

**FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES**

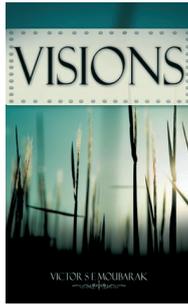
**FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES**



**By Victor S E Moubarak**

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

Also by Victor S E Moubarak



“VISIONS” (ISBN 978 1 60477 032 2).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Victor S E Moubarak**

[www.holyvisions.co.uk](http://www.holyvisions.co.uk)

## **FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

**This book, “FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES” is a selection of the short stories from my Blog. I hope you enjoy them.**

**Victor S E Moubarak**

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## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### THE REAL PRESENCE

Catechism lessons with the 15 years-old at the local Catholic school were often a challenge to Father Ignatius. The youngsters were unremitting with their questions and they certainly pulled no punches. Today was no exception.

“Is it true that the Host and Wine at Communion are actually the Body and Blood of Jesus?” asked one of the pupils.

“Why would Jesus want us to eat Him?” asked another.

“That’s cannibalism” retorted a third. And so the questions went on.

Father Ignatius waited until they had stopped and then said calmly:

“Our Faith is full of mysteries. That’s why they call it Faith. If everything was explained to us by God, with every little detail made known, and every fact analysed by scientists, learned people and so on; then it wouldn’t be Faith would it?”

“For reasons best known to Himself God has chosen to keep certain things hidden from us. And just as well I think, considering how we managed to mess up the world so far.”

“But is the Host the Body of Christ?” interrupted an impatient youngster.

The priest smiled and continued: “Catholics are invited, by the Church, to believe that the Host is indeed the Body of Christ, and the wine is His Blood.

“Many people have difficulties in believing this; and I can understand why.

“They can’t see what Christ meant at the last supper when He uttered those words we know so well. Was it symbolism? Was it fact?”

“What do you think Father?”

The priest habitually cleaned his spectacles as a natural pause and to allow the class to settle. He now knew he had their attention. All eagerly awaiting his reply to the challenging question.

“Let me tell you something first before I answer you” he said.

“Many years ago, about seven hundred years after the Birth of Jesus, there was a Basilian monk who lived in Italy in the Church of St Legontian. He doubted, like many others, the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

“One day, as he was celebrating the Holy Mass at the moment of Consecration the Host turned into live flesh, and the wine was changed into live blood.”

“Gosh ... “gasped a young girl.

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“This flesh and blood have been preserved, totally intact until today.”

“What? How is this possible?” asked one of the boys.

“That’s true ... the flesh is the same dimension as the large Host used in Church, it is light brown in colour. The Blood has coagulated and is slightly brownish yellow.

“Various scientific tests have been undertaken over the years on the flesh and blood and it was discovered that the flesh is real human flesh and the blood is real human blood. The flesh is essentially a human heart.

“The flesh and blood are the same blood-type, AB. That’s the same blood type uncovered in the Holy Shroud of Turin.”

“Wow ...” said one of the children.

“The preservation of the flesh and blood still in their natural state for all these years, over twelve centuries, is an extraordinary phenomenon.” declared the priest.

“After all this time?”

“Yes,” said Father Ignatius, “after all this time the flesh and blood still exists in their natural state. Why don’t you do some research in the library in time for next week’s lesson.

“Here are some clues on what to look for. Search for Eucharistic Miracle, Lanciano, Italy, 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, The Real Presence.

“I think that’s enough clues to keep you going for now.”

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### ON THE TONGUE

Father Ignatius considered himself a “traditionalist priest”, as he liked to call himself.

Sure enough, he accepted that changes happen in life generally as well as in the Catholic Church, and that he had to accept them; but it didn't mean that he agreed with the changes that came his way from “earthly above” – a term he used to describe the church's hierarchy, as opposed to “Heavenly above” when he referred to the Almighty.

One particular new development which the priest didn't like was handing the Host during Communion to people in their hands. He preferred the traditional placing of the Host on the tongue, and for people to genuflect by the altar rail to receive Communion. But change he did, and he gave way to new procedures as an obedient priest must.

This Sunday, however, his concerns were put to the test.

As he gave out Communion to the queue of parishioners walking up the center aisle he noticed two youngsters, both aged about eighteen or so, coming towards him. He had not seen them in church before and assumed they were visitors to town. As they came to him in turn, they both held out their hands and he placed the Host in it.

A sixth sense perhaps prompted him to keep an eye on them as they moved away. And he noticed that neither placed the Host in their mouths but walked away slowly.

“Would you please stop” he said sternly, at which point they both hurried and then ran away. Unfortunately in doing so one of them dropped the Host on the floor.

The priest went to recover the fallen Host and shouted “Stop those two ...” but unfortunately they escaped through a side door followed by two parishioners.

By the time they came out the parishioners found the car park totally empty ... there was no one in sight.

“Which way did they go?” asked one.

“They were too quick ... didn't see them ...” replied the other; and after a few moments' conversation they went back into the church.

That would have been the end of it ... but God had other plans.

At that very moment Father Donald was coming out of the parochial house and making his way to the church. He had seen the youngsters running and overheard the conversation of their pursuers. Rather than continue his way towards the church to find out what had happened he had the presence of mind to follow the youngsters at a distance.

They made their way into the park opposite the church and eventually sat down on one of the benches. Father Donald approached quietly and hid behind a tree.

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“Have you got it then?” he heard one of them ask.

“Yeh ... here it is” replied the second youth, “where’s yours?”

“I dropped it in church.”

“Idiot ...”

“Sorry ... let me see it ... it looks like a piece of thin paper or card ... why do they call it a Host?”

At this point Father Donald realized what had happened and knew he had to act quickly. He approached the bench from behind and grabbed both individuals simultaneously from the back of their shirts. He was really strong and knew how to take care of himself. A skill he had learnt in his native Glasgow where he fought many a street fight in his youth.

He asked them to turn round slowly and face him, kneeling on the bench whilst doing so.

Perhaps because of his broad Glaswegian accent, or perhaps because of his stature and the fact that they were taken by surprise, both youngsters obliged and turned round slowly. Neither made an attempt to escape or pull back. They knelt on the bench facing him whilst his strong hands held them tight by the back of the neck.

“Now then ...” he said calmly, “which one of you has the Host?”

“I have Mister ...” replied one of them.

“OK ... I’ll let you on my right go. Please walk away slowly and stand by that tree.” said the priest releasing the youngster without the Host, who obediently walked away towards the tree.

“As for you young man, please place the Host in my hand,” continued Father Donald holding out his hand and retrieving the stolen Host.

After releasing the second teenager the priest stood there and asked them “Do you realize the seriousness of what you have done?”

They shook their heads “No ...” said one of them.

It was certainly not the time for a discussion on Christianity or the reality that is the Eucharist. The priest had to say something to end this encounter. “In the name of God whom you do not know I forgive you and so does He. I pray for you that you may yet get to know Him.” He turned back towards the church and never saw the two of them again.

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### FATHER IGNATIUS'S SIN

The following Sunday at Mass Father Ignatius was determined to make a stand. He approached the lectern confidently and said:

“As many of you know by now we had an incident here at last Sunday’s Mass. Two youngsters came up front for Communion and instead of placing the Host in their mouth when I put it in their hands, they ran away. In their hurry to escape one of them dropped the Host on the floor. The other Host was also retrieved by Father Donald who had followed the youth out in the park.

“What happened here last Sunday is a sacrilege.

“The Host as you know is not just a wafer, or a biscuit. It is the Body of Christ.

“And I allowed the Body of Christ to be desecrated by handing it out in peoples’ hands. For this grave sin of thoughtlessness I have begged Him for forgiveness.

“I am personally responsible for what happened last Sunday to the Body of Christ and I know that I will be answerable to Him personally one day for my sin.”

The priest paused for a while.

“I have decided that from today, Communion will no longer be given in the hand in this church. Not as long as I am here.

“From now on, I would like you please to come forward and genuflect side by side here by the Altar rail. I will then give Communion on the tongue as we used to do previously.

“I’ve discussed this with Father Donald and he agrees and he will be following the same practice too.

“I have also discussed this matter with the Bishop who said that although the decision is ours to make in this parish; he will not be advising other parishes to change their practice.

“If anyone has a problem with this change please have a word with me afterwards or with Father Donald.”

Father Ignatius stopped for few moments to let the message sink in, then continued:

“I think you ought to know that we have identified one of the youngsters who ran away with the Host last Sunday.

“He is a Catholic boy who has in the past attended Mass here and was educated in our local Catholic school.”

The congregation gasped almost in unison. The priest waited for the noise to die down

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and then went on:

“I also feel responsible for that fact in itself.

“The fact that one of our own children could carry out such a deed proves that we have failed him somehow.

“It is obvious that we failed to teach him, and possibly other children, the true meaning of the Eucharist. As your priest I am guilty of that grave omission.

“I fail to understand how a child who took First Communion in this very church and was educated by us, amongst our own, did not understand the reality of Communion.

“I have discussed this at some length with Mother Superior at St Joseph School and the Headmaster at St Andrew’s. Both will take action to remedy the situation.

“But most of all I would like to plead with you parents. You are the first point of contact with your children, and rightly so. You promised at their Baptism that you will bring them up in the Faith. Please remember this and use every opportunity to teach your young ones the reality that is Christ and His Divinity.

“Teach them by example. Teach them by words. Teach them by praying together daily as a family, and by reading passages from the Bible.

“Father Donald and I are here to help you if you wish.

“The Lord God has given you the gift of children. Your gift to Him is to bring them up in the Faith.”

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### DID SHE SEE HIM?

Father Ignatius was busy in his office dealing with some paper work when Eric, a young man in his mid-twenties, came in.

“I’ve changed the oil Father and gave the engine a good run. It’s as good as new.”

Eric was a car mechanic at the local garage and every now and then he came over to the parochial house to maintain the priest’s car and undertake any minor jobs that needed doing.

“Thank you” replied Father Ignatius, “I’ll await the invoice from your boss in due course.”

“Oh I see you got that picture of Jesus ...” said Eric pointing at the wall. “The boss has the same one in his office at work.”

“It’s very popular ...” mumbled the priest hoping that the youngster would soon leave. He had plenty of paperwork to get on with and he could really not afford the time for a chat.

“Did He really look like that?” continued Eric.

“Who?”

“Jesus ... did He look like that? This is the picture painted by that nun isn’t it? What’s her name?”

Father Ignatius put down the letter he was reading and turned to Eric. It was obvious that although he wished to get on with his work the Good Lord had other plans for him.

“Her name is Sister Faustina. Her real name at birth was Helena Kowalska.”

“Greek was she?” asked Eric making himself comfortable in the armchair near the window.

Father Ignatius took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his right hand, as if to summon every ounce of patience that the Good Lord might send him. “Why now, when I’m busy,” he prayed silently.

“No Eric,” he said with a smile, “she was Polish.”

“That’s right; I knew it was somewhere foreign. Near Jerusalem where Jesus came from ...”

“Not quite near Jerusalem ...”

“And she actually saw Jesus and painted Him. That’s what I have been told. Do you believe that?” interrupted the young man eagerly.

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“Well ...”

“I mean ... she could have been lying. Can you prove that she actually saw Jesus and He looks like that picture?”

“Despite my age,” said the priest abruptly, “I can assure you I was not around when Sister Faustina was around. So I can’t actually prove what you ask for.” He then immediately regretted what he had said and continued in a more gentle voice.

“Look Eric, we are told that Sister Faustina back in 1931 had a Vision of our Lord. She saw Him dressed in white and standing very much as in the picture there. From His heart rays came out, one red and another pale, as you can see.

“The Lord spoke to her and asked her to paint an image according to the Vision she can see and to write ‘Jesus I trust in you.’

“And that’s how we came to have this picture.”

“Oh ...” said Eric.

“Now you and I have two choices to make,” continued the priest.

“We can believe this is all true. Or we can believe she was lying and nothing really happened.

“If indeed the story is true and we chose to ignore it we would have lost a great opportunity to venerate the image of Christ; as He has asked us to do when He spoke to Sister Faustina.

“And what a great pity, and tragedy that would be! To ignore a request made by our Lord Himself.”

“I see ...” said Eric pensively.

“Our Faith has a number of mysteries Eric,” continued the priest in his gentle tone, “things that we are invited to believe without any proof and without any evidence. That’s why they call it Faith. To believe in something when your common sense tells you otherwise.”

There followed a few moments silence whilst Eric digested the information he’d just heard.

“Does Jesus appear and speak to people these days too?” he asked finally.

“I believe He does,” replied Father Ignatius, “He certainly spoke through the Holy Spirit to Father John Woolley. Here, you can borrow his book ...”

Eric picked up the book handed by the priest and read the title, “I am with you.”

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He then asked, “Jesus performed miracles when He was on earth ... Does He do so now? Do miracles happen now Father?”

“Yes ... they do. Miracles happen every day to a lot of people. The sad fact is that too many are not willing to believe that they happen.

“Christ is alive and is amongst us now as He ever was. He speaks to us and guides us through His Holy Spirit.

“But hearts have hardened Eric. Plenty are not willing to believe.

“They may consider themselves Christians or Catholics but they don’t know what to believe anymore. They just go through the motions by going to church and by claiming they’re Christians.

“Christianity is not just a label Eric. Or a brand name. It is real. Christ is real and is alive today as He ever was. It is not an event that happened two thousand years ago which we commemorate as a Remembrance every Sunday. Christ is alive and here today. He is here in the Eucharist; He is here in the Holy Spirit who abides in our very soul, if we let Him. If we invite Him ...”

Eric hesitated for a while and then asked “I’d like to really believe in all these things Father. I don’t know how ...”

“That’s a good start ... wanting to believe. Opening your mind and heart to the Lord.

“Pray about it. Ask God to help you believe. If you like come and join us at the Bible classes we hold every now and then here at the Parish center.

“Ask for God’s help and leave the rest to Him.

“Say what you can read in that picture on the wall, ‘Jesus, I trust in you’ and mean it every time you say it.”

Note: I am with you. Author John A Woolley ISBN 09508840-7-3

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### HELL

Father Ignatius visited the local Catholic School to address the 15 years-old children at Catechism Class.

One of them asked: “Father, is it true that hell is full of fire and devils poking you with big forks and all that ...”

“And all that ...” repeated Father Ignatius with a smile.

“Hell has been described as a burning place many times in the Bible,” continued Father Ignatius. “Jesus tells us the story of a rich man who did not care for poor Lazarus starving at his gate. When both of them died, Lazarus went to Heaven whereas the rich man went to hell.

“Jesus says in this story that the rich man was in torment in the fire, so much so that he begged for a drop of water to cool his tongue.”

“So it is a fiery hot place; is it Father?” asked one of the children.

Father Ignatius cleaned his glasses of imaginary smudges. A habit he had acquired when he wanted to buy more thinking time.

A few seconds later he said: “The Bible often refers to hell as a fiery place where the flames never stop burning.

“When I was a young priest, and that’s many years ago as you can imagine, the message we gave from the pulpit on Sunday was that hell is indeed a fiery place, where torment is eternal and the worms that eat you never die. Fire and brimstone was the message of the day back then.

“A place where there will be crying and gnashing of teeth as it says in the Bible. Although I’ve often wondered what would happen to people with no teeth ... perhaps they’ll be provided with dentures to gnash!”

The children laughed in unison.

“These days, however, the message has changed,” continued Father Ignatius pensively, “we no longer seem to talk much about hell in our sermons.”

“Why?” asked a child.

“Good question. I suppose because people have become hardened and they no longer believe, or no longer wish to believe.

“If I were to say in my sermon on Sunday that hell is a burning place full of demons with long spears, as one of you described it, the congregation would scoff in disbelief. They would just not want to buy such an imagery of hell.

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“It seems to me that today’s generation wishes to believe in a nice place called Heaven, whatever they perceive it to be. And everyone seems to think that they are destined there.

“If you were to ask people in the street about Heaven most of those who believe in such a place hope they’ll go there. That’s because people consider themselves to be good and worthy of Heaven regardless of the way they live their lives.

“They’d rather not think about hell or what it’s like. Some may mention fire and damnation, but do they really believe it?

“And the only one laughing secretly at this state of affairs is the devil. For he exists all right although he’d rather we think he didn’t exist.”

The children were attentive to his every word. The priest continued in his gentle soothing voice:

“Someone once described hell as a place or a state of being totally without God.

“When I look around me these days I see many people in that state right now. They live without God in their lives. Totally unaware of Him; some even rejecting publicly His very existence. Others revel in the fact that they don’t believe in God, and consider themselves somewhat superior to the rest of us who believe in a supreme Creator of the Universe and all that is in it.

“So is hell just a state of being totally devoid of God’s love?

“Personally, I’d like to describe hell as a place not only totally devoid of God and His love, but also with a big difference.

“It is a place where you know for certain that God exists. You are made aware of His existence, His omnipotence, and His love for mankind. A place where you realize how wrong you were in choosing not to believe in Him, to reject Him and to mock Him in your lifetime.

A place where you know of His eternal love for us and you see this love being shared amongst His followers in Heaven. Yet you are totally excluded from His presence and His love.

“It is denied to you because of the choices you have made when you were free to choose.

“Can you imagine that? Knowing for certain that God exists yet being excluded from Him.

“Isn’t that worse than any eternal fire?” asked the priest.

“Wow ...” muttered one of the children.

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Father Ignatius smiled reassuringly. “So, what is it to be,” he asked, “a fiery place or a place devoid of God?”

A child raised his hand and said: “I think it’s a place where I would rather not be!”

“That’s very wise,” remarked the priest, as the bell rang to indicate the end of Catechism lesson.

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### I'M LOSING MY FAITH

Father Ignatius was in the Sacristy tidying up after morning's Mass when one of his parishioners came in and asked if he could have a quick chat. Being quite approachable, the priest glanced quickly at his watch and agreed to spend a few minutes with the young man, in his mid-twenties.

"Father ... I'm losing my Faith ..." was the abrupt introduction.

Father Ignatius said nothing, encouraging the young man to continue with a nod. "I've been a Christian all my life, but there are times when I'm totally confused. I ask myself whether God really exists ... whether it's all real ... or just some invention. I wonder whether God ... Jesus and the whole of Christianity have just been invented over the years by society ... just to regulate itself ... I sometimes find it a real struggle to believe that God exists ... but the more I try to believe the more I doubt."

"I don't blame you," replied the priest, and this had the desired effect of gaining the young man's full attention.

"We're living in difficult times," continued Father Ignatius, "times of confusion, half-truths and miss-information. The world is in financial crisis and turmoil. People are losing their jobs and their livelihoods. They fear for the future. Nothing seems as it should be. It is no wonder people get confused and don't know what to believe anymore. And in their confusion and daily worries they can't keep their focus on God. They hear and read so many conflicting stories they don't know what to think anymore ... to the point where they even start doubting God's very existence.

"You're not the only one who came to me recently saying what you've just said. That you doubt God exists."

"Oh ..." said the man.

"When the Jews left Egypt, they were confused too ..." the priest went on, "they had left the relative safety of slavery behind them, where they were fed and watered, and here they were, going round in circles in the desert following a man promising them jam tomorrow ... or was it milk and honey?"

The young man smiled.

"So they rebelled against Moses. They didn't want to believe in His God, leading them to safety. Despite what they had seen that God did for them ... dividing the sea so they could cross safely, sending food from Heaven and so on ... they still doubted and rebelled. They were more interested in placing their Faith in a statue made of solid gold. At least this was something they could see and touch and admire!

"Years later we read in the Bible about other people doubting and in confusion ... just as you feel right now.

"Peter had been with Christ for at least three years and had seen His miracles and heard His sermons. He witnessed the healings, the raising from the dead, walking on

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water, feeding the thousands. He of all people had no reason to doubt. Yet when it came to the crunch he too doubted and denied knowing Christ ... not once, but he denied knowing Him three times.

“How does that compare with you ... hmmm?”

“As for the disciple Thomas ... well he just refused to believe period.

“So you’re in good company young man. You’re not alone in doubting about the very existence of God your Creator.”

At this the young man was totally confused and didn’t know what to ask next.

Perhaps he had expected some magic formula to restore his ailing Faith, a wave of a wand, or some soothing words from his priest ... but alas no ... the priest just confounded his thoughts by affirming that his doubts are neither unusual nor unexpected.

Father Ignatius smiled and said, “That didn’t help did it?”

“Well ...” hesitated the young man.

“There once was a man whose son was very ill, and He came to Jesus for help” continued Father Ignatius, “ ‘Help us if you can,’ he asked Jesus. Jesus replied ‘Everything is possible if you have Faith,’ to which the man said ‘I do have Faith, but not enough, help me to have more.’

“Jesus healed this man’s son. He saw that the man was struggling with his Faith, as you’re doing right now. So He helped him.

“We don’t all have the same strength and vigor of Faith. Some, like you’ve admitted, are a little weak and waver from time to time. Just like Peter and Thomas did.

“But don’t tell me about it. Tell God, in your own words. Tell Him you’re struggling to believe; ask Him to help you.

“Say over and again I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.

“The good Lord will help you ... but only if you are willing to believe ... if you’re willing to fight your doubts, and your fears, and your confusion.

“God loves you, and He does not wish to see you go astray, away from Him. He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your capabilities. He is not in the business of losing souls you know ...”

Father Ignatius paused for a while and then continued in his gentle voice.

“There’s an old Cherokee Indian legend about a youth’s rite of passage, when he becomes a man so to speak.

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“When the child is of a certain age his father takes him to the forest where he has to sit blindfolded overnight. He shouldn’t take off the blindfold but sit there, in the darkness, hearing all the noises of the night ... animals howling, and the rustling of the trees and so on, and conquer his fears.

“The next morning, at sunrise, he takes off his blindfold and looks around him only to find that his father had been sitting with him all night, protecting him from danger. He shouldn’t tell what happened to anyone else, so others may experience the love of their fathers too.

“You are now blindfolded and confused. But God your Father in Heaven is right beside you, protecting you at all times. Because He loves you, more than any earthly father can love his children.”

The young man smiled and wiped his eye with the back of his hand.

“OK ... I think you’re already on the first steps towards recovery ... I suggest you pray time and again ... especially when you feel doubts coming on ... recite the Rosary ... have you got one?”

The man nodded.

“Our Lady will always protect you if you ask her. Don’t be afraid to tell her how you feel.”

As the man left the Sacristy much relieved than when he first came in, Father Ignatius added, “and whilst you’re praying, don’t forget to say one for me!”

## WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO COME TO EARTH?

Another week, another Friday. Father Ignatius set out from St Vincent Church to St Joseph Catholic School to take on the Catechism class with the 15 years old.

It was always a challenge facing those youngsters, especially since he allowed a few minutes at the end of class for free discussion. They could ask anything they wanted and he promised to give them an honest answer – even if he didn't have an answer, he promised them to say so.

A young pupil put up her hand and asked:

“Why did Jesus have to come to earth? Why didn't God continue to speak through the prophets like Moses and all the others? And send His Commandments and messages that way? Did Jesus really have to come and die for us to be forgiven? Couldn't God just forgive us?”

“That's an intelligent question Catherine,” replied the priest, “in fact it's more than one question; all intelligent at that!”

The young pupil smiled proudly.

“I am not God,” said Father Ignatius, “and I cannot possibly explain what went through His mind when He sent us Jesus; or His motivation for Christ's Virgin birth, sinless life, death and Resurrection. I know and believe that God decided to send us His Son Jesus to die for us. Yes, He could have just forgiven us, as you say. Being God, He could have done what He wishes, and still can. But I believe that He sent us Jesus, His Son ... and when Jesus was raised to Heaven He sent us the Holy Spirit, who is still with us today ...”

He stopped for a while to clean his glasses which gained him some thinking time; then putting them back on he continued:

“Let me tell you a story I heard years ago ...”

The whole class was now focused on his every word. He knew how to captivate their attention and he firmly believed that honesty, combined with his modern-day parables, would make them remember what he had to say and hopefully mold them into a lifetime founded on the Word of God.

“Once upon a time there was a farmer living in Canada where, as you know, the winters can be very cold and miserable.

“One such cold winter evening in the midst of a very violent snow storm, the farmer was in his home keeping warm by the fireside when he heard banging on the side of his house.

“What could it possibly be? He thought as he heard the continuous thump, thump, thump coming from outside?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“He ignored it at first, but as his dog was getting a little fractious by the sound the farmer put on his heavy overcoat and woolly hat and went outside to investigate.

“He struggled in the blinding snow and nearly slipped once or twice.

“As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he discovered that a flock of wild geese had lost their way in the snow storm and landed in the field near his house.

“There were literally hundreds of them. Disorientated, cold and wandering everywhere.

“They were landing heavily like an airplane with failed engines, and many of them crashed against the side of the barn.

“The farmer realized that left out in the cold they would soon perish without any shelter.

“So he opened the doors of one of his barns and hoped that they would go in for the night.

“But no ... they remained out in the cold cackling and walking around in circles rather than seek shelter in the barn.

“He tried to shoo them in by walking behind them with his arms spread out ... but to no avail ... the geese ran everywhere except into the barn.

“He tried to persuade his sheepdog to herd them into the barn. But the dog had better ideas in mind. He raised his back leg to answer a call of nature then ran back into the house.”

The class of students laughed in unison.

“The farmer thought to himself ‘If only I could talk to these birds in their own language and explain to them that the barn will shelter them from the snow ... It’s their only way to salvation from this freezing cold ...’

“Then an idea struck him.

“He opened another barn and let out his own geese in the yard. The yard was now full of his flock as well as these Canadian wild geese. All cackling away in the freezing snow.

“After a minute or so he shooed his own geese into the open barns again and to his relief the wild geese followed them to safety.”

The priest stopped to allow the story to sink into their young minds.

“You see ... I think God had the same problem with us humans on earth.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“For years He spoke to us through the prophets as Catherine said when she asked her question. But did we listen ... of course not. We continued in our sinful way.

“So God sent His only Son to us, as a human, so that we may see Him, hear Him and hopefully listen to Him speaking to us in our own language.

“Some of us have accepted Jesus as the Son of God and have heeded the Word of God, as spoken through Christ our Lord.

“But years later, even now, there are many who are not listening still.

“And that’s what we must remember at Christmas time. It isn’t just about the baby Jesus being born in a stable. It is more important than that. It is about the reality that God Himself visited us here on earth all those years ago.”

## WHAT DID SHE KNOW?

It's amazing how sometimes a chance remark or a word spoken in jest can lead one to think something anew or with a fresh point of view.

Father Ignatius was helping with the dismantling of the Nativity scene in church and putting away the various statues safely for use the following Christmas. One of the helpers lifted the statue of the Virgin Mary and remarked: "Look at her face. She looks sad. It's as if she knew what was to happen to Jesus when He grew up."

"She's probably tired after giving birth," replied another helper.

"No ... she looks sad, not tired. Do you think she knew that Jesus would be crucified Father?"

Father Ignatius sat down on a nearby chair.

"I think we need a rest, at least I know I do ..." he said.

The other helpers stopped for a while.

"It's a good question you ask ..." continued the priest, "many people have argued about the Virgin Mary over the years, and no doubt will continue to do so. Not everyone holds her in such high regards as we do. Some see her as a woman who gave birth to the Son of God, and just that.

"Many doubt her various Apparitions throughout the world.

"As for how much she knew ... well that's another matter."

"What do you mean Father?"

The priest finished cleaning his glasses and put them on again. It was a trick he had perfected when he wanted some thinking time.

"Let's consider Mary when the Angel Gabriel announced what is to happen. Did the Angel just tell her about the Birth of Jesus, or did he, or the Holy Spirit perhaps, also tell her of what is to happen after that?

"Was she told that Jesus would grow up to perform many miracles? That His Mission on earth was to redeem us from our sins? That He would be arrested, beaten, tortured, have a crown of thorns put on His head, made to carry His own Cross and then nailed cruelly to it until He died in agony?"

"I'm not sure ... the Bible doesn't say much about this," said one of his listeners.

"No, the Bible doesn't ..." continued the priest, "it does not record everything. For example, we have a gap in Christ's life from the age of twelve when He was found in the temple by His parents to the age of thirty or so when He started His Mission on earth.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“The Gospels in particular focus mainly on Christ, as they should, and don’t mention Mary or Joseph very much.”

“Well what do you think Father?” he was asked again.

“What I think is only a personal point of view.

“I doubt that God would have asked her to become the Mother of Jesus without telling her what this entailed.

“I believe the Holy Spirit would have told her what is to happen. We don’t know in how much details ... we can only guess at that. And throughout her life, from the moment the Angel Gabriel visited her, she had snippets of confirmation of what is to happen.

“When she visited Elizabeth ... we learn that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and confirmed ‘you are the most blessed amongst women, and blessed is the child you will bear!’

“When she presented the baby Jesus in the temple, Simeon warned her ‘and sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart.’

“And when at the age of twelve His parents found Jesus in the temple He said ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ And Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

“Yes ... I believe she knew quite a lot what was to happen to Jesus.”

“Wow ... no wonder she looks so sad ...” exclaimed one of the helpers.

“This leads us to consider something else,” added the priest.

“Imagine you knew every detail that is to happen in your life. Every illness, sad moment and unhappiness that is to happen. And you could not change it. You had to go through it. How would you feel? Would you be able to cope with the fear and agony of knowing what is to happen to you?

“We don’t know how much Mary knew of her future and that of Jesus.

“But Jesus certainly knew what would happen to Him. Every detail from the moment of His arrest to His death. Peter’s denial, Judas’ betrayal, His disciples fleeing in fear. The agony of His torture and Crucifixion.

“Can you imagine how He must have felt as He grew up, as a teenager and young man, knowing that this day was still to come? The horror of it must have been unbearable.

“Yet He went through with it ... just for us!” They were all silent for a few moments as they considered the seriousness of what they’d just heard.

## FATHER IGNATIUS FACES FAILURE

Father Ignatius was sitting at his desk reading his morning mail when there was a knock at the door.

“Do come in,” he said in his jovial welcoming voice.

The door opened and a young man came in.

“Hello Timothy ... I haven’t seen you for a while. Are you well?” asked the priest.

Timothy sat on the armchair by the window. He held his head in his hands and looked down without talking. The priest noticed that he was shaking a little ... could he be crying?

“What’s wrong Timothy?” said Father Ignatius as he stood from his desk.

The young man looked up; his eyes were bright red from holding back the tears and trying to compose himself as best he could. Father Ignatius said nothing for a while and waited for Timothy to speak when ready.

“I’ve failed my driving test ...” he finally blurted out, “my father will kill me ... he paid a fortune for driving lessons!”

“I’ve known your father for a long time,” replied the priest calmly, “and I know for a fact he is not a killer!”

Timothy looked up and smiled a little.

“I take it you haven’t told him yet.”

“No ... I rant straight here from the Test Center. I don’t know why ... you can hardly do anything about it can you?”

Father Ignatius smiled at the apparent lack of confidence the youngster had in him. He turned to the cupboard behind his desk and came back holding a small camera.

“Do you mind if I take a photo of you?” he asked Timothy.

Timothy looked surprised and before he could say anything he heard the clicking sound from the camera.

“What ... what did you do this for?” asked the confused youngster.

Father Ignatius put the camera on his desk and sat in a chair opposite Timothy.

“I just wanted to record this very moment in time ... for posterity do you understand ...” then after a moment's silence he continued, "Let me tell you something ...

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Failure is sometimes necessary if we happen to learn from it.

“It is only a picture in time when you happen to click your camera and record it for posterity. Just as I’ve done right now ... recorded your moment of failure.

“But if we were to move our camera pictures forward and see other pictures, the chances are that the individual we’ve photographed has learnt from his failure and gone on to greater success.

“When Christ hung dying on the Cross His followers saw failure.

“Here is a man whom many followed and listened to. As many as five thousand at one stage when He fed them loaves and fishes. They witnessed His many miracles and expected great things from Him. A new Ruler, a new King, someone to bring them freedom from their Roman oppressors. Yet here He is, beaten, tortured, humiliated and dying on a Cross amongst thieves.

“Failure indeed.

“Yet, a few more photos further on and we see the Resurrection, the Ascension into Heaven, the sending of the Holy Spirit, a new church born and growing from strength to strength several centuries later. We are redeemed from our sins.

“Everlasting success.” The priest paused briefly.

“So it really depends on which picture we focus on. The one I’ve just taken of you, or the one in a few months’ time when you’re driving your car all by yourself?”

Timothy smiled. “I’m sure your father will understand when you tell him your test result. He too was a learner driver once and he wants the best for you.”

“I’m sorry ... I just panicked ... I’d better get home now,” said Timothy.

“Remember Timothy” added the priest, “Failure is only what is recorded at a particular moment in time ... and no more than that.

“Bear this in mind the next time a camera clicks to record your personal failures; and take courage in the knowledge that, with God’s help, you can turn your negative moments into positives for others to emulate.”

Timothy got up to leave.

“And don’t worry ... there’s no film in this camera!!!” smiled Father Ignatius.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### THE GIFT

Father Ignatius was helping a few volunteers clearing out a storeroom deep in the basement of the church. It was dark and somewhat humid down there as well as dusty amongst the cobwebs that accumulated over the years.

The intention was to redecorate the basement, connect it to the mains electricity supply, and use the area reclaimed from years of neglect to more profitable use than just storage space for unwanted bits and pieces.

The helpers had brought with them extension cables and lit up the place a little. Slowly they took out old bits of furniture, wooden boxes full of books and other knick-knacks, church ornaments, statues and whatever else had been deposited there by previous generations.

Father Ignatius and an antique dealer friend started cataloguing the items as they were recovered from the bowels of the church in order to decide whether they were of any value and worth keeping, or whether they would be sold or got rid off.

“Rather musty in here,” commented one of the volunteers carrying a large vase.

“Creepy too ... if you ask me,” complained another, “I wouldn’t be surprised if this place is haunted. Is there not an old crypt at the end of this corridor?”

“Boooo ... hooo!!!!” moaned another helper eerily covering his head with an old blanket.

“Grow up George ...” cried out Sonia.

“Are you having fun down there?” enquired Father Ignatius from the top of the stairs as he catalogued yet another candlestick.

“Hey Father ... look what I’ve found down here,” replied Sonia coming up the stairs followed by the other helpers who needed a short break.

She carefully carried a large framed picture with the glass still intact. The wooden frame needed a little cleaning but otherwise it looked in reasonable condition. The helpers wiped the dirt from the frame and glass to reveal a brightly colored painting of a dove flying high with rays of light or fire descending on a heart.

“Wow ... this is beautiful,” said George.

“Isn’t it just ...” said Sonia.

“It’s the Holy Spirit ...” exclaimed Father Ignatius, “I wonder how long this has been down there.”

“Why is He depicted as a dove?” asked one of the volunteers, “and fire too ... The Holy Spirit is a bit of an enigma I think.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“I understand what you mean ...” reflected Father Ignatius, “the Holy Spirit can seem an enigma to some ...

“He appeared as a dove at Christ’s baptism, and as tongues of fire at Pentecost when he descended on the apostles.

“I suppose many people still misunderstand who the Holy Spirit is.

“We are taught about God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit .... He doesn’t seem to have a title or a description.

“It was St Hilary of Poitiers, a Bishop in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD, who first described the Holy Spirit as ‘the gift’.

“He is the gift given to us by God after Jesus ascended into Heaven. He is the very Spirit of God Himself. His very soul come back to us on earth to dwell within us and to help us in our Christian life.

“That’s why He is sometimes referred to as the Helper, the Counselor, God’s own Being living within us.”

“God living within us ...” repeated George.

“Yes ...” said Father Ignatius, “can you imagine that? God. Living within us. Guiding us. Helping us. Teaching us. Advising us when to speak and when to remain silent. What to say and what to do.

“Isn’t that wonderful? Or is it too difficult to imagine or believe?

“Isn’t it a tragedy that these days many people are too willing to believe that the devil can possess an individual unwillingly and reap havoc in their lives; which of course is true.

“Yet ... they find it difficult to understand that the Holy Spirit of God is willing to abide within us and lead us to an eternal better life in Heaven. And He only does so when we ask Him, when we invite Him in our hearts ...

“All we have to do is believe ... and ask Him.”

They reflected silently for a few seconds when eventually Sonia said “I think we should hang this picture prominently in church.”

“I agree ...” replied Father Ignatius, “and it will give me an opportunity to talk about the Holy Spirit in my sermon this Sunday.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### WHY NO ONE ASKED JESUS?

Father Ignatius tried something new with his congregation. He suggested they held an “Any Questions” meeting whereby members of the audience would ask him and Father Donald any question, totally unprepared and unscripted, and they would try to answer it.

It was the first such event held at the church center and that evening in question was well attended. About fifty people turned up, which by all standards was a good attendance on a cold winter evening. Some volunteers had prepared hot chocolate and tea and plenty of cakes had been brought in and enjoyed before the meeting started.

At first the questions were somewhat tentative and easily dealt with by either priest, mainly relating to the running of the church, Mass times in winter, and the diminishing amount received in Sunday collections.

But then a young lady stood up and asked the top table: “May I read something before I ask my question?”

“While Jesus was eating, a woman came in with an alabaster jar full of very expensive perfume made from pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus’ head. Some of the people there became angry and said to one another, ‘What was the use of wasting the perfume? It could have been sold for more than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor!’ And they criticized her harshly.

But Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone! Why are you bothering her? She has done a fine and beautiful thing for me. You will always have poor people with you, and any time you want to, you can help them. But you will not always have me.’

“This is from Mark 14 3-7,” she concluded.

“My question to you Fathers is ‘Why?’” she then asked hesitantly.

“Why what?” asked Father Donald in his broad Glaswegian accent.

“Why did Jesus say ‘You will always have poor people with you?’”

Before either priest could answer a man at the front said; “Good point ... Is Jesus saying poverty will be with us always? Is He saying that all our efforts to help the poor are in vain?”

“Might as well not bother,” mumbled another man sitting beside him.

The two priests looked at each other. Father Ignatius cleaned his glasses slowly and said nothing at first.

“Of course we should bother ...” declared Father Donald, “it is our duty to help the poor. Jesus was making the point that He would soon be Crucified and gone from the people, whereas the poor will always be with us. Don’t you agree Ignatius?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Well ...” replied Father Ignatius slowly, “two thousand years later and we still have poverty in this world. So Christ was not far wrong with what He said.

“But let us look at what Jesus said in a wider context.

“Could He perhaps be talking about something more than just material poverty?”

“Is He maybe reminding us that there will always be someone worse off than us? Someone who is poor in material things, someone poor in spirit, poor in health, poor in education or even poor in Faith. This may be miss-interpreting Him perhaps but still worth considering.

“We all have a responsibility towards those in poverty in one way or another. No matter how their poverty manifests itself.

“We should always readily recognize our blessings and share them with those less well off than us.

“If we are fortunate to be financially rich, we should give to those who have not.

“If we are in good health, we should help those who are sick. Visit them at home or in hospital, and give a hand when needed.

“If we are clever or intelligent we should be more tolerant towards those not as bright as us and help educate them where we can.

“And if our Faith is strong, we should help and pray for those who falter and fail in their walk with the Lord.”

“Wow ... I never saw it this way ...” commented the original questioner.

“We’ve all been given some talent or other” added Father Donald, “and we should use them for the benefit of others.”

“So I suppose Jesus could be referring to poverty in the wider sense, as well as physical poverty of course,” continued Father Ignatius, “and such poverty, whatever it may be, will continue with us as a permanent reminder of our responsibilities towards others as well as towards God Himself.

“Our talents are to be used for His glory to help others”

“Talking of talents,” interjected Father Donald, “may I remind you that if any of you has a talent for singing do not confine it to singing in the bath. The choir is always looking for new singers so come along to rehearsals.”

“As long as you don’t bring your bath with you,” chuckled Father Ignatius.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### WHY BOTHER WITH MARY

The first “Any Questions” session held by Father Ignatius in the church center proved so successful that some members of the congregation asked him to hold another one. They enjoyed asking questions about church matters in general and the Catholic Church’s teachings in particular, and learning from both Father Ignatius and Father Donald answering honestly rather than “toeing the party line”; as one parishioner called it.

“Are you sure that the hot chocolate drinks and free cakes aren’t the real attraction here?” asked Father Ignatius.

He was assured that this was not the case and it was agreed to hold another meeting at which parishioners could invite guests.

The night in question was well attended with about sixty people packing the church center and sitting cinema style facing the top table. Father Donald was not available and he was replaced by the Reverend Harold Barnstable, the vicar from a neighbouring church. He knew Father Ignatius well as the two priests were members of the Area Ecumenical Council, a body set up to encourage contact and co-operation amongst churches from various denominations. The Reverend had brought a few parishioners from his church to the meeting with him.

After the first few questions about the benefits of church unity and what obstacles lay in the way of such a goal a young man stood up at the back of the room and said:

“Father Ignatius, I do not attend your church. One thing I can’t understand about you Catholics is your devotion to Mary. Granted, she was the Mother of Jesus, but no more than that. Yet you Catholics pray to her all the time and ask her for favours.

“Christ said ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.’ What can be clearer than that? Paul re-iterates this message in his letter to Timothy when he says, ‘there is one God, and there is one mediator who brings God and mankind together, Christ Jesus.’

“I consider devotion to Mary as blasphemy to God. What do you have to say about this?”

The Reverend Barnstable shuffled uneasily in his chair as he recognized the questioner as one of his parishioners. However, he politely looked sideways at Father Ignatius and said nothing.

Father Ignatius smiled and said calmly “I agree ...”

This silenced the audience who knew him too well and expected a rebuttal of the points made by the visitor. They were not disappointed. Father Ignatius continued:

“Viewed from your perspective, and considering the Bible quotations you mention, it can be seen as blasphemy to pray to Mary and ask her to mediate for us and present our needs to Jesus, and to God. So let us see your point from a different perspective.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Let me ask you something first. Have you ever prayed for a sick relative or friend to get better?”

“Well ... yes ...” hesitated the young man.

“That’s good ...” replied Father Ignatius gently, “it shows charitable loving intentions from you towards those people. You didn’t say ‘let them pray for themselves to get better’ but you prayed for them. You mediated on their behalf, or, to put it in more common parlance, you put in a good word for them.

“You said to God ‘Dear Lord ... you know my friend is a good chap ... please heal him from his illness!’ ”

The audience laughed.

Father Ignatius continued, “By praying for your sick friends you mediated on their behalf. And if it is God’s will, He sometimes answers our prayers.

“In the same way, there’s nothing wrong in my opinion if the Virgin Mary puts in a good word for me with Jesus when I ask her. God knows I need it!”

The audience laughed again.

“You see ...” went on the priest, “at the wedding in Cana when the wine ran out, the servants went to Mary for advice and guidance. She was a guest at the wedding, no more. They didn’t go to Jesus direct, or to the bridegroom, or to the best man, if they had such a thing in those days ... but they went to Mary.

“She interceded on behalf of the married couple; and Jesus at her request performed His first miracle.

“I believe this to be very significant ... is Jesus encouraging us here to ask Mary to mediate for us?”

“Some may not agree, but I personally see nothing wrong in asking the Virgin Mary to intercede on my behalf, and I ask her often to do so.

“But let me answer your specific point as to whether my praying to her is blasphemy ... as you called it.

“God saw fit to choose this young lady to be the Mother of His only Son. Obviously He holds her in high regards.

“I too ... hold her in high regards. This is why I recite the Rosary daily.

“Do you honestly think that when I get to meet God face to face He will punish me for daring to love Mary, the Mother of Jesus? Will God view my honouring her as blasphemy? I think not.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“By praying to her, takes nothing away from my reverence to God and Jesus. Like you, I accept God as my Creator and Jesus as my Saviour; and I also pray to Mary to mediate on my behalf.

“Nothing wrong with that ... and certainly no blasphemy intended!”

“I understand ...” replied the young man sheepishly.

“It was a good question,” continued Father Ignatius, “but let me get back to your two quotations from the Bible.

“When Jesus said He is the way to God, and when St Paul re-affirmed this, they were referring to Christ as being the Son of God and our Saviour through His sacrifice on the Cross.

“They were not saying that we should not honour the Virgin Mary who holds a high place in Heaven. And no where in the Bible are we told not to pray to her or ask her to mediate on our behalf.

“We’re all sinners, and we need as many friends on the other side as we can muster. I also pray to Saint Ignatius of Loyola after whom I was named.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### FATHER IGNATIUS ANSWERS HONESTLY

Father Ignatius' policy with the people he met was to be as open and honest as possible when discussing matters or when giving advice or guidance. This included the youngsters he met at both Catholic schools, who, more often than not, asked direct personal questions and expected a straight answer. They were astute enough to know when someone was avoiding the question or giving them flannel.

The discussion during Catechism class was about vocations and the celibacy of priests and nuns.

Father Ignatius had been asked by a young pupil why priests and nuns are celibate.

“Let me see if I can answer this honestly and in personal terms,” said Father Ignatius. “There is, as you know a physical life which we all live right now, and a spiritual life which some people choose to follow at the same time.

“God wants us to enjoy our physical life and for us to live it in service of others so that He may be glorified by what we do. This can be done by being married and raising families and also indeed by remaining single in life.

“People who choose to follow a spiritual life, like Catholic priests and nuns, promise to remain chaste and not get married.”

“Like Jesus ...” interrupted one of the 15 year-old students, “why did Jesus never marry?”

“That’s a good question.” Replied Father Ignatius, “in my opinion, I believe that Christ’s mission on earth was so important that He could not allow anything else to detract Him from His main objective.

“As you know, Jesus came to teach us about His Father’s Word; but more important than that; He came to offer Himself in sacrifice by dying on the Cross so that we may be reconciled with God.

“If, as you suggest, He would have married, and perhaps have children, this would have in many ways sidetracked His main mission on earth. But that’s only my opinion.”

“Do you think He ever wanted to get married?” asked another student innocently.

“Being human, I suspect He was not immune to the many feelings and emotions we experience. Yet, being God at the same time, His job on earth was to obey His Father and take on the ultimate sacrifice for us on the Cross.

“He always knew what his mission on earth was and how He would die on the Cross. And although He was tempted before His arrest, and He prayed to God that His ordeal may pass Him by, He knew and accepted that ultimately He had to obey His Father’s will; and that nothing should deflect Him from it.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Is it the same with priests,” asked Rose, “is their mission to teach about God and not get married. And to obey the Pope?”

“Father John got married,” corrected Paul, “he left the church and got married. Should he have done that Father?”

“It is not for me to judge what Father John did. Jesus told us never to judge each other,” replied Father Ignatius.

“Father John decided to leave the priesthood and to get married. I’m certain that he did not make this decision lightly. He must have agonized and soul-searched for a long time before deciding to leave his vocation as a priest. Which, I must add, he undertook in an exemplary manner in his time as a priest. Yet, eventually he decided to do what he felt was right for him at the time.”

“Have you ever wanted to get married and have children?” asked directly a pupil sitting up front.

The rest of the class gasped at what they felt was an impertinent question. Father Ignatius smiled and responded calmly.

“It would be a lie to deny it. Many people would like to have a family and raise children, especially if they are as well turned out as you.”

They smiled almost in unison.

“But when I decided to become a priest, I knew full well what I was giving up. Sharing my life with and loving another person, and raising a family, is a great privilege.

“Matrimony is a Sacrament which Christ taught about several times. It is a mission and a full commitment which married couples undertake throughout their lives together.

“However, by becoming a priest I promised and accepted that I would not get married.

“Having made that decision, God has rewarded me by making me a member of all your families here in this Parish.

“You and your parents have welcomed me in your homes as one of your family. I have been privileged to have been invited for meals with many of you at home. I have shared with your families moments of happiness and moments of sorrows too. I have seen many of you grow from little babies whom I have baptized many years ago, to who you are now.

“I am grateful to God and to you for welcoming me in your families.”

“Should everybody get married then,” asked Mark, “except for priests and nuns?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Married life is a Sacrament which we should take seriously and it is the best foundation in which to raise a family. But no, not everyone has to get married.

“Remember that God’s wish for you in this life is for you to be happy.

“Some people find happiness in marriage, others prefer to remain single. Celibacy can be a vocation too. Just like marriage.

“I have found that being single allows many people the time to do more for their communities and for the church. Things they would not have been able to do if married; when their main commitments should be to their families first.

“I have just returned from America as you know. I met there a young priest from Houston in Texas. He was brought up in a loving Catholic family and something he said to me still sticks in my mind,

“He said, ‘the way my parents brought me up, it was inevitable I’d become a priest!’

“His sister is a nun, whilst his other sisters are married and raising their families.

“So you see ... his lovely parents created the conditions whilst raising their family that two of their children chose a vocation in the Church whilst the others are raising their children in the same Christian tradition their parents taught them.

“Whether you are married or not, a priest or a nun or not; the important thing that really matters is to live your life in the service of others and to glorify God at every opportunity.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS MAKES A DISCOVERY

There are times when a light turns on in your head and you see something clearly for the first time and understand something new you'd never realized before.

Father Ignatius was a studious type of person spending many hours reading the Bible as well as many books on theology, ancient history and similar subjects which would soon send any lesser head spinning widely.

One evening he retired to the room he called "my meditation corner" and after reciting the Rosary he started reading the Bible and cross-referencing certain passages with other books to better understand what God is teaching through His Word.

One passage in particular caught his interest. After Christ's death and burial, we are told that Mary Magdalene visited the tomb and found the stone rolled away from the entrance. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple and told them what she had seen. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb. When Simon Peter got in and went inside he noticed the linen wrappings lying there, but the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded and lying to the side.

There it was, in the Gospel of John Chapter 20 Verse 7.

Father Ignatius puzzled about this for a moment or two. He'd read that chapter many times and nothing specific occurred to him. But this time, as if a small voice buzzing in his head, he kept wondering the significance of what he had read.

"Why are we told that the cloth which covered Jesus' head was folded and lying to the side? What's so important about that?" Father Ignatius asked himself.

Yet somehow, John thought it important enough to mention it. Why?

Father Ignatius checked the other three Gospels but they did not mention this fact. "But why did John consider it so significant to point it out" he wondered silently.

After hours of searching other books and checking on ancient traditions he came upon something he'd never known before.

In ancient Hebrew tradition the folded napkin was symbolic between the master of the house and his servant.

When the servant set the dinner table he made sure that everything was perfectly set out as the master wished and then he would wait out of sight until the master finished eating.

The servant would not clear the table until the master had finished.

When the master finished his meal he would wipe his fingers and mouth with the napkin and then toss the napkin on the table.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

The servant would then clear the table, because in those days a tossed napkin meant “I’ve finished.”

However ... and this is the significant bit which Father Ignatius discovered for himself, if the master left the table but neatly folded the napkin and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not touch the table.

Because the folded napkin meant “I’m coming back!”

“He’s coming back ...” mumbled Father Ignatius in wonderment.

That’s what John was trying to tell us in his Gospel.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### CLOSED FOR CANDLES

It was just before 10 o'clock in the morning, early Mass had long been over and everyone had left. The church was empty, or so Father Ignatius thought. He came out of the Sacristy to spend a few minutes with the Virgin Mary, sitting on the front pew reciting his Rosary as usual, when he noticed a young man sitting in his place. He was wearing a very smart dark suit and had a small business case with him lying beside him on the pew.

Father Ignatius nodded a greeting and sat on the other side of the church, by St Joseph's statue, for a change. He thought it prudent to give the young man some privacy to pray or meditate. He'd never seen him before, "not one of our regulars," thought the priest as he started his prayers.

A few minutes later the young man got up and made his way towards the priest.

"Do you work here?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes ... I am the priest here, they call me Ignatius. At least to my face, that is ..." joked the priest standing up.

"I saw a book at the back about Catholic Saints. May I purchase it please?"

"Oh, you're welcome to it ... it's free. Please help yourself to any leaflets or pamphlets on the table at the back," replied Father Ignatius.

"I am not from this side of town ..." continued the young man, "I'm here for a job interview at the factory down the road. I was surprised to find the church open at this hour. Where I live they are always closed."

"It's the devil's finest hour when we lock our churches," replied Father Ignatius, "we try to leave the door open as much as we can around here ..."

"It's a shame that so many churches are closed during the middle of the day ... I like to go from time to time and just sit there ... it helps me to think ... and pray perhaps ... you know, before my interview. I really need this job."

"I wish you well ... and I shall pray for you too ..."

"All these statues of Jesus and the Saints have candles lit besides them. I'm not Catholic and I never understood the purpose of candles ... do you believe they help get your intentions attended to ... you know, if I lit a candle for this job I need?" asked the young man hesitantly.

The priest sat down and so did the young man. "Ah ... I've been asked this so many times ... the statues are of course inanimate objects just to help us envisage what Jesus or the Saints looked like. Just like having a photo of a loved one in your wallet. A helpful reminder every time you look at it ..."

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Some people consider it wrong to pray or light candles to statues. I understand that sentiment. But it’s important to understand also that we’re of course praying to Jesus or a Saint and certainly not to the statue we see there.

“It’s also important to understand that Jesus or the Saints do not require anything material from us ... they don’t need candles lit ... flowers put in vases or any such things ...

“Lighting a candle is for many people a sign of love and respect. Their way of veneration ... an expression of their Faith.

“So the answer is no ... a candle will not help get you a job at the factory or anything else for that matter.

“I’ve lit many a candle in my time ... I don’t see any harm in it, as long as it is understood that it will not buy you any favors in any way.

“God does answer prayers, I’ve seen it often ... but He does so according to His will and not based on candles, flowers or such like ...”

“Thank you ...” said the young man, “I’ll light one all the same ... but no promise or guarantee intended ...” he smiled.

“Should you get the job around here ... I hope to see you visit us from time to time ...” said Father Ignatius as he shook the young man’s hand.

It seems that this time God was willing, and the young man did get his job, because Father Ignatius saw him sitting at the back of the church at midday Mass on several occasions since.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### TEMPTATION

Father Ignatius read the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 4 Verses 1-11.

He waited a few moments for the congregation to sit down and then he continued:

“The devil appeared at the local supermarket one Saturday morning. He stood there by the main entrance looking menacingly and threatening. All the shoppers panicked. They escaped through every available emergency exits, jumped into their cars and drove off at speed.

“All except for one shopper. A small, short man, standing there by his shopping trolley holding a long shopping list in his hand.

“The devil advanced towards the small man and said angrily: ‘Do you know who I am?’

“ ‘Yes ... I do’ replied the shopper.

“ ‘Aren’t you afraid of me like all the others?’ asked the devil.

“ ‘No ... I’ve been married to your sister for 25 years!’ ”

Father Ignatius waited until the laughter died down, and then went on:

“The devil of course is no laughing matter. He exists alright, although his greatest trick is to convince us otherwise.

“If you were to ask people in the street what do they know about the devil, they would probably tell you about satanic worship, or satan possessing people, as they may have seen in the cinema. Some may mention a man with horns, a tail and pitchfork. But few would tell you of his existence and presence here and now.

“We Christians cannot possibly believe in God and not believe in the devil.

“Satan is amongst us every day of our lives and his task is simple; to lead us astray from the Lord.

“He doesn’t appear menacingly as he did in the supermarket in our opening story.

“No ... he is more subtle than that. He is present in our most innocent and slightest temptation; when we least expect him.

“He is that extra bar of chocolate we indulge in, that extra bottle of beer or glass of wine, that cigarette or whatever other weakness we may have.

“He is that tiredness and sleepiness on Sunday morning which tells you it does not matter if you miss Mass this week.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“He is those extra minutes you take for lunch instead of being back at work on time; or the leaving early to go home.

“He is the odd flirtatious smile, which in time may lead you further on.

“And that’s how it starts my friends. A few minor indiscretions here and there which by themselves may mean nothing to you; but they’re the first stepping stones for the evil one.

“His subtleness and ingenuity are worthy of high praise indeed; for he tempts you when you least expect it.

“And the more devout you are the harder he works to get you off track. He will put doubts and worries in your mind where none existed before.

“Right now for instance, I suspect he is most annoyed to see so many of you here in church instead of somewhere else. Especially as the sun is shining and I’m sure you have so many more important things to do ... or so he’ll tell you!

“I will not go on and give satan more publicity than he deserves. But let me say that if he had the audacity to tempt our Lord, as we have read in the Gospel, he will not shy away from tempting us.

“Like Jesus did, we must tell the devil: ‘Go away satan’. And pray again and again that the Lord may come to our aid and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### CURVE BALL

No doubt many a priest has faced a complicated or perhaps a trick question from time to time from a member of his congregation. Never mind ... it's part of their job I suppose.

Remember that Jesus faced many a curve-ball by His opponents trying to catch Him out.

Father Ignatius is no exception.

He was visiting one of his parishioners in hospital the other day and quite unexpectedly came the curve-ball. It wasn't meant in a malicious way at all; but more as a cry of help from a tired old body.

"You know Father," said the patient lying in his hospital bed, "this is the third time this year that I've landed in hospital. It's one check-up after another ... and these wretched doctors can't find what's wrong with me!

"I sometimes think that God has it in for me.

"Do you think he loves all people the same? Because I can't see it myself. Here I am in hospital yet again ... whilst others are OK and walking out there freely.

"I think He has favorites and He looks after them better than others.

"What do you think Father; does God love every one the same?"

"No." said Father Ignatius firmly.

The patient laughed.

"Now there's a surprise ... I thought you'd give me a lot of platitudes about us all being equal in the eyes of God; we're all His children, and He loves us all the same ... and yet you agree with me. Bravo Father Ignatius. So God does not love us the same. He has His favorites."

"I did not say that," replied the priest sitting by his friend's bedside.

"Explain yourself then," said the patient jovially.

"God does love us all," continued Father Ignatius, "and His love has no favors towards one individual as opposed to the next. He loves us all equally in the sense that He created us all and He loves us even though we might sin and distance ourselves from Him.

"Yet His love is not the same towards everyone."

"How so ..." asked the patient with a glint of humor in his eyes.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“He loves each one of us according to our needs,” said Father Ignatius gently, “like an earthly parent would do.

“You have three children Fred; and I’m sure you love all three of them. You have no favorites.”

Fred nodded silently.

“However,” continued Father Ignatius, “let us imagine two of your children were very bright and would one day follow in your footsteps and manage your business. Whilst the third is perhaps less business minded, not very academic, and interested in doing his own thing ... you’d still love him would you not?”

“Yes, of course. You know that Father!” said Fred sitting up in his bed.

“I know you would ... but let’s take the analogy a little further. Suppose for instance one of your children had been born with an incurable illness ... you would not love him any more, or any less than the other two; would you? You’d love them all the same but differently. If you see what I mean.”

“I think I do ...” said the man with a smile.

“God loves all of us according to our needs.

“For example, some people are born very bright, and are well educated whilst others are not.

“I see them in church every Sunday. Some of our parishioners are well versed about religion and their walk with the Lord; whilst others, through a variety of circumstances, perhaps related to their background and up-bringing, are poorer in spirit. Their Faith and knowledge of the Lord is not as advanced as say, a theologian.

“Sure they believe and love the Lord; but their spirituality is simpler compared to others’. Because that’s all they know; that’s all they are able to comprehend.

“They love God, and pray as simply as they’ve been taught; and they try to obey His Word as best they can.

“Does God love them any the less than say an educated priest, a bishop or cardinal who have studied incessantly and are, supposedly, more pious?”

Fred laughed heartily at the mention of more pious clergy.

“I suppose not ... He must love them all the same amount,” said Fred.

“Exactly ... He loves them the same amount; but differently ... each according to their need.

“And one more thing ...” continued Father Ignatius, “He expects more from those who are educated and should know better.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“To those who have been given much, more is expected of them.

“So the educated clergy are expected to set a particularly good example to those they are meant to guide to Heaven ... so I'd better watch out I suppose.”

Fred smiled as a nurse approached and interrupted the discussion.

“I have the results of your tests, Mr Temple,” she said indicating a private conversation.

“Oh don't mind him ...” chuckled Fred, “he's a priest. He can always give me the last Sacrament before you dispatch me off!”

“Well sir ... you are a little anemic and you need a lot of rest. It's nothing serious and we'll have you on your feet and out of here in no time” she said.

“That's great ... thank you” replied Fred as the nurse left.

“You see Fred,” said Father Ignatius, “God does love you differently. He obviously thought you needed to listen to a private sermon.

“One to one personal attention. You can't have better than that!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### ANY QUESTION?

No sooner had Father Ignatius faced a curve ball question from one of his parishioners ill in hospital, that he faced another one that very evening.

He was chairing the monthly “Any Questions” meeting at the Parish Hall. This is an event he had initiated some time ago whereby parishioners and their guests gather of an evening, and after refreshments of tea, coffee, hot chocolate drinks and cakes, they sit in cinema fashion and ask him any question totally un-prepared. Usually the questions are about the day to day running of the church, or the two Catholic schools nearby; but more often than not there are some questions about Christianity and the Catholic Faith.

Father Ignatius was convinced that the hot drinks and cakes were the main attraction; but he was assured this was not the case.

His curve ball came from a young lady sitting at the front.

“Father,” she said, “I can’t help feeling sorry for Judas. What chance did he really have? He had to betray Jesus; because if he didn’t do so, he’d be going against God’s will. So what choice or free will did Judas have?”

The priest put down his cup of coffee and cleaned his spectacles; a trick he had learnt in order to gain time.

“Would it help if I say I don’t know the answer to this?” he said eventually.

After a short pause the young lady continued, “well Father, I don’t understand the difference between our free will, or Judas’ free will, to do as we wish, and pre-destination to do what God has determined will happen.”

Before the priest could answer a man put up his hand and said: “Oddly enough, I was reading about this the other day. In John Chapter 17 I think it was. When Jesus was praying for His disciples He says to God something like ‘I kept the disciples safe. Not one was lost except the one who was meant to be lost so that the Scriptures may come true.’ This implies that Judas had no choice. He was pre-programmed as it were to betray Jesus.”

A few of the audience murmured at this; perhaps they hadn't read or heard about it.

“Free will and pre-destination are matters which have taxed many a learned brain over the centuries,” replied Father Ignatius gently, “and no doubt they will continue to do so.

“I am not God, and so I do not have a definite answer for you. But I assure you I will ask Him when I get to meet Him.

“In the meantime, let us consider the question a bit more.

“When God created us He had two choices.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“He could have created a species of robots. All pre-programmed to obey Him, to love Him and to do His will without question.

“And how trouble-free that would have been! No sin, no rebellion, no satan.

“But God loved us so much that He gave us a precious gift. He gave us the gift to choose. He allowed us to decide whether to love Him back, or not.

“When He invited us to return His love for us, He did so with no coercion whatsoever from His part. Love given freely by Him, and returned freely by us; but only if we want to.

“Hence our free will to choose.

“We are free to decide what we do with our lives. To love and obey Him, or to go our own way.

“Yet having said so, there are instances in the Bible where God does lead, or encourage, certain people in some direction. Look at the way he nudged Paul on the way to Damascus for instance.”

The audience laughed.

“You may well laugh,” continued Father Ignatius, “but God may have seen some good qualities in Paul which could come useful in furthering God’s Word on earth. And how right He was!

“After all, why should the devil have all the good talent?”

The audience laughed again.

“So ...,” went on the priest after they had settled down, “whilst on the face of it there is some evidence, in our eyes, that God does lead us in some direction it is somewhat presumptuous on our part to try to analyze when this is pre-destination and when it is free will.

“But this so-called evidence is in our eyes only. Because we try to understand God in human terms. Something we should not do, in my opinion, because we are humans and He is not.

“By analyzing Him in human terms we bring Him down to our level. And this is wrong.

“God does not want us to understand Him and analyze His motives. He wants us to love Him and to dare to obey Him, in blind Faith, in the sure knowledge that He knows what He is doing.

“Can we do that? Dare to obey Him without question?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“And not want to serve God in an advisory capacity. But as obedient children, trusting His every word and action.”

The priest stopped for a second and sipped his coffee.

“Let Him be God and let us be humans. And let us always be willing to listen to Him when He leads us in a certain direction” continued Father Ignatius.

“I really cannot tell you whether Judas was pre-programmed, as you put it, or not. But I trust God to know the answer to that question and to have dealt with it with compassion, fairness and love.

“Finally, I wish to say this.

“I did not fall out of bed one morning and decide to become a priest. At the time, I felt led by God to follow the path to priesthood. It was a gradual process, it took time and it took a lot of thinking and praying ... and eventually, I knew that He was calling me.

“God may well be calling some of you these days. Not necessarily into the priesthood, but to listen to Him and His will for you.

“I pray that you’d be listening when He calls you to do whatever He asks of you in this life.”

## COMPLICATED GOD

Early morning Mass had just finished. Everyone had gone home or to work, except for Simon the gardener. He stayed behind to collect any stray hymn books left in the pews and to clear up in the Sacristy before he put in an hour or two mowing the lawn in the garden behind the church.

“That was an odd reading we had today from 2 Peter 3:8” he said to Father Ignatius as he locked the Sacristy door.

“You remember the exact chapter and verse I see ...” replied the priest, “what was so odd about it?”

“I mean ... it said ‘There is no difference in the Lord’s sight between one day and a thousand years; to Him the two are the same.’

“That must make it very difficult keeping an appointment with God ... imagine Him asking Moses to come up the mountain tomorrow ... Moses wouldn’t know whether it’s in twenty four hours’ time or in a thousand years ...”

The priest smiled and said nothing.

“Why is God so complicated sometimes?” asked Simon.

“It’s a bit early in the morning for all these questions ... I haven’t had my toast and ginger marmalade yet ... have you had breakfast?” asked Father Ignatius.

“Er ... no ... not yet ...”

“In that case I suggest we go to the kitchen and prepare something to eat ...” continued the priest as he headed for the Parish house.

Minutes later he had set the table with fried eggs and bacon, coffee, toast and marmalade.

“Now then ...” said Father Ignatius as he put his cup down, “what’s on your mind Simon?”

“Well ... as I was saying ... God and the Bible seem so complicated at times. All this business about one day is the same as a thousand years ... and the story of the Creation for instance ... if God is so powerful why did He need seven days to create the universe ... and did He really need a rib from Adam to create Eve? Seems so improbable to me ...”

Father Ignatius sympathized with what Simon was saying.

“Remember Simon,” he said, “the Bible is a book of Faith and not necessarily a book of literal facts ... not all of it ...”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“No one was with God at the time of Creation. So no one can say for certain whether it took Him seven days or seven seconds or less even. In reality, it doesn’t matter how long God took to create the universe; or whether he really took a bone from the side of Adam or not. What matters is that we have learnt that God is the ultimate Creator of all that we see and all that we are. And all that we have yet to discover in this great universe.

“The Creation is a story told by the writer of the book of Genesis to teach the people of the time about God. A story inspired by God no doubt, but not necessarily all factual in every detail.”

“That’s what I meant by complicated...” retorted Simon, “how are we to know what is factual and what is not ... which bit to believe literally and which not?”

Father Ignatius chuckled gently.

“I see what you mean,” he said.

“Over the years, and in preparation for the priesthood, I have studied and read many books,” continued Father Ignatius, “you’d be surprised how many different views and opinions there are about God, the teachings of the Bible and theology in general.

“For centuries many learned wise heads have surmised and pronounced on various issues concerning God and Christianity. To the point where we have made it into a science; a discipline worthy of study at our universities and such like.

“And after all of my studies I’ve reached one conclusion ...

“God is not complicated at all ... it is us who make Him complicated.

“We question and analyze every aspect of our religion and our Faith. We try to understand in human terms what is not of human origin. We dissect our very Creator as if He were an insect in a laboratory and debate His very existence.

“This is wrong surely ...

“God is simply love. He created us out of love and wishes the best for us. He wishes to share eternity with us.

“But we distanced ourselves from Him through our sin. And when we did so, He did not give up on us.

“He loved us so much that He sent His Son on earth, so that we may see Him in human terms. Can you imagine that ... really imagine it?

“God walked this earth as a man, just like everyone else. Humans saw Him, spoke to Him and listened to Him. They witnessed His miracles. He died for us, and was raised from the dead so that we may be forgiven.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“It’s as simple as that ... God created us, and loved us so much that He came down on earth and lived amongst us.

“God does not ask us to understand His ways or to know how things work ... He doesn’t expect us to analyze His motives and His strategies ... He just wants us to step out in Faith and dare to trust Him ... to love Him ... and to obey Him.”

“I like that ... to step out in Faith and dare to trust Him ...” repeated Simon.

“That’s right,” said Father Ignatius as he poured another cup of coffee, “let us stop trying to find answers where He doesn’t want us to ... let’s trust Him that His ways are superior and better than ours, and that His love will see us through ... if we let Him.

“Let God work in your life, rather than waste time working out all about Him.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### DISTANT GOD

It was Good Friday, about nine in the evening, as Father Ignatius settled down in his armchair by the fire. It was still cold for this time of year and snowing yet again. He put a couple of logs on the open fire and picked up a book to read.

Moments later Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, entered the large living room and announced that Geoff Henderson had just called in and was waiting in the reception room.

“Oh let him in ...” said Father Ignatius standing up to greet his visitor.

Geoff Henderson was an architect and he had brought with him some plans to discuss some alterations to the Parish Hall and the area behind the garage. After their discussions were over the priest said:

“How are you these days Geoff? I haven’t seen you in church for a while now!”

Geoff hesitated as he gathered his papers together and sipped a little coffee.

“To be honest Father ...” he said finally, “I’ve been rather busy lately ....”

“Too busy to go to church?” asked Father Ignatius.

“Well ... actually, I feel that God is distant these days ...” confessed the architect standing up to leave.

At that point Canis the dog, who was lying by the fire, yawned heavily as he made himself more comfortable.

“That’s not a comment on what you’ve just said,” joked the priest, “sit down Geoff if you have a minute to spare.”

The architect sat down again.

“This dog and I have a special relationship,” said Father Ignatius, “when I take him for a walk in the park I sometimes let him off the lead. He runs away like mad here there and everywhere in no particular direction. He is free and he’ll go where he wants. Sometimes he is quite far away. It is he who has distanced himself from me Geoff; and not the other way round.

“Do you see what I mean?”

“Yes ... I do ... I suppose it is me who’s distanced myself from God,” replied the architect, “but I suppose it is because I no longer see Him as relevant in my life.”

“I wonder whether Canis sees me as relevant in his life?” asked the priest, “the other day I was cleaning the back garden and he looked at me as if to say ‘I like this ... I poo wherever I want and you get to pick it up ... that’s a special relationship all right!’ ” Geoff smiled.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“And what’s more ...” continued the priest, “he seems to be absolutely useless. He is certainly no guard dog. If we were to have a burglar in the house he would probably show him where I’ve hidden my stash of chocolates.

“The other day he came face to face with a cat in the back garden. He stood still like a statue. Then turned his head towards me expecting me to run and bark after the cat.

“I did not move. The cat started to panic and run but then stopped in total confusion and looked at the dog.

“Canis looked at me and then at the cat once or twice, and then he whined and ran inside the house to hide in his bed.” Geoff chuckled quietly.

“But I like him Geoff,” said the priest, “and I wouldn’t part with him. And he seems to like me.

“Do you know ... I think God likes you. In fact I know He loves you for sure, because He said so, many times in the Bible.

“I suspect you’re off the lead now and you’re running successfully all over the place. You don’t need God really ... you have a great business, a lovely car which I must admit I envy, and a good life. No wonder He seems distant.

“But God is there all the same Geoff. Protecting you from more ills than you can imagine without you knowing it. All because He loves you.

“When you get the time, come and visit Him in church just to say Hello!”

Geoff said nothing.

“I don’t mean to be critical,” continued Father Ignatius gently, “we all get distanced from God at some stage or other in our lives Geoff.

“It would be wrong of me to see this happen to you and say nothing.

“Take one step at a time. Come to church on Sunday, and when you feel ready come to Confession. Or come again and see me for a quiet talk.

“You’ll find God will welcome you back in His loving arms like a father welcoming his prodigal son.

“You’re a good man Geoff deep down. I wouldn’t be doing business with you otherwise. I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thank you ...” said Geoff quietly.

“I’ll be praying also that you won’t charge me too much for the building extension!” said Father Ignatius.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

“Jesus answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ ”

Father Ignatius stopped reading from the Gospel of St Matthew Chapter 22 and looked up at the congregation sitting there.

“And that’s where the problem lies,” he said, “love your neighbor as you love yourself.

“It’s almost too difficult for some people; and do you know why?

“It’s because too many people just do not love themselves.

“Yes ... that’s right ... they don’t really love themselves.

“They find faults with themselves and see no reason to like or love who they are. Many have a problem with their self-image or about their character in some way.

“They think they don’t look pretty enough for today’s society.

“And it is not just our physical appearance that some of us find cause to dislike; the shape of our nose, or our ears or whatever else we think is wrong.

“Some people don’t love themselves because they feel inadequate in some way or other. They feel they’re too shy perhaps, or not bright or clever enough like their friends, or not successful as others at work or in business.

“Many people sadly conjure up any reason they can think of which erodes their self-confidence, their self-esteem, and leads them not to like or love themselves.

“When Jesus said ‘as you love yourself’; He did not mean we should all have a Narcissus complex and be totally self-centered and self-obsessed.

“He was teaching us to appreciate who we really are. Not the outer part of ourselves, the visible body which we may find fault with, but our inner self. Our very soul!”

Father Ignatius paused for a while.

“We are the Creation of God. Each one of us different and unique. Each one of us beautiful in our own way and worthy of love,” he continued with a smile, “God does not make mistakes. There are no rejects off His production line ...

“Every one of His Creations is different, unique, and perfect in every way. And certainly worthy of love.

“And with your help, I will prove it to you.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

He looked up at the congregation in anticipation. They were intrigued and he definitely had their full attention.

“I want you to promise me you’ll do as I ask ... will you do that?”

They nodded and some said yes and agreed.

“When you get home after Mass I want each one of you to take a piece of paper and write down two or three things about yourself which you like.

“It could be anything. Your ability to play the piano perhaps, or the fact that you’re a hard worker, or maybe you’re a good cook, or you are good at drawing, painting or writing.

“Or it could be that you sing so well that the neighbors have broken all your windows to hear you better!”

They laughed.

“And when you’ve written down your list of two or three items, I want you to consider them as gifts from the Good Lord especially for you.

“Whatever is good about or within you is from His making, and not from your own efforts. He gave you the ability to sing, dance, and play music or whatever else you are or can do. These are gifts He gave you when He made you as a baby all those years ago.

“And as you learn to thank God for these gifts, as you begin to appreciate these gifts from Our Lord, especially and uniquely for you; then slowly and in time you’ll learn to appreciate yourselves.

“You’ll start to like yourselves as you really are; a gift from God.

“Whoever you are today is a gift from God. Whatever you do with your lives is your gift back to God.

“And as you learn to love yourselves a little better, then will you be able to appreciate and love your neighbors as Jesus commanded.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### THE HOLY TRINITY

“Father, I really have difficulty in understanding the Holy Trinity,” said a parishioner to Father Ignatius.

“I really can’t understand why we sometimes have difficulties in just accepting the mysteries of our Faith,” replied the priest, “after all, God is not really that complicated is He?”

“It’s the three in one that I don’t understand. When we get to Heaven will we meet all three of them God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Or will we see just one?”

“When I get to Heaven and find out, I’ll phone you to let you know,” replied the priest with a chuckle.

There was silence for a moment or two as James continued to fix the priest’s car. Fr Ignatius stood there as an assistant handing different tools when asked.

“You obviously know how St Patrick used a shamrock to explain the Trinity,” asked Father Ignatius eventually.

“Yes ... but it doesn’t really answer my question does it?”

“Everywhere around us we see in nature things made of many parts,” said the priest, “look at that tree over there. It is made up of a trunk, roots which you cannot see, branches and leaves, and sometimes it has fruits too. You don’t have difficulty accepting that all these parts make up one tree do you?”

“No Father,” said James, “I understand that they can be together as one tree, or separate ... the tree, the leaves and the fruit. Is that how the Trinity works?”

“I don’t know. I just accept it and believe it,” said Father Ignatius.

“But let’s continue along this path for a moment.

“We believe in God. Whoever we perceive Him to be. Some imagine Him as a bearded old man living in Heaven somewhere; others see Him as a Spirit or a Supernatural Being perhaps ... we each have a mental description of God.

“I prefer to see Him as Jesus told us about Him; a loving caring Father, Creator of everything.

“Are you OK this far?”

James nodded and put down the wrench he was using to fix the car. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and listened.

“In times of old God spoke to His people on earth through the prophets,” continued Father Ignatius, “He guided them and gave them Commandments on how to live ... I’m sure you read all about it in the Old Testament ... But people did not always

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listen to the prophets as you well know James. They killed some of them and ignored quite a few.

“God could of course have sent punishments from above ... floods, famines, pestilence and so on. And indeed He did for a while.

“He could of course have come down as a Superman type character ... now that may have worked don't you think?

“He could have frightened everyone of them into total and perfect submission. But that is hardly the behavior we'd expect from a loving caring Father is it? What is the point of enforcing His will on all of us and make us love Him under duress?”

James smiled.

“So God decided to come to earth as a human being. As one of us. A human we could see, talk to, listen to and witness His power of love through His miracles,” said Father Ignatius gently.

“He came as a vulnerable little baby. And for a while He was vulnerable indeed when Herod tried to destroy Him. He grew up amongst us and throughout His life it was love and only love which motivated His every action.

“Jesus was, and is, God made incarnate.

“Whatever image we may have in our mind about God being a Spirit or whatever ... in Jesus we see God Himself made human just like us.

“Are you OK with my explanation so far?”

James agreed as he kept working on the car engine.

“And this is where some people get a little confused ...” continued the priest.

“When Jesus was set to return to Heaven after the Resurrection, you can imagine the disciples were totally distraught.

“They'd lost all confidence, even though they witnessed the Resurrection and saw the victory.

“Their leader, their God was leaving now. What are they to do without Him? How can they carry on without His guidance? How can they build His church and preach about Him? What a responsibility without His loving, guiding hand!

“So God, Jesus, promised to return.

“And He did return, as the Holy Spirit. He returned in Spirit form, not in physical form. You remember the story of the Pentecost don't you?

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“He lived within them and they were enlightened. They spoke in different languages and taught throughout all lands.

“He lived there, just within their soul, not in human form, but as a Spirit. A Holy Ghost if you prefer.

“And the Good News is that God, Jesus, this very Holy Spirit never left. He is still here right now. He lives within some people as He did within the disciples. It doesn't mean that every Christian has the Holy Spirit within him. But some do. I have seen it.”

The priest paused for a while.

“What saddens me,” he continued, “is that these days it is so much easier for people to believe that the devil can possess people and live within them, as you see in the movies, but they cannot believe or even understand that God can, and does, live within us.”

“That’s true,” said James, “many people believe in ghosts and evil spirits.”

“Unlike the devil, God does not possess people. He dwells within us but only if we ask Him and invite Him,” Father Ignatius continued.

“That’s because God is love. He would not do anything against our will. He invites us to love Him back without any coercion whatsoever. We choose freely whether to love Him back or not. Whether to invite Him in our hearts or not.

“So when we say people have the Holy Spirit within them, we mean they have God, and Jesus Christ, guiding their very soul in every aspect of their lives; in what they do, in what they say, and when to do or say it. They serve as an example to the rest of us; and they help and lead us towards our Heavenly home.”

At this point, James, who was listening intently whilst working, dropped something accidentally on the floor.

Father Ignatius got down on his hands and knees to search under the car and picked up a bolt and nut with a washer ring on it.



The priest looked at his hand for a few seconds and then said:

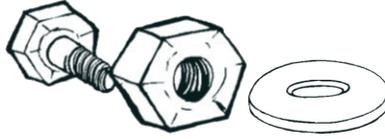
“Hey ... look at this James. A bolt and nut with a disc attached in the middle.”

James stopped working and looked at what the priest was holding.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“The three together are one item,” said Father Ignatius, “they work together to serve their purpose ... a Trinity you might say.

“Let’s separate them.



“This bolt here represents God, Our Almighty Father.

“The nut represents Jesus, made human and come to visit us on earth.

“And this disc or washer is the Holy Spirit. You can see when we put them together again that the disc is held securely on the bolt by the nut.

“It’s the same with the Holy Trinity I suppose.

“We cannot get to see or be with the Holy Spirit, until we have accepted Jesus first. Take this nut off the bolt, and now you have the disc. Accept Jesus in your life, and the Holy Spirit will descend upon you.”

James smiled broadly.

“I’ll keep this as a souvenir to remind me of this valuable lesson,” he said.

“I suggest you use it to fix the car, and get yourself another set ...” replied the priest jokingly.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### FOR WHOM THE COCK CROWS

Sunday Mass was over and everyone had left. Father Ignatius was clearing up in the Sacristy when Arthur, a young Altar Boy, came in sheepishly.

“Are you still here?” asked the priest.

“Yes Father ... can I ask you something please?” replied the young teenager.

“Fire away ...” encouraged the priest as he sat down.

“I think I committed a sin yesterday ... and I took Communion today.”

“You think ... are you not sure? What did you do?” asked Father Ignatius gently.

“I was at the Karate Club yesterday. I go every Saturday. During break some of the boys were talking about Jesus and they were mocking and laughing. They were telling jokes about Him and saying bad things!”

“I see ... and what did you do?”

“That’s it ...” hesitated the young lad, “I did nothing. I didn’t want to tell them about Jesus in case they laughed at me. I just kept quiet and smiled.”

“I understand ...” said Father Ignatius pausing slightly, “have you told Peter about this?”

“Peter Marsden?”

“No ... not Peter Marsden! Who is he anyway?” asked the priest frowning a little.

“He is our Karate Instructor ... we call him Sensei ...” replied young Arthur.

Father Ignatius smiled.

“I meant St Peter ...” he continued, “you know him? We have a large statue of him at the back of the church.”

The boy nodded.

“What do you know about him?”

“He was a disciple of Jesus,” said Arthur.

“That’s right ... and like you he was a little hesitant when asked about Jesus. When Jesus was arrested Peter denied knowing Him three times. And then the cock crew and reminded Peter of what Jesus had said ... do you know the story?” asked Father Ignatius.

Arthur nodded again.

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“The important thing to remember Arthur,” continued Father Ignatius gently, “is that Peter was sorry at what he had done; and Jesus forgave him. And Peter went on to become head of the Church.

“I quite understand that you felt a little intimidated yesterday. Jesus understands it too, and He forgives you just as He forgave Peter.

“But remember this Arthur ... as you grow up there will be other occasions when you’ll be faced with the same situation. People will mock Jesus, God or your religion. This is the way of the world I’m afraid. Jesus has many enemies in this world, despite all He has done for us.

“It’s at those times when I pray and hope that you’ll have the courage to stand up for Jesus and for your beliefs.

“What happened yesterday is understandable in the life of someone so young as yourself.

“The sad tragedy Arthur is that grown-ups often deny knowing and loving Jesus for fear of what others might say. In a free society as we enjoy these days, compared to the times of Peter, grown-ups still shy away from knowing and loving the Lord. They keep their heads down in embarrassment.”

Father Ignatius looked at the child in the eye and asked.

“You’re learning Karate you say?”

Arthur nodded.

“Good ...” said the priest, “that’s a defensive martial art. Isn’t it?”

“You should remember always to defend the Lord, Arthur. Not with your fighting skills, but with your wisdom, your pure soul and by the way you live.

“The Good Lord will help you to know what to say and when to say it.

“You’re the Karate Altar Boy ... defending the Lord with your soul!”

Arthur smiled broadly.

“Now you’d better hurry home before your parents start worrying about you.”

As the young boy turned to leave Father Ignatius added, “and don’t forget to pray for me ... I need prayers too you know!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### GOD IN ADVERSITY

Jack was a lovely man. Well loved by his wife, three children and four grandchildren, as well as his wider family and friends.

When they all went to church together they filled the two front rows on the left of the Altar. But that wasn't often, because they usually attended different Masses at St Vincent.

One day, out of the blue, Jack was taken severely ill and admitted to hospital. The whole family was devastated and it is fair to say that their Faith took quite a beating.

But not Jack. He remained calm and somehow, accepted the will of God. Of course, he was a little scared, but accepted what was happening to him willingly, trusting God that all would be well.

Father Ignatius visited him in the hospital often, and was greatly humbled by the man's Faith and cheerfulness, despite the obvious pain he was in at times.

Jack remained in hospital for a while, receiving family visitors as well as his priest every now and then.

One day, whilst Father Ignatius was the only visitor Jack said to him:

“See that man over there Father, in the bed just opposite me?”

The priest nodded silently.

“He doesn't believe in God Father ...” continued Jack, “and he's scared to death. He has the same symptoms and the same problems as me ... and to be honest the doctors don't hold much hope for either of us ...”

Father Ignatius held Jack's hand.

“Hey ... I know what's what Father. Both of us will have an operation soon and the chances are ... well, I wouldn't bet my shirt on it ...”

Jack laughed weakly.

“You know what I did Father ...”

The priest shook his head.

“Yesterday, I went over to that man. His name is Larry. And I said to Larry that Jesus will look after him. I told him that everything will be OK and he is not to worry about the operation.

“I don't think he believed me, or in Jesus ... but I think it calmed him down a bit.

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“At least I’ve noticed that he’s stopped crying. He used to sit there and wipe his eyes and feel sorry for himself. He’s stopped that now. Maybe Jesus has started working on him ... hein?”

Father Ignatius nodded weakly. He prayed silently for Jack and thanked the Lord for this man’s Faith in such adversity. Not only to believe in Christ’s healing power but to announce it boldly to someone who didn’t believe at all.

“Hey Father ... you’d better give me Communion now; before the family turns up ... you know how emotional they get ... especially my wife ...” said Jack with a weak smile.

The priest prayed with Jack for a while after giving him Communion and waited until his family arrived before leaving the hospital.

A few days later Jack and Larry were operated on. Both operations were successful and after a period of recuperation in hospital and at home both fully recovered.

Jack and Larry became friends. Larry and his wife and daughter became Christian and attend church at St Vincent.

Jack’s severe illness and his stay in hospital were the channel for a family of un-believers to get to know and love Christ.

(Based on a true story).

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### FAITH

Father Ignatius looked out of the window and heard the electrically-motorized milk van driving down the hill as it slowly approached the Parish House. The distinctive whirring of the battery operated motor, and the clinking of the glass milk bottles rattling against each other in their crates as the vehicle started and stopped every few yards, enhanced the musical dawn chorus as the sun woke up gently from its sleep.

Clink ... clink ... clink ... sang the milk bottles as the birds chirped merrily amongst the trees greeting a new day. Clackety clack ... clackety clack ... clackety clack ... responded an old steam train in the distance as it danced past slowly on the metal rails.

The priest came down the stairs from his office and opened the front door just as Len, the milkman, put down two pints of milk on the doorstep and collected the empty bottles left there the previous night by Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper.

“Hello Len ...” he said, “please do come in ... I have a list somewhere of other items which Mrs Davenport asked for. I believe she wants an extra pint of milk, some cream, butter and cheese. Come sit in the kitchen whilst I find her list!”

The milkman sat down by the warm stove in the kitchen whilst the priest searched for the list prepared by his housekeeper.

“That’s an odd poster you have here ...” said the milkman pointing at the wall, “To have Faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see ... What does that mean exactly?”

“Well ... it means what it says I suppose. To have Faith is to be sure that things will turn out exactly as you hope they will. To believe in something without seeing it ...” replied Father Ignatius, “It’s from the Bible, Hebrews Chapter 11.”

“Yeh ... I guessed that much. It’s still odd though” mumbled the milkman.

“What’s odd about it?”

“Well ...” Len hesitated a little, “I’m not a religious man Father, a bit above my head all this religious stuff ... but it is a little difficult to believe in something blind like ... without proof ... without seeing it with your eyes!”

“I agree ... it is more than a little difficult. Very difficult I would say. That’s why they call it Faith.” replied Father Ignatius handing Len the list.

“I believe in God ... I haven’t seen Him of course ... but I believe He exists. And in more ways than one I have proved it to myself, or He helped in proving it to me, that He exists all right.

“Now I can never prove His existence to you ...”

“I would agree with that,” laughed Len.

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“I could not prove it to you ...” continued the priest gently, “but God could prove His existence to you ... if only you’d be willing to take the first step ... to dare to believe without any proof.”

“I can’t see myself doing that Father!” said Len reading the list prepared by Mrs Davenport.

“God asks us to trust Him ... and He’ll do the rest” said Father Ignatius, “let me tell you a story ... have you got a few minutes?”

The milkman nodded.

“There once was a very famous tight-rope walker. You know the kind ...

“He’d walked across many rivers and ravines and canyons on a rope stretched between two points; and every time he attracted great crowds who came to see him. He was always successful, of course, and kept his balance despite the weather, the high winds and other difficulties which made his act both dangerous and exciting.

“And over the years he became very rich just by walking on a rope!

“One day he decided to retire. And for his last performance he decided to cross the Niagara Falls on a tight rope.

“Well ... on the day in question the whole world and his uncle was there to witness the event.”

The milkman smiled.

“Before performing his walk the tight-rope walker picked up the microphone and thanked his audience for their support over the years.

“He then asked them ... ‘Do you think I’ll be successful crossing the Niagara Falls?’

“The audience cheered enthusiastically and said ‘Yes ...’ in unison. After all they’d witnessed his many walks over the years.

“So the tight-rope walker continued, ‘this time however it will be a bit different ... I’ll walk across on this rope but I will also push a wheelbarrow in front of me ... do you think I’ll be able to do this successfully across to the other side?’

“The audience shouted again ‘Yes ...’ with one voice.

“OK, said the man ... ‘I need a volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow ... who will come across with me?’

“Not surprisingly ... nobody volunteered ... the crowd remained silent. They had seen him perform his walks many times over the years ... but not one of them had the courage to go across with him.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

The milkman looked at Father Ignatius rather puzzled.

“You see Len,” continued the priest, “they did not have Faith in him, even though they had seen him walk on a rope many times.

“And that’s what God asks of us ... to have Faith, even without seeing for ourselves.

“To dare to trust Him without any proof. To dare to sit in the wheelbarrow and be carried by Him.

“A little difficult you think? I say it is ... it is very difficult to trust and to believe without any proof whatsoever.

“It’s very difficult indeed to have Faith ... but the rewards are really worth it!

“So it’s up to you ... whether you want to sit in God’s wheelbarrow or not.”

As Len went to his milk van to fetch the items on Mrs Davenport’s list, Father Ignatius brought a small booklet of St Matthew’s Gospel from his office.

“Here Len ...” said the priest, “have a read of this ... I hope it sets you thinking. And when you finish it ... I have another booklet for you if you wish!”

## FORGOTTEN IN PURGATORY

Father Ignatius was in the back garden pruning the rose bushes whilst one of his parishioners was cleaning the pond and checking that the goldfish were in good health.

It was more to start a conversation than anything else when the parishioner asked: “Father ... is it a sin to fear death?”

“That’s a strange question ...” replied the priest, “what brought that on?”

“Well ... it’s not so much death that I’m concerned about,” said the man, hesitating a little, “it’s what comes afterwards.”

“You’re concerned about Heaven?”

“No Father ...” continued the man standing up from the pond and drying his hands on an old towel, “Purgatory ... that’s the real problem.

“The Church tells us that our souls will go to Purgatory until they’re made clean of all sins.”

“Yes ... that’s right ...” said Father Ignatius stopping what he was doing for a moment.

“The way I see it ...” said the man placing the old towel on one side, “we all have some sin or other on our conscience at any one time. So whenever we die not one of us will escape Purgatory. No matter how much I try ... the chances are that I’ll die having committed some sin or other ... and I’ll spend time in Purgatory.

“I don’t even know how long I’ll be there ... it could be years ... and I don’t like it.

“I’m not even sure what’s in Purgatory ... is there a fire like in hell ... only not as hot?”

Father Ignatius laughed.

“What’s so funny Father? What is in Purgatory anyway? It’s never quite explained in Catholic teaching; all I remember from my Catechism days is that it’s a place where we’re spiritually cleansed ... sounds more like a car-wash to me!”

Father Ignatius smiled again. He stopped pruning the roses and sat down on a nearby chair.

“Jesus certainly told us about Heaven and hell ... and He certainly described hell as a fiery place ... but He never mentioned Purgatory,” said the priest cautiously.

“So it’s a Catholic invention then?” retorted the parishioner, “because I know that other Christian churches don’t teach about Purgatory or believe in it.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

Father Ignatius took off his glasses and cleaned imaginary specks of dust to gain some thinking time.

“You accept, do you not ...” he asked eventually, “that after you’ve confessed your sins you should do a penance?”

“Yes ... sure.”

“Well ...” continued the priest, “those who die with sins on their soul, venial sins that is ... have to go to Purgatory as a penance until they are spiritually cleansed. That’s what the Church teaches ...

“The Catholic Church bases its teaching from Scripture. In Revelation Chapter 21 Verse 27 it says ‘Nothing unclean shall enter Heaven.’ So, strictly speaking, if we die with venial sins on our conscience we’re not spiritually cleaned ... and that’s why we go to Purgatory.

“The belief in the existence of Purgatory goes back to the early Christians; and other Christian denominations, though not all, do also believe in such a place where souls go before they are ready to enter Heaven.

“As you know ... we Catholics also believe that if we pray for the souls in Purgatory, or offer Mass for them, it shortens their stay there ...”

“That’s exactly what I’m scared about Father ...” interrupted the man somewhat agitated, “I have no family whatsoever ... when I’m dead and gone I’ll be forgotten there in Purgatory for years on end ... it’s just not fair!

“Having accepted that I’ll die with venial sins I’ll then spend time in Purgatory with no one praying for me or offering Mass for me ... I just can’t escape the fact that I’ll end up in Purgatory ... totally forgotten.”

Father Ignatius sympathized with the man and his fear of the after-life and what was in store for him there. He had to tread a thin line indeed between the teachings of his Church and the realities of life as he faced them right here and right now.

One of his parishioners believed so much in Catholic doctrine that it frightened him to death, almost literally so.

“Hey ... don’t be scared ...” he said gently, “let’s consider this a bit more ...

“As I’ve explained, the belief in Purgatory and the need to purify our souls before we enter Heaven goes back to the early Church.

“Over the years ... you can rest assured that many wise heads have pondered and argued about this time and again. And it is still a matter of contention between various denominations today ... As you rightly say, some Christian denominations don’t believe in the existence of Purgatory as we Catholics do.

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“Now ... you wouldn't expect me as a Catholic priest to tell you that Purgatory doesn't exist ... it's all a Catholic invention ... as you put it ... would you?”

The man shook his head. “No Father!”

“Good ... as a priest I can tell you what the Church teaches about Purgatory.

“But I can also tell you this ... and I believe it because Jesus taught us so ...” continued Father Ignatius gently.

“God our Creator loves us very much ... so much so that He sent Jesus to die for us ...

“Those who love God and believe in Jesus as His Son will certainly go to Heaven ... as Jesus promised us so many times ...

“God is a loving, forgiving Father whose wish is for us to be united with Him in Heaven.

“I don't believe that He is so callous and uncaring that He'll leave you forgotten in Purgatory for years on end ... He loves you too much to forget about you.

“He knows your soul as well as He knows mine and everyone else's. When we die He knows how pure we are; and He'll decide when and how we will go to meet Him in Heaven.

“If there is such a place as Purgatory, or a means through which we have to be cleansed spiritually before we enter Heaven, God will make sure that this happens to us as is fitting and appropriate to our individual circumstances.

“So don't fret so much about going to Purgatory but concentrate more on being at Peace with God. Trust Him to do the right thing.

“By all means, pray for those who died before you ... put in a good word for them with our Lord.

“But most of all Trust Him to guide you and welcome you to Heaven rather than worry about how you'll get there.”

The man nodded silently and continued cleaning the pond. Meanwhile, Father Ignatius prayed silently that the Church's teachings serve to up-lift those put in its care rather than frighten them as in this case.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### I HAVE SINNED

It was another Saturday morning and Father Ignatius made his way into the confessional and sat there praying silently.

It was one of those old fashioned wooden confessionals consisting of a large cubicle into which he sat and at either side of him there was a little window covered by a thick curtain. On the other side of the window his parishioners would kneel to confess their sins; alternating one on the left and one on the right.

He was half-way through reciting the Hail Mary when he heard two people kneeling at either side of him. He leant to his right and said quietly “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

This was his signal for the person at the other side of the curtain to start his confession. At first he had two or three young children confessing their usual “I have been naughty ... I disobeyed my parents ... I forgot to say my evening prayers ...” type of sins.

These were then followed by a few adults with more mature sins to confess. Nothing too serious though like murder or robbing a bank; but the usual sins he had heard times before perfectly symbolizing the frailty of human nature and the tendency to fail again and again at the same stumbling block.

It got to the point that, over the years, he got to recognize his parishioners by their voices and he could foretell their litany of sins before they even started speaking.

“Ah ... it’s Mrs Salter once again ...” he would think, “and here comes that same old sin once more ... it’s like going to the doctor for a repeat prescription for the same old ailments!” He would yet again, gently and with love and sympathy, dispense his words of wisdom before absolving her and mete out a penance.

And Mrs Salter would be followed by Mrs James ... and Mr Collins ... and so on and so forth ... all religiously kneeling beside him confessing, more out of habit rather than determination, the same old sins week in and week out.

He’d fantasized that one day he’d stop one of his parishioners before they started and he’d say, “Now let me guess ... you’ve done this and that once again this week ... and you’ve also done this ...”

Of course, Father Ignatius would never sully the sanctity of the Confession by doing such a thing, but the thought had crossed his mind many a time. Besides, if he did such a thing they’d probably think he was a mind-reader ... and that would be worse for his reputation!

One Sunday morning he resolved to address the problem head on; but he had to do it with kindness and diplomacy. He approached the lectern and said:

“I love ginger marmalade!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

Well ... that certainly focused his parishioners' attention.

"I have ginger marmalade on toast for breakfast every morning," he continued, "sometimes Mrs Davenport, our kind and very helpful housekeeper, only serves me two slices of toast for breakfast ..."

"So I wait when she's not looking and sneak into the kitchen for two more slices!"

Mrs Davenport frowned in the front pew as the congregation laughed.

"Mrs Davenport says that I am putting on weight ..." said Father Ignatius, "and it's true that when I stand on the weighing machine it confirms what she says ..."

"So I have resolved to do something about it ..."

"From now on, I promise to stop weighing myself!"

The congregation laughed again. The priest waited until they'd settled down before going on.

"You see ... ginger marmalade is my weakness. You may call it my sin."

"No matter how much I try ... I always weaken and have some more. Sometimes I serve a little bit more marmalade than I need on my plate; and then, having finished the toast, all four slices, I enjoy the extra marmalade by itself ..."

"But this is not my only sin of course. I confess many others to Father Donald and Monsignor Thomas when he visits here ..."

"Now I don't know about you ... but I find that I frequently seem to confess the same sins I committed before ..."

"Just like ginger marmalade ... the wily old devil seems to know my weakness and he tricks me yet again into the same sins."

"Do you remember I wonder when the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught committing adultery?"

"Now that was a whopper of a sin! Not just an extra spoon of ginger marmalade ... was it?"

The congregation laughed.

"And according to Jewish law she had to be stoned to death for that sin," continued Father Ignatius gently.

"Now we're told in the Gospel of John that Jesus wrote in the sand with His finger."

"We're not told what He wrote ... I guess He wrote 'Dear God ... will they never learn?'"

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“But that’s not important ... what is important is that after He said let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone ... and when they all left one by one ... Jesus turned to the woman and asked ‘Is there no one left to condemn you?’

“She said ‘No one ...’

“And Jesus replied ‘I do not condemn you either. Go, but do not sin again.’ ”

Father Ignatius paused for a few moments.

“Go, but do not sin again,” he repeated.

“Now Jesus did not mean do not sin any sin whatsoever ever again for the rest of your life ...

“He knew that that would be impossible. The woman was human, and it is natural that she would sin again.

“Jesus knows our human nature and He knows that we are liable to sin again and again ...

“What Jesus said to the woman is, do not commit that particular sin again ... it is serious enough to get you into a lot of trouble with the Pharisees as well as with God Himself.

“And that’s what Jesus is saying to us today ...

“He knows we are weak ... He knows that we will sin ... which is why we have the Holy Sacrament of Confession.

“By saying ‘do not sin again’ Jesus is warning us to beware of those particular sins which are serious enough to lead us into damnation, and into an eternity of exclusion from our Father in Heaven.

“As we prepare for our weekly confession we need to consider carefully the seriousness of our sins. Which ones are ginger marmalade sins; and which ones are grave enough to exclude us from God’s ever lasting love.

“In our propensity to sin, God is loving and caring enough to forgive us again and again.

“But with our confession there should also be remorse and guilt for what we have done. Confession should not be just a laborious recitation of the same old sins; and a futile exercise which serves no one and certainly does not fool God Himself.

“Without true remorse, and a genuine resolve not to repeat our sins; then Confession means nothing. And it would be better not to come to Confession at all. At least that is honest in the eyes of God.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### BAD LUCK!

It was another one of those “Questions and Answers” sessions which were held at the Parish Hall every now and then. The parishioners would gather of an evening and after enjoying hot drinks and cakes they would ask their priests any questions about the running of St Vincent Church or indeed about the Catholic Faith and the priests would answer as best they can.

“Is it a sin to be superstitious Father?” asked a parishioner sitting at the front.

“Well ... I’ve never been known to walk under a black cat!” replied Father Ignatius as everyone laughed.

“You mean walk under a ladder surely?” continued the questioner.

“Yes ... of course you’re right. Some people believe you shouldn’t walk under a ladder. Do you know where this belief comes from Harry?” asked the priest of his questioner.

“No Father ... there are so many superstitions and I wondered if it is a sin to believe them.”

“It may surprise you to know that a lot of superstitions derive from the Christian Faith, believe it or not,” explained Father Ignatius.

“The Holy Trinity was often symbolized in ancient times by a triangle denoting God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

“A self-standing ladder is shaped like a triangle, and so is a ladder leaning against a wall. So to walk through it, or under it, if it is leaning against the wall, was considered walking through the Trinity; which is wrong. And therefore, bad luck.”

“That’s interesting ... I never knew that!” said another young man sitting at the front.

“Personally ... I would advise you never to walk under a ladder,” continued the priest, “especially if there’s someone standing on top with a pot of paint in his hand!”

They laughed again.

“You will have noticed that a number of people touch wood, or knock on wood, when they say something,” Father Ignatius went on.

“Yet again, this originates from Christianity when the Crusaders returned from the Holy Lands with wood which they claimed belonged to the Cross Jesus died on ...

“Apparently, so much wood was brought back that you could have built your own Cathedral!”

“So is it a sin then ...” asked Harry once more, “to believe in these superstitions? Or is it harmless fun?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Well ... I suppose it could be considered a sin. Although I’ve never had anyone confess it to me,” joked the priest.

“Why Father?” asked someone else, “what’s wrong in saying knock on wood? Or wearing a good luck charm or something like that. God didn’t say it’s a sin did He?”

Father Ignatius paused for a while.

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said, “it says in the Commandments ‘worship no other god but me’ so it could be argued that if we put serious reliance on our superstitious belief then, strictly speaking, we are sinning against God.”

“Wow ... so it’s a mortal sin then?” retorted Harry.

“It could be ...” said the priest cautiously, “but let’s not run away with ourselves.

“We need to ask how much relevance, and how seriously does a person take these beliefs.

“Personally, I wouldn’t consider anyone saying ‘knock on wood’ as having committed a mortal sin, especially if said in jest. But if the individual honestly believed that by touching a piece of wood he has averted evil from happening, then this does become more serious, and yes ... it could be a sin.

“Our Christian Faith teaches us to believe and trust in one living God, who loves us and cares for us.

“God protects us from many evils every day without our knowledge and beyond our imagination.

“So to seriously believe that touching a piece of wood has the same effect is surely an insult to Him!”

“I understand ...” replied Harry.

“I would also like to say something about wearing good luck charms, as someone has just mentioned,” continued Father Ignatius gently.

“Many of us wear a Cross on a chain round our neck, or a medallion of Our Lady or St Patrick ...

“I would like to ask you to consider why you do this.

“As a reminder of the sacrifice Our Lord did for us ... or as a reminder to pray to Our Lady or the Saints ...

“There’s nothing wrong with that of course. As there’s nothing wrong in having statues in church or at home and lighting candles to them.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“But there’s certainly a lot wrong if you believe that the medallion or Cross, or the statue has some mystical or magic power.

“Be careful, as this is verging on idolatry.”

The silence that followed underlined the seriousness of what Father Ignatius had just said. He hoped to say something to lighten the mood a little when another questioner asked,

“I suppose taking horoscopes seriously is also wrong Father?”

“You’re so right Debra ...” replied Father Ignatius.

“There’s absolutely no relationship between the position of the stars and the planets when we’re born, or at any moment in time, and our character or our future ...

“It’s all nonsense ...

“Except for one thing ...”

He paused for a short while to gain their full attention.

“I knew someone who was born under Taurus the bull ... and boy did he smell bad!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### EMMAUS VALLEY

“Father, is it possible that God stops loving us?” Roger asked Father Ignatius.

The priest stopped what he was doing and asked, “What brought this on? It’s rather a strange question to ask.”

“Well Father,” continued Roger, “We’re told that God loves all of us. But is it possible that sometimes He turns His attention to someone else, and we’re not in His good books, or in His priorities anymore?”

“Feeling neglected are we ... is that the problem?”

“No Father ... it’s that ... I don’t know ... I seem to be down in the valley at this moment in time. Sometimes I’m right up there and I feel great and all is well ... and then at times I feel really down and things aren’t going so well ...”

“Aha ... I see ...” exclaimed the priest, “remember, that in order to be up there, as you put it, we must start from a low point.

“There are times when our Faith is really strong and we feel at one with God ... and then at times, we begin to wobble and wonder and doubt ...

“It’s usually when things aren’t going so well in our lives. Is that what is happening to you?”

Roger hesitated. “Perhaps ... yes, I feel a bit fearful about life in general ... will I still have my job this time next year, with the financial situation being what it is? How will I cope at my age? Would I get another job ... you know the sort of worries we all have ...”

Father Ignatius remained silent for a while, allowing Roger to think about what he had just said. Then he asked:

“I was reading Luke Chapter 24 Verse 13 onwards this morning. Do you know what it is about?”

Roger shook his head.

“It’s an unfair question I suppose ... to expect you to know chapter and verse by heart ... not even a priest can do that!” exclaimed Father Ignatius.

Roger smiled.

“Just after Christ’s Resurrection, two of His followers were going to Emmaus,” said Father Ignatius. “They were totally distraught about Jesus’ death, and even though they had heard news that His tomb is empty and that Christ is alive, they were still down-hearted and confused.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Jesus appeared to them on the way. They did not recognize Him. They spoke with Him and told Him their news. They said that their Lord and leader had been crucified, and there were rumors going around that He was raised from the dead and He was alive again.

“Jesus did not tell them who He was but explained to them the prophets’ predictions about Him. He walked with them all the way to Emmaus, but still they did not recognize Him. It wasn’t until He broke and blessed the bread that they recognized Him.”

The priest paused again for a while; and then he went on.

“Why? I ask myself.

“Why did they not recognize Him when they first saw Him, or when He took the time to explain to them the writings of the prophets?

“Could it be that their minds were more pre-occupied with their own problems and their dilemma rather than listening to Him?

“You can just imagine how their mind worked and how concerned they were about their predicament.

“Their leader is dead. What are they to do now? Is it all over? Every thing He said and taught comes to nothing? And what of the future? What are His followers to do now?

“Can you see how their mind was working Roger?”

“Yes ... I suppose they were frightened about their future,” said Roger.

“Just like you ...” said Father Ignatius with a gentle smile.

“We are all just the same as those two disciples at times ...

“Sudden events may affect our lives and turn it upside down. Events perhaps of our own making sometimes ... or events that we did not contribute to, but they affect us all the same.

“And we panic. We fear the future, we fear matters getting out of our control and we turn our attention to our problems and our dilemma. Just like those two on the way to Emmaus.

“And from being on a high up there with our Lord, we’re suddenly plunged into the valley you find yourself in right now.

“Yet, all the time we are panicking Jesus is there, walking right beside us. Quite literally! He is waiting for us to recognize Him, to trust Him, and hold His hand in the full knowledge that He will see us through our darkest hour.

“It is our doubts, our fears and our worries which prevent us from seeing Him.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### MOTIVATED BY FEAR

“Father ... is it wrong to go to Confession for the wrong reasons?” asked Leonard one day whilst helping Father Ignatius in the Sacristy.

“And what do you consider the wrong reasons?” asked the priest gently.

“Well Father ... I think a lot of Christians are hypocrites ... they only go to church and go to Confession because they’re afraid of going to hell!”

“I would have thought these are the right reasons,” replied the priest with a smile, “but I see what you mean ...”

“The thing is ...” interrupted Leonard, “if there was no hell, or fear of hell, I wonder how many people would bother to go to church?”

Father Ignatius laughed.

“Many have said that the church invented hell to keep the faithful under control.” said Father Ignatius, “but then ... Jesus did warn us many times about hell ... so it must exist.

“When God loved us He also invited us to love Him back in return. He did not wish to force our hand in any way ... It’s a choice we have to make freely. To love Him back or not.

“God’s love for us is so much that He wishes us to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. That’s His invitation to all of humanity.

“The alternative to going to Heaven is going to hell. To be separated from God and from His love for ever. It’s a bit like the many parables that Jesus told about someone having a party, or a feast, and inviting everyone yet people choose not to attend.”

The priest paused a little, as he usually did when he wanted to press home a point.

“God loves us ... and He invites us to spend eternity with Him in Heaven,” repeated Father Ignatius slowly.

“Or we may choose to turn down His invitation and spend eternity in hell.

“Now is that forceful on His part do you think? It seems a pretty clear choice to me ... go to the party or the feast to which you are invited ... or turn Him down and go freely your own way ...

“I can see how some people might think this unfair ... and that we really have no choice because the consequences are so horrendous that any sane person would choose to accept God’s invitation. Yet ... having said so, there are many who do turn down the invitation, and choose not to believe in God’s very existence, never mind accepting His love.”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

Father Ignatius stopped once again. He thought that maybe this was getting a bit too heavy for poor Leonard to grasp. He tried another approach.

“Ideally Leonard ... we should go to church because we want to ... because we want to thank God for what He has done for us ... and because we wish to receive Him in our hearts through the Holy Sacrament of Communion. It’s like visiting a friend whom we like very much, and we like being with them and in their company.

“Ideally ... we should go to Confession because we are truly sorry that we have hurt God ... because we feel remorse for what we have done ... and because we promise we will genuinely try to do better with our lives. It’s like making up again when we’ve fallen out with a friend over an argument ...

“This is all ideally ... as I say.

“Yet ... as you say ... some people do these things out of fear. They attend church out of fear, take Communion out of fear and go to Confession for the same reason. They see God as a vengeful master who will punish them unless they do these things.

“It shouldn’t be so Leonard ... and I suspect God is hurt when He sees us doing things out of fear. This is the very God who sacrificed His Son who died horribly on the Cross for us. He did it out of love ... not as a means to command fear from us ...”

“Yes Father ...” mumbled Leonard.

“OK ...” continued Father Ignatius, “let us consider how that fear you speak of ... the fear of hell ... gets into this whole matter and muddles our thinking.

“Who introduced fear into the equation do you think?”

“It is the devil ... is it not?”

“He whispers into our ears ... you really don’t want to be here in church do you? Especially on a lovely sunny day like today. You’re only here because you’re afraid of God. In fact everything you do is because you fear Him ... take courage ... stand up to Him.

“Sounds familiar does it not? Almost the same words whispered to Adam and Eve when He told them to stand up to God.”

“Gosh ... I never saw it this way ...” said Leonard.

“So to answer your original question Leonard ...” said Father Ignatius, “it is wrong to go to Confession, or to church for the wrong reasons ...

“But the wrong reasons are not the fear of ending up in hell, these are genuine reasons all right ... the wrong reasons are listening to the devil and putting credence to his tricks ...

“Do you see and understand the subtle difference?”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### FATHER IGNATIUS VISITS PURGATORY

“Today my sermon will be about Purgatory ...” said Father Ignatius to the congregation on Sunday, “but let me first explain why I chose this subject to talk about ...

“As you know, I teach the Catechism class at our local school every Friday ... and I don’t mind confessing that those children frighten me ...

“They have that innocence which only people of their age have ... and they don’t mind asking you any kind of question no matter how difficult it is to answer.

“This is what they asked me last week ... I have it written down on this piece of paper ...”

The priest unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket and began to read.

“Ah ... here’s the first thing they asked me ...

“Jesus told us about Heaven and hell ... but He never mentioned Purgatory ... how do we know it really exists?

“What does Purgatory look like? Does it have a fire like hell? Is it hot or cold there? Or is it perhaps just warm so you feel uncomfortable but you don’t burn?

“Does it have devils looking after all the inmates; like in hell ... or are they a little kinder perhaps?

“How long do we stay in Purgatory? Is it one day for every sin we have ... or is it a week or more for every sin?

“Are we in pain when in Purgatory? Like the fire in hell?

“When we pray for people in Purgatory, how many days off do they get? Is it one Hail Mary and they have one day less there; or how does it work?”

Father Ignatius folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket.

“Well ...” he said, “how do you answer questions like these? After all, I’m only a priest not an Einstein!”

The congregation laughed.

“They are all valid questions which may have crossed our minds too at some time or other; if we do think about Purgatory that is ... but then we dismissed them into our pending tray in our head. Our let’s not think about it right now tray ...”

He paused for a while.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Let me explain the Catholic Church’s teaching regarding Purgatory ...” he continued.

“Our teaching is based on Revelations 21:27 where it says nothing unclean will enter the presence of God in Heaven.

“Given that very few of us will die with no sins whatsoever on our conscience, the Church teaches that there must exist a place, or a state of being, or a state of purification, where we are cleansed of our sins and we can enter Heaven. This place, or state of being, is known as Purgatory.

“Jesus did describe Heaven at one time as a mansion with many rooms ... so it follows, perhaps, that in our imagination we visualize Purgatory as a physical place too ...

“The pertinent point, however, is that the Church teaches that there is a stage where souls destined for Heaven undergo a period of purification.

“As you well know, this belief has given rise to a lot of criticism of the Catholic Church over the years. Criticism and ridicule even ...

“Some have suggested that Purgatory is a Catholic invention ... a way of raising money for the Church by encouraging the faithful to pay for prayers and Masses for the souls of loved ones who are in Purgatory.

“Others have said that once a person is dead their destination is in the hands of God ... and it cannot be bought or influenced by prayers or money from the living on this side of the divide.

“The fact remains, however, that the existence of Purgatory is one of our fundamental beliefs as Catholics. And as Catholics we cannot pick and choose what we believe in ... we have to follow what our Church teaches, do we not?”

He stopped for a while, sensing that, like the children in his Catechism class, his congregation was now eager for answers to the many questions posed.

“Of course ...” Father Ignatius continued, “I cannot answer all the questions asked by my pupils.

“I cannot tell you whether it is hot or cold in Purgatory, whether there are guards or wardens there checking on the inmates, or how long we have to stay there until our sins are cleansed and forgiven ...

“I suspect that Purgatory is a state in which we find ourselves in, rather than a place as such ... but this is pure speculation on my part.

“We can scratch our heads and fathom and think as long as we want ... at the end of the day it is a matter of personal conscience what we believe. It is a matter of Faith.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“Some of you, no doubt, will choose to believe that Purgatory does not exist ... and that our sins when we die are somehow ...”

He waved his hands in the air.

“... dissipated ... vanished ... forgiven ...”

He stopped again.

““As for praying for the souls in Purgatory and offering Masses for them,” he said, “... the way I see it ... it is like putting in a good word on behalf of a relative or friend.

“How many of us applying for jobs, or applying to join a club or an institution, ask a friend to act as a referee?

“When we pray ... we’re doing the same thing. We are putting in a good word on behalf of a loved one ... we are acting as their referee ...

“When someone is ill ... or in some difficulty ... we pray for them ... we ask God to help them, to show them mercy and compassion ... and often, I have seen it happen, God does answer our prayers.

“Jesus did, after all, teach us to ask our Father in Heaven ... did He not?

“In the same way, when we pray for the souls in Purgatory we’re asking God to have mercy on them and to hasten their entry into Heaven ... it’s as simple as that.

“Whether God is influenced by such prayers, as our critics would hasten to say ... is another matter which we can debate for ever.

“At the end of the day it all boils down to a matter of belief.”

Father Ignatius stopped once again to punctuate his sermon.

“As your priest,” he continued gently in a calm and soothing voice, “I have always tried to be honest with you when asked about matters of Faith. I tell you what the Church teaches and ... as best I can ... help you in making your decisions on what to believe ...

“Leaving aside the question of Purgatory for a moment ...

“What is more important here is our relationship with God, our Creator, and our Father in Heaven.

“As humans we tend to envisage God with our limited human understanding.

“We measure Him by our own human yardstick and try to work out His thinking and His strategies and plans ...

## **FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES**

“This is wrong. He is God ... and we are not. It’s as simple as that.

“It is not up to us to work out who will and who will not enter Heaven; and whether they go there via a direct route or through a temporary stay or detour in Purgatory or wherever.

“Let God be God ... and let man be man. And let us have the humility to obey Him and trust Him to do the right thing!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### SLEEPWALKING INTO HELL

Father Ignatius' sermon started with a warning.

“You will not like my sermon today!” he declared.

“In fact I don't like it myself and I would rather be giving you a different sermon. A gentle one which tickles your ears and makes you feel warm and comfortable.

“The reason I don't particularly like this sermon is because perhaps it speaks to me too as well as all of you.

“When Jesus was raised to Heaven He gave His disciples and all of us a Mission. He asked us to go and preach the Good News about God and about Him.

“But are we doing as He asked? I mean each one of us in our daily lives, within our families, at work or wherever we may be? I don't mean of course that you need to stand on a soap box in the middle of the street and shout at the top of your voice. Or knock from door to door and try to convince people on their doorsteps. Some people do just that and I admire their courage and determination.

“What I mean is” he paused for a moment to concentrate his listeners' attention, “what I mean is, do people who know you recognize you as a disciple of Christ?

“Is there anything in your behavior or your character that is different? Something which makes people say ‘he or she is a Christian you know!’ Even in a derogative sense; at least it shows they've recognized something in you which is different.

“St Francis of Assisi advised his followers to preach the Gospel by the way they live.

“When people look at us do they see Christ in us?

“More important, when you look at the mirror in the morning do you see Christ there?”

He stopped again to ensure his point struck home. He then repeated slowly.

“When you look in the mirror do you see Christ?

“Our Lord said ‘Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do what my Father in Heaven wants them to do.’

“In other words we can assume that there are no parrots in Heaven!”

The congregation laughed silently. Father Ignatius went on.

“God requires from each one of us action throughout our lives. Each one of us is tasked, to the best of their abilities, to do something in their lives, just a little, day in and day out, to put Christ in someone else's life.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“We can’t all be Mother Theresa and leave our native land and go help others elsewhere. And indeed God does not ask us so to do ... not all of us anyway.

“To most people He asks that we live Christ everyday ... in our families, at work, at play or wherever we go and whatever we do.

“It is not enough to go to church on Sunday, and then get on with our own lifestyles the rest of the time.

“Nor am I saying that we should spend our lives on our knees collecting scars and calluses. That is not the first thing that St Peter will check for when you get to meet him!”

They laughed quietly again.

“God does not want us to endure this life. He wants us to enjoy it. And at the same time He wants us to tell others that there’s better to come when we meet Him in Heaven.

“We can each do as God asks in our own way ... and best of all by living the Gospels day after day.

“Instead ... I fear; there are too many so called Christians who are sleepwalking their way into hell!”

## HARD FORGIVENESS

“Father ... I have a problem with forgiving” said Sonia as she folded the last of the vestments and put them away in their cupboard in the Sacristy.

Father Ignatius was checking some paper work at a small desk in the corner of the large room. There was a tray there and parishioners were invited to place their messages, notices and sundry bits and pieces of information intended for the weekly Church Newsletter. The priest was reading through them in preparation for printing the Newsletter that evening. He stopped what he was doing and asked:

“What do you mean? A problem with forgiving ...”

Sonia hesitated.

“I know you’ve always said we should forgive with all our heart ... unreservedly ... if we want God to forgive us our sins ...”

“I understand that ... and I try as best I can to forgive wholeheartedly ...”

“I can foretell a ‘but’ coming up ...” smiled the priest, “but in this case ...”

She smiled back.

“But in this case it is different ...” she continued.

“There’s this woman at work who has hurt me really bad ... she lied about me Father. And as a result I was severely reprimanded by our manager and I was made to lose a day’s pay ... which I cannot afford.

“We used to be friends and all ... but she lied to cover up her mistake and I got unfairly punished. This happened about two weeks ago ...”

“This is terrible ...” said Father Ignatius frowning at the unfairness of what he’d just heard. “Is there not some sort of appeal procedure at your workplace? Someone to talk to about it perhaps ...”

“No ... that’s not the problem Father.” Sonia said.

“The thing is, this woman came to see me yesterday and apologized profusely for what she had done ... she cried her heart out and said she could not have been found out as having made yet another mistake ... she was on her last warning and another mistake would mean losing her job. That’s why she lied and put the blame on me ...”

“She begged me to forgive her ... which I did straightaway Father. I told her to think no more about it and that all was now OK ...”

“That’s very generous and loving of you ... so what is the problem?” asked the priest.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“She wants us to be friends again, as before ... we used to visit each other at our homes ... and we’d shop together, or pick up each others’ children from school and so on ... she wants everything to be as before.

“I find that very difficult ... I just can’t trust her anymore and I want us to keep our distance ... I forgive her as I said ... but I can’t go back as before. My husband agrees and says I should no longer speak to her. I think I can speak and be nice to her at work but that’s as far as it goes ... I can’t be friends again.

“Is my forgiveness worthless?”

“No ... it is not worthless,” replied Father Ignatius gently, “when we forgive someone else, we touch their very soul with the merciful love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

“You’ve been hurt Sonia ... hurt and punished unfairly and undeservedly ...

“When we forgive people it means that we no longer hold their wrongdoings to account. We no longer bear them any malice or ill-feelings or ill-will.

“We acknowledge that we forgive them and we let them go their own way free from any fear of punishment or retribution on our part.

“This doesn’t mean however that we forget the pain caused to us. How can we? The hurt is imprinted in our memory and try as we might the chances are that we’ll remember it time and again. It’s only natural ... it’s human nature.

“You forgave her and told her so ...”

Sonia nodded; holding back her tears.

“And that’s all that is expected of you ...” continued the priest gently, noticing that she was very upset at the mere thought of the event.

“We all have a right ... a duty even ... to protect ourselves and to protect our loved ones ...

“If we feel uncomfortable about a particular situation or relationship, we have every right to distance ourselves from it ...

“For very understandable reasons you feel uncomfortable at being friendly with this person as you were before ... visiting each other and picking each others’ children from school and so on ...

“There’s nothing wrong with that ... tell her politely that you’ve forgiven her and that you feel both of you should leave it at that ... an amicable relationship from a distance ...”

“But ...” Sonia interrupted, “how can that be forgiveness? By keeping my distance implies that I’m still holding something against her ...

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

“She knows that ... you and I know that ... and God knows that ...”

Father Ignatius smiled.

“Oh yes ... God knows that all right ... and He knows the reason behind it too ...” he said.

“Let me tell you a story ...

“Jesus once taught His disciples and His followers about Himself.

“He said, ‘whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in him’

“A number of His followers found this difficult to understand. What does He mean ... eat His flesh and drink His blood ... Many today, find this very concept difficult to understand; so you can imagine how it was in those times.

“So a number of Christ’s followers decided to leave and no longer follow Him.

“What did Jesus do?

“He didn’t call them back. He didn’t say, ‘Wait, let me explain ... this is what I meant to say ...’ He didn’t compromise His position in any way ...

“He just let them go ... and He even asked His twelve disciples, ‘How about you ... do you want to go as well?’

“You see Sonia ... Jesus forgave them and let them go ... He didn’t curse them and send plagues and pestilence on them and their families for generations ...”

She smiled again feeling a little calmer.

“He just forgave them and let them go ...

“Which is what you should also do ...” said Father Ignatius serenely.

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### THE FOX

It was a lovely warm summer afternoon. Father Ignatius had invited Theodore Luxton-Joyce and his lovely wife Rose to a barbecue in the church's gardens. After all, the priest had been invited to the eccentric millionaire's mansion many a time and it was perhaps appropriate that he should return the favor.

Father Donald was also there of course and had entertained the group with his guitar playing. Mrs Davenport had excelled herself in preparing a lovely meal helped by Sister Martha and a few other nuns from the Convent nearby, who had also been invited. All in all it had been a lovely afternoon with great food and drink and a wonderful small gathering of friends enjoying themselves and each others company.

Father Donald had just finished his solo performance of some Spanish melody on the guitar when Theodore decided to change the mood of the party altogether.

"I have brought my bagpipes with me ..." he declared, "they're in the car ... let me fetch them and play you a tune or two ... what?"

Before anyone could react to the suggestion, he stormed out of the garden missing altogether the sideways glances between Sister Martha and Father Donald.

"He has been practicing for some time ..." said Rose sweetly with a smile, "I don't see why I should be the only one to enjoy his noise ..."

"It'll make a change from the guitar ..." replied Father Donald in his broad Glaswegian accent, "and it's great to have someone proud to be Scottish ... I would have learnt to play the bagpipes myself ... but it's hard to practice when you're brought up in the tenements of Glasgow ..." he chuckled.

A few moments later Theodore re-appeared with his bagpipes in hand.

"You're from up North Padre ..." he asked Father Donald, "Do you play the bagpipes?"

"I'm afraid not ..." replied the priest, "I learnt the guitar instead as a child ..."

"Oh ... I can teach you if you wish ..." said Theodore enthusiastically, "although I can't think off-hand of any church hymns suitable for the bagpipes ..."

As he started blowing through the pipes and getting ever so redder in the face, his cheeks inflated to the point where they would explode, there was a rustling noise in the bushes at the back end of the gardens; just by the statue of Our Lady. They all turned round towards the bushes as Theodore stopped playing, and they saw a fox come out of the bushes and fall on its side at the feet of Our Lady.

"Strange behavior ..." whispered Father Donald, "I'll go there slowly to investigate."

The others remained in their seats by the barbecue and watched intently as the priest walked ever so slowly towards the fox, trying not to disturb it. When he was a few

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feet away the creature let out a scream but did not get up or even move. It just lay there baring its teeth threateningly. Father Donald stopped and then after a short while he walked backwards slowly to rejoin the group by the fire.

“It’s badly injured ...” he said, “its back leg is bleeding ... probably shot by a farmer in the lands just behind our gardens ... or maybe bitten by some dogs ...”

Theodore pulled Father Ignatius gently aside away from the group and then whispered quietly “I have my shot gun in the car Padre ... shall I put it out of its misery?”

“No ... that won’t be necessary Theodore ... I’ll phone the Animal Welfare Society for their advice,” replied Father Ignatius, “in the meantime, get everyone in the house ... luckily we’ve all finished eating.”

About half-an-hour later they all watched from the safety of the house as the Animal Welfare Society people dealt with the situation. They tried to capture the fox and take it to an animal hospital where it could be treated and looked after until it is strong enough to be released in the wild once again. Every time they approached the animal he bared its teeth again and attempted to bite his benefactors. Eventually, it was caught and taken to the hospital.

“And to think I was prepared to shoot him ...” said Theodore looking out of the window, “luckily the Padre here stopped me ... well done Padre!”

“That fox reminds me of our behavior ...” said Father Ignatius gently as he poured his guests hot chocolate drinks just brought in by Mrs Davenport in an extra large pot.

“How so ... Padre ... I don’t look like a fox do I?” interrupted Theodore as Sister Martha smiled coyly.

“When things go wrong in our lives we too tend to behave like that fox,” continued Father Ignatius. “We get angry at what’s happened, we’re concerned, frightened even, about the future ... we get defensive and we go on the attack. We believe that God has abandoned us; and we’ve reached the end of the line. When we behave like that, we shut off a channel of communication with God. When God is temporarily put aside, He doesn’t stop loving us, but we block His influence to do good in our lives. Like the fox, every time God tries to help us we bare our teeth in anger. Our behavior is futile and un-productive.

“The fox did not realize that by being caught he’d soon improve his hopeless situation. But we should know better, and trust our Lord rather than lash out at Him without thinking.”

“How true ...” said Sister Martha, “what a good observation Ignatius.”

“Thank you Father,” said Rose, “I’ll remember that next time I feel things are getting too much!”

Theodore put his cup down and declared “Jolly good show that God doesn’t carry a shotgun ... that’s what I say ... what?”

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### PRAYING

Father Ignatius sat in the empty church right up front by Our Lady's statue. He watched for a while the votive candles burning at her feet and then started his Rosary.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, these words came whirling fast into his head, totally uncontrollable and spontaneous, yet as clear as if they were spoken to him there and then.

"How shall I pray?" said the words in Father Ignatius' head.

"Shall I beg over and over again for you to hear me? Is that what You want of me?"

"Shall I plead for ever like the widow to the judge until she was heard?"

"How do you want me to see You? As an over-powerful ruler demanding His own way?"

"How do you want me to love You? As one loves a monster, with immense fear lest I arouse your anger and wrath?"

"Shall I fear you for ever and cower at the thought of your fury?"

Father Ignatius stopped praying and made the sign of the Cross. He took a deep breath ... and yet the words continued in his mind ... somehow gentler now ... somehow softer ...

"Love me as a child ... with no fear and no dread.

"Trust me as a child trusts his parents when they give him food and drink.

"A child never questions whether the food is good to eat ... he takes it in trust and asks for more.

"He never doubts when led by his parents ... he follows eagerly holding hands along the way.

"Love me as a child ... and I'll treat you with love and compassion.

"Ask me as a child ... and I'll give you what's good for you in good time.

"Trust me as a child ... and I'll show you the way ...

"No matter how difficult your journey ahead, I'll always be there ... guiding you into eternity ... with Me."

The words suddenly stopped as quickly as they'd started. Yet their message remained with the priest for a long time.

## BELIEVING WITH EYES CLOSED

Sister Georgina came to see Father Ignatius in his office. She was a nun living in the Convent nearby and whilst it was not unusual for the nuns to visit the Parish House from time to time this visit was somewhat formal. The nun had phoned the priest that morning and asked him for an appointment.

“Hello Sister ... come in ... come in ...” said the kindly priest, “would you like some coffee ... or some tea perhaps!”

“No thank you Father ...” she said somewhat shyly as she sat down.

“You know you don’t need to phone to make an appointment ...” he said as he closed the door and sat at his desk, “just pop in anytime ...”

“Well Father ... I wanted to make sure you were available ... and we would not be disturbed.” She said. “The thing is ... I’m finding it very hard believing ...”

“Are you having doubts about your Faith Sister?” Father Ignatius asked gently and soothingly.

“No ... no ... it’s not that. I believe in God and Jesus and the Trinity ...” she hesitated, “Can someone be selective in their beliefs?”

“Well Georgina ...” he smiled, “it depends on what one is selective about ... I do have my doubts about some of the changes we’re making as a Church ... What is troubling you exactly?”

“Well Father ...”

“Let’s dispense with the formalities for now ...” he interrupted.

“Well ...” she hesitated again, “for some time now I’ve had great difficulty in believing in the true presence of Our Lord in the Eucharist.

“I can’t quite explain it. Did Christ in the Last Supper ask us to celebrate Communion in His memory ... or is it really His flesh and blood? And why would He want us to eat and drink His very Being?”

“It is one of our fundamental beliefs as a Church,” said the priest calmly, “one that has been tested and debated for centuries. You’ve no doubt heard of the Eucharistic Miracle at Lanciano?”

“Yes Father ... but how can I make myself believe?” she replied, “I could shut my eyes tightly and convince myself to believe ... but at the end of the day my mind says differently.

“I have no difficulty in believing the existence of God ... I accept that as fact. I believe in Christ’s Virgin birth, His resurrection, the Holy Spirit and so on ...

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Somehow these beliefs cause me no difficulties and they are part of my being ... they are me and have been me for sometime.

“And I suppose that at some stage I must have believed in the Eucharist too. How could I not have?”

“I became a nun ... studied for years and took on my vocation ... and all was well ... Yet now, it’s this one aspect of my Faith that I find difficulty with.”

The priest paused for a while and said a silent prayer before going on.

“We’ve all had our moments of doubts and our little stumbles every now and then ...” he said.

“It’s our human nature coming to the fore. We’re programmed to think, to analyze ... to ask questions and yes ... to doubt too.

“It’s what some people call Free Will ... and I’m sure you’ve heard the many debates about that and God’s pre-destination of our lives!”

She smiled as he continued.

“God does not want us to work hard at our beliefs. He does not want us to shut our eyes tightly and convince ourselves to believe in this or in that.

“He understands our struggles between total acceptance and the natural desire to examine and evaluate what we’re told to believe.

“He did make us after all ... so He knows what makes us tick and how the cogs in our heads constantly turn.

“What God asks of us is to believe like a child. A child never questions the veracity of what he’s told ... he just accepts it.

“There’s no need to believe with eyes tightly shut.

“Just accept ... like a child. Trust him ... like a child. Love Him ... like a child.

“And when your mind questions ... as it certainly will ... just say ... Get behind me Satan.

“Look up at God and pray ... I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.”

She left with a much lighter heart and a heavy weight off her shoulders.

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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 30<sup>th</sup> 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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### MIRACLES

Father Ignatius approached the pulpit and said, “Hands up all those who have been to Lourdes!” Quite a few hands went up.

“Keep your hands up,” he said, “now hands up those who went to Fatima, Knock or any other Holy Shrine!” A few more hands went up.

“OK ...” continued the priest, “hands down. Now hands up again anyone who has had a miracle happen to them at any of these places!” No hands went up. The priest waited a few seconds and then continued.

“Just as I thought! No one considers that a miracle has happened to them. Which of course begs the question; Do miracles happen these days?”

“The truth is that miracles do happen these days; but people are not willing to believe in them.

“Perhaps they expect spectacular miracles to happen ... Raising of the dead. Walking on water, changing water into wine ... now that was a good one!

“Anything less than that and our Faith has not been stimulated enough to even consider it as a miracle, let alone believe it has happened.” He stopped once again, as he usually did in his sermons, to allow the challenge to sink into the parishioners’ minds.

“I’d like us to consider for a while what is a miracle and who actually performs it when it happens.

“Spectacular miracles, as you would wish them to be, like healings from incurable illnesses and diseases do happen at Lourdes and elsewhere even today. There is plenty of documented evidence if you wish to research it.

“Many people have been healed suddenly with no explanation from medical or scientific sources. They remain unexplained and are accepted as miracles performed at the many Shrines visited by the sick person.

“Miracles happen elsewhere too ... not just at these Shrines. Miracles can happen in churches, hospitals or even at your homes ... if it is the will of God that they should happen.

“This then leads to the second question. Who performs these miracles?”

“Is it Our Lady, the Mother of God at Lourdes or her other Shrines? Is it the particular Saint you happen to be praying to for help? Or is it God?”

“And when we pray to individuals before they become Saints for a particular favor, or miracle even ... like Padre Pio, Pere Charbel, and so on before they were made Saints by the Vatican ... who performed the miracles do you think? Was it the particular person prayed to or was it God?”

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“Isn’t it after all the performance of miracles, or the answers to prayers, one of the tests which our Church considers as a requirement to Sainthood?”

He paused yet again.

“There are those who say that only God or Jesus can perform miracles; and to pray to Saints, or even people who have not even yet been considered as Saints, is wrong.

“Let me read you something from Acts of the Apostles ... you can look it up yourselves at Acts 3.

“You’ll remember that as Peter and John went into the Temple to pray they met a man at The Beautiful Gate, as it was called, who had been lame all his life.

“The beggar expected money from the two apostles. Peter turned to him and said, ‘I don’t have silver or gold. But what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth get up and walk!’ And of course the man was healed.

“Later on in Acts 5 Verse 12 we read that many miracles were performed by the apostles. Sick people lay in the streets so that Peter’s shadow would fall upon them and heal them. And indeed many were healed.

“The important thing to note here is that Peter said ‘in the name of Jesus Christ get up and walk.’

“So yes ... the apostles whilst they walked this earth, and now they are in Heaven, can and do perform miracles; they have not lost their ability to perform miracles, in the name of Jesus, just because they’re in Heaven.

“And so does Our Lady perform miracles in the name of her Son Jesus. As do Padre Pio, Pere Charbel and many other Saints. But they do so in the name of Jesus. It is very important to remember that.”

Father Ignatius stopped once again having pressed his point home.

“And now we move on to our last question,” he said, “for today at least!

“What role does our Faith has to play in the performance of miracles?

“Jesus said time and again to the sick, ‘Your Faith has healed you. Your Faith has saved you.’

“He did not say, ‘Wait ... let me click my fingers and hey presto you’ll be healed ... Because I’m great at miracles!’ ”

The congregation laughed. The priest continued.

“He made a point of saying that the people’s Faith played a great part in their healing and in their salvation.

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“The sick did not stay at home and think ‘Oh well ... if Jesus wants to heal me, He’ll do so in good time ... I don’t need to go and see Him!’

“They went out to seek Him. They believed in this man who was different. A holy man, a teacher, a healer, the Son of God.

“They had heard about Him, and now He’s in their town or village they went out to find Him ... in hope, in desperation perhaps, and even in Faith ... as small as a mustard seed! But that little Faith, however tiny it was, is what saved and healed them.

“The blind man shouted at the top of his voice to attract Christ’s attention and to be healed.

“The old lady pushed her way through the crowds in order to get close enough to just touch His cloak and be healed.

“The Roman soldier believed in Jesus so much that he thought just one word from Him would bring healing.

“That’s what I mean by true Faith ... it plays a great part in the performance of miracles.

“It need not be our Faith that saves us ... the Faith of others, on our behalf can and does bring miracles and healing to us.

“The Roman soldier was asking for healing for his servant, not for himself. His Faith helped heal his servant.

“The men who broke the roof off a house and lowered the man in his sick bed down to Jesus showed Faith on behalf of their friend ... and their Faith was rewarded.

“All the people who lay in the streets hoping that Peter’s shadow may fall upon them showed great Faith too.

“As indeed do all those who visit Lourdes, Fatima, Knock and all the Holy Shrines.

“Let me conclude by saying that miracles do indeed happen today. Both great and small. They are performed by Saints and those yet to be Saints through the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ

“Faith plays a great part in the performance of miracles.

“And before you ask ... we do not have to go to the Holy Shrines for our prayers to be heard, or for our miracles to happen. All we need is to trust in God and be willing to accept His will in His time and in His way.

“We need a little Faith ... not much, just a mustard seed’s worth!”

## FATHER IGNATIUS TEACHES

### SIN

Father Ignatius had been asked to take Sister Josephine's Catechism class again as she was away on business. This time he attended to the top class at school – the 16 and 17 years old.

They were discussing sin and the nature of sin; and especially how often God was willing to forgive our sins.

They had mentioned Christ's famous saying about forgiving 70 times 7 and understood that this did not mean literally that number of times. But, in discussion, they seemed confused about the various degrees of gravity between one sin and another.

"Does God forgive greediness like having an extra piece of cake, or chocolate, as much as He forgives cheating on one's husband or wife?" asked a student sitting up front.

Father Ignatius cleaned his glasses of imaginary smudges just to gain some thinking time.

"It's true to suggest that there are various degrees of seriousness between one sin and another," he said quietly, "and the Church has tried, over the years, to help with this distinction by denoting venial and mortal sins.

"Traditionally, this has meant that breaking one of the Commandments is a mortal sin. But there's more to it than that ... in my opinion!

"You're all astute enough to know the difference between having extra cake, or in my case extra ginger marmalade, and cheating on one's spouse, or stealing, or murder.

"There is an obvious difference in seriousness between these sins and God, of course, views them differently as such. But He is wise too, and He considers the circumstances behind the sin; not just their degree of seriousness."

He stopped for a second or two to gain their attention.

"We know that the Church, for instance, considers not going to Mass on Sunday as a mortal sin. It is after all one of the Commandments" the priest continued.

"Now, in my view, I believe that God looks behind the real intent of that sin before deciding on its degree of gravity.

"Was missing Sunday Mass the result of an act of laziness brought about by tiredness, by having a good Saturday night with plenty to eat and drink?"

They all laughed.

"Or was it a deliberate attempt to defy and disobey God?" he continued as the laughter died down.

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“If it’s the former, then God will consider it a sin of weakness. Not too different from the sin of weakness of Christ’s disciples when they could not stay awake as Jesus prayed in the garden before His arrest.

“God knows all about our weak nature. He did create us after all! He knows full well I have a weakness for ginger marmalade, and some of you have a weakness for chocolate or whatever.

“And He forgives that sin for what it is. Provided of course we repent and try our best not to repeat it. Albeit our weakness may cause us to sin yet again.

“He is of course disappointed at our behavior. Very much as a loving parent would be disappointed at the behavior of his children. Yet He forgives it again and again.

“So missing Mass on Sunday because of the occasional laziness, I believe, would be viewed with disappointment for what it is ... a sin of weakness.”

“So is it not a mortal sin then?” asked one pupil.

“Yeh ... what if someone dies with venial sins, but has missed Mass due to laziness. Does he go to hell?” asked another.

Father Ignatius waited a second or two before going on.

“As I said ... the Church does designate missing Sunday Mass as a mortal sin. I believe God looks at the intent, the very reason, behind the sin before deciding on its seriousness.

“So in the example you mention, I believe that God would not exclude a person from Heaven purely because he missed Mass as a result of a drinking hangover.

“If on the other hand someone misses Mass because He doesn’t believe in God, or in direct defiance of God, then that is more serious.

“Let me explain what I mean to be in defiance of God. This means being in full knowledge of God yet having the impertinence, the impudence, the audacity to stand up against Him.

“This means making oneself as big and as important as the Lord God Himself.

“We read in the Bible about the original sin committed by Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. What do we learn from this?”

“Don’t eat in the nude!” replied one of the school’s comedians as the class broke into total laughter.

Father Ignatius tapped the ruler gently on the desk to regain control of the class. As they settled down he continued.

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“Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. That’s what the devil told them would happen if they ate the fruit. Theirs was a sin of defiance, not weakness. They didn’t want to know what the fruit tasted like. They wanted to be like Him.

“Over the years since then, many have tried to defy God. To stand up to Him instead of loving and obeying Him. The Pharisees did not believe that Jesus was God. Now that in itself is bad enough. They made the choice, given freely by God, to believe in Him or not.

“But they went further. They attributed Christ’s powers to the devil, knowing full well this is not so. And they encouraged others to stand up against Him.

“Some theologians call this the un-forgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. And many have debated it over the years and wondered whether it can be committed today, considering that Jesus is not visible amongst us as He was then.

“Personally, I don’t think this is important. What is important however is our relationship, individually, with God.

“Do we believe in Him? And if we do, do we honor, love and obey Him or do we stand against Him.

“Remember, even the devil believes in God. So believing alone is not enough. What is the action, the intent, behind our belief? That’s what God looks for and judges.

“These days, sadly, there are many amongst us in our society who do not believe in God. That is of course their prerogative, and whether we call it a mortal sin or not, we know that only God will judge those individuals when the time comes.

“But what is worse, is when those individuals encourage others to follow in their ways by what they say, and what they write or do, which serves as an example to others. They are no different to those people at the time of Christ who tried to lead others astray.

“Not to believe in God is one thing ... but to lead others to do the same is far far worse in the eyes of God.”

The priest stopped again to ensure the message hit home.

“As I said many times before ...” he continued, “no one goes to hell by mistake.

“No one goes to hell by mistake.

“God judges each and every sin according to its seriousness and its intent. He sees deep into our hearts and knows whether it is a sin of human weakness or a sin of defiance against His Divinity and omnipotence.

“And of course, He forgives. He forgives as many times as is necessary if our repentance is genuine. Our remorse is genuine. And our determination not to sin again is genuine.”

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### FOREVER HELL

Father Ignatius was taken aback by Quentin's question one evening when they were watching TV in the Parish House living room. Quentin owned a small garage and workshop nearby and every so often he would take the priest's car for maintenance or to fix something that had gone wrong. That evening, he'd just returned the priest's car when an important football match had just started on TV. Quentin did not have time to go home to see the game, so the priest invited him in and they both enjoyed a mediocre game seeing their favorite team lose.

But football was not on the mechanic's mind when he asked his unexpected question.

"Father ..." he asked, "if God loves us so much, how can he possibly condemn someone to an eternity in hell? Eternity is a long time ... it's for ever like."

Father Ignatius switched the TV off. He poured himself and Quentin another cup of coffee. He was playing for time and wondering how best to approach this subject.

"There is this misconception," he said finally, "that priests know everything. Now that may be true of others but not necessarily me ..."

Quentin smiled and said, "No matter how bad a person is, or was, surely an eternity is a long punishment. I feel sad for those in hell for ever and ever. If it was up to me, and I knew that someone was truly sorry and repented after his death, I would forgive him. Is God not more merciful than me? Does He forgive people after they die, if they truly repent?"

Father Ignatius put down his cup and replied, "Jesus tells us about hell in the Bible. It has been described as a place where fire burns and people stay there for ever. Christ's parable about the rich man and Lazarus states that there is a chasm between earth and hell that cannot be bridged.

"So, seen from what the Bible tells us, it does seem that those who go to hell are there for an eternity.

"Now then ... seen from your perspective, a human perspective, this does seem somewhat harsh. No matter what someone may have done, surely an eternity is too extreme a punishment."

"That's right" agreed Quentin.

"But God sees things from His perspective, which is of course different to ours." continued the priest.

"You're right in saying that He is merciful and forgiving. More than any human can be. But He is also just.

"Over the years, many wise heads have pondered the same question which you ask. So you're not alone here Quentin; you're amongst the great theologians and philosophers of history!"

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Quentin smiled again.

“Some have argued that a merciful God would in His own time forgive those in hell and they would join Him in Heaven.

“Some have also said that God will some day forgive even Satan. And that hell will some day be empty as everyone there truly repents and is forgiven as they rejoin God in His Glory in Heaven.

“Now wouldn’t that be wonderful?” asked the priest, “humanity totally forgiven as a result of the ultimate sacrifice that Christ suffered for us.

“That is God’s love and mercy in the extreme. Total love, full of mercy and forgiveness!”

Father Ignatius stopped for while; then he went on just as calmly as before.

“But nothing of what I have just said is Biblical. There is nothing in Christian teaching that implies God will eventually forgive everyone, even those in hell.

“It’s human conjecture, borne of human nature, human sense of justice and forgiveness.

“God sees things God’s way; not our way.

“As I see it, God’s love is so much that He gave us the freedom of choice. We can choose to respond to His invitation to love or choose to ignore it.

“God’s invitation is always open. Even if we don’t RSVP.

“Now those who choose to ignore God will eventually end up in hell. Whether it is a burning fire, or whatever else we may imagine it to be, one thing is certain. Hell is an exclusion of God.

“No one goes there by mistake. We choose, through our actions, to exclude ourselves from God.

“For how long ... I wouldn’t hazard a guess. An eternity maybe ... or as you and others surmise perhaps as long as it takes for God to forgive, once again.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Quentin.

“Yes I know,” replied Father Ignatius, “and as I said, you’re not alone in your thinking.

“Was it not C S Lewis who said that the door of hell is locked from the inside?

“We send ourselves to hell by turning down God’s invitation to love ... and we lock ourselves in self-imposed exile, by continuing to refuse to love Him, by continuing to

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refuse to acknowledge our sins and repent; rather than God locking us in from the other side of the door.”

“I see ...” mumbled Quentin.

“But I repeat,” said Father Ignatius, “none of this is Biblical. It is merely the result of assumptions from human minds who like to believe in an eventual ‘get out of jail free’ card which we can all ultimately use.

“If you ask for my opinion. I believe God knows what He is doing. And nothing is impossible to God. We should trust Him to do the right thing!”

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### OLD HENRY'S SIN

As Father Ignatius arrived at Old Henry's cottage he recognized the doctor's car pulling away, so he parked in the vacant space and rang the doorbell.

The seventy-five year old opened the door ashen faced and not having shaved for a few days.

As the priest went into the house he asked tentatively, "That was the doctor leaving ... have you not been well Henry?"

The old man sat down and said: "I've been in terrible pains since Friday night. Shivering and feeling cold yet sweating and with a temperature. I felt tired and light-headed and thought my time had come!"

"Since Friday night?" asked the priest, "did you call the doctor then?"

"Yes I did. There was no one there. And they don't work during the weekend either. The doctor finally came on Monday ... and he came again today. You just saw him leaving!"

"He gave me a variety of pills ... all different pretty colors like sweets, and said if I don't improve he'll take me to hospital.

"Fat chance! I can't go to hospital and leave the dog at home alone."

"But ... if this started on Friday night, why did you not call me Henry? I would have come straightaway!" said Father Ignatius.

"Oh ... I thought you'd be too busy Father" Henry replied, "I bet you had the church full of sinners at every Mass this weekend. Am I right?" he asked with a glint in his eye.

The priest smiled.

"The thing is ..." continued Henry, "at my age I don't have much opportunity to sin. I don't think I've broken any of the Commandments. I haven't killed anyone nor stolen anything ... and I doubt I have the energy to covet anything my neighbor might have ... either his wife, who is ugly and as large as a gorilla, or his donkey ... because he hasn't got one!!!" He chuckled to himself.

"But I'll tell you something Father ..." he continued, "I did despair with God over the last few days ... Now that's a sin I'm sure!"

"I was in terrible pain and although I prayed He didn't listen. Too busy with someone else I suppose ... I begged Him many times to take the pain away, but it got worse. At times I did pass out and sleep for hours then the pain would wake me again.

"I thought God had abandoned me.

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“I still believed in Him you know. I believed in His power to heal and His love for us. I knew He could heal me ... but I felt He did not want to.

“Now why would He do that?”

“He can heal, yet He withholds His healing power for some ... including me. I suppose I lost my Faith in Him.”

“That is not so,” said Father Ignatius gently, “when we are in difficulty, or as in your case, in great pain, we doubt and we question, but we do not lose our Faith.

“Our human nature can’t understand what is happening to us. But deep inside we still believe.

“You said yourself that you still believed in God. So your Faith remained intact.

“But your pain and your fears said otherwise. The trauma of it all overwhelmed you.

“It’s human nature. God knows that.

“When Jesus was on the Cross, His human nature thought He’d been abandoned. But His Godly nature, as part of The Holy Trinity, knew otherwise.

“So have no fears Henry! God loves you and He has already forgiven you.”

The old man smiled feebly.

“Now tell me,” continued the priest, “did the doctor say what you can eat?”

“He said toast and butter would be OK, and tea with lemon, not milk.”

“I can do that ... how about a hot meal?”

“He said chicken soup with bread ... something light!”

“Mrs Davenport, our housekeeper, makes a great chicken soup with vegetables.” said Father Ignatius, “I’ll ask her to bring you some this afternoon.”

Over the next few days Father Ignatius made sure that a group of people took turns at visiting Old Henry until he was up on his feet and ready to sin again. Small sins of course!

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### A HELL OF A QUESTION

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

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

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

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

“Why do you ask?” he said gently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another child raised his hand and asked a question.

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

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

Father Ignatius prayed silently for inspiration before answering.

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

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

“Let me explain it another way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### GUESS WHO'S IN HEAVEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you feel about it?"

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

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

Johnny hesitated and did not answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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