



***The Red Madonna* (excerpt)
By Michael Shaughnessy © 2013**

Prologue:

The persons in this book are all fictitious.

As of the publishing of this book 34 people in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis have been publicly accused of sex-abuse in the past 50 years.

Sadly, many were guilty and caused untold hurt.

Just as sadly others were accused falsely and had their reputations destroyed or at least very seriously damaged.

Some cases remain open.

The day of judgment will reveal the truth – about us all...

1

Stef's heart pounded in his neck and his head. His lungs burned from the lack of oxygen. This alley was a bad choice, a dead end. He turned back, the way he came, running like a pursued criminal. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye just in time. Instantly, he raised his left arm in defense, blocking the pipe intended for his head. He wheeled on his left leg and with his right caught his assailant in the kidney. The man doubled over. He followed up with a kick to the groin and the man sprawled to the ground, groaning.

Now another man charged at him, pulled a switchblade and smiled. Stef's odds took a significant turn for the worse. He took two steps back and prepared for the attack. The man approached, slicing the air with his knife, the smile growing with every thrust of his arm. Stef stepped back further and backed into a wall. His eyes darted – up, down, left, right – looking for a weapon of defense or any route of escape. There was an iron bar three feet above his head, part of a fire escape. It was fixed, useless as a weapon. Stef was trapped. The man smiled again. He waved his knife in small circles as he approached Stef.

Stef made the first move. He leaped as high as he could, caught the iron bar overhead with his hands, and pulled himself up and climbed up onto the fire escape platform. Stef smiled down at his assailant. “New muscles...” He thought.

His assailant looked up at him with a face devoid of all emotion but one – determination – just like so many faces in computer games. “Later...” Stef mumbled, rather incomprehensibly. “I’ll fix you later.” He even knew how he would do it, but first he leaped up three stairs on the fire escape.

The man wanted to give chase, but gymnastics just wasn't in his skill set. He looked to his right and saw a garbage can. He tried it and it held his weight. He slipped his knife back into his pocket and reached upward. He could just grab the platform.

Stef leaped back down the three steps and unlatched the ten foot extension of the fire-escape ladder. The extension was like the arm of a clock, hinged and standing at twelve o'clock. Stef rammed the ladder. It swung outward on its hinge and crashed downward. The man jumped, but it was too late. The ladder smashed into his head and knocked him unconscious. “Two down, two to go.” Stef climbed down the ladder and ran to the junction of the two alleys.

Two men had gone up the west alley when the original foursome split. When they heard the crash of the ladder, they turned around and headed toward the noise.

Stef jumped from the fire escape and ran. He looked up the west alley and saw them. One of the men pulled a gun. The stakes just went up again. Stef turned and looked down the south alley. He saw streetlights and started to run toward them when suddenly he tripped over – nothing. “That’s odd,” he thought, “No time to wonder why, I ain’t got time to die.” He scrambled back to his feet, awed at his own thoughts. “How did that song come to mind?” He ran.

A police siren rang in his ears. It was close-by, but Stef knew about the police in this precinct. Half of them were corrupt and would not be on his side in this fight. How had they been notified? He'd have to think about that afterward, too. He reached the end of the alley, looked quickly both ways and slid to his left along the wall of the building, just as the police car turned into the street. Friend or foe? If friend, he would run toward them and take cover behind their car. If foe, he didn't want to be trapped between them and the two men coming down the south alley, nor did he want to be anywhere near the police when they got out. He had to decide, now! The two men were less than 50 yards away and the police car was speeding up the street. He

thought he recognized the face of the driver, but what did the report he had just read say about him? Suddenly he remembered.

Stef pushed off the wall and ran straight into the street. He expected the gunshot as he ran out across the alley. The bullet smashed into the rear window of the police car, which began to skid just as Stef reached the left, front quarter-panel. He leaped and did a hand spring off the car. He flew twelve feet up in the air, the world turning up-side-down beneath him.

Before he even landed Stef reached forward and flicked the switch just in front of him. The screen in his helmet went black, the siren died and Stef sat back in his chair. He'd just had the thrill of his life.

A technician from DRIVER Inc. – Development and Research Into Virtual Experience and Reality, Incorporated – approached Stef and removed his virtual reality helmet.

“Why did you quit?”

Stef just shook his head.

DRIVER, Inc. had hired him, a paraplegic with cerebral palsy, to develop software for them that could allow the disabled to do things they would never dream of. In one more week his software would be ready to go.

2

“Uh!” The burst of exhaled breath accompanied an overhand serve just inside the center-line.

The serve was powerful. It was a full force, well-placed stroke. It caught Reilly's opponent off guard because it was unexpected. It is somewhat unorthodox among amateurs to give full force to a second serve when it is game point for your opponent, but Reilly saw Adams come forward to receive a second serve so he gave it all he had instead. A double fault is no way to lose a game, but this time the gamble worked and brought the game to deuce. Reilly set up for his next serve, considering where to place it and the kind of spin it would have. He chose topspin just inside the center-line, but his opponent was ready and returned a well-placed backhand. It was good, but not quite good enough. Reilly had moved in immediately and met the shot at full stretch and beat him with a forehand passing shot down the right sideline. It was now Reilly's advantage and match point.

His next move was again unorthodox. He intentionally faulted on his first serve. A stifled “stupid” came across his lips as he looked at the spot where the ball had hit the net. He closed his eyes and a look of intense resolution came across his face. Adams didn't know what to expect now: a legitimate second serve or another gamble on a hard-hit serve. He stayed back. Reilly bounced the ball hard on the court surface, once, twice. The ball went up and Reilly was at full stretch. Adams backed deeper into his court as he saw Reilly finish his wind-up and start to come through his serve with full force. At the last possible moment Reilly pulled back and took everything off his serve, the force of his stroke coming across the ball right to left. The ball barely cleared the net, skipped low and off to the left and died on the second bounce. Adams never had a chance of making it to the ball. Game, set, match, Reilly.

“I don't believe it.” Bill Adams flustered. “I don't believe it. What kind of juvenile shot was that? This is tennis, not ping-pong. No professional alive would pull that!”

“Sometimes it helps to be a rank amateur.” Michael Reilly smiled just to rub it in.

“I should have guessed it. You were exactly the same at the bar. Legal, unorthodox, maybe even unprofessional.”

“Clever is the word you are looking for.”

Reilly and Adams were about as closely matched in tennis as you can get. They had one of those treasured friendships that allows for full competition without fear of harming the relationship. In the summer, that meant Wednesday afternoon tennis at 4:30.

They shook hands over the net and headed for the showers.

“Anything new at St. Kevin's, Padre?” Attorney Bill Adams asked Fr. Michael Reilly.

“Not much.”

“How long have you been there now?”

“Five years and a lifetime.”

“Just another priest content with life, I see.”

“The only content priests are dead or drunk. I'm neither.”

“Still hanging around with the rich and famous?”

“No more than you.”

“Fifteen love, Reilly.”

“Besides, they're not all rich. There is quite a cross section in Wayzata. Not many Black Americans, not many of the real poor, but a nice cross-section. Certainly better than Edina.” Fr. Reilly stopped them both with his racket, and looked at Bill Adams. “But don't get me wrong, I wouldn't mind being pastor of your church, then I could give you a real penance. I might even get you to live a reasonably Christian life!”

Adams brushed the racket aside, “That's assuming I'd come to you for confession. Do I look that stupid?”

“As they say, looks aren't everything.”

Adams slipped back out of the banter. “The Archbishop seems to like what you've done at St. Kevin's.”

“I think you talk to him more than I do, and I'm the priest.”

“But I'm the lawyer, and today, holy mother the Church needs unholy brother the lawyer as much as she needs loyal son the priest.”

“Unfortunately.”

“I hear the parish income is up.”

“You hear too much.”

“The Archbishop likes telling me the good news when I tell him the bad. He said you paid off the debt on the new parish center five years ahead of schedule.”

“If financial prosperity were the judge of the health of the parish I would be satisfied with how we're doing. It's not. So I'm not.”

“So how does parish health get judged?”

“It depends on who is judging it. Some count baptisms, weddings, and weekly communion averages. Not many count confessions anymore, too many fingers left over after the counting is done.”

“How about you? What do you count?”

“Good question. I'm not sure – maybe the percentage of the youth still coming at seventeen and,” then jabbing his thumb upward, he added, “the percentages of the dead going that way.”

Adams opened the door to the men's locker room for Fr. Reilly. “Good luck trying to figure that out!”

“It is a bit tricky to calculate.”

“Any estimate you can make for me, personally?” Adams asked, rotating a thumbs-down to a thumbs-up as Fr. Reilly passed.

“Well, your soul is in better condition than your tennis, but that's not saying much.”

Mickey O'Reilly crossed the Atlantic in 1980 with his parents. By the time they made it to Minnesota he was simply Michael Reilly, a decision his father, James O'Reilly made on the flight over “the pond”. It took Mickey about three weeks in High School to switch to Mike and start dropping the Irish accent. In 1981 he graduated and went to the University of St. Thomas on a full scholarship because his father coached soccer there. He had briefly considered the priesthood, but decided against it and took pre-law courses finishing with a double major in German and Philosophy. His four years at St. Thomas were followed by a degree from William Mitchell School of Law. He practiced for only thirteen months, during which time he again changed his mind and entered the seminary.

Michael Reilly had been raised in the confused Catholic world of post-Vatican II Northern Ireland. He had learned all the old ways of the Roman Catholic Church from his parents and grandparents, who took fifteen years to make their peace with the sign of peace. Many of the Vatican II changes had a rough time crossing the Irish Sea and foundered on the rocks of Northern Ireland's resurgence of “troubles”. Communion taken in the hand happened in Hollywood movies before it did in St. Theresa's in West Belfast. Communion under both species was not practiced there until the late 1990s. Congregational singing has blasted off a couple of times, but has never reached orbit.

Reilly was confused further by attending St. Thomas University and tasting its eclectic mix of theologies, spiritualities and practices. Ultimately, he was ordained with twenty-seven others in 1991. Of these twenty-seven, only twenty were still functioning as priests. They had been ill-prepared for what they would face. Some fell victim to the new sexual morality. They were guinea pigs for a new approach in the seminary that went miserably wrong. However, something unusual happened in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis the year after Fr. Reilly was ordained. The newly appointed Archbishop, the Rt. Reverend Thomas Johnson instituted several tests for men studying for ordination that proved very worthwhile. The diocese quickly dropped in the number of ordinations but rose in quality.

3

For Jim Smith it had been a frustrating day – yet another argument with his wife, Adelia Morton. It also had been a long day. He had been out of his slightly claustrophobic office only to give his mid-morning, summer term lecture. The rest of the day was spent in front of his computer doing linguistic analysis. He had expected to see certain similarities in the two pieces of classical Greek literature he was comparing, but after three hours of running them through various tests he had no useful evidence to support his theory. He looked at his watch. It was four-thirty. Enough was enough; he decided to take a coffee break. One thing the University of Minnesota did have was free coffee for its professors. The pay was OK. The office was smaller and less well-appointed than he would have had if he had chosen for a business career instead of an academic one.

He returned to his office with his cup of coffee and sat down at his desk. On his computer he clicked on the icon for *Scrabble*.

“It’s strange that a linguist can learn something from this computer game,” he rationalized as he clicked on the ninth button, selecting the most difficult level. He noted his abilities to himself. He almost always won when the timer was set for anything above five minutes. He was on eight wins in a row at three minutes. Every reduction in the time allowed per word made the game harder. The computer could check its entire dictionary in thirty seconds. It could compare all possible words to the positions available on the board incredibly fast. “Two more wins and I’ll drop down to one minute.”

He gave the first word to the computer, an automatic, double-word square. The computer got the letters “n-d-b-u-n-o” and a blank. Very quickly it coughed up “inbound” and Jim was down 74-0 due to the 50-point bonus for using all seven letters and a double letter score on the “b”. It was a bad start, especially when his letters were “a-a-i-e-r-k-n”. He spelled “rank”, putting the “k” and the “a” on double letter squares He had 14.

The computer responded with “idiotic” – ten points, but on two double-word squares for 40 points. It was 114 to 14. Jim now faced “a-a-i-e-r-n-s”, all one-point letters. He managed to put the word “raise” alongside the “i” and “d” from “idiotic and got 15.

The computer put “vampish” across Jim’s “a” and on a double-word square and led by 129. Jim got “e-e-e-a-a-i-r”, again all one-point letters. He put “ea” above the “s” from “vampish” and added his “e” below it. The triple-word and double-letter squares made “ease” worth 15 points. He had 44 points.

The computer put “qu” above the “i” of inbound and added “re” below it. The “q was on a triple-letter square. “quire” was worth 37. Jim got back into the game by transforming “n-m-a-r-v-e” and a blank into “everyman”. He put it on a triple-word square and got 86 for it.

The computer responded by putting “helper” on a triple-word square with the “p” added to the front of “raise” to make “praise.” That scored 41. Jim put “flinged” on a double-word square, but it also made “ease” into “easel” and “rank” into frank. It was worth 91. Jim took a deep breath. He was back in the game: 227-223.

The computer placed its letters quickly. “Cloning” was on a double-word square for 20. Jim barely had looked at his tiles: “c-b-d-e-f-a-g”. He started arranging them and looking at the board. Then it struck him. He had the letters a-b-c-d-e-f-g. He wondered how often that happened. It was the first time he’d had those letters, at least as far as he knew. He began to think about how to calculate the odds of this occurring. There were 100 letter tiles in *Scrabble*. Twelve were the letter “e”. That meant there was an 84% chance of having an “e” among your first seven tiles. There were nine “a” tiles. Multiplying 63% times 84% gave a 53% chance of having those two letters, but with only two “b”, “c” and “f” tiles, the odds came way down.

The distraction cost him nearly two minutes before he realized what had happened. He focused on the board and knew he had to cover the triple-word square below the “n” in “cloning”, but he couldn’t see a way to do it. His time nearly ran out when he put “ac” above “quire” and added the “d” after for 21.

The computer put “waxier” on a triple-word square. With “we” and “ad” it scored 56. The 22 Jim received from “mowed” on a double-word square left him 47 behind.

The computer flashed through the words it was considering. Its speed was a big advantage, but its lack of wisdom left it beatable. The computer put “nutty” onto a triple-word square. Jim saw a better move and realized he was making another mistake – thinking about what the

computer should have done rather than what he needed to do now. He countered with “boogie” on a double-word square with “web” and “ado” to give him 30.

The computer put ooze on a double-word square and the score was 361 to 286. Jim needed to score big. He was 75 behind.

He picked up six tiles: “t-t-l-u-a-s”. His “f” remained from the first seven letters of the alphabet. Instantly he saw where to put the word “tasteful” it was worth 74. He was one point behind. He picked up the two remaining tiles.

The computer immediately dashed his hopes by putting “total” on a triple-word square. Jim was down 16 points. He could put his “yo” in front of a “u” which would give him six. The computer would lose ten points for its unused tiles and they would end in a tie. His win streak would be broken. He looked again. With seconds remaining he put his “y” after an “o” to spell “oy.” He put the “o” below the “y” for “yo” and that “o” also completed the word “go.” It was worth 23. He won by 17.

Jim sat back in his chair and exhaled. Win number ten was beckoning. He clicked on the menu for a new game with the same players. The computer threw up his seven letters and they were off. He started well, building up an early lead of 57 points and more or less holding it through 17 plays by each side. On number 18 the computer managed “exculpate” with the “p” on a double letter square and the “x” on a double-word square for 96. “Damn!” He was suddenly down 31 and had seven one-point-letters: “a-a-e-l-o-o-r”. He saw no options for using all seven tiles. He tried every combination rearranging the letters. None of them was worth more than 22 points and the computer only had two tiles left. Finally he saw “oral”, which, if slid between a “w” and “x”, it would make a second word “wax” with the “a” on a double-word square. It was worth 33. He only got the letters “ora” on the board when time ran out. The computer added the “ed” to “wax” and gained 15 points to win 397-375.

He slammed both fists onto his desk. His streak had ended. He looked at his watch. The two games had taken two hours and two minutes, and he had lost. “What a waste of time. I’m becoming an addict!” He was angry from the frustration of the whole day. He deleted the file marked *scrabble.exe*. The game was gone.

4

Adelia Morton ran her fingers through her long red hair. She closed and opened her eyes. Their deep blue color and her long eyelashes gave the gesture a powerful effect when she wanted it to. She looked at her watch. It was time to end this lunch.

“I know my husband is faithful. He is a nice guy, but I’m just not happy being around a nice guy any more. I need something more exciting.”

“But are you sure?” Lynda asked. “Men like Mark are hard to find these days and even harder to keep. Besides, I’ve seen his secretary, the look in her eyes. She wants him and she’ll do anything to get him.”

“I know. I gave her a piece of my mind at the Christmas party. You know, she was sloshed by ten o’clock; even so she kept making for him. Mark was standing against the dining room table, talking to Aidan Johnson. She walked over to him and leaned against him in that ridiculously low-cut pile of rags she was wearing. Mark was trapped. Any movement would

make it seem like he was responding to her advances. She gave him one of those looks that says, 'I'm available'. Then she asked, 'Is there anything you want?' Mark, God bless him, looked at his empty glass and said, 'Yah, I wouldn't mind another eggnog – but the unspiked stuff. I'm the designated driver.' He acted like he was totally oblivious to what she was doing. After that defeat she went to the powder room. I followed her in and grabbed her by her Revlon-blond hair and told her if she made one more move I'd rip the dress right off her. I probably didn't need to be so forceful. Mark has told me he thinks she's just a little hussy."

"So why does he keep her? She's just a secretary."

"The blond bimbo actually types one hundred words a minute, knows all the major players on Wall Street and the color of their bedspreads. Mark's not interested in her. He says I'm his one and only."

"Then why, for heaven's sake, do you even give Uwe the time of day? I don't understand!"

"You won't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"It's partly Mark. He's a really nice guy. Nice to look at, but not a hunk, a nice lover, but no thriller, a nice friend, but there's no... well, you know what I mean. He's just... nice. Uwe, on the other hand, has something magnetic about him. When he's in the room I just have to look at him. If he is talking, I want to listen. It's the way he walks, the way he stands, the way he looks. His Swedish accent and real blond hair don't hurt either. I don't know, I just feel something," she said, moving her hands sensually down to her abdomen. "I want him."

Lynda took a deep breath. "You sound the same as Mark's secretary. She sees Mark like you see Uwe!"

"No, it's different. She goes after anything worth more than \$100,000 a year. If she could marry a gold statue she would. I'm interested in a person, not a walking wallet."

"Susan, I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it."

"I'm afraid it's too late," Susan replied as the bedroom door opened. Uwe Keller strode into the living room wearing only his boxer shorts. He shook back his long blond hair and apologized. "Sorry, I didn't know we had a guest."

Adelia Morton put down the book she was reading. Emotions were being stirred. First, the story was too close to home. Second, this wasn't exactly feminist literature. She put the book back into her desk drawer and finished eating her last carrot. Lunch was over. It was time to return to work.

5

"Bless me Father..."

You have to be a special kind of human being to be a priest, completely apart from the vow of celibacy. Hearing confessions can resemble working on the line for Ford Motor Company. The repetition of sins can be monotonous. For centuries people have come and confessed the same things: lying to their boss or their husband, losing their temper with their children, blaspheming, missing Mass, drinking too much, these are the safe sins. These are the sins most people confess easily and often. They are the sins a parishioner brings to his own parish priest. The shameful

sins, adultery, wife abuse, receiving a bribe, indecent exposure, stealing from your children's savings... These seldom get confessed, whether serious or not, to the parish priest. He might recognize your voice.

“For I have sinned...”

Hearing your first confession is very similar to making your first confession. The common factor is the excitement of the unknown. This excitement, this fear, wears off during childhood. It returns however when it is time to confess a new sin, a serious one, one you have never committed before, thus you always remain vulnerable to the power of the Church, and the power of forgiveness.

As a confessor, the excitement lasts a bit longer, until you have “heard it all”, or at least most of it. Then even the shameful sins quickly become mundane. It is only at this point that the difference between a good confessor and a poor one becomes noticeable. Boring sins and boring confessions can lead to bored priests doing assembly line work. “For your penance say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, and now make an act of contrition.” Fortunately, for many priests this is not the case. It certainly was not the case for Fr. Michael Reilly.

“My last confession was...”

Fr. Reilly hoped he gave good counsel to those who came to confession, but he knew from his own experience, that even the best confessors can't hit the bull's-eye every time. Even so, good counsel isn't the point and Fr. Reilly never tired of making that point – whether in his homilies or in the confessional. The point of confession is objective. You actually confess your sins – you don't just feel sorry for them – and you actually are forgiven by God, through his designated means, the Church. “Those sins you forgive are forgiven. Those you retain are retained.” You walk in objectively guilty. You walk out objectively forgiven. How you feel about it doesn't matter and that makes a big difference in how you feel about it.

This confession began like confessions have begun for centuries. It began like the twenty others Fr. Reilly had heard that day, but this confession would be quite different.

“Bless me Father for I have sinned, my last confession was... Well, there really hasn't ever been a first confession. I just said what my wife told me to say. She is the one who was raised Catholic, not me. I suppose that makes me a Protestant. Is it OK for me to be here and talk to you like this?”

Fr. Reilly tilted his head slightly toward the screen between them. “It is perfectly fine, happens all the time.” He said, calmly, adding, “just not this way” under his breath.

“That's a relief. ...but, ah... I don't really know what I am supposed to do,” the voice continued. “I only come to church for weddings and funerals. My wife doesn't even know that I am here. I didn't tell her I wanted to see a priest. I just asked her what people do when they come to confession and she told me what Catholics say to get started. Are you sure it's OK for me to tell you this?”

Fr. Reilly did have to change his mindset for this confession. It certainly was not an ordinary one. “Yes, go right ahead, I'll listen.”

“Well, it has to do with my wife and I. I think our marriage is in trouble.”

“Yes, go on.”

“What do you recommend we do?”

Fr. Reilly waited a moment before responding to the unusually abrupt question. “I suppose it depends on the nature of the trouble. You could try talking it out if you haven't done that, or you could get some marriage counseling...” He paused briefly, then continued. “I am willing to listen as well, but I would most certainly recommend you ask the Lord for his help.” A longer pause.

“O.K. Thanks.”

Suddenly, the confession, if that was what it was, finished.

Fr. Reilly didn't have enough time to be too surprised or to wonder whether he had mishandled something before the next confession began. “Bless me Father for I have sinned...”

One half hour later, when he finally finished his duty in the confessional, Fr. Reilly returned to the rectory to hear one more confession. It too would be unusual, although not unusual for him. He would “hear” the confession of Stephen Bauer by reading it. It was Stef's way to go to confession.

“Bless me Father for I have sinned, my last confession was three weeks ago. I have no mortal sin to confess.

I have committed sins of envy, anger and pride. My envy is of you and other priests. You live the life I would like to be living.

I also confess to being angry with the Lord due to my condition.

I need to confess to a bit of pride, too. I helped DRIVER Inc. perfect their virtual reality equipment. When I was done with the test run today, I snubbed a bunch of the people. They couldn't get the adjustments right.”

Stephen Bauer had been called Stef since childhood, because it was one of the first and only sounds he could make. He was a very intelligent – but a virtually unintelligible – victim of cerebral palsy. His ability to control the muscles necessary for speech were impaired beyond those of most who suffer from the disorder, yet some of his other motor abilities were quite a bit better. For the first two years Fr. Reilly was in the parish he went through an awkward process each Lent hearing Stef's confession. It resembled a game of twenty questions. He would ask Stef whether he had done various sins and Stef would nod his head yes or no. It was better than nothing, but he knew it was unsatisfactory for Stef. Fr. Reilly was thinking about this when he came up with the idea of a laptop computer. A computer may have been within the reach of the Bauer family to purchase on their own, but Fr. Reilly knew it would do something to draw the parish together if they bought it as a parish. They did.

Stef now split his time three ways. Mondays went toward writing. Tuesdays and Wednesdays went to DRIVER Inc., who had hired him because someone had read a *Reader's Digest* article written by him. Thursdays and Fridays went toward working at the rectory. For him this was going to work. He would leave his apartment and come to the rectory where he had his own office. The rectory, like many, was far too big for a solitary priest and Fr. Reilly was happy for the company. Over time they developed their own signals for running the rectory.

Stef's apartment was not far from his parents' home. The apartment complex accommodated handicapped people well so Stef moved in after he attended a course on fending for himself. Equipped with his electric wheelchair he was able to do most things. A front-loading laundry allowed him to wash and dry his own clothes. His bills and banking were done electronically. A nearby grocer did food deliveries. He just needed to email his request. He managed his life reasonably well now due to the generosity of his parish.

As was Fr. Reilly's custom, he finished reading the entire confession and then paused asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on what comments to make.

“Stef, envy and anger are sins well worthy of repentance. It would be easy to say something condescending like, ‘Stef, don't worry about your condition, I think you are a super person simply because of how much you have accomplished,’ but sin is sin.”

Fr. Reilly was going to leave it at that, but he saw that Stef wanted more attention. He added. “I don't understand God or evil. Somehow, in his perfect will, he has allowed your condition to exist and expects you to glorify him through it. In that, he expects no less of you than any other Christian.

“If God decides to heal you instantly, great! Then become a priest. If not, live as joyfully as you can and be an encouragement to others, especially at work.

“For your penance I want you to meditate on Luke's Gospel, chapter 22, verses 39-46. It is the part about Jesus struggling to say yes to the will of his Father. Now make your act of contrition.”

Stef, in his own awkward language, spoke the words that place the sinner in the merciful hands of a loving God. Fr. Reilly pronounced the words of absolution and left Stef alone to do his penance in the house chapel. Fr. Reilly then went to the office and left Stef a final couple of notices to put into the next week's parish bulletin. The rest of the day was filled with hospital rounds, homily preparation, afternoon confessions and the 5pm Saturday evening Mass. After dinner he had two marriage preparation sessions. It wasn't until he had finished saying his night prayers that his mind came back to the odd confession he had heard that morning, but given how tired he was he only had time to note it before he fell off to sleep.

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