right for her life ...

“Our Lord forgave many sins when He walked this earth ... who am I to stand in the way of true repentance?”

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MOTHER'S LOVE

It had been a long day and Father Ignatius had travelled to the city and driven back all on the same day; something which he hated to do, especially when he had to navigate his way through heavy city traffic. He was a little tired so he settled down in his armchair next to the fireplace and put on his favorite classical record.

A few minutes later Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, came in and interrupted the orchestra in mid-flow. She was carrying a large tray with tea and biscuits.

"I've made you a lovely pot of tea Father," she said, "and your favorite ginger biscuits."

"Ginger biscuits?" he replied turning the volume down on the record player, "but it's not Friday ..."

"I know Father ... but I thought you deserved a treat today. What with your long journey and what's been happening at the Convent?"

The priest raised his eyebrows, "I don't understand ..." he said.

"Oh ... no one has told you ... have they?" she continued as she poured two cups of tea and sat down, "Sister Martha rang me earlier on and gave me the news ..."

"Well earlier this afternoon ... at about four o'clock it was ... I'm sure that's what she said ... anyway, earlier this afternoon they found a baby on the doorstep of the Convent."

"A baby ..." said Father Ignatius helping himself to another biscuit.

"Yes ... a wee little mite ... about a week old they say ... a little boy. Mother Superior found him just by the statue of St Joseph and the Baby Jesus ... you know the one ... the statue outdoors by the main entrance to the Convent ..."

"Yes ... yes ... I know ..." said Father Ignatius, "what happened then?"

"Well the wee baby was crying so Mother Superior took him in ... he needed changing ... and probably hungry too I shouldn't wonder ... Sister Martha called the police and they took him away to the hospital to check he's all right ..."

"Dear Lord ..." mumbled Father Ignatius as he said a quick silent prayer under his breath.

"What kind of person would do such a thing?" said Mrs Davenport angrily as she poured two more cups of tea, "to abandon one's own flesh and blood like that ..."

"A desperate person ..." replied the priest gently, "we can only wonder what led her to such an extreme act ..."

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“But she’s his mother ...” interrupted Mrs Davenport, “how could she ... she’s supposed to love him ...”

“Giving birth in itself does not make a person a loving mother ...” replied Father Ignatius, “normally there is a strong unbreakable bond between the mother and child from the moment the baby is born ... if not well before. That bond of love I believe has been created by God for our own protection from the moment we enter this world. God knows we are born totally defenceless and vulnerable so He created that special protection which is a mother’s love.

“Now I’m not saying this bond of love did not exist in this baby’s case; most probably it does ... so can you imagine the terrible circumstances which led this poor desperate woman to abandon her child, as you put it.

“In fact ... she did not abandon him ... she could have left him anywhere and walked off ... that’s abandonment. But she carefully selected the most appropriate place where he would have been found and cared for.

“No doubt she hid behind some bushes in the Convent gardens and waited for the baby to be found.”

“What ... like Moses?” said Mrs Davenport, “I thought he was left floating in a basket in the river ... not at a Convent!”

Father Ignatius smiled.

“Did they have Convents in Moses time?” she continued innocently.

“I don’t think so ...” answered the priest as he got up to remove the record from the turntable.

“Do you think she’s Catholic ... the mother that is ... is that why she left him at the Convent?” went on Mrs Davenport.

“I really wouldn’t know ... no doubt all will come to light sooner or later ...” replied Father Ignatius patiently, “in the meantime I suggest we say a little prayer for the little child and his mother ...”

At this point Father Donald entered the room.

“Did you hear the terrible news ...” he asked gravely.

“Yes ... I was telling Father Ignatius about it ...” piped up Mrs Davenport, “they found a baby abandoned at the Convent ...”

“Well ... there have been further developments ...” said Father Donald, “I met Sister Martha just now and she told me ... they found the body of a teenage girl at the far end of the park behind some bushes. An overdose ... all indications are that she’s the mother of the child. She was clutching a letter to her parents in her hand ...”

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LAST LETTER

“Dear Mom and Dad,

I’m so sorry I left home. I couldn’t take any more arguments and shouting. I went to stay with a school friend.

Sometime later I met a man at a party and we became friends. I went to live with him and I got pregnant. He wanted me to get rid of it. I said no and he asked me to leave his apartment. I went back to my school friend. She helped me all this time I was pregnant and I had a baby boy in secret. She took me to a house of a friend where I had the baby three days ago.

I left him at the Convent and saw a nun take him in. Then I saw a police car at the Convent. I think they are looking for me. I am frightened and don’t know what to do.

Louise.”

Father Ignatius stopped reading the newspaper. It seems the police had no choice but to publish the letter in order to try to identify who the dead teenager found in the park was.

The priest left the breakfast table and went to his church to offer Mass for the repose of her soul.

THE ADVENTURES OF FATHER IGNATIUS

GOD IS GETTING OLD

Father Ignatius's car had broken down just on the day he had to drive to the City miles away. Somehow he was glad this had happened because in all honesty he hated to drive long distances, especially when it involved negotiating busy traffic in the City.

He phoned his local garage for help and just as luck would have it, or was it a God-incidence, one of the managers was due to travel to the City that very day and he was happy to take Father Ignatius to his Conference and drive him back the same evening.

Oh what a God send Gerald was as he and the priest set off on the long journey. For once Father Ignatius could relax and not worry about the driving.

A few minutes into the journey Gerald started the conversation.

"I was thinking Father," he said, "do you reckon that God has mellowed with age?"

"What do you mean?" enquired the priest.

"Well ..." continued Gerald, "in the Old Testament we see Him full of wrath and anger sending floods everywhere and pestilence on the Egyptians and all sorts of bad things to those who did not tow the line. He behaved like a right monster at times, thumping people on the head if they did not obey Him.

"And now we're told He's a loving, caring, forgiving Father who has our best interests at heart. Why do you think He changed strategy? Did His first plans not work?"

Father Ignatius laughed.

"I'm amused that you think I know all about God's plans," he said, "the Almighty does not confide in me you know ..."

"Maybe not Father! But you must admit it is a total change of tactics from anger and wrath ... and you must admit the Bible says in the Old Testament things like vengeance is mine ... and I am a jealous God ... and all that. And now it's all gentleness and sweet love ... at least that's what you priests lead us to believe.

"Why doesn't God thump people on the head and into line these days? The world is going to ruin and His sweet love will get us nowhere ..."

The priest laughed again at Gerald's direct and forthright way of putting things.

"OK ... let's analyze what you've been saying ..." said Father Ignatius, "on the face of it ... it does appear that there's a great contrast between the description of God in the Old Testament and the description in the New Testament.

"Now what I'm saying here is purely my opinion, you understand. I don't have a hotline to God and I'm not privy to His strategies and plans ..."

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Gerald smiled and nodded.

“We tend to see God from our human perspective,” continued the priest, “we see Him with human understanding and we attribute to Him human qualities, plans, strategies, emotions and so on.

“But God is God. And man is man. We cannot possibly understand Him from our viewpoint, nor should we attempt to do so.

“Now it could well be ... and this is me guessing here you understand Gerald ... it could well be that the people at the time of the Old Testament were accustomed to being led ... being guided ... and told what to do.

“Can you imagine for instance one man ... Moses ... guiding a multitude of people out of Egypt, promising them a better life elsewhere, and going round in circles in the desert for forty years?

“This wouldn’t happen today.

“In modern times people would have set up committees to discuss the project, appointed several managers to chair sub-committees and devised multiple budgetary plans and operational strategies ... all before their poor overworked wives had time to pack the luggage and prepare the kids to leave Cairo.

“Yet in the Old Testament one man said let’s go ... and they all went.

“True ... they argued and rebelled along the way ... and Moses dealt with it in a forthright manner as you advocate ...”

Gerald laughed.

“So it could well be that God treated people in the Old Testament days the way they expected to be lead and the way they understood,” said Father Ignatius, “With firmness where necessary ... yet at all times with fairness and compassion.

“This is only my opinion ... as I said.

“And it could be that in His own time, according to His will, God decided to send Jesus to us in human form to teach us ... to show us God’s infinite love, and to forgive and redeem us through His death and Resurrection.

“Jesus in human form had to be kind, and gentle and compassionate to portray God’s infinite love. And He taught us in the Lord’s Prayer about a loving Father caring for His children and always ready to provide for them.

"It would have been pointless to have a ruthless commanding Jesus forcing people to obey Him. This does not depict God's love for us, which is so infinite, that He gave up His own Son to die for us.

“Hence the contrast between the Old and New Testaments ...”

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At this point a huge truck overtook their car and moved back into lane so close that Gerald had to swerve sharply in order to avoid a collision.

“Stupid idiot . . .” shouted Gerald, and then muttered something else unrepeatable under his breath.

After a moment or two as the two men calmed down a little Gerald continued, “There are times Father, when I wish God would deal with people the old fashioned Old Testament way!”

Father Ignatius said nothing but prayed silently that God may forgive Gerald for his immediate reaction under pressure.

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TELL IT AS IT IS

Miss Lemon had invited Father Ignatius to sit in at Catechism class for the seven year olds at Junior School. He duly obliged and after the youngsters greeted him warmly and sang a welcoming song for him, Miss Lemon managed to settle them down and start her class.

She was talking about the sanctity of marriage and how important the family unit is in today's society.

“When a man and a woman love each other very much,” she said, “they decide to get married and they have a wedding. Jesus went to a wedding a long time ago. Father Ignatius will read you the story later. How many of you have been to a wedding?”

A few children raised their hands and they talked all at once relating their experiences.

“Good ... OK settle down,” she continued gently, “now when a man and a woman get married in church there is a priest there to bless the marriage ... and the man and woman are given rings to wear on this finger here ... Did you see that happen ... Those of you who have been to a wedding?”

One or two of them said they'd seen this when they attended a relative's wedding.

“The wedding rings are a symbol of the people's love for one another,” continued Miss Lemon patiently, “and they normally wear the ring all their lives. It shows to everyone that they are married.

“So ... can anyone tell me how you tell a man and a woman are married?”

A young boy raised his hand and said, “They yell at the same kids!”

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GOD'S SHEPHERD

Father Ignatius was a shepherd although he had never been anywhere near sheep; even though his father had been a farmer.

No ... Father Ignatius was a shepherd of human sheep. And that is not meant as a description of his congregation or their collective mental ability.

It was a responsibility which the kindly priest took upon himself from that day the Good Lord tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to take on his vocation. Father Ignatius saw his role in life to guide and lead as many that are put in his care as possible into the Kingdom of Heaven.

And in doing so he had to teach with kindness but with firmness too for it was not up to him to change the Word of God or to re-interpret it in such a way as to make it more palatable to his parishioners.

Father Ignatius knew his sheep by name and he also had the gift, or ability, to associate with each one of them a story or some fact or other about their lives. For example when greeting the parishioners after Mass on Sunday he would say "Hello Guy ... how are the children settling in at school ..." or "Good morning Mrs Perkins ... are you feeling a little better after the operation?" And so on. This made them feel special which of course they were to him ... just as a shepherd knows his sheep whether they are young lambs or long in the tooth mutton on legs.

The priest noted one Sunday that a young man looked a little morose and somehow out of sorts and this led him to recall that he hadn't seen him take Communion for a while. He stopped him on the way out of church and asked him to wait a while to have a word.

When everyone had gone Father Ignatius and Roger went to the Sacristy.

"How are you keeping Roger?" asked the priest, "you don't look too happy to me ... is anything wrong?"

Roger did not need much prompting. Whatever had been eating him had been there for far too long to remain hidden and under control.

"There's nothing to be happy about ..." he replied, "I have lost my job and there's little prospect of employment ... as a result Sue and I have had to postpone our wedding ... she hardly earns enough at the bakery ... and all our plans to marry in the summer have gone out of kilter as it were ..." and then he laughed bitterly and added "I've prayed of course Father ... but I think God is too busy with someone else to bother about us ..."

Father Ignatius said nothing for a moment and then asked, "Would you say a short prayer with me please Roger?"

The young man nodded and the priest started praying as Roger repeated ...

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“Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done ...

“OK ... let’s hold it there,” said the priest, “what’s the last thing we said?”

Roger hesitated and then mumbled “Thy will be done ...”

“Precisely ...” said the priest quietly and gently, “do you know Roger ... I’ve often struggled with these four words ... and me being a priest too ...

“Thy will be done ...

“We say these words time and again when we recite the Lord’s Prayer or the Rosary but do we really mean them?

“How far are we to accept our Lord’s will without question and without protest I wonder?

“Would we just accept the odd discomfort and setback if it is God’s will and somehow, without our knowledge or understanding, it serves His purpose? Maybe our problem and the way we deal with it serves as an example to others and brings someone closer to God. Would we accept His will in those circumstances?

“What if it is more than just a slight discomfort? What if His will leads us to pain or hardship? What then ... do we accept it like Job did? Do we go on accepting it all the way onto death and torture like St Peter did and the Christian martyrs over the years?

“At what point do we say to God ... Hey I said Thy will be done ... but this is taking it too far!”

Roger smiled. The priest continued.

“We ought to be very careful when we make that particular promise in the Lord’s Prayer.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a while, as he often does in conversation to punctuate what he had just said, and to let the point sink in. He then smiled at Roger and said.

“The Lord knows what happens to us every moment of our lives Roger ... not a hair should fall from our heads without His knowledge ... and of course without His will and agreement ...

“So when something happens to us ... like losing a job ... we should remember that He is still in control and somehow it serves His purpose.

“I am not saying it is easy ... far from it. Our first human instinct is to rebel, get angry and complain or whine about our situation ... It’s human nature to do so ... But let’s try some non-human nature for a change ... let’s with the aid of the Holy Spirit try superhuman nature to deal with the situation.

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“I’m not criticizing you Roger ... for I’ve had these difficulties myself you see ...

“When the words ‘Thy will be done’ get to mean ‘as long as it is what I want’ then we’re adding a condition which was not there nor meant by Our Lord when He taught us to pray.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a while and then went on.

“It is sometimes difficult to accept or even understand the Lord’s will ...

“We wonder why certain things happen to us ... we being good and prayerful and attending Mass regularly and so on ... why does He let it happen to us ...

“The thing is Roger, the Lord knows what is happening to us and He will not let us be tested or be pushed beyond our capabilities ...

“I have known people who have undergone great hardship in their lives Roger and they never lost their Faith. They accepted His will without question and were an example to the rest of us.

“Years ago I knew a young lady in this Parish, about your age and newly married. She became very ill with no prospects of getting better.

“I remember praying with her by her bedside in hospital and she said to me, ‘Cheer up Father ... I’ll be seeing Jesus before you.’

“She died about an hour afterwards and yes ... she did see Jesus before me Roger. She remained faithful to Him despite all that had happened to her.”

A few moments of silence followed as both men reflected on what had just been said.

“Go in peace Roger ...” said Father Ignatius, “Trust Him to know better and to lead you where you are meant to be ...”

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CHANNEL OF PEACE

It was Friday evening and as usual Sister Martha had called at the Parish House on her way home to the Convent. She sat in the large living room with Father Ignatius enjoying a lovely cup of tea and ginger biscuits whilst watching the news on TV. Some person or other had been nominated for a Peace Prize because of his work around the world.

“What a great honour,” said Sister Martha, “to be nominated for having tried to establish a little peace in this troubled world.”

“Yes indeed,” replied the priest picking up another ginger biscuit.

“Reminds me of the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi ... Make me a channel of your peace,” continued the nun, “it must be wonderful to have spent one’s life furthering the cause of peace. It should bring a smile to God’s face” she concluded chortling silently.

“There isn’t much to make God smile nowadays,” said Father Ignatius, “so someone like this person doing his bit for peace should bring a great smile in Heaven!”

“This makes me wonder ...” she said, “does someone have to be a Christian to be a channel of God’s peace? What if someone has no faith at all, a total un-believer? And he works hard for peace ... is he God’s channel or not? What do you think Ignatius?”

The priest put his cup of tea down and pondered for a minute or so whilst she switched off the TV.

“I believe our God wishes Peace on this earth,” said Father Ignatius softly, “Christ used to welcome people with the words ‘Peace be with you’, But I don’t think that it is a condition for God to use us as a channel of His peace that we should have Faith.

“God can and will use anyone in the right circumstances to do His will on earth and to further His Kingdom. If someone with no Faith at all is in the right place and at the right time then I believe God will use him. That person with no Faith may not even know that he is guided by God, yet he will be a channel of God’s peace all the same.

“Remember Moses was hesitant at first, when approached by God, citing his stammer as an impediment to the task ahead. But God chose him anyway.

“Paul had no Faith whatsoever. He was a declared enemy of God; in fact he fought God by killing the followers of Jesus. If ever there was a man chosen to further God’s Kingdom on earth Paul was such a man. But look where he started from ... an un-believer with no Faith.

“No Martha, I don’t think one needs to be a Christian to be a channel of God’s peace.

“To be a channel for God’s use we need to be willing to listen to Him, to obey Him and to trust Him in every respect.”

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YELLOW HELMET

Father Ignatius was out driving in his car when he stopped at a red traffic light at the road crossing. He waited there for a minute or two until the lights changed to green when suddenly there was this almighty bang at the back of his car.

Another motorist had come at speed from behind and failed to brake hitting the priest's car so hard that it pushed him forward into the path of oncoming traffic at the street intersection. The priest felt himself thrown violently forward when his car was hit from behind; and then he was hit again just as violently when a bus hit him on the side as his vehicle moved forward onto the traffic. The sideways hit was so hard that the priest's car swung round almost back the way it was coming.

Father Ignatius must have lost consciousness for a few moments because the next thing he heard was the sound of sirens and blue and red lights flashing everywhere.

He opened his eyes slowly and felt the warm trickle of blood down his face. He tried to move but he felt trapped in what now was a crushed metal box around him. He was somewhat dazed and in pain all over. His thoughts turned to panic when he considered the possibility of the car exploding into fire.

He looked to his side and saw a huge man in a bright yellow helmet. The man managed to open the car door window slightly and said:

"Please sir, don't move ... we'll have you out in no time. I am Fireman Derek Larcing ... my colleagues will help you straightaway ..."

Father Ignatius must have mumbled something incoherent because the fireman continued,

"I didn't quite understand that Sir ... eh ... I notice you're wearing a white collar Sir ... are you a priest?"

"Yes ..." said Father Ignatius.

"What is your name Sir?" asked the fireman.

"Ignatius ..."

"That's good Ignatius ... now don't talk and tire yourself. I'd like you please to try to move your feet and your toes ... can you do that for me?"

The priest moved his feet and toes and then nodded.

"That's a good sign Ignatius. Can you move your arms and hands?" The priest nodded again.

"OK ... I'll hand you this piece of cloth through the window, please just hold it on your head wound. It is sterilized and will soak the blood. Just hold it still ... don't wipe ... just keep it there for a moment or two ..." said the fireman soothingly.

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“You’re obviously in great discomfort Sir, in such a confined space. The vehicle’s bodywork has collapsed around you, but all signs are that you don’t have any broken bones ...”

“I know how sardines feel like ...” said the priest forcing a smile.

“That’s good Sir, a sense of humor helps in moments like these ... my colleagues have all the cutting equipment ready and we’ll soon have you out. It will be noisy for a while whilst they cut through the bodywork ... but we’ll soon have you out.”

Fireman Larcing moved to the other side of the car whilst his colleagues started cutting open the bodywork. Moments later the priest was out of the wreckage and able to stand on his own feet. A couple of ambulance men moved forward and asked him to lie on a stretcher. Before he could protest that he was OK to go home the priest had been carried into a waiting ambulance and driven at speed to hospital.

On arrival at the hospital Father Ignatius was surrounded by doctors and nurses. They cleaned his head wound which had bled profusely and took various X Rays to ensure there were no broken bones or internal injuries.

As he lay in his hospital bed half-dazed by the experience he noticed Father Donald and Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, sitting beside him. Someone had contacted them soon after the accident. Before Father Ignatius could say anything a doctor came in.

“Well Father ...” said the doctor, “I’m not a believer personally ... but it seems to me that your God must have been with you in that accident.

“Apart from the deep cut above your eye ... which missed your eye by millimetres ... you seem to be perfectly OK. There are no broken bones or fractures or internal injuries whatsoever ... A few bruises which will soon heal ... and maybe a scar will remain on your forehead.

“To be honest Father ... my colleagues and I are surprised you’re alive. The police and fire brigade cannot understand how you got out of that wreckage in one piece.

“It’s as if someone was there with you in the car holding you tightly in His arms and shielding you with His body.”

Father Ignatius said nothing, whilst Father Donald made the Sign of the Cross.

“Was anyone else hurt?” asked Father Ignatius eventually.

“No ... no one. The car which hit you from behind was damaged as was the bus which hit you from the side. But no one was hurt. Police say witnesses saw your car spin right round like a top when it was hit on the side.

“We’ll keep you here for a day or so for observations,” continued the doctor, “just a precaution you understand ... we doctors like to make sure ...”

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A week later Father Ignatius had a visitor in church. It was a tall handsome man in jeans and T shirt.

“I am Fireman Derek Larcing ... Father.” he said quietly.

“Oh do come in ...” the priest invited him in the Parish House, “I didn’t recognize you without your bright yellow helmet!”

Moments later, as they were enjoying a nice cup of tea and biscuits the fireman said, “Sir ... I have something to tell you.

“I am not a religious man ... somehow, I don’t believe in anything. Religion was never mentioned in our house or at school ...

“The thing is Sir ... a few days before your accident I had a dream ... nothing specific, I can’t even remember it ... but I remember seeing a man in my dreams with a white collar ... just as you’re wearing.

“It happened twice ... a few days later I saw the same man in my dream ... I can’t even make out his face ... but I remember the white collar well.

“I mentioned it to my wife and we thought nothing of it. We just laughed it off. But since your accident my wife asked me to come and see you and tell you about it.”

“Thank you for doing so.” said Father Ignatius gently, “I cannot explain it nor interpret it ... dreams do feature often in Christian teachings and there are several instances recorded in the Bible. Whether your dreams are of any significance I cannot tell ... but I sure welcome you being there and helping me when I was in that wreckage.”

The fireman smiled and said.

“The thing is Sir ... my wife and I discussed this incident ... especially you coming out of the car alive and in one piece ... I’ve seen many accidents in my time but none so bad with such an outcome ...

“My wife and I think we should come to your church ... is that allowed? We’re not Christian or anything you see ...”

“Everyone is allowed in God’s Church” said the priest, “it is His and not mine.

“You’re welcome on Sunday ... take it one step at a time and perhaps you’d wish to join our Adult Catechism Classes too when you’re ready ... just come along and see how it goes!”

And that’s what happened as a result of Father Ignatius’ accident.

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COME ON

It was a warm sunny day and Father Ignatius was alone in the Parish House. He got out in the gardens at the back of the house and sat by the little shrine to Our Lady set amongst rose bushes some way from the main building.

He took his Rosary from his pocket and started praying. A few minutes later he heard a bird singing in a tree nearby. It wasn't so much the usual singing one hears, nor the panic cries of a mother when a cat or other predator approaches the nest ... this was more like a calling type of singing. It was as if the bird was beckoning someone to do something.

Father Ignatius got up from his chair and walked into the shadows to better see what caused this bird behavior.

There on a tree nearby was a nest. He could see it clearly now, even though it was well camouflaged amongst the branches and leaves. And in the nest there were three birds ... quite well-grown by the looks of their size and the fact they were covered in feathers.

The mother bird kept flying towards the nest singing wildly and then moving away from branch to branch ... then it got down to the ground ... and up to the nest again ... singing all the time.

The three little ones looked over the edge of the nest but stayed put.

The priest realized what was going on. The mother was teaching her little ones to leave the nest and fly.

There she was hopping from one branch to another singing away: no doubt encouraging her young to take flight. You could almost hear her speak: "Come on my dears ... don't be afraid ... jump!"

They hesitated. Looked around, looked down at the ground which seems miles away, and then politely said to each other: "You first." "No, no, after you ..." "Ladies first, I always say."

And none of them had the courage to take off, whilst the mother is cheering heartily: "Come on, you know you can do it!"

Eventually one of the little ones gingerly jumped out of the nest, his wings flapping madly, and somehow landed safely to the ground. In time he was followed by his siblings and yet another generation took flight and left the nest.

The priest smiled as he saw all four birds hop from bush to bush, and eventually up the tree branches again, and then fly away confidently.

He sat down again at the feet of the statue and reflected on what he had just witnessed.

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“Our first steps with the Lord are no different to these birds I suppose” he thought to himself.

“We question, we analyze, we debate and then ... perhaps ... in time, we come to believe.

“Eventually, we make that first step in Faith. Believing, without having all the answers. Without knowing everything about the aero-dynamics of flight, or the effects of gravity as we leave the perceived safety of our nest.

“God does not ask us to know everything about Him, how He thinks, how He works, and how He manages the universe.

“All He asks is that we trust Him and believe, without question and without hesitation.

“His Holy Spirit will then lead us through our journey to the Father.”

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THE CLOCK

It was Monsignor Thomas' 30th Anniversary as a priest and the Bishop had arranged a Celebratory Reunion at Bishop's House. Father Ignatius had been invited and he was very eager to attend since he had not seen Monsignor Thomas for quite sometime. They knew each other well and had trained together as young priests all those many years ago.

A few weeks before the Reunion Father Ignatius was in the big city for business. He passed by an antiques shop and saw a lovely old wooden mantelpiece clock. It was made of very dark ebony wood with a clock face made of pale yellowish ivory encrusted with large gold numerals and hands. It wasn't too big, or too small. Just the right size to put on a mantelpiece, a bookshelf or on a desk! In fact it was the perfect present for Monsignor Thomas. He would be so pleased to have that in his office, thought Father Ignatius. He entered the shop and to his surprise, despite the antique's age and quality it was priced just right. So he bought it and was very pleased with himself.

When he arrived back at his Parish that evening Father Ignatius discovered to his great chagrin that the clock did not work. It was OK in the shop, so something must have happened during transit from the city. The next day he took the clock to the local horologist ... at least that's what it said on the shop window. "James Merry-Time Horologist"

The young attendant at the shop, dressed very smartly in a three-piece suit, welcomed the priest and announced proudly in an impeccable upper-class English accent that the Company had been in business for 150 years and now had 27 branches nationwide.

"We are proud to serve time after time! That's our Company motto Sir!" he concluded with a smile.

He then looked at the clock carefully and advised Father Ignatius that it was a unique and very valuable time-piece. The mechanism had been slightly damaged during the journey from the city but it could easily be fixed for £20. The priest readily agreed to this and left the clock in the shop intending to collect it when it was fixed.

A week later he returned and was greeted by the same shop attendant.

Ashen faced the attendant announced that the clock was nowhere to be found. They looked everywhere for it but could not find it. It wasn't in the storeroom, nor the workshop, and not in the safe either, where valuable pieces are always kept for safe-keeping.

The young attendant lamented the disappearance of the clock ... "Tempus Fugit" he said with a wry smile which the priest did not appreciate.

"It was such a lovely time-piece too," he said soothingly, "perfect movement and spring action ... reminiscent of the Georgian period I would say, probably earlier ... solid gold numerals and hands set against an ivory clock face all encased in an ebony framework ... Very unusual combination of materials, if I may say so Sir!"

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And so he went on describing the missing clock as if he was at an auction enticing as many buyers as possible to bid highly for it.

All this did not help the priest one bit.

“What do you propose doing about it?” he asked in desperation.

“Well Sir ...” said the attendant, “we could offer you a refund if you have proof of purchase or a valuation certificate or something that would ascertain its true value!”

As it happened, the priest still had the receipt from the city shop where he bought the clock. It cost exactly £100.

“That is indeed a valuable clock Sir.” said the attendant looking at the receipt, “I would have valued it at that sum if not a little higher ... but then it should be ... it is unique after all. They don’t make such lovely clocks like this anymore you know. Beautiful wooden craftsmanship is very difficult to find these days! And solid gold numerals and hands as I recall.”

The priest felt really low at having lost such a valuable item; especially when he heard it described so eloquently by someone who knew his trade very well.

The man continued in the same polite and considered voice.

“Our establishment deeply apologizes for the loss you have suffered Sir, and we offer you the sum of £80 in full recompense for our temporary drop in our high standard of service.”

Father Ignatius was totally perplexed at the amount offered in compensation.

“Why are you offering just £80?” he asked, “you can see from the receipt I paid £100 for the clock only a few days ago.”

“That is indeed correct Sir,” said the shop attendant, “but we have to deduct £20 for fixing the clock as you requested.”

Father Ignatius was astounded at what he’d just heard.

“But ...” he paused for a while, “you lost the clock. A clock costing me £100 to purchase! You can’t deduct £20 because you fixed it since I do not have the clock to take with me.”

“Oh indeed we can ...” continued the attendant politely, “the work was done at our workshop Sir. I inspected the clock myself after it was fixed and it passed our high standards of quality control. It was working perfectly. Surely you can’t expect us not to be paid for work carried out? That would hardly be fair, would you not say?”

There was no point in arguing further. The attendant was adamant that only £80 would be offered in compensation because the clock which was not working properly

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beforehand had indeed now been fixed. Father Ignatius took the amount offered and went away more puzzled than deflated.

It seems that there must be in Heaven a Patron Saint of Horology and all things relating to clocks.

Because a few days later Father Ignatius received a letter from the shop stating that the clock was ready for collection.

He rushed to the shop with a heart overflowing with joy and met the very same young attendant ... and there, ready for collection, was the valuable clock working perfectly.

“Oh you found it ... thank you so much!” said the priest smiling broadly.

“Indeed Sir,” said the attendant, “it was not so much lost than just temporarily misplaced due to refurbishment of our premises. We pride ourselves in this establishment never to lose our patrons property Sir.”

“That’s nice ... now I’d better give you your £80 back.”

“What for Sir?” enquired the young man rather puzzled.

“You know ... the £80 compensation you gave me when the clock was lost!”

“That will not be necessary Sir. As I’ve explained, the clock was never lost. It was temporarily misplaced. It was here all the time.”

“I’m glad about that ... but you must see that you’re down on the deal, as they say. You fixed the clock for me, it is now found, and you gave me £80.”

“I do understand Sir,” said the man in his impeccable English, “I have checked with our Head Office and they explained that as the clock was never lost we were wrong to give you £80 compensation. That transaction never took place as far as we’re concerned.”

“That’s very generous,” replied Father Ignatius with a smile, “but tell me ... what would have happened if the clock had not been found?”

“That is an impossibility as far as we’re concerned Sir. In our 150 years’ history no item has ever been lost. Very rarely, as indeed it did occur on this occasion, an item is misplaced and eventually found. Misplaced Sir, never lost!”

Father Ignatius was very pleased at what he’d heard and grateful for the generosity of this organization. He left the shop with his treasured time-piece restored to good working order and £80 in his pocket put to good use in helping his poor parishioners.

And it made a good story to relate at Monsignor Thomas’ Celebratory Reunion as well as the subject of the sermon on Sunday.

“A soul is never lost,” he thought to himself, “just temporarily misplaced!”

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LOST?

Father Ignatius was at the pulpit reading from the Bible:

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I told you that although you have seen me, you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from Heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what He gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day.’”

The priest waited until the congregation sat down and then said:

“There’s an important message here from John’s Gospel at Chapter 6 verses 37 onwards.

“Jesus says that the will of God is that He, Jesus, should not lose anything, or anyone, that was given to Him. What does this mean? Are we all destined for Heaven and none of us should be lost?”

“Let me tell you something which happened to me lately.

“Monsignor Thomas at Bishop’s House celebrated his 30th Anniversary as a priest recently. The Bishop held a party which I attended and I bought the Monsignor a lovely antique clock as a gift.

“Unfortunately, by the time I got home the clock stopped working. I took it to a shop and they agreed to fix it for £20.

“A few days later when I got back for the clock I was told it was lost. It was not anywhere to be found. The shop attendant explained that the clock had indeed been fixed yet somehow it got lost during refurbishment of the premises. He offered me compensation which I reluctantly accepted; but it was a small recompense for the lost valuable antique.”

The priest stopped for a while as he usually did during his sermons; then he continued.

“A few days later I received a letter saying the clock was ready for collection. You can imagine my delight at finding this precious antique once again.

“I of course offered to return the money the shop gave me as compensation but the attendant refused to accept it. He said it was Company policy never to lose an item. The clock was never lost; he told me emphatically, it was just temporarily misplaced.

“Not lost; but temporarily misplaced.

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“And since the clock was never lost the shop attendant could not take back any money paid in compensation. It was mine to keep and use as a donation from the shop.”

The priest stopped again for a while.

“This set me thinking dear friends ...” he continued.

“God created us body and soul. We know that the body eventually turns to dust yet the soul lives on.

“It is given to each one of us for safe-keeping so that we may return it to God as He intended and as Jesus said.

“But through our sins we manage to lose it time and again. A lost soul destined for another destination than the one intended ... all because of our sin.

“God, in all His love and mercy sent Jesus to pay the price of restoring our soul. He has made us whole again. And the price was not a mere £20 which I paid to repair the clock. Jesus paid the price with His own life when He was so cruelly and horribly nailed to the Cross.

“That is a high price indeed my friends ...

“The Son of God paid the price for our soul to be restored once again; just like that clock of mine.

“And it is our job ... our duty and our great responsibility not to lose or misplace our soul ever again.

“Whether it is temporarily misplaced in Purgatory or forever misplaced in hell ... this is something which each one of us will have to account for to God when it is our turn to meet Him face to face.

“What have you done with the soul I gave you for safe-keeping? He will ask us.

“I hope we’ll be ready to say ‘Here I am Lord, it is I returning to you. Not lost, nor misplaced.’ ”

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PARK ENCOUNTER

It was a crisp autumn evening when Father Ignatius took his dog Canis for a walk in the park. As he passed the pond a few ducks followed him quacking in the hope that he'd feed them a few pieces of bread. The dog stopped for a few seconds, looked at them as if to say "Go away ... we're busy" then pulled at the lead once again beckoning the priest to move on.

The kind priest moved on slowly through the empty park, his thoughts and prayers in mind. He felt particularly sad at the poverty and desolation around him. He remembered the Biblical story of seven years of plenty and seven years of drought and wondered whether there was a Joseph amongst the nation's leaders and politicians to guide the country through the economic crisis it was in.

Almost every one of his parishioners had a story to tell about job losses, business closures, bankruptcies and house repossessions. He recalled the Parish Council treasurer's voice as he said in his Welsh accent, "Sorry to tell you Father ... but the Sunday collection is down yet again ... for the seventh week running ..."

Church funds were low and there was little prospect of financial help from the Bishop. Yet work needed to be done. Some of the brick work in the bell tower was getting loose and needed repair, the electric wiring in the Parish house required up-grading, his car was beginning to show its age ... but more important, the number of parishioners who needed urgent financial help was increasing. He knew of families where the children went to bed hungry because of lack of food ... and that's more vital than any work the church needed.

It was getting rather dark when he was awakened from his reveries by the sound of a scuffle in the bushes. The dog growled once or twice but the priest managed to keep him quiet.

He approached the bushes cautiously and discovered three men with their backs to him standing over a fourth man lying on the ground. Obviously the result of an unfair fight

"What's going on here?" he asked in a quiet yet firm voice.

This startled the three men who turned round suddenly to face him. They were young, early twenties at the most, and looked thuggish and menacing. Not the sort of people you'd like to meet alone in the dark in the middle of a park. Which was precisely the situation Father Ignatius found himself in!

One of the thugs said "What's it to do with you old man? Walk away and keep your mutt under control or else ..."

Father Ignatius pulled back on the dog's lead as Canis stood there baring his teeth. He looked at the man standing in the middle straight in the eye and said, "You're Gabbi aren't you? Named after the Angel Gabriel as I recall; pity you didn't inherit some of the Angel's good character!"

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The young man who'd spoken previously jumped in again, "Do you know this geezer Gabbi? That's all we need, someone to identify us!" He moved a few steps forward but Gabbi, who seemed to be the leader of the group, pulled him back.

"Hello Father ..." said Gabbi sheepishly.

"Father?" said the third young man, "is this fellow your old dad?"

"Shut it!" commanded Gabbi.

A second or so later the priest spoke again, still in his quiet yet assured voice.

"Tell your friends, Gabbi," he said, "never to engage someone they do not know. For all they know I might be a martial arts expert and despite my age I may well take the three of you on. Ask them if they want to try!"

None of the youngsters spoke.

"Now then ..." continued the priest, "I want you to walk away quietly and go to your homes.

"Oh ... and one more thing! Don't you ever touch one hair from this man's head. He is under my protection now ... as you people might say. If any harm ever comes to him I'll come after you and make you regret it for the rest of your lives. Understood?"

"Yes Father ..." said Gabbi and the three men walked away hurriedly.

The priest bent down to check on the fourth man who had been kicked a few times in the ribs. He was somewhat shaken but not badly hurt. He did not wish to give his name, thanked the priest and then ran away.

Father Ignatius got up and made his way back home with his dog.

The Angel Gabriel may not have been in the park that evening, but Father Ignatius' Angel was sure there ready to protect him if needs be!

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THE RETURN

A few days after Father Ignatius encountered the thugs in the park he had a visit at Parish House.

It was the young man lying on the ground who had been punched and kicked by the other three hooligans. He still had the scars on his face where he'd been injured and his left eye had turned a lovely shade of blue.

"May I have a word Sir?" he asked as he stood nervously at the door.

The priest led him to the downstairs waiting room and offered him a cup of tea.

"I see you're still healing slowly," he said soothingly, "have those people bothered you again?"

The young man shook his head.

"You come and tell me if they do ..." continued the priest, "I know one of them well and I'll soon put a stop to it. Who are the other two?"

The young man gave Father Ignatius the names of the other men who beat him up.

"What can I do to help you?" asked the priest gently.

"I have come to explain myself," said the young man, "the other night at the park I had to run away quickly for a reason as I shall explain why ..."

The priest nodded gently to encourage the man to continue.

"The four of us are friends ... Gabbi and the others," said the man, "at least I thought we were ..."

"We don't have jobs ... it's difficult to find work these days ... well, I'm OK now, as I'll explain ..."

"You see Sir ... why did Gabbi call you Father the other day, by the way?"

"It's because I'm a priest" said Father Ignatius, "it's customary to call a priest Father!"

"I see ..." said the man, "well ... the four of us a few days ago ... last week it was. Well we mugged a man in town by the cinema."

"It was Tuesday night and we stopped this man and we asked him for his wallet. He gave it to Gabbi and the three of them ran away. As I was leaving I noticed he was wearing a gold watch ... so I asked him for it. He gave it to me and I ran away also."

"Afterwards the three of them divided the money between them and gave me nothing."

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“They said I didn’t deserve anything because I had not agreed to the mugging. I said it was wrong to rob people.

“They then saw me with the watch and realized I’d taken it from the man. They wanted that too but I ran away.

“A few days later they met me in the park and beat me up ... that’s when you found me with your dog.

“I had to run away when you helped me because I was worried they’d go and beat my sister!”

“I see ...” said the priest frowning, “and what happened to the watch?”

“I still have it here ... I was going to sell it because I need the money for my sister. She has no husband you see ... and she has a small baby girl which she has to feed. I was going to give her the money.”

The priest looked at the gold watch in his hand and realized that it was quite valuable.

“How much were you intending to sell it for?” he asked.

“About £20 ...” said the man.

“I’ll buy it from you for this sum on one condition,” said Father Ignatius, “I want you to promise that you will never ever mug or steal from anyone again. Is that understood?”

The young man nodded.

“If you ever get in trouble again you’re no longer under my protection. The police will no doubt find you and you’ll end up in prison.”

“Yes Sir ... Father. You see ... I now have a job cleaning cars at the garage in town. I can give some money to my sister ...”

The priest gave the young man £20 and let him go. He then picked up the phone and called the police.

An hour later Detective Inspector Lorne called on the priest.

“On Tuesday of last week there was a mugging in town by the cinema and a wallet and watch were taken,” said Father Ignatius.

“Good Heavens, Father ...” said the Inspector, “that’s very accurate. Don’t tell me it was you who did it! I know funds are short in your church but I never expected the likes of you to turn to robbing people!”

He then laughed heartily as he watched the priest’s face.

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“Seriously though, Father ...” he continued, “it’s one of the cases I’m investigating. Do you have some information for me?”

“Better than that ...” said the priest, “I have the watch in question ... here it is.”

The detective looked at the watch and whistled quietly under his breath. “That’s a very expensive time-piece,” he said, “Care to tell me how it came in your possession?”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Vince.” replied Father Ignatius.

“I thought not Father ... But you can’t blame me for trying. I’d better give you a receipt for this then we’ll return it to its owner. You don’t happen to have the wallet too?”

“No, sorry! Was much taken?”

“Only £10. The victim was more interested in the watch. He said it had sentimental value. For such a solid gold time-piece I’d have sentimental value too I tell you, Father. Some people have more money than they’ll ever need whilst others around here are starving under our very noses.”

The policeman thanked the priest and went away happily.

Father Ignatius never saw the young man who’d been beaten up ever again.

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JUST A CARPENTER

On the left side of St Vincent church, right in front by the Altar, just by the Sacristy door, there's a large statue of Our Lady. On the right side of the altar, hanging on the wall, there's a picture of St Vincent, the Patron Saint of the church. Mother Superior found in the Convent, in an old storeroom, a large statue of St Joseph and the baby Jesus. It was exactly the same size as the statue of Our Lady. She suggested to Father Ignatius that the statue be restored and put on the right of the Altar, and for the picture of St Vincent to be moved elsewhere in the Church.

On the appointed day the beautifully restored statue of St Joseph was put in its rightful place on the right side of the church and Father Ignatius led a short prayer meeting for all involved. A few nuns from the convent were there, as well as the restorer and a few helpers, and Mrs Davenport the priests' housekeeper.

After leading the prayers Father Ignatius said a few words.

"I'm so glad that Mother Superior suggested we put this statue here to honor St Joseph; and I thank her for her kindness and generosity in donating the statue which was found in the convent.

"I'd like us to think for a while about St Joseph as an individual.

"Here we have a man, often depicted in pictures and statues as being a little advanced in age, we don't know really how old he was when he met Mary ... but she always looks much younger doesn't she?

"Anyway ... here we have a man intending to marry the young lady he loves and no doubt start a family which he will look after by way of his job as a humble carpenter.

"When one day he finds out she is pregnant. I don't know about you ... but I'd feel really hurt and cheated if it happened to me. How could she? And I trusted her so?

"Aren't these the thoughts that would cross your minds ... Peter, Ken and Mark?"

He looked at the three young men in the little prayer group and they smiled coyly.

"And I'd bet if it happened to you you'd run a mile in the opposite direction ... wouldn't you?" he asked them.

They did not reply.

"Oh ... but there's more ..." said the priest, "not only did Joseph's girlfriend promise him that she did not cheat on him ... no, wait for it. She tells him that she is carrying the Son of God. Yes ... she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and she's carrying the Son of God.

"Now in those days it would have been a great scandal to have a baby if you're not married. You would have been ostracized by your family for a start for bringing shame upon them.

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“Chances are you would have been stoned to death too ...

“But to say that you’re carrying the Son of God from a Virgin pregnancy would have been blasphemy of the highest order. Either that, or people would have thought you’d lost your mind ... simply gone mad and left to suffer the consequences.

“Yet, despite all these risks to her good name and indeed to her safety Mary had the courage and the Faith to trust in God and say ‘Yes’ when the Angel visited her. We should always be grateful for her saying ‘Yes’.

“Can you imagine? An Angel appeared to her ... if it was me I’d probably fall off my chair with fright at the sight of such a visitation.”

They all laughed.

“And can you imagine poor old Joseph? His head must have been really spinning in a daze ... and without the benefit of a Guinness or two!

“First she tells him she’s pregnant, then she says it’s a Virgin birth and the baby is the Son of God.

“Over to you three young men ... what would you do in such circumstances?”

He paused for a second or two and did not give them time to reply.

“But the Angel appeared to Joseph in a dream ... we don’t know if it was the same Angel Gabriel, but never mind. And like Mary, Joseph too has great Faith and he believes what he is told. He stays with Mary and raises the young infant as any good father would. And for this too we should be always grateful.

“I am very pleased to have the statue of St Joseph and the baby Jesus here and that of Our Lady on the other side of the Altar over there. The Holy Family on either side of the Altar reminding us of Faith in God and parental responsibility.

“I would like now to read you a short prayer to St Joseph. This prayer is said to be over 1900 years old. It was found in the fiftieth year of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the 1500's it was sent by the Pope to Emperor Charles when he was going into battle. It is a novena to be prayed for nine consecutive mornings for anything you may desire. It has seldom been known to fail.

“O St. Joseph whose protection is so great, so strong, so prompt before the Throne of God, I place in you all my interests and desires. O St. Joseph do assist me by your powerful intercession and obtain for me from your Divine Son all spiritual blessings through Jesus Christ, Our Lord; so that having engaged here below your Heavenly power I may offer my Thanksgiving and Homage to the most Loving of Fathers. O St. Joseph, I never weary contemplating you and Jesus asleep in your arms. I dare not approach while He reposes near your heart. Press him in my name and kiss His fine Head for me, and ask Him to return the Kiss when I draw my dying breath. St. Joseph, Patron of departing souls, pray for us. Amen.”

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UPHILL YOUNG LIFE

Father Ignatius came out of the Sacristy and found a young boy at the back of the church crying. It was Tim Bryant.

The priest knew the eleven year old well. He came from a very poor family and had a difficult life despite his few years on this world.

Tim often worked hard after school to supplement the family budget. He delivered groceries for Mr Harris to all the customers in the vicinity. The priest had seen him often pushing his bicycle up the steep hill in Carrington Road and Heath Avenue. Those two roads were steep all right ... but not as steep as Nelson Gardens right up the hill where Tim often delivered cans of food as well as vegetables and other items purchased from Mr Harris. He certainly enjoyed the ride down the hill when the deliveries were finished and his bicycle was light; but going up was really difficult, especially when it was dark and cold in winter.

He'd been working for Mr Harris for about a year now and proudly gave his mother the £3 a week he earned to help her pay the rent and buy food.

She too worked hard. She took in washing from a number of people every week to earn a little more than what she got by cleaning people's homes. Some time ago Father Ignatius decided to help her without appearing to be charitable and risk losing her dignity. He decided that the Altar boys vestments needed washing and ironing at least once a month, as well as various other church items such as the Altar cloth and other items of linen. He asked Mrs Bryant to take on this task for a monthly fee, which she gladly did.

However, this upset Mrs Davenport, his housekeeper, who felt she was perfectly capable of doing this work as she had done for years ... thank you very much!

The priest diplomatically explained that Mrs Davenport's talents were in the kitchen and that her culinary expertise made many a professional chef green with envy. It would be wrong to waste such skills on washing vestments.

Mrs Davenport acquiesced and peace was restored once again in the Parish House.

Tim's father, Mr Bryant, was partly the cause of much unhappiness in the poor household. He earned a pittance doing odd jobs as a gardener; but whatever he earned was soon spent on drink. He often got home in a bad state, got into an argument which he started, and then beat his wife and son.

Mrs Bryant often begged Father Ignatius not to say anything to anyone, least of all the Authorities for fear that her son Tim would be taken into care and she'd lose him for ever. The priest understood well this dilemma, yet could not let such a situation continue where mother and child are often beaten up, sometimes violently. He had spoken to Mr Bryant on many occasions, sometimes harshly threatening to report him to the police, yet Mr Bryant would be totally and fully repentant, promising not to lay a finger on his family ever again and to stop drinking forthwith ... only to repeat his behavior in a few weeks later.

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Understandably, young Tim performed very badly at school. When you work hard delivering groceries every night, and you go home not knowing whether your parents will be there, or whether you'd be beaten for no reason and often went to bed hungry because there is no food in the house, it is very difficult to concentrate on your studies.

And now there he was ... the poor eleven year old crying at the back of the church.

Father Ignatius approached him and asked gently, "What's the matter Tim? Has your dad beaten you?"

"No ... it's much worse." said the boy wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

What could be much worse, thought the priest. "Would you like to tell me about it?" he asked.

"You know I deliver groceries for Mr Harris?" said the young lad.

The priest nodded.

"Well ... today as I was delivering in Wilson Lane someone stole from my bicycle when I left it there to go to one of the houses. They took a few vegetables and packets of sugar and flour.

"Mr Harris got very angry with me and said I stole them. He didn't believe me when I told him what happened and he fired me.

"Mom will be very upset because she needs the money I give her every week. Dad will go mad ... as always."

"Is Mr Harris the greengrocer just by the corner at the end of the street?" asked the priest gently, not forgetting to say a silent prayer for the Lord to help in this situation.

"Yes!" said Tim.

"Well ... I need some fresh air. Let's walk there and see what the Lord Jesus will do to help us about this! Always trust in Jesus, Tim. He will help change a bad situation for the good, if you trust Him."

As they arrived at the small shop Father Ignatius asked the boy to wait outside and went in alone.

"What can I do for you Padre?" said Mr Harris from behind the counter.

"We haven't met," said the priest, "I've come with that young boy outside. He used to work for you until today ..."

"Oh ... yes ..." said Mr Harris looking through the shop window.

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“I’ve known the boy for years ... he’s not the type who would steal, Mr Harris. I tend to believe what he told you ...”

Mr Harris raised his eyebrows.

“Are you the priest from the church up the hill?” he asked.

“Yes, how rude of me. I should have introduced myself. I’m Father Ignatius from St Vincent Church!”

“Yeh ... I’ve heard about you ...” continued Mr Harris, “you lot buy a good deal from me. Good customers you are.

“Your housekeeper, Mrs Davenport, is always here fussing about what she buys. ‘Must have the best vegetables for Father Ignatius’ she says ... ‘These are not fresh enough ... these are too big ... these are too small ...’ and on and on she goes. My wife calls her Mrs Fusspot ... behind her back of course.”

“Oh!” said the priest who had no idea where his household purchases came from, “is she here often?”

“Yes ... every week! She fills her trolley to the brim and pulls it behind her up the hill. It must be very difficult for a woman her age.”

“Why doesn’t she have everything delivered?” asked the priest.

“She’s too mean ...” said Mr Harris, “I suggested the idea to her but she said that the church is short of cash and she will not waste good funds on delivery charges!”

“I tend to agree with you!” Father Ignatius went on, “it’s wrong for her to pull a heavy trolley up the hill every week. She should have everything delivered ... if only you had a delivery boy!”

“I see where you’re coming from ...” laughed Mr Harris, “perhaps I was wrong to accuse the lad of stealing. He’s a good boy and works hard. Bring him in and tell him he’s hired!”

And that’s how the Lord Jesus helped Tim Bryant get his job back delivering for Mr Harris.

Father Ignatius had a little difficulty explaining to Mrs Davenport why it was better to have everything delivered, but it wasn’t a task that his diplomacy couldn’t handle.

Three months later Mr Bryant, Tim’s dad, died suddenly of a heart attack.

The beatings stopped once and for all, and in time, Tim started to improve with his work at school.

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THE GRACEFUL LADY

For the last three Sundays, Father Ignatius noticed a new member of his congregation attending Mass and always sitting in the same place on the left of the Altar.

She was an elegantly dressed lady in her mid to late fifties. She took part in silent prayer throughout Mass and never came forward for Communion. At the end of Mass she got out of church without speaking with anyone and drove away in a nice new car. Not the sort of car you see often in St Vincent Church whose parishioners are mostly either out of work or earning a pittance in a job in the poorest town in the country.

Father Ignatius liked to wait in the car park after Mass and greet his parishioners as they came out of church. Yet he never managed to speak to this mysterious lady who always left just before the final hymn ended, and so avoided contact with him or any other parishioner.

This week however the repetitive saga would have a different outcome because Father Donald was offering Mass; so our resourceful priest decided to wait in the car park a few minutes before Mass ended and so have the opportunity to greet his mysterious new visitor.

As the elegant woman came out of church early Father Ignatius greeted her with a smile.

“Hello, I’m Father Ignatius ... I don’t think we’ve met ...” he said.

“Yes Father ... how remiss of me ...” she replied in a refined English accent, “perhaps we can meet somewhere and I’ll introduce myself ...”

Father Ignatius was taken aback. He certainly did not expect such a response.

“Ehm ... we can go in the Parish House” he mumbled.

“Excellent ... lead on and I’ll follow” she smiled.

Minutes later they were both in the large lounge room downstairs in the Parish House. She sat on the armchair near the warm fireplace; the very chair the priest often used when watching TV or listening to his beloved classical music. He sat on the settee opposite her.

“I haven’t been attending your church for long,” she started.

“You’re very welcome here ...” he encouraged her.

“The truth is ... I haven’t been to church for almost thirty years,” she continued, “but my husband died a month ago and I thought I’d come back ...”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear it ...” the priest sympathized.

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“Sorry that I’ve come back to church or that my husband died?” she asked teasingly, and before the priest had time to reply she smiled and went on “oh ... don’t worry Father, actually I’m glad he’s dead ... I’ve cursed him often enough ...”

Father Ignatius knew to say nothing and let her continue.

“We married some thirty two years ago to be precise and he left me for another woman after two years of marriage. We had a young son aged one year at the time. My husband moved to another part of the country to start a new life with his new lover and I haven’t seen him since.

“He provided generously for the up-bringing of our son. He was fairly wealthy and made arrangements for moneys to be regularly credited to my bank, yet he never made contact nor visited our son since the day he left.

“My son is grown-up now and married with two children of his own. And my husband and I never divorced.

“He went to live with his girl friend, and had two other children with her although he never married her. And last month he died in a car accident.

“I heard from his solicitors that he left money for our son and for me.

“And I cursed him once again ... I never forgave him for the pain he’s caused me and that’s why I’ve not been to church ever since the day our marriage broke down!”

“Well, as I said, you’re very welcome here ...” Father Ignatius replied encouragingly once again.

“I know it’s wrong not to forgive Father ...” she continued as calmly as before, “but I just can’t. And that’s why I haven’t been to church for a long while.

“I don’t even know why I’m back in church now ... for the past three weeks at least. Perhaps I’m hoping that God will give me a ‘get out of jail free’ card,” she smiled. “You know what I mean ... He’d forgive my hatred for my husband yet let me continue to hate him.”

“I doesn’t work like that ...” Father Ignatius said gently.

“Yes I know Father. You’d have thought that after all these years I would have moved on ... but I haven’t ...” she continued lighting a cigarette.

“That’s because the hurt caused to you all those years ago has not healed. For various reasons the pain has not been given time to subside and fade away. Memories perhaps remained too vividly alive and so fuelled your anger and made the pain worse,” he explained as quietly and gently as before.

“Anyway ... that’s my story,” she smiled stubbing out her just lit cigarette in the ashtray, “I may or may not continue to come to church ... but it’s been nice meeting you Father. You’re a very gentle and caring person, and I appreciate your kindness.”

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“Let me ask you something ...” Father Ignatius asked just as she was about to get up, “if your husband was alive today, and he was here right now, full of genuine remorse for the hurt he has caused you all these years. If he asked you to forgive him, knowing full well that there’s nothing he can do to turn back the clock and put things right. If he genuinely and truly asked you for forgiveness; would you find it in your heart to forgive him?”

“What an interesting question ...” she replied, “yes ... on reflection I think I would forgive him.”

“It’s too late for him to ask your forgiveness,” said the priest, “but it’s not too late for you to forgive him.

“For your own peace of mind ... and for your own sake and salvation, you must forgive him once and for all. The memories and hurt may well linger on, but with true forgiveness will come healing and in time reconciliation with Our Lord.”

“I’ll try ...” she said showing emotion for the first time.

“That’s all God is asking of you. And I’ll be here to help you if you need me ...” he replied.

And that’s how a wounded soul finally managed to find peace and healing. She continued to attend Mass on Sundays and had several discussions with Father Ignatius and Father Donald over a period of time to make her way back to God.

Yesterday, she went to Confession and had Communion for the first time in over thirty years.

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THREE BELLS TO PARADISE

The Parish House is a very large and old building situated right next to St Vincent Church at the top of the hill overlooking the whole town. Upstairs there's enough living accommodation to house five priests, and downstairs there's a very large kitchen and dining room as well as other space used for administrative purposes and as meeting rooms.

Of course, now there's only Father Ignatius and Father Donald living there; and their housekeeper who works there by daytime but lives in her cottage on the church grounds.

Many years ago a pre-school mother and toddlers group used to meet regularly in the large rooms downstairs. It was like a daily school really and at times it had as many as thirty children and enough adults to care for them.

The priest at the time, Father Ferdinand, of French origin, had three electric push-bell buttons installed by the front door, each ringing in a different tone. He labeled each button "Priests", "School" and "Kitchen" so that he is no longer disturbed having to open the door for someone who really did not want to see him.

Very efficient Father Ferdinand was ... albeit somewhat aloof from his parishioners at times. Unlike Father Ignatius of course!

As soon as Father Ignatius took over at St Vincent he removed the three labels but kept the bells which are still in working order.

On Friday, our friendly priest was at the local Catholic school as a visiting speaker at the Catechism class for the 15 year-olds.

After he gave his short talk, Father Ignatius invited questions from his young audience.

One of the pupils asked, "Why have you got three buttons to press the bell on the front door at Parish House?"

The priest was astonished at this somewhat unrelated question. In order to gain more thinking time, he turned the question back onto his audience. "Good question," he said with a smile, "does anybody know why we have three bell buttons on our door at Parish House?"

"Variety is the spice of life!" said a young boy as the whole class erupted into laughter.

This encouraged another boy to say, "One bell is for tall people, one for normal people, and the other one is for the short ones who can't reach the other two bells!"

Father Ignatius said nothing as the pupils continued to laugh.

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This went on for a few minutes and eventually the children exhausted their reservoir of wit as one said, “It depends how in a hurry the visitor is. One bell is for urgent, another is for normal and the other is for people who can wait a bit!”

Father Ignatius replied, “If only it were so ... I find that most people want to see me in a hurry.

“Those three bell buttons were there when I first came to St Vincent. All three still work. I’ve kept them as a reminder of the three bell buttons on the gates of Heaven.

“There are three buttons there just by the Pearly Gates ... and depending on which one you press you go to Heaven, hell or Purgatory!”

“Wow ...” said a young girl, “does one know which bell sends you to which place?”

“No!” replied Father Ignatius emphatically.

“That’s hardly fair ...” cried out a boy, “what if you press the wrong button and go to hell by mistake?”

“No one goes to hell by mistake!” said the priest as he stopped for a few moments. Then he repeated again gently in a softer voice ...

“No one goes to hell by mistake!

“The Good Lord knows precisely who believes in Him. Who has loved and obeyed Him in this life, and who has come to Him through His only Son Jesus Christ.

“He also knows too well who has continuously defied Him. Who has continuously snubbed Him, and who has continuously ignored Him in this world. Not through ignorance, carelessness or stupidity even, but through willful insolence and outright unwillingness to believe.

“The choice between Heaven and hell does not depend on which bell button you push. It depends on your state of sinfulness at the time you die.

“That is what really determines your eventual destination.

“And I repeat ... no one goes to hell by mistake. People willingly choose to go there.”

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COFFEE IN HEAVEN

Father Ignatius had received a request from Bishop's House to accommodate Father Ferdinand at St Vincent Parish House for a few days.

The French priest was visiting from France to attend a Conference at Bishop's House, but as there was no accommodation for him there it was decided to house him at St Vincent, where he was Parish priest many years ago before Father Ignatius, and for him to travel daily to the Conference from there.

On the appointed day Father Ferdinand arrived and was greeted by Father Ignatius whom he had never met.

The two men spent some time getting acquainted with each other before settling down to a sumptuous evening meal prepared by Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper.

At the end of the meal the French priest complimented Mrs Davenport on her culinary skills.

"That was marvelous Madame," he said, "perhaps you should come with me to Tours in France where you can be my chef in our Parish!"

"What is that?" asked Mrs Davenport not understanding the man's distinct French accent, "you want me to do the Tour de France? You expect me to cycle at my age?"

"Non ... non ... Madame," continued the priest, "I said Tours in France. It is a City in Central France where my Parish is situated. I am known jokingly there as Le Curé de Tours ... as in the book by Balzac!"

"Balzac?" asked the housekeeper as she left the room with a tray full of empty plates and cutlery, "I've never heard of him. But then I don't know much about French cyclists!"

Father Ignatius smiled and said nothing, knowing full well that to have a conversation with Mrs Davenport is sometimes like speaking to a being from outer space.

"Eh bien ..." continued Father Ferdinand, "how is the state of affairs in your little corner of God's Kingdom on earth?"

"Generally things are getting along fine ..." replied Father Ignatius, "most people are struggling in a small northern town where the economic crisis has had most effect. Poverty and desolation are widespread but people are coping as well as they can, with the help of God!"

"At least God is still with you ..." said the French visitor, "even in this cold and damp place which I remember all too well from my days here! It has always been poor as I remember. Poor in wealth but rich in Spirit! I really liked my time here Ignatius. I regret having to return to France and handing over this bit of Heaven to you!"

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Father Ignatius smiled and said nothing. He'd never heard his town described as a bit of Heaven before.

"You see ..." the French priest went on, "there is in France a trend, a modern movement if you like, where it is fashionable to reconsider one's beliefs in an Almighty Deity.

"It is now trendy, enlightened even, to say that God does not exist. He is either a figment of one's imagination ... or an invention created by man to soothe and protect himself from adversity, or even to control lesser educated fellow humans.

"We often see famous figures writing in the press or speaking on radio and TV about the non-existence of God.

"It is bad enough in itself Ignatius. But these people encourage others to follow in their beliefs. It's as if the devil himself has visited our affluent towns and cities and he is on a recruitment drive."

The French priest stopped and sipped a little coffee.

"That is sad ..." commented Father Ignatius quietly.

"It is a crisis in every respect ..." the French man responded, "the Church, in France and elsewhere in Europe I suspect, seems helpless in this situation ...

"Sermons on Sundays and Church teachings have been toned down ... mustn't frighten the horses you see ... as you English say!

"Talk of the devil and hell from the pulpit is greeted with ridicule and derision.

"But he exists all right. Ignatius. I've seen him often in my town ... He is certainly winning over many souls at the moment with his fine convincing arguments on the media and the temptations he puts in our way to lure people to his way of thinking!"

Father Ferdinand stopped again as he put his cup of coffee down.

"I pray daily Ignatius," he went on, "that this trend does not spread throughout Europe and beyond. But I fear that as wealth increases throughout nations and their populations the devil advances in its wake!"

"In that case the devil may never come here ..." joked Father Ignatius, "this town has always been very poor ... so much so that even the church mice are on a starvation diet!"

Father Ferdinand smiled as Father Ignatius went on, "In Christ's death and Resurrection we know that God has conquered evil.

"He knows full well those who believe in Him and love Him. Whether we do this with full intellectual knowledge; or just with humble, simple humility and understanding.

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“And the Lord knows full well those who stand against Him in defiance, and worse still, encourage others to do the same!”

The two men were interrupted by Mrs Davenport entering the room with another pot of hot coffee.

Father Ferdinand looked up and said, “Madame ... you are one of God’s treasures here on earth. One day the Good Lord will be most pleased to have you serve coffee in Heaven!”

“I don’t know what you mean ...” she said as she gathered more empty plates on her tray, “Do they have coffee in Heaven? What do you think Father Ignatius?”

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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 ..."

"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!"

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“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.

“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 ...”

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“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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THE COCKTAIL QUEEN CATCHES UP

There are times in life when whatever we have done in the past has a habit of catching up with us and come back to haunt us, or bite us on the backside, or give us a pleasant surprise even. And that's what happened to Father Ignatius when the door bell at St Vincent Parish House rang one sunny afternoon.

There at the door was a pretty young lady of about 23 years of age with two toddlers, a girl aged about five and a little boy aged four.

"Hia ... Father ... Ignatius isn't it?" she said with a smile, "I have a surprise for you!"

"Good afternoon ..." he replied gently.

"May we come in?" she asked, "the little ones want to go to the toilet ... and I have something to tell you ..."

Father Ignatius led them into the downstairs waiting room and showed them where the toilets were. He then asked Mrs Davenport to prepare some tea and biscuits and orange juice for the children.

Moments later they were all in the waiting room as Mrs Davenport came in with the refreshments. As she left, closing the door behind her, Father Ignatius asked, "How can I help you?"

"You don't remember me?" she asked.

"Well ..." he mumbled embarrassingly, "I get to meet so many people over the years ..."

"I'll give you a clue ..." she interrupted, "about five years ago ... the age of this little girl; now that should jog your memory."

He looked at her blankly.

"I was the Cocktail Queen working at the Bitten Apple Night Club ... I offered to let you in without paying ... and you were too embarrassed to be seen there I think!"

"I told you I was pregnant, having a baby ... do you remember?"

Father Ignatius lifted his eyebrows as faded memories came rushing back from the deep recesses of his mind.

"Ah ..." she said in exasperation, "you still don't seem to remember me ... that's not very flattering to a pretty girl you know ... and I thought I had made quite an impression on you!"

"Well I do remember that you were none too happy when I told you I were pregnant ... it made you quite mad I think ..."

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“As I recall I came to see you and tell you all about it ... you took me in your office upstairs.

“And that’s when I told you I were pregnant and I wanted to have an abortion and get rid of it.

“You got very upset with me and you advised me against it. I thought what right have you to tell me what to do? You said it was a living human being and it was wrong to kill it ... and that I would always regret it.

“As I said at the time, I was working at the Night Club ... the Cocktail Queen I was ... very popular with the clientele I were!

“I couldn’t keep the baby could I? It would have interfered with my job. Who has ever heard of the Pregnant Cocktail Queen? You can’t wear those skimpy outfits with a big bump upfront can you?

“Anyhow ... I left you and I was proper upset with you I was ... telling me to keep the baby!

“Months later we met again at the supermarket and I told you that I had the baby after all ...

“It’s this little girl here; you never met her. I called her Ignatia after you. Well it’s her middle name really ... Ignatia is rather an odd name don’t you think? But I had to name her after you. Her first name is Hilary.”

The priest smiled feebly.

“So when I had Hilary I gave up working at the Night Club and took on a job at the supermarket where we met.

“I was living with Hilary’s father at the time ... When I told him what you’d said to me he agreed that I should not have the abortion ... even though he was keen on it at first ...

“His name is Alec. We later married you know ... not in a church like, but at the Registry Office. A year later we had Mark here ... he’s about four years old!”

“Yes ... I remember,” said Father Ignatius, “I’m so glad you and your husband decided not to proceed with the abortion ... she’s such a pretty girl. I’m sure you love both your children.”

“Oh yes ... we do love them very much, my husband and I. We’re ever so happy. If it were not for you I would not have my precious Hilary!

“I still work at the supermarket ... part-time like ... I have to look after the kids and all! You don’t go to that supermarket anymore ... ‘cos I haven’t seen you for ages!” she said, “My husband Alec works at the bus depot you know ... he asked me to come

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and see you ... since you helped us the last time when I were pregnant with Hilary ... Alec said perhaps you can help us again!"

"I'll do my best ..." he said gently.

"Well, it's about Hilary here ... I took her to the Catholic school down the road and they wouldn't let her in ... the Head Mistress there was a proper snooty fancy pants she was ... She said she couldn't accept Hilary because she didn't have a Baptismal Certificate. So Alec, my husband, suggested I come to you for a Baptismal Certificate. And could we have one for Mark as well while we're at it ... I hope they don't cost much! "

"It's not that simple ..." said Father Ignatius, "I take it the children have not been baptized!"

"No ... I don't think so. I was brought up a Catholic on my mother's side ... she taught me the Hail Mary and showed me a little chain with beads ... but I don't think I got baptized ... it was too expensive in them days ... is it expensive now?"

"No ... you don't have to pay" he replied gently, "what the Head Mistress at the school meant is that before your children are accepted at the school she has to give priority to Catholic families and their children. I'm sure you understand that."

"Yes I do ... I'd like to come to church with my husband and the kids and learn about God and all that ... only I was put off by a woman I work with.

"She said the Catholics are expensive ... they have two money collections and sometimes more on Sunday and even on weekdays if you go to church to pray. She said you have to pay to get a Baptismal Certificate ... which is what the Head Mistress asked for.

"This friend ... Diane is her name ... well she said you also talk in a foreign language in church ... Italian was it? No ... no ... Latin. That was it. Only we don't know Latin Alec and me ... I left school at fifteen and can just speak proper English ... never mind Latin.

"She also said Catholics have to eat fish every Friday ... well we can't do with that ... It's expensive for a start and Alec is allergic to shell-fish ... brings him out in spots it does!"

"There appears to have been a lot of misconceptions about the Catholic Faith ..." said Father Ignatius, "what I mean is that you've misunderstood about the Catholic Church ... never mind. Many people make the same mistakes.

"Can I suggest perhaps that you and Alec come to a few meetings when we can talk about God and Jesus and the Catholic Faith? You said you were willing to learn.

"It'll be just you and Alec and me, or Father Donald if I'm not here. You can bring the children too and I'll ask Mrs Davenport, whom you've just met, to look after them.

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“It’s just once a week, in the evening or at weekends ... and in time, if you wish, you can have the children baptized and you and Alec too ... if you wish.

“And it will be in English ... not one word of Latin will be spoken, I promise.”

She smiled broadly and asked “How much will it cost?”

“There’s no charge at all ...” he replied smiling back, “the Love of Christ is priceless but you don’t have to pay ... He already has!”

“And what about the fish?”

He held back the urge to laugh and said “Don’t worry about that ... you don’t have to eat fish or anything else you don’t want to eat ... on Fridays or any other days!”

And that’s how it was that the Cocktail Queen and her husband Alec attended Catholic teachings at St Vincent and in time, the two of them and their children were baptized at a private ceremony attended by both priests and Mrs Davenport.

Hilary now attends the Catholic school and Mark has been registered to attend the following year.

The family is now part of Father Ignatius’ flock!

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E=MC2

There was a University in the town where Father Ignatius lived. It was not far from St Vincent Church, just down the hill at the edge of the town center.

Father Ignatius was one of the visiting chaplains at the University. He shared the task with other vicars and ministers from other churches and they took turns to man the Pastoral Center on a weekly basis.

Father Ignatius was at the Center one day waiting and hoping that someone might call-in for a chat when his wish was rewarded.

Two students, a young lady and a young man came in.

“Hi” she said, “we’ve come to ask you a question we’ve been debating. We’re not Christians as such ... searchers for the truth more like ...”

The priest smiled and said, “Come in, sit down. Help yourselves to coffee from the table over there!”

As they sat down with their coffee the man said in a more reserved tone, “Well Sir, we were wondering about Jesus ...

“We are both science students here at the University ... I’m reading biology, chemistry and physics and my friend here is studying medicine ...”

“That sounds like very hard work to me ...” said the priest encouragingly.

“Well, yes ... at times,” continued the young man, “We were wondering, Jesus is supposed to be the Son of God. When He was around on earth these subjects like biology and such like were not known at all ... people then were very primitive. Did Jesus know all these subjects? Was He knowledgeable to University Degree standard and beyond? Or was He just as ignorant as the people of His time?”

The priest did not reply but cleaned his spectacles to gain a few seconds thinking time. A trick he had used often enough.

“This is not a joke question ...” said the young lady.

“I am sure it isn’t,” replied the priest, “I was watching a TV programme about animals in zoos the other day ...

“You know the new style zoos? The ones where they keep the animals roaming free in a large enclosure instead of cages. The animals feel as if they are in their native environment and the visitors see their behavior in this environment rather than in a cage ...”

The two students looked at each other and said nothing. The priest continued.

“Apparently feeding time is quite elaborate. The zoo keepers don’t just throw the food in the enclosures, but they spend a lot of time hiding food in trees and in bushes,

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behind rocks and under stones and so on ... whilst the animals are caged of course. Then they release the animals in the open enclosures and let them search, or hunt, for their food, whatever it is. Be it meat for lions and tigers or seeds and fruit for other animals ...

“This of course enriches the lives of the animals. They behave as they would do in the wild. They use their sense of smell and inquisitiveness as they go out searching for food. They climb up trees to reach any food hidden there. They dig under rocks to find the seeds placed there by their keepers. This gives them exercise and no doubt sharpens their appetite.

“And it’s all good fun for the visitors watching them.

“Yes ... those zoo keepers go to great length to make the animals feel at home, as it were!”

“What has that to do with our question?” asked the young lady impatiently.

“A lot really ...” continued Father Ignatius, “When God created us He could have fed us easily by providing us with all we need.

“He could have invented a magic oven and whenever we opened its door out came the most succulent steak and French fries, my favorites. Or roast beef with Yorkshire pudding and roast potatoes, parsnips and carrots; not forgetting the Brussels sprouts and gravy of course. Or chicken or turkey ... and chocolate cake. Do you like chocolate cake?”

They both nodded and waited to hear more.

“Oh ... can you imagine having an oven like that? Whatever your wish, you press a button or two and out comes your meal.

“God could have also made things easier for us in many other ways you know. Take travel for instance ... I hate driving in busy highways don’t you? We could have a box somewhere in our homes and whenever we got in, press a button or two, and in seconds we’re somewhere else ... America! Oh ... I love America ... How lovely it would be to go there every weekend without having to wait at those airports ... There’s fifty States you know. One for every weekend of the year ... I could visit them in alphabetical order you know. Then stay at home the two remaining weekends.”

The students looked at each other and smiled wondering whether this priest was really losing his mind. He noticed their confusion and went on, pretending to be totally unperturbed by their bewilderment.

“But God is wiser than that ...

“He created us and gave us the power of thinking, questioning, investigating and looking around.

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“Then He created a world full of wonders for us to find and enjoy. From the large varieties of trees, plants and flowers and the birds and insects that inhabit them, to the wonders of the oceans and their various creatures. He gave us a whole world to discover and marvel at. And as if this is not enough He also gave us a whole universe full of planets and stars to gaze at and study and research.

“He gave us hidden talents too ... investigative talents. Inquisitiveness, like in those animals in the zoo. But we didn't use them just to search for food. We searched for knowledge and boy did we discover ... did we not just marvel at what we found ...

“We discovered writing, painting, sculpture, music and the arts. We discovered science and medicine ... We learnt who we are, what we are, what we're made of and how we are made. We learnt to heal ourselves from illness and disease. We learnt to travel and to fly.

“Do you understand where I'm getting at?”

They nodded silently.

“But God is clever you know ... He did not give us all the secrets to life and to His creation. There are some things which will always be hidden from us, for our own protection, in case we think we're a little too clever and can manage everything by ourselves ... And make a mess of it, as we seem to be doing right now!”

He chuckled to himself.

“And having given us all these marvels to discover and enjoy, He still remains in control of events. He watches us as we learn and progress through the ages, but He will not let us go against His ultimate will for us.

“You're both studying scientific subjects right now. This is good. I hope and pray that in your personal journey of discovery you too will one day discover some hidden gems in a tree or behind a rock like the animals in the zoo. And I hope that whatever you discover will help mankind in the field of medicine young lady ... or in the sciences you're engaged in young man.

“Praise God He'll guide you into purposeful careers for the benefit of humanity.”

They smiled meekly.

“You're right in the original point you made,” Father Ignatius continued gently, “At the time of Jesus people were primitive in comparison to us ... They knew very little of what we know now.

“But they searched, they questioned and they learned ... and they discovered many things slowly, year by year until today.

“It's the way God gave us a purpose in life ... instead of having everything ready for us. Like a magic oven ...

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“That’s what I think, anyway. Call it Father Ignatius’ Theory of Evolution!”

They smiled again, now both of them more relaxed.

“But don’t look for it in the Bible ... I doubt you’ll find it exactly as I said it ... You’ll discover a lot more about God though ... it may even change your lives.

“Oh ... and about your original question. How much did Jesus know at the time He walked this earth?

“The Bible teaches us that He is the Son of God ... All powerful and omnipotent. So how much do you think He knew then when He visited this world?”

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NO STRANGER AT THE DOOR

“... and there we were both standing at the doorway of the Church,” said Father Ignatius, “and then he asked me if I could spare a cup of coffee. I didn’t think he drank coffee. What do you think he drank anyway?”

“St Peter?” asked Father Donald.

“Yes ... St Peter,” repeated Father Ignatius, “what do you think he drank. Surely not coffee. It hadn’t been discovered then! When he was alive on earth.”

“Oh ... boiled fish water, I shouldn’t wonder” laughed Father Donald, “must have tasted really horrible I should think!”

“And then ...” continued Father Ignatius after a short pause, “and then, as if by magic, we were here in my office. I was sitting at my desk, like now, and he sat in the very armchair where you’re sitting in!”

Father Donald looked around him in the armchair and said nothing. Father Ignatius continued.

“St Peter sat just where you’re sitting Donald. He looked just like we’ve seen him portrayed in the movies. Tall guy and well set. With a beard and wearing a brown tunic ... and sandals. I remember distinctly the sandals ... Big man, he was ... I wouldn’t wish to be on the wrong side of an argument with him. He was here in this office.

“He asked what I thought of him.

“I mumbled the usual things we’ve been taught in seminary ... Loyal follower of Christ, leader of the Disciples, Head of the Church ... That sort of thing!

“He smiled and picked up a biscuit ... he preferred the chocolate covered ones and commented that they tasted different to the ones he was used to in them days ... That’s exactly what he said ... in them days!”

Father Donald raised an eyebrow and smiled, whilst Father Ignatius went on.

“Then he asked me to be honest. Not repeat what I’d been taught. What did I really think of him?”

Father Donald smiled once more and said nothing.

“Well ...” Father Ignatius went on, “I hesitated of course ... it’s quite a shock seeing St Peter face to face and being asked such a direct question ...

“I said that some theologians consider him to be a bit irresolute of character ... Tends to speak first, sometimes acts quickly, yet ... a bit hesitant when the chips are down!”

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“Wow ...” said Father Donald, “did he hit you for saying that? He has a bit of a temper our St Peter you know.”

“No ... he remained calm,” replied Father Ignatius, “He said ‘I don’t care about what theologians think ... what do they know? I’m asking for your opinion Ignatius!’ He called me Ignatius ... so he knew full well who I was. Then he asked me if I had any more of those brown covered biscuits ...

“I gave him the whole packet of chocolate biscuits which somehow I had here in my desk; and then I said that I sympathized with his predicament and how he’d been portrayed by some theologians. He was and I’m sure he still is very loyal to Christ. He spoke first because of his confidence and beliefs in our Lord.

“He hesitated a little when he jumped into the lake and tried to walk on water. But anyone would have done that ... Jesus had asked to him to come to Him ... so at least he did show real Faith by jumping into the water ... but his Faith faltered ... understandable really!

“And that’s when St Peter sat a little forward in the armchair and calmly said to me ... ‘Quite the diplomat aren’t you Ignatius?’ I remember distinctly those words ... and they were not said in a complimentary way either ... He asked me to go on ... what did I really and honestly think of him ...

“So I swallowed hard Donald ... I knew what he wanted me to say but I was too scared to say it. He nodded gently to encourage me ...

“And very quietly I mumbled that he had denied Christ three times ...

“He looked me straight in the eye and all gentleness seemed to have gone from his face. He waved his hand gently at me, still holding a half-eaten chocolate biscuit, as if to reprimand me ... you know, as we do with our finger when we point at a little child, and then he said ‘After over two thousand years you people still hold that against me! And you call yourselves forgiving Christians ... The Lord Himself forgave me with His knowledgeable look full of love and pity for me. But you Christians still bring this matter up ...

“And it’s the same with Thomas ... Whenever I meet him he says that the only thing that people remember about him is his doubting, and they can’t relate anything else he did after that.

“Well let me tell you something clever Ignatius that you are’ ... That’s what St Peter called me, Donald. ‘Clever Ignatius that you are ...

“Let me tell you something ... Have you ever considered what would have happened if I did not deny our Lord? I would have most probably been taken by the crowd and hung from the nearest tree ...

“They were horrible they were ... and angry and wild. Those same people who pretended to love Him, whom He had healed and taught over the years suddenly became very wild. They became angry, almost feral ... And of course I was scared.

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They were probably scared too, you know. They had to act this way because acting any differently would have resulted in them being hanged too!

“And by denying Christ, the Son of our God, I unwittingly set in course the chain of events which followed. Jesus knew exactly why I had to deny Him at the time of His capture.

“After His Resurrection, when He appeared to us on the shore of the lake as we were fishing; it was the third time Jesus appeared to us after He was raised from death ... We had just eaten together, and Jesus asked me three times if I loved Him. And every time I said yes He asked me to take care of His lambs and His sheep!’ ”

After a short silence Father Donald asked “What happened then Ignatius? When St Peter told you that?”

Father Ignatius replied.

“Well, he finished eating his biscuit and then he asked me whether I thought I had done a good job of looking after Our Lord’s lambs and sheep ...

“Before I could answer ... I just woke up!”

“That’s quite a dream ...” said Father Donald, “and quite a message from St Peter.

“Christ knew precisely why Peter had to be spared at the time of His capture ... in order to lead the Disciples and the Church!”

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RESCUE DRIVE

For a few days Father Ignatius had been thinking over his conversation with Father Donald about the dream he had.

In the dream, St Peter asked Father Ignatius directly, ‘Have you done a good job of looking after Our Lord’s lambs and sheep?’

“What a challenge!” thought Father Ignatius, “St Peter himself asking me if I was a good priest!”

Jack lived a few yards down the road from St Vincent Church, just the other side of the Convent.

One Friday evening he was waiting outside the Fish and Chips Shop just opposite the church when Father Ignatius joined the queue.

“How are you keeping Jack?” he asked, “you look really miserable right now ... just like a mile of bad road, I should say!”

“Hello Father ...” mumbled Jack under his breath, “it’s a long story!”

“You’d better tell me about it ... let’s move away from this queue ...”

The two men left the queue and walked a few paces away from the shop.

“It’s this friend of mine ...” Jack said hesitantly, “he’s over seventy years old, lives in Brintown, and he’s not too well. I think he’s dying. I spoke to the lady friend he lives with and she said the doctor is not holding much hope. I’ll go and see him tomorrow as I’m not working this weekend ... I hope I get there in time ...”

“I’ll pray for him Jack. I notice you said lady friend ... is he not married then?”

“Oh ... that’s another long story Father.” said Jack, “Many years ago, when he was thirty or so, he met this lady and fell in love with her. She was divorced and his priest would not marry them. In fact he argued the matter with the priest and the priest excommunicated him.

“I think he probably excommunicated her as well ... I don’t know.

“Anyway, they’ve lived together ever since ... that’s about forty years. I don’t know if they ever got married in the Civil Court.

“But the man kept faithful to the ban imposed on him. He didn’t move to another church and take Communion there, even though they moved town several times. In fact I believe he never set foot in another church ever since that day!”

“We’d better go and see them then ...” said the priest.

“What now ... it’s five o’clock. It will take us two hours to get to Brintown!”

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“The sooner we start the better,” replied Father Ignatius, “you go to my office and phone them from there. I’ll get the car ready!”

Moments later Father Ignatius was driving up the highway as fast as the speed limit allowed.

They arrived just after 7:30 that evening. Father Ignatius went to see the old man in his bedroom whilst Jack stayed with the old lady in the front room.

They could hear talk, and sometimes laughter from the bedroom. The priest stayed there for a while. He heard the old man’s Confession and gave him Holy Communion. Then they chatted away about the past ... the old man had spent some time in Italy, not far from where Father Ignatius studied for the priesthood, so they talked about Italy and all the places they visited whilst there.

Eventually the priest came out and asked Jack to go and stay with the old man.

He heard the old lady’s Confession and gave her Holy Communion.

Father Ignatius and Jack set off back home at about 10:45 that evening. In the car, on the way to St Vincent, Jack said, “Thank you Father ... being with you is like being with Jesus!”

“Don’t ever say that,” replied the priest, “no one can possibly be like Jesus!”

The old man died three days later.

The old lady also died a few months after that.

(Based on a true story).

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BISHOP PHONING

The phone rang one evening as Father Ignatius was watching football on TV. It was Father Frederick from Bishop's House.

"Hello Ignatius are you well?"

The preliminary greetings over, Father Ignatius was keen to find out the reason for the call. After all, it isn't everyday that the Bishop rings a lowly priest such as he.

"I'm sorry to tell you that Monsignor Thomas is not well ... he's in hospital right now ..."

Father Ignatius knew the Monsignor from way back as they trained together for the priesthood in Rome. He hadn't seen him for a while and the news of his illness came as quite a shock.

"Oh don't worry it's nothing serious. He sprained an ankle as he fell down the stairs," declared Father Frederick nonchalantly. "Anyway ... are you doing anything on Tuesday? Thomas was due to go to a Conference and deliver a Keynote Speech on behalf of the Bishop ... now he can't make it he suggested you go instead!"

"Keynote speech ... well ... I've never given a speech ... and it's only three days away ..." hesitated Father Ignatius.

"Oh I'm sure you'll do well, the Bishop has every confidence in you ... we'll send you your itinerary and your speech and everything else you'll need in the morning ... Oh it's in Washington," interrupted the priest at the other end of the line in his usual casual manner.

"Washington up North?" asked Father Ignatius still in a daze by the sudden turn of events.

"Not Washington in Tyne and Wear ... the real Washington old boy ... in America ... it's only for a few days ... nothing to it ... we'll send you all the details first thing tomorrow."

Father Ignatius put the phone down and tried to recall the phone conversation. Had he dreamt what just happened? One minute he was happily watching football on TV the next he'd received his marching orders to go to the other end of the world.

The following morning a special courier delivered a large pouch confirming that it was not all a dream after all. There for him to read were his speech, the programme of the Conference, his air tickets and everything else he needed to complete his mission.

Apparently the Monsignor was due to attend an International Youth Conference to discuss and evaluate various ways of encouraging young men into the priesthood in order to overcome a projected shortfall in vocations.

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“Have they thought of praying about it?” mumbled Father Ignatius as he fumbled through the reams of papers on his desk.

Three days later and Father Ignatius was in the States once again. He recalled that the last time he visited America was also, as now, a totally unscheduled and unexpected visit.

His hotel was full of priests mainly from America and Canada and a few from Europe. He was the only one from England and soon discovered that he spoke “with a funny accent”, or so his fellow conference delegates thought.

The itinerary included several trips to tourist venues scheduled by the conference organizers and he was paired with a young priest in his twenties from Houston Texas. The idea was to allow exchange of views and ideas on the way different churches tackled vocations in the priesthood.

Father Ignatius got on very well with this young priest and they discussed quite a lot during the various organized trips and free time they had together.

Father Ignatius learnt how this young farmer’s son, decided to become a priest. Being almost half his own age, the young Texan provided quite an insight into his motivation, outlook, hopes and fears. His Christian up-bringing had played a very important part in his decision to become a priest. So much so that the night before he was to deliver his speech Father Ignatius had an important decision to make.

“Do I deliver the Monsignor’s speech as it has been given to me, or do I tell them also my very own views on vocations and the priesthood?” he asked himself.

He felt that the speech written for him, whilst full of facts and statistics, projections and strategies for the future, lacked the very essence and soul which the young lad from Houston had engendered in his conversations with him.

Here we have a young Catholic boy, one of a family of six, all girls except for him. Brought up on a farm by loving Catholic parents who had endured poverty and hardship over the years, yet they managed to keep the family together, all of whom grew up to be exemplary treasures for their parents to be proud of. One of the young man’s sisters was a nun back in Texas. The others were happily married and raising their children as taught by their parents.

In particular, one phrase from that young priest stuck in Father Ignatius’ mind, “The way my parents brought me up, it was inevitable I’d become a priest!” he had said in his Texan accent.

“That alone is worthy of a speech,” Father Ignatius thought to himself, “Even though I might deliver it in my funny British accent.”

And that’s exactly what he did.

He said to his listeners that it isn’t the church which selects people to be priests; but it is God Himself.

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By the grace of God we all have a mission on this earth. Some parents are given the gift of children by God. Their gift back to God is the way they bring these children up.

They can create the conditions within the family where it becomes inevitable that their sons may become priests, and their daughters nuns. And those children who go on to have their own families may in their turn emulate their parents' good example.

Nothing should give parents more pride than to see their sons and daughters join the church. And when they get to meet the Good Lord they can look up humbly and say: "I did my best Lord with the children you gifted me."

He explained to his audience that priests have an important role in this cycle of events by being an example which others might wish to follow.

Priesthood was not a matter of statistics, projections, strategies and plans. Whether or not there were enough vocations in the future was a matter for God and not for planners and strategists.

"We should have enough Faith in God to ensure that His Word is spread on this earth by people chosen by Him. And in so doing, our role is to pray constantly that many will follow in our footsteps as we priests lead by good example," concluded Father Ignatius.

Before he left for the airport Father Ignatius met up again with the young Texan and gave him a small Crucifix as a souvenir. He thanked him warmly for inspiring him to deliver a speech from the heart which was no doubt remembered by all delegates at the conference.

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A CHRISTMAS TALE

It was a very cold week in early December. Some parishioners asked Father Ignatius if it was all right to build a Christmas crib in the car park as well as the one usually set up in church by the Altar.

The intention was to build a small wooden hut made of old wood they could pick up cheaply from the local saw mill; and then decorate it, and use the Nativity scene statues which they discovered in the store room deep in the basement under the church whilst they were cleaning it in summer.

Father Ignatius agreed, “as long as you don’t ask me to lift those heavy statues from the basement ... they’re quite heavy you know. So be careful!” he said.

A few youngsters helped by the leaders of the Youth Club got together and built the wooden hut. At first it looked quite bare and unwelcoming, a little like the original manger in Bethlehem I suppose. But eventually, with loving tender care, mostly by the women involved whilst the men gave instructions or went to the pub for a drink, it looked really magnificent.

The statues were then brought up, with great difficulty, from the basement and placed in position. A local electrician volunteered his services and placed hidden lights at strategic places to make the crib glow warmly at night.

As it snowed and got bitterly cold, even for Northern England, the little wooden hut glowing in the church’s car park made a beautiful heart-warming sight for all passers-by and gave them a little hope for the New Year ahead.

Just beside St Vincent church, by the car park gate, there’s a little narrow lane leading deep into fields at the back of the church. From the street you cannot see the fields. There’s the church’s car park entrance, then the narrow lane entrance, then the entrance to the Convent nearby.

This long lane leads to a small field used by a local farmer to store his farm machinery. He leaves his tractors there, as well as several harvesting equipment and ploughs in a large shed. The field is well enclosed by a high fence and, for extra security; the farmer keeps a dog loose in the field with a small opening in the shed for it to shelter in his doghouse when it is cold and raining.

The dog is not always there; only on rare occasions when the farmer needs additional security on the site.

One morning, a few days before Christmas, the farmer called on Father Ignatius.

“You haven’t seen my dog by any chance Father?” he asked, “it’s a large shepherd dog. I keep him in the yard behind you every now and then, in his dog house in the shed.

“The area is well fenced-off so he shouldn’t have got away. But maybe he found a hole in the fence somewhere and ran off!”

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The priest hadn't seen the dog, but it could be possible that he found a way through the fence and got into the church's gardens and car park. So he put on his coat and went out with the farmer to search the church's back gardens first.

It had snowed all night and the snow was very thick and even everywhere since no one had been out to walk on it.

"I hope he's OK ..." said the farmer despondently, "it was very cold last night ... well below zero Father. He should have stayed in his dog-house for any chance of warmth. I keep an electric fire on the wall nearby to heat the place ... he would have been as warm as toast in the shed. It's like a sauna in there even in winter!"

"Well ... he's not in the back gardens," said the priest, "we'd better look in the church car park. Although if he went there he would have escaped in the street by now ..."

The two men searched the car park and, eventually, there in the crib, sleeping in the manger just beside the statue of baby Jesus was the large shepherd dog.

As soon as he heard the men approaching he jumped in delight welcoming his master.

"At least he had the sense to find some warmth in the lap of Jesus," said Father Ignatius, "pity some people do not have as much sense!"

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PARENTS

Harvey was 19 years old, so he definitely knew everything there is to know in the world.

He lived with his parents in a small terraced house and went to work at the same factory as his father.

One day, in his spare time, he was helping Father Ignatius paint the wooden fence at the very end of the back gardens; the one separating the Church grounds from the fields beyond.

In conversation, Harvey explained to the wise priest how his parents really knew very little of the modern world. How they lived in ancient times. How their expectations and ambitions were out of sequence with reality. Harvey felt that his parents held him back somewhat. They insisted on his being at home at a certain time ... “Can you imagine that? I am 19, and they still want to know who I go out with and where! Archaic or what ... I tell you!”

Father Ignatius put down the pot of paint he was holding and sat down on the small step ladder they had brought with them to reach the top of the wooden fence.

“When you look at your parents, Harvey,” he asked, “what do you see?”

Harvey looked at him in puzzlement and replied “I see Mom and Dad ... of course!”

“Silly question, I suppose,” continued the priest, “but I’ll ask it again ... what do you really see?”

“I don’t know what you’re on about ... you’re a bit like them at times Father ... you don’t speak straight!”

Father Ignatius laughed.

“It is natural, and a good thing of course, for children to see Mom and Dad when they look at their parents.

“Mom and Dad brought them into this world. Mom and Dad took care of them when they were young. Mom and Dad were involved in their up-bringing and their education. They took time off to attend all the school events such as sports day, music evening and whatever else.

“Your parents did that for you; am I right?”

Harvey nodded. The priest continued.

“Your father often drove you in his old battered car wherever you needed to go to ... like the Saturday football games.

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“Your mother made sure you had a packed lunch every day at school, and you had clean clothes every day ...”

“Yeh ... I understand ...” Harvey interrupted.

“I am not criticizing you Harvey,” said the priest gently, “what I’m saying is that our parents care for us. I know mine did ... even after I left home and went to Italy to study for the priesthood. My mother used to send me packets of a special cake she used to bake in case Italian food was not nourishing enough!”

Harvey smiled.

“And your parents care for you too ... they always will. It’s in the genes as they say.”

Harvey laughed.

“But that’s not what I meant when I said what do you see when you look at your parents.” continued Father Ignatius.

“Most people would say, just as you said ... I see Mom and Dad.

“Not many people see an individual human being. A woman and a man. People, no different to you and I.

“People who at one time were children themselves. And they grew up with their own hopes, their own worries and their own fears. People, like every one else, struggling in this world to make the best of their lives, and that of their children.

“We do tend to see our parents differently than anyone else. We see Mom and Dad ... we don’t see the people beyond Mom and Dad ... the people who are Mom and Dad.

“Our parents are people with their own personal abilities, limitations and foibles. People with their own personal emotions and characteristics and personalities; developed and honed through years of circumstances and experiences which life threw at them.

“Our parents may well curtail our freedoms somewhat ... they may well appear ancient and from a different age ... but I’m sure they mean well. They behave the way they do because they are human and they have their own human characteristics.

“I know my parents meant well when they tried to teach me right from wrong. Do you think yours do?”

“I suppose ...” mumbled Harvey.

“Of course they do,” confirmed the wise old priest, “the thing is ... parents too tend to see their children as children ... they seldom see beyond the child, and see a growing young man or woman with their own characters, weaknesses, needs and so on. A child your age is eager to explore the world around him ... nothing wrong with that. But sometimes parents can’t see that ... they forget how they were at that age.

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“For a parent, a child is always a child ... it’s often very difficult to let go. But they do it out of love.

“Do you think your parents love you?” the priest asked directly.

“Yes ... of course.” said the young man emphatically.

“Good ...” replied the priest, “you’re right of course.

“... And I’m sure you’ll remember that when in turn one day in the future, you too will become a parent and you’ll love your own children just as your parents love you. You too will not be able to let go ... And I suspect your children will think you’re an old relic from times gone by worthy of an exhibit in a museum!”

Harvey laughed.

“Now let’s get on with the painting ...” continued Father Ignatius.

Harvey smiled as he dipped the paint brush in the pot of paint.

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PRAGMATIC IGNATIUS

As a priest, Father Ignatius always tried to teach his parishioners according to the doctrines and rules of the Church. Yet, there were times when he had to be pragmatic and accept the realities of life and the fact that he could not change events. Priests just don't have magic wands ... and they can't make things better all the time; not even Father Ignatius.

Such a case involves Derek and Geraldine. They were in their early thirties and they had a daughter aged about five.

As sometimes happens in life they grew apart and both of them became unfaithful to their wedding vows. Derek became friendly with his secretary at work and Geraldine met the brother of a friend from school and did the same.

In time Derek and Geraldine divorced and they moved in with their new partners. Derek is now the father of a young son from his new, un-married, partner.

At the time, the kind priest tried his best to help them save the marriage. They came to him for advice and he tried to persuade them to forgive each other, to consider their young daughter, and he even arranged for them to obtain marriage guidance advice. But somehow, he felt that they were only going through the motions. In their hearts they had both decided to end the marriage and start anew with their new found loves.

After the divorce ... quite a while afterwards, Derek did come to confession. He deeply regretted his role in the breakdown of the marriage. He sought genuine forgiveness, having accepted that there was no way of turning the clock back. He was now with his secretary who was, at the time, expecting his baby.

The priest did of course give him absolution, but warned him of the Church's view regarding his co-habitation with his partner. Derek understood the situation and never again came to church.

A few months later Geraldine approached the priest with a view to marrying her new partner. Father Ignatius explained the difficulties involved, and she later married in a Civil Ceremony at the Registry Office. She too stopped attending church.

A few days ago Father Ignatius was standing in the queue outside the Fish and Chips shop opposite the church looking forwards to a fish supper washed down with a bottle of ginger beer when he heard a young voice shouting "Daddy ... Daddy ..."

He turned round and saw Geraldine a few feet away with her daughter who'd now grown a little. The young girl had seen Derek on the other side of the road and called out to him.

Derek came across to greet his child when Geraldine said, loud enough to be heard by everyone, "You know you're not allowed to see her outside pre-arranged visiting times. If you don't go away I'll tell my lawyer to start proceedings ..."

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Derek walked away without saying a word whilst Geraldine left in the opposite direction dragging a screaming child crying to her father “Daddy ... don’t go Daddy ... don’t leave me ...”

Suddenly the priest lost his appetite and left the queue to go to his church.

He sat at the front by the statue of Our Lady and prayed for that little girl. He could still hear her screams in his head. He prayed and prayed as tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Why are people so cruel?” he asked himself, “and why do they use innocent young children in their games of emotional blackmail?”

Eventually he got up as he knew what he had to do.

He went to see Geraldine at her home. The child was asleep on an armchair having tired herself of crying.

The priest explained what he had witnessed and how it must have affected the young child. He tried using every reasonable argument that he could muster; yet he felt that he was being listened to politely but not taken seriously enough for Geraldine to change her ways. He detected some hurt still there in her heart which somehow translated into bitterness and retaliation towards her ex-husband.

He left feeling terrible as he handed the situation over to God.

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THE RETREAT

Father Ignatius was a calm individual always trusting that God will provide a solution to whatever problem comes his way. He never worried unduly when things did not work out as planned since he knew, deep within his heart, that God may have a better plan in mind.

His favorite saying whenever he discussed such matters with his parishioners was “I have made a deal with God. I do His will on earth. And He takes care of the worries!”

He often prayed silently whenever a project or event was planned in the Parish and he offered the whole matter to God saying “Let it develop and work out according to your will oh Lord!”

One evening, during a Prayer Meeting at the Parish Hall, when all participants offered prayers and petitions for healings and other personal needs, Father Ignatius said:

“Let us pray for the success of the Young Peoples Retreat this weekend.

“The Youth Leaders and I are taking a few youngsters on Saturday morning to a Monastery in the countryside. It is run by Franciscan Monks.

“We hope to leave early on Saturday morning and the children will bring with them a packed lunch.

“Praise God we’ve already acquired two mini-vans donated for the weekend by one of our parishioners and the two Youth Leaders will drive them with all of the children. I will follow behind in my car carrying any luggage that will not fit in the vans.

“When we get there we hope to hold an open-air Mass in the grounds of the Monastery. Followed by a short Retreat and Prayers led by two of the Monks.

“We also hope to have a barbecue and the children will do all the cooking and preparations for the meal. Supervised of course! This will help them to work together and to take on responsibility for various tasks.

“We hope to return back here after Mass and breakfast on Sunday morning.

“We have everything organized, except for the food for Saturday night and Sunday breakfast.

“So please pray that the children enjoy the experience and are blessed spiritually as a result of this Retreat as they prepare for their Confirmation in two weeks’ time.”

At the end of the Prayer Meeting the priest was approached by two Americans from a nearby military base who had visited that evening for the first time as guests of one of the regular parishioners.

They asked Father Ignatius how many children he was taking on the retreat.

“Oh ... about twenty or so ...” replied the priest.

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“Is that all?” they replied, “feeding them should be no problem!”

They offered to provide all food for the Saturday evening barbecue and the Sunday morning breakfast for children and adults alike.

And true to their word, on the day in question, they followed the convoy in their own van filled with food and the necessary equipment to ensure a successful barbecue. They stayed in a nearby hotel for the night and returned to the Monastery on Sunday morning to collect their utensils and equipments and go home.

Father Ignatius thanked the Lord for providing once again.

Based on a true story.

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THORNY LIFE

It was Saturday morning when Father Ignatius noticed that Canis, the dog, was limping on his front leg. Luckily, he noticed the vet's car parked outside by the farm gate nearby so he popped next door to ask the vet to call at the Parish House when he'd finished his round at the farm.

The vet discovered that the dog had been injured on both front paws by some thorns which he had picked up from a bush in the garden. The injuries had become infected and needed treatment. He sedated the dog and after removing the thorns he cleaned and bandaged both injured paws. He explained that the dog should remain indoors most of the time and the bandages changed daily.

Every time Father Ignatius and Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, approached the dog to clean and re-bandage his wounds he would growl and bare his teeth. No matter how gently they tried the dog would not let them near him as he cowered in his bed.

At one stage the dog snarled and bit Father Ignatius' hand drawing blood.

"Oh dear Lord ..." said Mrs Davenport as she cleaned the priest's wound, "do you think your hand is infected?"

"We'll soon see, if I start to scratch my ear violently like the dog does ..." chuckled Father Ignatius.

"This is no joking matter ..." interrupted the housekeeper, "the dog's a menace ... We're only trying to help him ... can't he understand that?"

"He's only reacting like you and I would ..." said the priest.

"I've never bitten anyone, Father!" she replied indignantly.

Father Ignatius smiled and continued.

"You see Theresa ..." he said, "when things go wrong in our lives, we too growl and snap at God in anger.

"We blame Him for what has happened. And quite wrongly so.

"God of course can take our anger. He did after all take our anger when nailed to the Cross, did He not?"

"And although He is nearby, ready to help us, whenever He approaches we snarl and fight back.

"Somehow, our defensive attitude, understandable as it is, being born of human nature, is the very obstacle which keeps God at bay and blocks His ever present gift of love, caring and healing.

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“The only way we can help Canis is if he trusts us and submits himself totally to our care.

“And so too it is with God. The only way He can help us, when we are ill or facing difficulties in life, is when we totally trust Him and accept that His will for us is for the good.

“Human nature, of course, gets in the way ... just like with the dog and his instincts to reject help. But our human nature should not stop us from at least trying our best to trust God.”

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EVENTS AT ST VINCENT

Sometimes in life a chain of events is set in motion, no doubt with the full knowledge of God above, yet for us down here it doesn't half cause us a lot of trouble and confusion. This is what happened one beautiful Saturday at St Vincent Parish Church.

Father Donald was away traveling and Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, had gone away to spend a few days with relatives.

Father Ignatius, the Parish priest, was not quite alone however, for on the Friday evening he welcomed a newly ordained priest, Father Clement, who had been sent unannounced to St Vincent by the Bishop to gain some experience before being posted to another Parish.

Father Ignatius intended to introduce the young priest to parishioners and to the nuns in the nearby Convent on the Saturday but unexpected events changed his plans.

At about eight on Saturday morning Father Ignatius received a phone call asking him to go to the hospital urgently as one of his parishioners had been admitted in a serious condition. He had no time to explain this to the young priest who had not yet come down for breakfast. So Father Ignatius left a quick note asking him to hear Confessions at 9:30 and left him a set of keys to the church and Parish House.

A few minutes later, Father Clement came down to the kitchen, helped himself to breakfast and set out to the church to prepare for Confessions.

St Vincent had one of those old fashioned wooden confessionals which consisted of a small stall with a seat for the priest to sit in, and two positions on either side where the people would kneel, and speak to him in turn through a small window.

Father Clement entered the confessional and shut the door behind him. He made a point of explaining to each person seeking Confession that he was a new priest and that he'd be at St Vincent for a few weeks.

He heard Confessions for about an hour or so until eventually everyone had left the church. He stayed in the confessional for a few minutes longer in case there was anyone else to confess, and then, as no one came, he tried to get out of the confessional. Somehow, the handle to the confessional door broke in his hand and the door would not open. He was trapped in a small wooden room with no means of escape. He called out for help but there was no one there to hear him.

The young priest kept his cool as best he could. He sat there praying and every so often, if he heard a noise, real or imagined, he would bang on the confessional door and call for help. But no help arrived for there was no one there to help him!

Eventually, at about eleven o'clock Stuart entered the church.

Stuart was an elderly gentleman of about seventy years of age. He had served in the military many years ago and was a strict no-nonsense man always wary of any wrongdoings and suspicious of anything that was not the norm. It was his turn to clean the

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church on Saturday and having called at the Parish House for the keys and received no response he then called at Mrs Davenport's cottage and got no response either. He looked for the priest's car and that was missing too. He called at the church and to his surprise found the door open. Courageously, he entered the church to find it totally deserted. His keen mind jumped to several wrong conclusions all at once and somersaulted over them time and again.

On hearing the church door closing Father Clement banged on the confessional door and called for help. Stuart was startled and his septuagenarian heart nearly had a cardiac arrest. His aching knees knocked together in rhythm with his heart and the butterflies in his stomach had their knees knocking too. Even his goose bumps had goose bumps of their own. He steadied himself against one of the nearby pews and took one or two deep breaths to recover from his fright.

Despite his courage, Stuart decided to walk out of the church slowly without making a noise and once out he rushed to the nearby Convent to call the police.

The police arrived in force moments later and let Father Clement out of the confessional. There was no one to confirm his story and the nuns had not been told of a new visiting priest. Having a bunch of keys in his possession did not help the young priest's case who was taken away to the police station pending further enquiries.

At the police station Father Clement was put in a cell with a man who had spent the night there to recover from too much drink on Friday evening. He had been picked up sleeping on a park bench with no means of identification on him.

"Have you been drinking too Father?" asked the man in the cell.

Father Clement protested his innocence and explained what had happened to the incredulous cell-mate.

"That's a good story Father. I must use it next time they bring me here!" he said.

"Next time?" asked Father Clement.

"Oh yes ... I'm a frequent visitor of the constabulary ... usually it's the police station in town. This is my first time here. I normally sleep at the Mission House in town ... got nowhere to live ..."

The young priest spent the next hour or so getting to know his companion in the cell until eventually Father Ignatius came to verify his story and he was let out.

Over the next few weeks at St Vincent Church Father Clement visited the Mission many times to see his prison friend. With the help of Father Ignatius they encouraged him to seek professional help to stop drinking, and they helped him find a part-time job at a nearby farm.

And God looked down and smiled at the turn of events.

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SHE WAS NOT BLONDE

Father Ignatius was very approachable; not only to his parishioners but to everyone. He would often be stopped in public and talked to by perfect strangers; in the street, on the bus or train, in shops or the library or where ever he happened to be. And this happened whether he was wearing his white collar indicating he is a priest, or when he was in civilian clothes ... as happened in this case.

Our kind priest had to attend hospital for blood tests. He had never been to this Medical Department before so he decided to take off his white collar and go incognito so as not to attract attention to himself and perhaps gain favor over other patients.

He was generally a jovial character with a keen, albeit singular, sense of humor. He saw the funny side of any situation where others would perhaps be more serious and withdrawn.

Clutching the Medical Card given him by his doctor, Father Ignatius sat in the hospital waiting-room for his name to be called by the nurse in charge.

He picked up a magazine to pass the time. He noted that it was thirteen months old. He looked at the various pictures and then picked up another one. It was almost the same vintage as the previous publication.

He wondered why hospital and doctors' waiting-rooms always had very old magazines. He had asked a dentist once and the medic told him that it was deliberate to calm down patients especially when they are apprehensive at meeting the medical profession. Apparently, the world is changing so fast, and not for the better, so by placing old magazines in receptions people would remember fondly "the good old times" albeit the journals are only a few months old.

The priest was not convinced of this explanation. He picked up an old newspaper and expected reading the news of a ship named the Titanic sinking!

Moments later a young lady in her late twenties came in the room and sat next to him. She was holding a similar card from her doctor for blood tests. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs and looking at her watch every few minutes willing it to move faster.

"They're taking a long time to deal with patients aren't they?" she asked the priest.

"Perhaps they're looking for new leeches," replied Father Ignatius with a smile.

"What ... is that how they take blood these days?" said the young lady to the amusement of the other patients sitting in the room.

"No ... of course not ... It's more advanced now. You have nothing to worry about." Father Ignatius replied reassuringly.

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“I’m in a hurry you see ...” she went on, “I’d heard that medical advancements in recent years have been wonderful. It’s such a pity we still have to wait ages to get the benefits.”

“You can go in before me if you wish” he offered, “If I could, I’d take your Medical Card with me and give blood on your behalf. So you won’t have to wait ...” he continued with an obvious smile indicating he was joking of course.

“Oh that’s very kind ...” she interrupted, “that would be helpful”.

The other patients in the room looked up incredulously. Father Ignatius was about to say something. She looked at her watch once again and interrupted him.

“The thing is ...” she said in a lower voice, “I’m pregnant and a little anemic. I wouldn’t want you to catch what I’ve got.”

“I understand ...” Father Ignatius said, “especially since I’m not even married!”

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WITHIN HIMSELF

Raymond was disabled and forever in a wheelchair. These were the plain facts for all to see. But behind these facts hid a story which challenged Father Ignatius at St Vincent Church.

Raymond was a policeman who was shot whilst on duty and condemned to a lifetime in a wheelchair. Sure, he got compensation and a pension, but this was in no way reparation for what he went through as his young life was suddenly changed overnight.

About a year after the shooting Raymond's marriage broke down as his wife left him and moved to another town to live with her new lover. Ironically, he was a policeman too. A friend of Raymond. She took with her their two young children.

So, in that moment when Raymond was shot he effectively lost his mobility, his wife and children, his marriage, his job and his best friend.

He often wished he'd lost his life instead.

He was on permanent pain-killers and took to drinking to ease the mental and physical agony which tortured his every hour.

Understandably, he stopped going to church, but that did not keep him out of Father Ignatius' mind and reach. The kindly priest visited Raymond at home every now and then to offer whatever practical help he could.

He arranged for a housekeeper to visit to do the cleaning, cooking and shopping as needed, and a buildings contractor to make the necessary alterations to the house to accommodate a wheelchair user.

As time went by, Father Ignatius continued to visit Raymond for friendly chats and to see he was settling down as best as he could to his new circumstances. Once or twice the priest encouraged Raymond back to church, offering to arrange transport when needed. But this was politely and resolutely refused.

Raymond, it seems, blamed God for what had happened to him.

"I really appreciate your help and sympathy Father," he said, "and I accept them, reluctantly, from you as a friend ... not a priest.

"I don't need your or anyone else's sympathy ... I don't want people to look at me in this contraption and feel pity for me ...

"I was offered a job as a civilian in the police force, as well as my full pension ... but I turned them down. I did not want to be a statistic to help them prove that they have an Equal Opportunities Policy and that they employ all people regardless of disability, race, gender orientation or whatever. I am not a statistic Father. I am me ... Raymond the cripple!

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“Does God understand that? I have always been a good person, a devout Catholic attending church and helping whenever possible ... I was on the Parish Council well before you came at St Vincent, Father ...

“And how does God reward me? By putting me in this chair and turning my life upside down ...”

Father Ignatius knew that the time was not right to get into theological discussion with Raymond. It was obvious that the man was still hurting both literally and mentally and the priest realized that when a man is starving you feed him first before giving him a Bible!

“I see you have a fine collection of empty drinks bottles here ...” said the priest changing the subject.

“They help ease the pain.” Raymond replied, “that, and the medicines I take ...”

“It’s not wise to mix drink and medicine,” continued Father Ignatius.

“And what will it do Father? Kill me? At least then I’d be out of this chair.”

Father Ignatius chose not to respond. He sat down and picked up a bottle and started reading the label.

“You can’t imagine how empty I feel inside, Father,” Raymond said after a while, “I’m thirty-five with no future, no family and no hope ... stuck to this wheelchair whilst the man who put me here will soon be free ...

“When I say I’m empty ... perhaps it’s wrong ... I’m full of resentment, and hate and bitterness at the unfairness and injustice of it all ...”

“And full of drink too ...” mumbled the priest.

Raymond smiled.

“Trust you to see the funny side ... even in this situation,” said Raymond. “I’m surprised you didn’t put your professional hat on and tell me how much God loves me, and how much He cares for me ... perhaps He was too busy doing something else the day I got shot!”

“No ... I wouldn’t preach to you about God ...” Father Ignatius replied, “it’s not my job right now ...”

“Hein?”

“If God wants to speak to you ... He’ll do so Himself in His own time ...” the priest went on, “No ... I’m here for more selfish reasons ... I need your help.”

“How so?” asked Raymond.

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“I’d like you to come and have a chat with the older pupils at school about life in general ...” Father Ignatius replied.

“They’re at that age where they are striking out for independence ... some of them have started smoking cigarettes ... a few of the boys carry knives ... just for show, you understand ...

“I doubt they’d listen to an old foggy like me. Especially one wearing a white Catholic collar round his neck ...

“You, on the other hand, seem ideal ... you’ve been a policeman ...”

Father Ignatius stopped for a while pretending to think about the proposal he’d just made.

“No ... it wouldn’t work ... I doubt they’d listen to you either ... the police is hardly more popular than a priest ... forget I mentioned it ...”

“What would you want me to talk about?” Raymond interrupted.

“I don’t know ... I was just thinking aloud ... I just thought ... stupid of me really ... I thought that if we could save at least one child from getting into trouble with the police, or from getting injured or killed in a gang fight ... then perhaps it would be worth it you speaking to them ... but it wouldn’t work ...”

The priest dropped the subject and left Raymond.

Over the weeks that followed the policeman thought about Father Ignatius’ suggestion and eventually contacted the priest offering to do one talk at the school.

It went well. Not an overwhelming success, but just well enough to get Raymond out of his self-imposed shell for a short while.

And that’s when God intervened.

One of the youngsters got in trouble with the police for fighting using a knife. The priest managed to keep him out of Court and suggested to the Authorities that the youth be obliged to attend “probational sessions” with the ex-policeman instead.

The experiment worked well in as much that the young boy’s behavior improved. The police hired Raymond on a part-time basis to help with other delinquent youths.

In time, Raymond eased off the drink ... to set a good example to the youths.

The physical pain and the memories are still there ... they’ll never go away. But they are eased every now and then as the ex-policeman succeeds in slowly accepting his situation.

“At least he’s started to attend church once again ...” thought Father Ignatius.

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THE CALLING

“Father ... I want to become a priest!”

Normally such words would gladden the heart of any priest. To learn that someone has received the calling from God and is only too willing to respond. But this was not the reaction of Father Ignatius at Norman’s sudden announcement.

“Father ... did you hear me?” continued Norman sitting uncomfortably in the armchair in the priest’s office. Father Ignatius sat back behind his desk and said calmly:

“When did you decide that this is what you wish to do?”

“It took a long time ... I didn’t decide as such ... I felt, and still feel and believe, that God is calling me to the priesthood ...” stammered Norman.

“At first I was confused ... this can’t be, I thought. I tried to get the thought out of my mind ... but it kept coming back ... stronger than ever ... I know deep in my heart that this is what I have to do ... God is asking me to be a priest ...”

“Have you discussed it with Helen?” enquired the priest.

“No ... no ... I can’t” replied Norman looking down to the ground, “not yet anyway ... I thought I’d talk to you first ... I ... I ... I wanted your opinion, and advice.”

“Norman ... you realize it is impossible for you to become a priest!” Father Ignatius said as gently as he could.

“Just because I’m married ... why should that stop me becoming a priest?” interrupted the young man, “it happens in other denominations ...”

“I know it does,” Father Ignatius continued, “and perhaps at some date in the future it may well happen in our Church too. I don’t know about that ... But right now, a married man with children, as in your case, cannot become a priest ...”

“But ... I feel God is calling me ...” interrupted Norman.

“That may well be true ... Again, I don’t know about that. Would God invite you to be a priest as a married man ...”

“I’ve often felt drawn to the priesthood ...” Norman interrupted once more.

“Do you remember Father, all those years ago; when Helen and I came to tell you we wished to marry? You jokingly asked me whether I wish to become a priest instead! And you asked her whether she’d like to be a nun rather than be shackled with me ...”

The priest smiled.

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“And do you remember even earlier than that ... well before I even met Helen ... you suggested to me once that I might consider priesthood ...”

“Yes ... I always thought you'd be well suited to the vocation. You would have made a good priest.” Father Ignatius agreed.

“But at the time I was not ready ... somehow I believed that's not what God wanted. Perhaps I was mistaken ... or just did not listen to God's prompting. Then I met Helen and we fell in love. But now I'm sure that's what God is asking me to do. I've been a Deacon for four years ... yet it's not enough ... I want to be a priest.”

“Why is it not enough?” asked the priest gently.

“I don't know ... I just feel and believe that's what God wants of me ... At first I thought it was my mind making things up. I dismissed the idea believing it to be impossible ... but it keeps coming back ...”

“Why can't I be a priest and married ... St Peter was married was he not? He was good enough to be chosen by Jesus ... why not me?”

Father Ignatius ignored the question.

“How do you envisage being a priest and married at the same time, with your family responsibilities?” he asked Norman.

“I don't know ...” mumbled the distraught young man.

“I've thought it over again and again. You know in the Bible Jesus saying in Matthew Chapter 16 Verse 24; I looked it up ... ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me’.

“I suspect Peter and the other disciples must have left their families behind to follow Jesus wherever He went ...”

“And is that what you're planning to do? Leave Helen and the children to fend for themselves?” Father Ignatius asked in his quiet and calm tone of voice.

“No ... of course not. I couldn't do that.” retorted Norman, “I love my wife and children. I couldn't possibly leave them ... That's why I came to you. I'm all confused. I couldn't leave my job and responsibilities ... the house is not fully paid for ... I ... I ... I don't know what to think anymore ...”

“These thoughts have been torturing me for some time now. I know and understand my responsibilities as a husband and a father ... but I firmly believe that I am called to the vocation ...”

“I believe you are ...” replied the priest surprisingly.

“I'll tell you what I'll do.” he continued, “I'll discuss what you've told me with Monsignor Thomas at Bishop's House. I'll seek his advice. In the meantime I suggest

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you pray some more about this, and discuss it with Helen ... I'll pray for you too, and leave it in God's hands to show us how to proceed.”

All this happened a long time ago. The Church understood and sympathized with Norman but could not accept him as a priest. He eventually left and became a priest in another denomination, supported by his wife and children. Father Ignatius still keeps in touch.

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CAVE CANEM

In St Vincent Parish House there's a very small room right at the top of the building, on the fourth floor attic which Father Ignatius calls "my meditation corner". There's a small table and a chair and a few books in a bookshelf. Father Ignatius often goes there for private prayers or for some "time alone with Jesus".

One wintry day in February Father Ignatius was in his meditation corner at about 1 o'clock in the morning with his dog Canis. He was alone in the house. Father Donald was away traveling and Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, had long retired to her small cottage at the back of St Vincent House.

Father Ignatius could not get to sleep so he decided to go up to the attic for some reading of the Bible and cross-referencing it with several other books he had collected over the years.

Suddenly, the dog woke up from his sleep and started growling quietly. His ears were standing to attention as he looked at the priest as if to say: "Come on ... open the door. I've heard something downstairs!"

The priest did nothing for a moment or two but the dog was insistent, growling all the time and jumping at the door handle.

Father Ignatius got up from his chair and opened the door as Canis shot out at full speed down the stairs. There was a sudden sound of running, then an almighty crash followed by the dog barking menacingly as if ready to attack.

Father Ignatius rushed from the fourth floor attic and by the time he reached the second floor, switching on lights as he moved hurriedly, he saw a young man lying on the floor waving his hands in the air to keep the dog from attacking him. Canis was a few feet away barking loudly and was about to pounce when Father Ignatius called him to stop. Luckily the dog stopped and sat down at the priest's feet growling all the time.

It took a moment or two for the priest to assess the situation. An intruder had broken into the house thinking it was empty, and in his escape had tripped down the stairs and lay there injured.

"I think I've broken my foot" said the young man, "it hurts very much. I tripped on that worn out carpet".

"Let me see," replied the priest gently. He approached the intruder cautiously in case the man attacked him, and all the time keeping an eager Canis at bay. "Stretch your foot towards me ..."

The man did as he was asked and the priest gently held the foot in his hand. "Can you move it freely?" he asked. And the man moved the foot once or twice backwards and forwards.

"It hurts ..." he said, and then, to the priest's surprise he added, "I shall sue you ..."

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Father Ignatius raised his eyebrows in surprise as the man continued, “That carpet there is worn and I tripped on a torn bit ... it’s dangerous and I’ll sue you for negligence ...”

“The carpet is in a private property” said the priest, “and you had no reason to be in the house at all at this time of night. How did you get in?”

“I broke the kitchen window ... I thought the place was empty ...”

“Perhaps I’d better call an ambulance and the police ...” replied Father Ignatius as he got up from the man’s feet. “I’d advise you not to go anywhere with this injury, I doubt you can outrun the dog!”

The priest phoned the emergency services and walked down to the front door to let them in. The police were first to arrive ten minutes later followed by an ambulance. They walked up to the second floor to find the man still motionless on the floor with the dog staring at him a few feet away.

They put the man on a stretcher and as he was carried away he complained to the police that he wanted to sue for compensation for the accident caused by the worn carpet.

“Yes Harry ... I understand. We’ll sort it out later” said one of the policemen as he followed him into the ambulance.

The other policeman stayed behind to take a statement from the priest as to what had happened. He inspected the damaged window in the kitchen and then went up to inspect the worn carpet.

“Technically, Harry is correct Father” he said, “this carpet is dangerous and you are liable for causing an injury to a visitor.”

“But ... but ... he is not a visitor. He is an intruder in the middle of the night having broken a window to get in. He could have attacked me ...”

“Be that as it may Father ... you caused the injury which landed him in hospital. You are fortunate that the dog didn’t attack him as we would have had other claims to deal with ...”

Father Ignatius was at a loss for words. His mind was so confused by what he’d just heard that momentarily he forgot to pray about it. He was too concerned about facing substantial claims for injuries which the church could not afford to pay.

“We know the lad,” said the policeman, “he’s wanted for other break-ins. We’ll interview him in hospital in the morning and keep in touch Father.”

As the policeman left Father Ignatius shut the door and looked up at the Crucifix on the wall in the entrance hall and said, “What now? How do you intend to solve this Lord?”

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He then went to the kitchen to pick up the broken glass and somehow secure the window for the night. He glanced at Mrs Davenport's cottage which had not been disturbed whatsoever. "No doubt she's tucked in bed" he thought to himself.

The next day, at about ten in the morning, the two policemen returned.

"We've interviewed the young man," said one of the policemen, "he's wanted for a number of robberies from houses in this area and we found several stolen items on his premises.

"We've come to an agreement regarding the injuries sustained whilst on your property. He has badly bruised his ankle but, fortunately for him and you Father, there are no broken bones.

"As he has not stolen anything from your property, we have agreed not to take into consideration the break-in here if he doesn't pursue a claim for injury from you.

"Is this arrangement agreeable to you Father?"

"Er ... yes ... yes, of course." replied a confused Father Ignatius.

"As it is," continued the police officer, "he'll be facing a number of other charges relating to all the stolen property we've recovered ... and he's likely to be put away for a long time. So there's no need to mention the break-in here."

"I understand," mumbled the priest.

"And it'll save us a lot of paper-work writing a report about your break-in," continued the policeman, "although, you should have that carpet fixed Father. You may not be so lucky next time if an intruder were to get injured in a fall!"

As the two men left, Father Ignatius looked up to the Crucifix and said, "You have a novel way of sorting things out. I'd better get the carpet and kitchen window fixed I suppose!"

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SHARING POVERTY

Father Frederic from Bishop's House was due to visit St Vincent Church later in the day. He was sent by the Bishop to discuss church funds at St Vincent, or more precisely, why the church's contribution to the Bishop's Fund has decreased over the past year.

Father Ignatius knew all too well why his contribution to the Bishop's Fund had decreased. They were in the middle of a severe recession. This particular town had been hit harder than most with business closures, bankruptcies and redundancies. Most of his parishioners were poor and looking for work. The Sunday collection had been getting less and less every week.

"But try telling that to a young priest fresh from College!" thought Father Ignatius.

Father Frederic had graduated as an accountant before becoming a priest; and the Bishop knew too well how to use his talents with figures.

He sent him round to all Parishes to "help improve their finances" and to encourage them to increase their annual contributions to the Bishop's Fund.

Early on the day that Father Frederic was due to visit, Father Ignatius got in his office and waited for the Parish Treasurer to arrive.

"Have you got the map?" the priest asked Kim, the volunteer treasurer, as she entered the room.

She nodded as she unfolded a large map of the town which she pinned on a large board the priest had acquired for the purpose.

Father Ignatius pulled out four boxes of pins from his desk drawer; some with red colored heads, some blue, some green and some yellow.

He consulted the Parish Records and placed various pins on the map. Kim sat in the armchair silently until he finished. She was about to ask a question when Father Frederic was brought in by Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper.

After the introductions and coffee had been served, Father Frederic looked at the map with all the colored pins and said, "That's impressive Ignatius. What do these pins represent?"

"Oh well ... you see ..." mumbled Father Ignatius politely, "Kim and I were analyzing the breakdown of our parishioners' propensity to consume according to income just as you came in ... and from that we could deduce their ability to contribute to church funds ..."

Kim raised an eyebrow, not understanding a word Father Ignatius had said.

Father Frederic nodded knowledgeably and said, "That's very useful ... we could use such a system in other Parishes. Show me how it works ..."

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“Ehm ... well, this is a map of the whole town and surrounding countryside,” explained Father Ignatius.

“These red pins all over here represent parishioners who are either out of work, or in very poorly paid jobs ... you see how they’re all in the poorer inner city areas where business closures have been particularly prevalent! Sadly, they form the majority of our parishioners, and although many of them do contribute generously to the Sunday collections and other appeals there’s a limit to how much they can donate!”

“Quite so ...” said the young priest, “what about the blue pins?”

“Well ... they’re middle income families. Office managers, shopkeepers, factory supervisors ... that sort of thing ... we have a few of those in the Parish and they contribute to the church and the local Catholic schools where they send their children. There’s a limit to how much we can ask of them since they would reduce their donations to the schools to increase ours. Can’t serve two masters you understand ...”

“Indeed ... yes indeed ...” agreed Father Frederic.

Encouraged by his visitor’s enthusiasm Father Ignatius went on.

“Now these green pins ... they represent the countryside. You’ll note there’s much fewer of them and they’re all out of town. They are Catholic farmers in the main who not only donate generously financially but also in kind. Many of them donate food and produce from their farms, which is distributed by the St Vincent Society amongst poor parishioners.”

“That’s admirable Ignatius ... admirable” nodded Father Frederic.

“And as you may have guessed Father,” Father Ignatius continued, “the yellow pins represent those parishioners who are helped by the church. They are recipients of our generosity rather than contributors.

“Now ... would you like to see our weekly accounts of Sunday collections, and how the money is used? Kim here has prepared all the books for you to examine.”

“No that is not necessary ...” said Father Frederic, “I’m in a bit of a hurry and have to visit another Parish. This is splendid Ignatius. I’ll explain to the Bishop and he’ll be most impressed”

After the visiting priest had left Kim spoke for the first time.

“This map Father,” she said, “and all those pins ... does every pin represent a parishioner in St Vincent?”

“Of course not ...” replied Father Ignatius with a smile, “I couldn’t possibly remember every parishioner and their personal circumstances and pin them on the board just a few minutes before he arrived ...”

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“I just put a few red pins in the poor area of town. And a few green ones in the countryside ... and the others I spattered here and there ...

“I’ve met these young enthusiastic priests before, eager to impress the Bishop. Just show them a map with a few colored pins and they’re most impressed at your efficiency and grasp of the situation.

“Strictly speaking, what I said is correct. We have more poor people in this Parish than those able to contribute to our funds.

“If I’d said that, Father Frederic would have asked more questions and wanted more details. But show him a few colored pins on a board and he’s as happy as a child with a new toy!

“I’m far too busy looking after my parishioners, and I prefer to help them in their difficult lives rather than squeeze a few more pennies out of them.”

Father Ignatius paused for a moment or two as he took off all the pins and returned the map to Kim.

“I wonder if our Lord had a board and pins when He helped the poor and the sick ...” he asked.

THE ADVENTURES OF FATHER IGNATIUS

FATHER IGNATIUS LEARNS A LESSON

Father Ignatius had an old radio which, despite its age, was in good working order. He really didn't need it anymore because a kind parishioner had given him a newer model. So he asked around if anyone wanted it. Mrs Davenport, his housekeeper, turned down his generous offer. She had no need of another radio in her home. He asked a few parishioners whom he knew were too poor to own a radio but they said they didn't need one.

So he put a little notice in the weekly Church Newsletter and ... three weeks later, there were still no takers for this free radio seeking a good home with someone, somewhere.

On a sunny summer afternoon Father Ignatius put a small table at the end of the church's car park, just by the gate, on the sidewalk. On the table he placed the old radio and a sign which read: "This radio is yours for FREE. Help yourself."

He then went to his office on the first floor of Parish House and got on with some work. Every so often he looked out of the window and there, on the table, was the poor radio waiting to be taken away.

A few passers-by stopped, looked at the radio, some picked it up to see if it was broken, then they placed it back on the table and walked away.

An hour later and the radio was still there even though some fifty people must have passed by.

"Perhaps people can't believe such a beautiful item is given away free!" thought the priest.

So he went out to the table, took away the notice and put another one saying: "Radio for sale. Only £10. Please call at the Parish House to pay."

He thought to himself as he went back to his office, "If anyone offers to buy it I'll give it to them for free!"

Moments later he looked out of the window and the radio was still there. Some people picked it up, examined it for a while, and then put it back again on the table and left.

The priest was about to give up when he noticed two youngsters approach the table.

"They look interested!" he thought.

They picked up the radio, examined it carefully, looked around to see if anyone was watching them, then ran away with the radio in hand.

Father Ignatius turned back into his office and looked at the large Crucifix hanging on the wall and said: "I don't know about You ... but sometimes I despair with the human race!"

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RECEIVING JESUS

Father Ignatius finished reading from Matthew Chapter 8 Verse 5 then waited for the congregation to sit down.

“Imagine ...” he said, “that I asked you to share your lunch with me today ...

“If I said that Mrs Davenport, our housekeeper, has gone away suddenly and has not prepared Sunday lunch. So instead of staying at home alone with a piece of bread and ginger marmalade, I’d come home with you after Mass and share your meal with you.

“What would you think?”

He waited patiently for a few seconds.

“Would you think ... Oh no ... I haven’t had time to clean the house. It’s in a right state and I don’t want him to see it this way!

“Or ... Not today, without prior notice ... All we have at home is a few eggs and some bread ...

“What other reasons would cross your mind, I wonder, to stop me from visiting you unannounced?”

After a few seconds’ pause he continued.

“In today’s Gospel we read about a Roman Centurion asking Jesus to heal his servant. And when Jesus agrees and makes his way towards the house the soldier says, ‘I am not worthy that you come into my house ...’

“He doesn’t stop Jesus because the house is not clean, or because he has nothing to offer Him by way of refreshments ... He says that he is not worthy to have Jesus visit him.

“He is a Roman Officer, a member of an occupying army with many soldiers under his command. He has power over many men and territory. Yet, he does not feel worthy enough to have such an eminent person as Jesus visit his home.

“He goes on to say ‘Just say the word and my servant will be healed!’

“What Faith, from someone who supposedly should have no Faith at all in Jesus ... another Jew in this occupied land!

“He says to Jesus, ‘I trust you enough and in your power, that you only have to say it, and my servant will be well’

“And of course Jesus heals the servant without visiting the house.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a few moments once again.

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“I wonder if we have similar Faith!” he asked.

“Do we trust Jesus enough to believe that He will listen to our prayers? Or do we harbor some doubts in our minds?”

“Are we worthy to have Him visit us in our homes? Or will He be shocked by the cobwebs in every corner?”

“And when we come forward for Holy Communion, and repeat the Centurion’s words, do we really mean them?”

“Or do we hide the cobwebs of sin in our very souls? For make no mistake about it. This is what Communion is ... Jesus abiding within your very soul.

“And if there’s sin hidden in our hearts ... then we are not worthy indeed to receive Him.”

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IF NOT NOW WHEN

Once upon a time there was an elderly lady who had a bone china tea set. She had a teapot, a milk jug, a container for sugar, twelve cups and saucers and side plates for tea and cakes. The individually hand-made items were white in color with beautiful red roses hand-painted as decorations and gold plating on the rims of the cups and plates. Although the set was quite old it was in pristine condition as if it had just left the factory; now long closed and out of business.

She loved that tea set and displayed it proudly in a glass-fronted cupboard in her living room.

She never used it because it was reserved for very special occasions. You know, just in case the Pope or the Queen might visit. Which of course they never did; nor were they likely to ever do. The old lady was very concerned in case an item would break or be chipped in use and the set would be incomplete and the damaged item irreplaceable.

The tea set remained in the glass-fronted cupboard, admired by everyone who visited the old lady, and proudly loved by her whenever she looked at it.

One day the old lady died and her distant relatives, who never visited her when alive, sold all her belongings and used the money towards a holiday abroad.

When the old lady met St Peter at the Gates of Heaven, for that is where she was destined, the old Saint, who was used to drinking from an old clay cup when on earth, remarked casually "You never did get to use that lovely tea set, did you?"

"No!" she replied forlornly, "I saved it for a special occasion which never arrived!"

"Hmmm ..." thought the Saint stroking his beard, "You also never got round to planting aubergines and courgettes in your garden. You always wanted to do that. But never did!"

"That's right ..." remembered the old lady, "Somehow I never got round to it. You know how it is ... I was busy cleaning the house and things ..."

St Peter chuckled quietly and added "Buon giorno!"

The old lady looked up at the tall man in total confusion.

He laughed and said, "Remember that winter when you promised yourself to learn Italian? You even bought a book and a dictionary, but never got to enroll at the local college for evening classes."

"Yes ... that's right ..." she replied shyly, "I wish I'd done that. Somehow the time was never right to start those classes. I would have enjoyed them too!"

An ominous silence followed and she wondered frightfully whether her omissions had somehow prejudiced her chances of entering Paradise.

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“Do come in, my dear!” said the kindly Saint, “you know ...” he added as he scratched his head, “it grieves me when I look down on earth and see so many people procrastinating and postponing doing something they set their hearts on.

“I watch and think ... if not now, when?

“Somehow, people always have a reason for not doing something. When the Big Boss created the world for us He meant us to enjoy His creations, not postpone them and endure life!”

As she was led to her room in Paradise she discovered by her bedside the porcelain tea-set she once owned, two packets of aubergine and courgette seeds and an Italian dictionary.

The kindly Saint had given her a second chance to fulfil her dreams.