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Altar Boy

BRIAN DOYLE

*I will go up to the altar of God
The giver of youth and happiness.
—Psalm 43*

Introit

I missed one Mass as an altar boy—the Tuesday dawn patrol, 6:00 A.M., Father Dennis Whelan presiding. He was a good-natured fellow, a cigar smoker, although he was a little young for it, that kind of guy, but he was furious when I trudged back to the sacristy after sitting through the second half of Mass in the very last pew.

Where were you?

I was late, Father.

You miss another and you're out of the corps.

I'm very sorry, Father.

It's no joke to be all alone out there.

Yes, Father.

I knew why he was peeved; I was the key to his famous twenty-two-minute Mass. He pulled off this miracle week after week, without ever looking at his watch. His Mass drew the faithful by the dozens, especially businessmen trying to catch the weekday 6:30 train into New York City. One time Whelan had the 6:00 on St. Patrick's Day, and we had nearly fifty people in the church—still a record for our parish, I bet.

Working with Whelan was a pleasure; he was a real artist, someone who would have made his mark in any field. He had all the tools—good hands, nimble feet, a sense of drama, a healthy ego, the unnerving itch to be loved that all great performers have. He did not rush his movements, mumble, or edit his work. He was *efficient*, yes—he'd send his right hand out for the chalice as his left was carving a blessing in the air, that sort of thing—but every motion was cleanly executed and held in the air for the proper instant, and he had astounding footwork

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for such a slab of meat. He was one or two inches over six feet tall, 250 pounds maybe, big belly sliding around in his shirt, but he was deft at the altar and could turn on a dime in the thick red carpet. He cut a memorable double pivot around the corners of the altar table on his way to his spot, and he cut that sucker as cleanly as a professional skater before a Russian judge.

My job was simple: I was the wizard's boy, and the whole essence of being a great altar boy was to be where you needed to be without seeming to get there. Great altar boys flowed to their spots, osmosed from place to place. They just appeared suddenly at the priest's elbow and then vanished like Cheshire cats. There were other arts—quick work with the hands, proper bell ringing, a firm hand with matches and candles, the ability to project a sort of blue-collar holiness on the stage, that sort of thing—but the flowing around like a five-foot-tall column of water was the main thing, and it was damned hard to learn. Rookies spent their whole first year, and often two, lurching around the altar like zombies, a tick behind Father's moves, which led to, horror of horrors, an irritated Father gesturing distractedly for what he needed. Extra gestures from the wizard were the greatest sins, and we recoiled in horror when we saw them when we were at Mass with our families and out of uniform. At such moments, when the clod at the altar forgot to ring the bells, or brought the wrong cruets, or knelt there like a stone when he should have been liquidating around the altar in a flutter of surplice sleeves, I closed my eyes in shame and in memory, for my rookie year was a litany of errors too long to list, and my graduation from rookie to veteran was a source of great pride to me.

Gloria

Whelan was all business out there from the moment he strode purposefully through the little doorway from the sacristy. He had to duck a bit to get under the lintel easily, but even this little dip was done smoothly and powerfully, as if he had trained for it. This quick duck-and-rise move made it appear that he was leaping onto the stage, and he always startled the rail birds getting in a last ask before the lights went up; by the time Whelan was front and center, the old birds were back in their pews doing the rosary ramble.

Whelan ran his Mass like clockwork, and God help the boy who was still sleepy, because the man knew our marks like they were chalked on the floor, and he expected us to be quick with the equipment of the Mass—glassware, towels, smoke. Cruets were to be filled to the neck, incense respectfully removed from the boat and properly lit in the thurible, hand towel clean and folded over the left arm, Mass book open to the right page, bells rung sharply at exactly the instant he

paused for the sharp ringing of the bells. He also liked his wine cut with water in advance, half and half. Most priests liked to mix it themselves during Mass. Some drank mostly water with only a touch of wine for color and legitimacy; some drank the wine straight, with barely a drop of water. Few priests drank a full load of wine; even the heavy hitters found cheap burgundy distasteful at dawn. We did, too, although there were more than a few boys who drank wine in the musty stockroom, and every altar boy at some point gobbled a handful of Communion wafers to see how they tasted fresh from the box. They tasted like typing paper. After I discovered that the hosts came wholesale from a convent in New Jersey, the consecrated Host never tasted quite as savory again.

Oremus

I joined the altar boys because my older brother was in the corps and because my parents expected it. Also you could get out of class for funerals. Funerals and weddings paid, usually a buck, although there were rumors of five-dollar weddings, and it was said of one boy that he had once received a twenty-dollar bill from a bride's father who was drunk. Baptisms didn't pay—a quarter, maybe, if you were doing twins. The way to make money was to do funerals and to work the banks of candles on either side of the altar. The big ones were on the left and the little ones were on the right—"big ones for the horses and little ones for the dogs," as Mr. Collins, the altar master, said with an enigmatic smile. He was a horseplayer, I think.

People would come up to the candles before and after Mass, and if you were there in uniform, they'd hand you the money, even though the steel box was right in front of them. Large candles were a dollar, and small ones were a quarter.

Light a big one for my grandmother, they'd say, crumpling a bill into your hand.

Here's a quarter for my boy at sea.

Here's a quarter for a marriage.

A quarter for the Pope's health.

Two smalls, for my intentions.

A dollar for the dead.

The code among us was that coins placed in your hand were yours; bills went into the box. The theory was that we were just standing there and the women (they were mostly women) were handing us money out of the goodness of their hearts. This was the first tickle of sin for some of us, and while the practice enriched some boys, it was by no means universal, partly because our cassocks had no pockets and partly because Mr. Collins learned about it from a first-year boy

and after that kept a sharp eye on us from the sacristy door. A boy named Frank Cuozzo was asked to leave the corps because of this, and it caused great embarrassment to his family. He became a bully in adolescence and probably still is.

The Poem of the Twenty-Two Rites and Thirteen Masses

When I was an altar boy, there were twenty-two rites for the Mass, and we were expected to know them even though we were to be witnesses and assistants at only one, the Roman rite, by far the world and Olympic champion in Western civilization. There were actually two other Western rites and a startling total of nineteen Eastern Catholic rites. All twenty-two rites remain in my mind not unlike a poem, and so I chant the Poem of the Twenty-Two Rites, which I dedicate to Father Dennis Whelan, wherever he may be: Abyssinian, Albanian, Ambrosian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Chaldean, Coptic, Georgian, Greek, Hungarian, Italo-Albanian, Malabar, Malankar, Maronite, Melkite, Mozarabic, Roman, Rumanian, Russian, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Syrian. I even remember that the Ambrosian rite was used only in Milan, and the Mozarabic rite only in Toledo and Salamanca in Spain. And then there are the thirteen Masses within the Roman rite: the Missa Cantata, or sung Mass (or "High Mass") sung by a priest and a choir, the Gregorian Masses (a series celebrated for thirty consecutive days for the release of a soul in purgatory), the Low (the "usual Mass," like the ones I assisted Father Whelan with), the Pontifical (said by a bishop), the Solemn (sung by a priest with acolytes, choir, deacon, and sub-deacon), the Votive (priest's choice of intentions), Missa Pro Populo (said by pastors by Church law eighty-eight times a year), Mass of a Saint, Mass of Exposition, Mass of Reposition, Mass of the Catechumens (the first half of Mass, before the big moment), Mass of the Faithful (second half), and Mass of the Presanctified (part of the Good Friday Mass during the Passion of Christ).

To remember all this, is that prayer or foolishness?

Mass of the Faithful

After Father Whelan was on his mark, facing the congregation from behind the altar, Mass was under way. The pieces of it snicked into place like oiled parts of an engine. Opening prayers, prayer for the intention of the day, Gospel, Eucharist, serving of Eucharist along the rail, left to right and back again, cleanup and closing prayers, back to the front of the altar for the brisk procession back into the sacristy. Or, in the order of the Latin prayers we learned and then unlearned, *aufer a nobis, oramus te, Kyrie* (Greek, left over from the first and second centuries A.D. before the Mass went Latin), *Gloria, Alleluia,*

Credo, Dominus Vobiscum, Oremus, Sanctus, Te igitur, Communicantes, Hanc igitur, Quam oblationem, unde et memores, Supra quae, Supplices, per quem, per ipsum, Pater Noster, Libera nos, Agnus Dei, Domine, Ite missa es, placeat, and then a rush for the door, or, in the case of the priest and the altar boy, a dignified retreat to the sacristy.

As Whelan ducked back under the sacristy lintel, he was a different man, and even before he was across the room you could see the steel go out of his body. At the counter, he took off his alb and hung up his rope belt on the inside of his closet door. Then he peeled his surplice off over his head like a boy yanking off a sweater, and then he sat down on his stool and lit a cigar. By then my amice and cassock were hanging in my locker and I was sitting in one of the two chairs by the door. It was considered bad form to leave the sacristy before Father left. Some boys waited impatiently by the door, but I rather liked Whelan and enjoyed the postmortem:

Good job out there, son.

Thank you, Father.

Could do the bells a little sharper.

Yes, Father.

Then still them with your off hand.

Yes, Father.

Are we on next week?

Monday for me, Father.

Ah, that'll be Father Driscoll.

Driscoll was another brisk guy, although not quite so smooth as Whelan. He was a good deal younger, and he lingered over the prayers a little. It was said that he had a hair shirt and the stigmata, and we watched his hands closely when he carved the prayers during Mass. You couldn't really tell about the stigmata; there were marks there, but he could have cut himself working in the priests' garden, which was the domain of a little Italian fellow who made pickles and such. Driscoll's small hands were always moist, and he had the unusual habit of shaking hands with his altar boys after a Mass; he did this as part of his disrobing ritual, and he would actually come into our little locker room to shake hands if we'd forgotten about it. He always seemed out of place there, and he didn't stay any longer than the handshake.

Once a visiting Franciscan who didn't know the custom wandered into our locker room after a Sunday Mass and sat down companionably. There were four of us boys there at the time, two just finished and two suiting up, and I remember the uncomfortable silences after the priest's friendly questions; we weren't used to a priest in our room, and he was an oddity anyway, with his hooded brown robe and bare

feet in enormous sandals. He had gnarled feet like the roots of oak trees. The veins on his feet looked like cables and his toenails were as big as quarters. He finally realized the score and left, after shaking our hands. His hands were a lot bigger and dryer than Father Driscoll's. He didn't have the stigmata.

Years later I realized with a start that Christ probably looked a good deal like the Franciscan, with his dusty feet and pocked face, and I had ignored the guy, wished him gone no less than shaky Peter had wished Jesus gone from his past before the cock crew; Peter standing there in the icy darkness, the fire at his feet sparking up into the dangerous night, sharp voices coming at him like needles, he shifts uneasily from foot to foot and damns his friend as easily, as thoughtlessly, as you might crush a beetle; then a shooting pain of light in the sky, dawn crawls over the hills, and right in his ear, as loud and shrill as a scream, comes the shriek of a rooster and the horrible knowledge that he has betrayed the man he loves . . .

Consecration

Actual belief in the miracle was mixed among us boys, although all of us watched the priests' hands with awe at the instant the Host was changed into the living, breathing Body of Christ. We did not expect actually to see change steal over the Host itself, as we had been told ad infinitum by the nuns that the miracle was beyond human ken, but we did half expect to see a priest's hands burst spontaneously into flame as he handled the distilled essence of the Mind that invented the universe. There was some discussion about what we should do if a hand fire broke out. There were two general camps: the first insisted that the water cruet should be flung at the fire, and the second advised a sprint away from the awful miracle and toward the janitor, who spoke only shards of English but who knew how to deal with shards of glass, fire, locked doors, broken bicycle chains, vomit, heart attacks, dog bites, broken teeth, broken noses, blood, and sobbing first graders who wet their pants because they were too shy to raise their hands and ask Sister if they could go to the bathroom.

I could never turn my eyes away from that key moment, though. It was and is the single most mysterious and bizarre belief of my faith, and it was in many ways the thing that set us apart from all other Christian denominations. In later years I would sit in Congregationalist and Episcopalian and Lutheran services and observe the Communion of those faiths, the passing of torn bread among the faithful and the circulating cups of wine, and while these acts seemed friendlier to me, more communal than the shivering magic of the Transubstantiation, they seemed insubstantial, too, muted, more like a casual brunch

than a heartbreaking Last Supper. I always wanted to like the communions of other faiths, but they seemed pale to me. I suppose being dipped in miracles every day inoculates you against the mundane; or at least it shoots your sense of perspective all to hell. I still expect miracles, and I have seen some: my wife, my daughter coming out of my wife, my twin sons coming out of my wife one after another like a circus act, the bolt of light that shot around the room when my uncle died.

Requiem

Recently I went to Mass in the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City. This edifice, a monument to the staying power of Catholicism in the heart of Mormon country, is the church where my late father-in-law was an altar boy in the 1920s. He was also a student there, as the cathedral once housed a grade school in its nether regions (four Congregation of Holy Cross nuns taught eight grades). But it was the altar itself that I was interested in. During Mass I deliberately detoured past the immense stone altar and proscenium, thinking of the man who once knelt there, garbed in acolyte's robes, draped in youth, not yet the affable patriarch who would sire six children and build a business and hammer a home out of the Oregon woods and die there suddenly among his pastures and gardens, his breath sliding to a halt as his lungs filled with fluid, his wife holding him in her arms as he slumped helplessly to one side of the bed, the look on his face more confusion than pain, his death a great surprise to him on a lovely April morning, the scents of horses and blackberry trickling in the window.

I don't know what I expected to see there, amid the pomp and circumstance of Mass in this garish old castle. I suppose I was looking for the marks of his knees, or the hovering nugget of his soul. He died before I met him, before I could thank him for his daughter and show him my daughter and sons. I have looked for him in the woods and in the wood of the house he made. I have been closest to him near a small pond that he labored to clear from the woods, but the forest in Oregon is a tenacious thing, and it took the pond back after the man died.

Adolesensuous

Certainly being an altar boy was training for the priesthood, in the way that baseball's little leagues are training grounds for the big leagues. We were encouraged to go on outings with the younger priests, who took us to carnivals and baseball games (always the Mets, never the Yankees) and bowling alleys. The eighth graders made a pilgrimage to the seminary at Garrison, New York, every year; the year I went,

the school had just opened a vast and gleaming sports center, and a quiver of athletic lust went through me like winter wind when the doors to this Xanadu swung open and revealed an oceanic swimming pool and glittering gymnasium with polished hardwood floors and *glass backboards*. We nearly fainted with desire. The young priest showing off this gem had the wit to remain silent as we gaped at Neverland, and my friends and I spent the rest of the day envisioning ourselves sprinting and spinning and scoring thousands of points on that perfect floor, the stands throbbing with local girls tantalized not only by our patent skill but by the thought that we were tadpole priests—how much more enticing to lure a prospective saint down into the willow trees by the river, and there slip a tongue in his mouth and get his hand on your breast and see if the Catholic Church in the vaguely sanctified person of this gangly zit of a boy was indeed convinced that asceticism was a road to holiness.

Combine this athletic Xanadu with the sweeping view of the Hudson Valley below, and the lush playing fields terracing off into the distance, and the sense that a boy living at a high school fully two hours from home was an independent and mature creature, and you had a potent draw for boys on the lip of puberty; but then we were served mystery meat for lunch, in a dank military-style cafeteria, and shown through the cold moist barracks, where narrow metal cots stretched away for miles, where a thousand boys had pulled the pud in a thousand slate-gray stalls, and they lost us. All the way home Father Driscoll chirped the virtues of the seminary, but we were silent, each boy afraid to be the first to burst the poor man's bubble. He might, after all, bear the stigmata; plus we felt sorry for him. He had once been sentenced to a narrow cot and horse burgers and dismal mornings in a dank gray stall where cockroaches did the fandango through scummy puddles.

We went home to our bright houses with joy.

Catechumens

On mornings when I had the 6:00 Mass, I would awake in the woolly dark and leave my brothers snoring like bears and pedal through the empty streets with my fists clenched in my jacket pockets and my collar turned up against the whip of dawn. The church was silent and dark. The only light in it was the tabernacle lamp, and the only sign of human life the stray styrofoam coffee cups filled with cigarette butts in the back of the church, the spoor of the Nocturnal Adoration Society, which met once a month to conduct a vigil with the Blessed Sacrament, which reposed inside a monstrance on the altar; teams of men would arrive every hour and replace the team in the church, each

team yawning as it passed the other, each exchanging muted greetings, a handshake here and there in the dark air, the men checking their watches and settling down on their knees like old horses waiting for dawn.

There were seven lay societies: the Altar Society (for women), the Blessed Virgin Sodality (for young women), the Holy Name Society (for men), the Legion of Mary, the Mother's Club, the Nocturnal Adoration Society, and the Rosary Society (for women). While my ambition was someday to join my father in the Nocturnal Adoration Society, my admiration was highest for the Altar Society, whose members worked liked bees to keep the church and its accoutrements sparkling. "It was they who undertook the laundering of altar linens, communion cloths and surplices, the polishing of the brass candelabra and altar vases, as well as the disposal of withered flowers, ferns, and pot plants," the Irish writer Mary Lavin recounts in her story "A Voice from the Dead." They were an efficient lot, friendly but brisk, and the Good Lord Himself could not help a boy who got in their way when they were stripping the altar linens; more than once I was shouldered against the cold wall of the sacristy by a brisk Altar Society Woman with an armful of God's laundry, on her way purposefully, moving through the waters of the day like a battleship, toward her dank basement laundry room and the magic Maytag thundering away down there like the monstrous engine in a tramp steamer.

Incense

Almost always I was at the church before Father Whelan. I would hear his steps in the courtyard and smell his cigar. He smoked villainous cigars, execrable things that smelled like peat moss and burned fitfully if at all. He was always at them, lighting, re-lighting, puffing determinedly, moaning with despair at the shoddy plug that hung like a zeppelin between his lips. He got them from the tobacconist in the village, a seedy man with a harelip who gave the priests a break, twenty percent off, probably in exchange for future considerations. I knew the price because I once bought a box for Whelan after Mass; he'd been caught short, and after thrashing his pockets like a man with bees in his pants, he sat me down in the sacristy.

I need a favor, son.

Yes, Father.

It's unorthodox.

Yes, Father.

I need cigars.

Cigars?

Cigars. A box of them.

Yes, Father.
You'll have to go up to the village. You have a bike.
Yes, Father.
Get a box of panatelas. Here's a fiver.
Yes, Father.
Don't smoke any.
No, Father.
Keep the change.
Yes, Father.
None of these coronas, now.
Yes, Father.
What?
I mean No, Father.

Memento

I remember the dark scent of the church at dawn, the dense purple light, the smells of incense and cigars and dust. I remember the dry shuffling of shoes as communicants shambled toward the Host. I remember the twisted faces of saints in the windows, Veronica's pale hand outstretched with a cloth for the face of Christ, the bulging Popeye forearm of Simon as he supported the collapsing Savior. I remember the groaning organ and the reverberating wowl of an infant being baptized in the nave. I remember the stiff black cloth under which you hid all desire and personality as you prepared to assist at a miracle that you did not and could never understand but which you watched for ravenously, like a hawk after meat. For a time we were expected to wear ties under our cassocks, but eventually this stricture was lifted and we were allowed to go tieless. No jeans, no sneakers, no sandals—this last despite the gnarled tree-like feet of the Franciscans at the altar once a month. You buttoned your cassock from the bottom up, to be sure of symmetry, and then you slipped on the starched white surplice. A simple uniform, black and white, unornamented, memorable.

Credo

I have come, in my middle years, to a passionate belief in a Coherence—a pervasive divineness that I only dimly comprehend and cannot at all articulate. It is a feeling, a sense. I feel it most near my elfin daughter, my newborn sons. Last night I stood over the huddled body of my daughter, asleep in her bed, her hair flowing around her like dark water. She had fallen asleep only minutes before, sobbing herself to sleep after soiling herself and her bedding and her bear. She is very sick and cannot control her bowels, and she is humiliated and fright-

ened by this; she fell asleep in my wife's arms, her sobs muffled in the folds of my wife's deep soft flannel shirt. I stand above her now in the dark. She is curled like a question in the corner of her bed. My body curls itself into an ancient gesture of prayer and humility, and I place my hands together and begin to weep—for love of this child, in fear of illness, in despair at my helplessness. I make a prayer in the dark. I believe so strongly, so viscerally, in a wisdom and vast joy under the tangled weave of the world, under the tattered blanket of our evil and tragedy and illness and brokenness and sadness and loss, that I cannot speak it, cannot articulate it, but can only hold on to ritual and religion like a drowning man to a sturdy ship.

Benedicamus Domino

“And so the Mass comes to an end, in a whirl of purifications and postscripts that do not seek to impress themselves deeply on the mind; one has not enough capacity left for receiving impressions,” wrote Ronald Knox. “‘And every man went to his own house,’ as it says frequently in the Old Testament and once in the New, and that is what we do; we must be alone.”

Many a time I was alone, when it was all over, when the rail birds had gone from the rail, when the businessmen were walking briskly to their trains. When the audience was gone, the janitor would whip through the church slamming the kneelers back up and slipping missals and songbooks back into their racks behind each pew. Then he would bow before the altar and slip out a side door toward the school. I would wait for the click of the side door closing and then wander out of the sacristy and sit down in a pew and think and listen and wait for something to happen. The building groaned and creaked, the candles fluttered and sizzled, bees and flies bounced off the windows. In the windows were the saints, red and blue and green and pink, their faces and bodies and fluttering hands outlined in lead. After a few minutes I would walk down the aisle, past the empty pews and kneelers and missals and Stations of the Cross, and push through the massive oak door and into the broad fat light of the new day, dazzled.