

Not without reason did Fr. McKinder choose to celebrate the optional memorial of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, complete with the sterling silver altar vessels and his silver-worked robes accented in alternating blues and reds. This particular saint was a nun, one known for her patient faith despite adversity. He even made sure the music leader was the organist instead of the adult guitar group – the better to avoid prickling the sensations of his guest for the evening, Sr. Catherine Sutherland, and whichever of the elderly sisters felt like making the three-hour trek from suburban Detroit.

Part of his plan of scoping out the nuns about the mysterious parochial adoptions was foiled by a dying parishioner; he had to make a hospital visit, which gave him almost no time between returning to St. William's and the start of the Mass. He had intended to plant some seeds with pre-prayer schmoozing. But he had a back-up plan in the form of his homily.

After the Gospel, Fr. McKinder preached his usual: Sin, repentance, love, forgiveness. But he diverted from his normal routine by referencing the saint, explicitly. "And we must not forget, brothers and sisters, the wise words of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, who said, 'From this divine heart three streams flow endlessly. The first is the stream of mercy for sinners; it pours into their hearts sentiments of contrition and repentance. The second is the stream of charity which helps all in need and especially aids those seeking perfection to find the means of surmounting their difficulties.'"

The priest adjusted his notes. "Now, before we talk about the third stream – and if you are thirsty for more, pray today's Office of Readings – let me just say this. None of us, not a single one, is without sin. We know this. But a spirit of mercy that reveals our own long-forgotten sin and seeks, in charity, to repair old injuries – well, now, such acts are accounted as a blessing and serve to glorify God."

Fr. McKinder continued in this vein for most of the sermon, emphasizing the saint's humility as a jumping-off point for reflecting on

past misbehaviors. He especially called attention to the value of helping others to right old wrongs. He did not, however, specifically stare down the nuns.

The Mass continued. The service music was more baroque than it usually was, and the priest sung the first Eucharistic Prayer. The few members of the congregation who attended, apart from the nuns, were delighted; he occasionally, but not often, sang the Eucharistic Prayer, and when he did, his beautiful baritone enlivened the Mass.

When the service concluded and the ministers processed out of the sanctuary, Fr. McKinder noticed the nuns – three of them, Sr. Cathy plus two elderly sisters he didn't recognize – remain in their "old" seats in the transept. So he took his time greeting the parishioners as they filed out, and then took his time again in removing his vestments and conferring with the sacristan who washed the vessels and cleaned the linens. Then, in just his house cassock, he re-entered the nave to greet the nuns.

"Sisters! How blessed are we to welcome you back for your visit. I trust your trip from the Mothership went well?"

Sr. Cathy smiled. "Indeed it did. Sr. Rosalita and Sr. Maxine spent most of the ride reminiscing about their days here. Before my time."

"Oh yes," one of the two older nuns said with a smile. The priest had no idea which was Rosalita and which was Maxine. "I'm so glad that the statues outside have been preserved, and that such care has been taken with the interior of the church."

"We have a precious gift, with these fine facilities here at St. Williams, sister," he said. "And we do maintain the convent, as well. Would you care to chat in the common room?"

Both older nuns grinned and nodded their heads. "Oh, yes, Father," the other one said. "That would be delightful."

With an exaggerated flourish of his arm, he pointed toward the convent door. "Then off we shall go!" He escorted them down the stark corridor and into the interior of the convent. Earlier that day, parish volunteers had prepared the common room for them; everything had been dusted, the lights

turned on, the water cycled and a covered tin of cookies placed on the table. And during Mass, by prior arrangement, the sacristan had turned on the coffee pot and placed their luggage in the convent. Everything was ready for them, and when they arrived, the nuns were clearly pleased with the effort.

They sat around a large round table, cookies and coffee in the middle. One of the older nuns said, "Oh, my. It looks like I remember."

"Tell me, Sister, when were you here? And what was your specific ministry?"

She smiled. "Rosalita and I were here for much of the same time," she said. Fr. McKinder made a mental note; the nun with the white hair was Rosalita and the steel-gray hair was Maxine. "I was here from 1964 until 1978; Rosalita was here from 1968 until 1985. Was it '85, dear?" Rosalita nodded. "Yes, 1985. I taught, mostly, in the migrant camps throughout Kent, Ottawa and Muskegon counties. The big farms. Lots of seasonal labor, much of it illegal, you know. From Mexico. They needed the Church."

"And while Maxine taught," Rosalita said, "I mostly ministered here, in the convent itself, taking care of domestic chores and assisting with the Masses and helping parishioners who struggled."

"Fascinating," the priest said. "And how long have you been religious?"

Rosalita raised a cookie. "Well, now that you mention it, we're both going on 60 years. Maxine and I were born in the same year and professed our vows in the same year."

"My," Fr. McKinder marveled. "The things you must have seen!"

"Well, I suppose," Maxine grumbled, "the absolute *worst* was Vatican II. We were young nuns then. Everyone thought the rules were going to change. Boy, were they wrong!" She rolled her eyes, but the priest thought he caught a significant look toward Sr. Cathy.

"And you, Sr. Catherine?" he inquired, mildly. "You were one of the leaders of this community when it left residency here."

"A nice way of saying it, Jerome," she said, dryly. "But yes. I got

here just in time to be appointed to shut down this old place.”

With deference to the nuns, he poured three cups of coffee, offering one to each woman, then one for himself. Then he braced himself to ask the question he'd been waiting weeks to pose: “So in your years at St. William's, did you sisters ever have to deal with things with the migrant population that you didn't have to do with the rest of the parishioners? I know that many of our Hispanic families still speak of the nuns with great reverence.”

“It wasn't unusual,” Cathy said. “We had to work within our limits. Some of those limits were imposed by the discipline of the Church, but others came from state and federal regulations. We did what we needed to do, to care for the souls in our community.”

He laughed, saying, “Even if it meant breaking the law?” He asked the question in a light-hearted, joking way, but his question was a serious one.

Maxine replied: “We never broke the law. Bent it a bit, sometimes. Maybe. But not broke. Didn't need to. We had ways to honor both God and Caesar, and I'm proud of that.”

He gave her a warm smile. “I'm very glad to hear that,” he said.

“But, Jerome,” Cathy said, “let's cut the crap. We still have friends here, even though we've been gone more than a generation. So ask me what you're going to ask me.”

His face leveled. He noticed the quizzical looks, albeit faint, from Maxine and Rosalita; he suspected they didn't know what Cathy knew about the adoptions – or at least, didn't know the scope of the situation. “To the point, as usual, Cathy,” he said with a sigh. “Very well. Since you already know the question, why don't you offer an answer?”

“As you know, given your role as pastor of this parish, St. William's spent the better part of a half-century facilitating adoptions of young children. This part of the state is odd, in a cultural sense. Again, as you know. Deeply conservative, strongly Evangelical. Lots of workingmen, farmers. And migrant laborers. When our family ministry was at its peak,

state laws were less enlightened and state offices were less efficient than they are today. So we probably facilitated three or four adoptions per year. Almost always, to young girls who were pregnant out of wedlock. Sometimes, to undocumented workers.”

He nodded. “And a valuable ministry that was, Sr. Catherine. Very valuable. And it’s a sign of the times that those services are no longer in as much demand as once they were. But – and I say this with all due love and respect – you didn’t answer the question.”

“I did, Jerome. The question is whether you understood my response.”

The priest raised an irritated eyebrow. “Fine. Let me ask you directly. If you’ve had calls, then you know I’m looking into parish-led adoptions of several children who have the same biological parents. The Prices. The Van Groots. Among others. What can you tell me of their biological parents? That question, about the parents, comes up often. And it’s vexing that parish records are insufficiently precise to reflect the diligence with which I’m sure the nuns here exercised their ministry.”

“Oh, Father,” Maxine said. “Don’t worry. Everything we did was carefully documented and either stored in the parish files or forwarded on to the diocesan archive.” But Rosalita simply put her hand on Maxine’s, gently shaking her head.

“I apologize, Father,” Rosalita mumbled. “But the day’s travels have left me tired. I’m afraid I must retire for the night.” She looked Maxine in the eye; to the priest, Maxine looked slightly befuddled, but she nodded in agreement.

He gave them both a warm smile, however, saying, “I bet you have! And it’s been a blessing to us that you’d make the journey. I had your bags brought from the office, during Mass, to what had been the superior’s office down the hall. We put a pair of nice beds in there, so you don’t have to worry about the staircase. We figured you’d like to sleep in the convent rather than the rectory, for old times’ sake.”

Both nuns eyes widened in appreciation; they excused themselves, then retreated to the chapel for prayer before bed. Only Fr. McKinder and Sr.

Catherine remained in the common room.

When the two older nuns were out of earshot, he said, "Here's a bit of trivia for you, Cathy." He sipped his coffee. "Did you know that I was once married with children of my own?" She nodded. "I lost them. Painful, that was, but it gave me the grace to join the ministry. Because ministry is, at heart, an open and honest caring for the needs of others."

"I don't need a lecture from you on ministry, Jerome," she said. "I've been doing the grunt work for far longer than you've been a priest."

"Here's another bit of trivia for you, then. Did you know that a month before Msgr. Terry died, he was notified by the bishop that he'd be rotated out of his role as pastor of St. William's? Oh, I tell you, Bill was plenty upset by that. Especially when he found out that it was going to be me, a 'freshly collared whippersnapper' as he put it. The transfer was to take place in June, as usual, and announced in the spring, but he died in the preceding December. But not before I got to meet with him a few times."

She looked at him, blankly. "And?" she asked, after he paused a moment.

"Merely this. We had several transition meetings. Mostly low-key. Mostly condescending. Bill wasn't a nice man when you got in his way, I'm afraid. I didn't get to know him all that well before he died, and he didn't put a lot of faith in me, but he told me something, once. Something I remembered and respected. He said, 'Jerry' – I hated that, by the way; he's the only person who shortened my name like that – 'Jerry, one thing you have to know about churches is that they have history. When you take over, put the keys in a safe and leave the history alone. Lock the door and never look back.' He went on, that day, about it being a new era in the Church and that old crises had finally been put to rest. I didn't follow him too much; I thought the old man was getting senile. But I'll never forget that meeting. He pulled the master keys out of his pocket, held one up stamped '37B' and said something like, 'This is your get-out-of-jail free card, but don't use it unless your life depends on it.'"

He sipped his coffee, then brushed cookie crumbs into a napkin. He

continued: "I've followed his advice. I put the old master keys in the safe and forgot about them. Funny thing, though. When the normal files didn't have what I needed, I remembered that magic key of his. So I went to the basement and opened the door to the old archives."

"Isn't that lovely?" the nun muttered. She looked uncomfortable.

"I didn't spend long down there. It was cold and dusty and the lights mostly didn't work. But I did see some things that surprised me. So tell me, Cathy. When I go back downstairs and really tear the place apart, what will I find?"

The two locked eyes on each other. "You idiot," she said, with a hint of venom in her voice. "Just listen to yourself. Forget about the archive. Forget about the adoptions. Some stones are best left unturned."

He raised an eyebrow. "Best for whom?"

She stood. "For all of us," she said, weary with exasperation. "For the love of God, Jerome, leave it alone."

"What aren't you telling me, Cathy?"

She shook her head. "Knowing Bill, you won't find anything down there anyway. Waste of time."

He stood, too. "Listen to yourself. Why can't you answer a straight question? What's so damned important, or so damned secret, that you can't even bring yourself to mention it, *knowing I have the power to find out soon enough*? I gave you the benefit of the doubt, Cathy. You and your sisters. But you look guilty as hell. My question is, guilty of what?"

"Of nothing, Fr. McKinder. We are guilty of nothing. You'll '*find out soon enough*.'" She waved her hand, dismissively. "You think there's a cover-up? Maybe there is, maybe there isn't. But did it occur to you that maybe what's being covered up isn't a crime at all, but perhaps just a painful secret that needs to remain locked away?"

"So that's it, then? No straight answer, just invective and misdirection?"

She shook her head. "Believe what you wish, Jerome. I, for one, will do my part to enjoy this last pastoral trip I'm going to be making to St.

William's. Good night."

She turned and left, heels clicking.

Fr. McKinder rubbed his face in frustration, then cleaned up the cookies and coffee.