

Blessings

by Bob Sorrells

It was in St. Patrick Cathedral in Fort Worth, Texas. It was a house of worship that had been around since 1870. That is, the parish had been around that long, the building only since 1892. The parish itself was established as St. Stanislaus parish and has come up in the world from having a “mass sometimes offered,” from 1870-1876, to being Co-Cathedral of Dallas-Fort Worth Diocese in 1954, then being named Cathedral of Fort Worth Diocese in 1969. It’s southwestern white, that building, and more or less recently has been put on the National Register of Historic Places.

It faces Throckmorton Street, and in the late June of a Fort Worth summer, it sat—almost diminutive for a structure that’s called a cathedral—not quite sparkling, but like an ice cream cone might appear to a child: cooling, inviting, and comfortable.

I saw it through the doors of the Fort Worth Convention Center while I was down there attending an annual meeting of our Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly. These GAs, can be wonderful affairs, after their fashion, but they come with hours of walking, lines, workshops, crowds, services attended by massive numbers of people, crowds, meals on the fly, meetings, politicking, elections, crowds....

St. Patrick Cathedral was always there in view, because the doors I first saw it through were directly across from the entrance to the huge exhibit hall where everything from trinkets to clothing to books was sold. St. Patrick Cathedral sat there, white and compact and inviting, its three Gothic doors facing me directly, its beautiful stain glass window above the larger central door, the two smaller doors set neatly in the tower-like parts of the façade (each with its double lancet windows) flanking the central door. It was a compact, neat, orderly looking structure, and I loved it the minute I first saw it.

In time, I walked the very short block from the convention hall’s side door on Houston Street, up to and across Throckmorton, then up to the front portal, hoping the place was not locked, as so many church doors are in our cities these days.

...

I’ve entered a number of churches or chapels this way—usually Catholic ones—so I’d become pretty adept at entering quietly in case there was a service in progress or people sitting in their own stillnesses, praying after some fashion, to collect whatever they needed: something of or for themselves, something of or from the church—some hope, in any event, some strength to help them persevere, or even just some habit without which the day would be diminished in some important or modest or even trivial way for them.

Too, there are always people who wander into churches of whatever stripe simply to be alone for a few precious minutes. There was only one other person there when I first entered.

I made my way quietly around the sanctuary. There was the statue of Jesus, and one of Mary, a number of saints—St. Patrick, surely, and St. Stanislaus, I should think; there were the lovely light-muting, stained glass windows, many of them memorial windows. I didn’t see a reliquary.

I found a seat for my rest, though. It was an end space in the front pew of the cross aisle. Directly next to one of the great supporting pillars, it was a seat by itself, and

wide, like a modest throne. I sat for a bit, quietly waiting for whatever I always wait for in such circumstances. What came was a strange insight.

While I was sitting there quietly, I started inventing a little scene. But first, this needs to be said here: Some months earlier I had been re-reading a journal I kept during a year in England with the family, and I was shocked by what I perceived as my inadequacies as a father. I saw myself overwhelmed by the trivial things nine- and seven-year old children can come up with, and I even saw some of my reactions as cruelties. Too, I had gotten into one of those periodic self-recrimination modes about having been a bad provider: leaving a “good” job in the first place, not working hard enough at my writing, not looking hard enough for other kinds of work (or being bright enough or willing enough to consider other kinds of work)—all the forms of self-battering I assume most of us go through now and again.

But there on my petite throne in St. Patrick, my little scene started developing. I had it that a priest had come into the sanctuary on his way to somewhere, but hesitated when he saw me. I could see that he hesitated: Should he pause and come to chat or see if I needed anything or was just visiting; or should he assume the latter and just keep on moving?

I chose to have him stop.

“Good morning,” he said as brightly as hushed tones allowed. “Um, were you wanting to come to confession?” His voice sounded like he knew that wasn’t the case.

“Oh no, Father,” I replied, noting how he balanced himself among the rôles between pleasant host, dispenser of information of the times confession was offered, and willing pastoral presence if need be. “I’m the wrong brand for confession, actually,” I said, taking a bantering tack as the easiest response. “I just wandered in from across the street.”

“Ah,” he said. Then, “Oh. You’re with the um, um...”

“The Unitarian Universalists,” I said with a smile. “Yes.”

“Ah,” he went on. “Well does that mean you don’t *need* confession or that you just *don’t* confess things?”

His tone was truly bantering, so I assumed he was one of the younger types who understood that the world is made up of all kinds of good people.

“Well, we don’t tend to have a whole lot of traffic with sin, I suppose—probably not enough, in any event.”

“Really?” he said.

I felt a slight shift of tone in his voice. He was still amusing himself, and was still being chatty with me, being a cheerful host, but he seemed also to be starting to scratch around at something more—or at least something else.

“Really,” I affirmed.

He started to speak, then didn’t.

I wanted to let him off that hook, so I said, “Across the street we pretty much speak for ourselves—own our own statements, as we like to say.”

He looked like he more or less understood where I might be going with that, but still said nothing.

“About confession,” I went on. “It’s not that we’re without sin, however that may get defined—I was just beating up on myself about some things as a matter of fact—but when we *do* think about that sort of thing, we don’t believe that we need intercessors.”

“Direct access?” he parried, by now clearly having a little fun with me.

“Well, with respect, Padre, we more likely than not have a problem about who or what *you’re* talking to. Or for,” I finished.

“Ah,” he said. “God is dead and all that?”

I was a little amused at his reaching back to the Fifties and Sixties for a handle on what I’d just said, but he had said it slowly, I realized, and had lowered his voice slightly, which made it a more thoughtful question than it might otherwise have been.

“Different,” I finally said.

He seemed to ponder that for a minute, then got back to a slightly ribbing tone of voice.

“Well, if not confessions, what about blessings?” he asked, picking his way through numerous nuances, possibilities—now almost seriously, but still with a bantering edge.

“If you don’t ever need to confess, do you ever pine away just a little nostalgically for blessings now and again?”

He left that slightly up in the air.

“Blessings are good,” I finally said.

“Would you bless a Catholic—if you were into blessings at all, that is?”

“Do you need blessing, Padre?”

His reply was spoken very quietly and slowly.

“Actually, I wasn’t speaking for myself exactly,” he said. “But we all need blessings. Or so it seems to me. To us”

“That wasn’t exactly what I asked, I don’t think.”

“Well, then, would you bless me?” he said, his voice muted, even trembling.

I didn’t know if he was putting me on—or off; didn’t know if he was asking a theoretical or an actual, so I chanced it.

“Would you like me to bless you, Padre?”

I don’t know how long we were silent with each other, but I felt he was wrestling with himself—or with his God or with The Church. I had no way of knowing.

Then, in answer, he bent slightly toward me. I raised a hand toward his head, but I couldn’t reach him sitting down, so I stood. He wasn’t a young man, but certainly was nowhere near old. One of the young middle-aged, I guess. Oh hell, he looked to be about forty.

The palm of my right hand gingerly hovered close to the top of his head. As he must have felt that slight touch on his hair, he gently clasped his hands before him. I had no idea in the world how a Unitarian Universalist layman could bless a priest—in a cathedral, no less. But it was my own invention, after all, so I figured that one way to start was pretty obvious. The rest would just have to be left for the situation to take care of itself.

So, “Bless you,” I began. And then it just poured out.

“Bless you, Padre, because you must serve all those who say they need you—and possibly do;

“Bless you, Padre, because you must care for those who are most vulnerable, because they are the ones who most desperately need and trust you;

“Bless you, Padre, because,” and here he closed his eyes when he felt both my hands gently cupping his skull, “you must not make mistakes in this calling;

“Bless you, Padre, because you must assume the agony of those who sit on the other side of the grill from you, whether they know your agony or not, or care about it or not, or deserve it or not;

“Bless you, Padre, because you have so foolishly taken all this unto yourself in ignorance and likely even in some arrogance, but kept it as your own blessing even after you understood the impossibility of it all;

“Bless you, Padre, for striving to retain your innocence in the face of such im-placable awareness and knowledge;

“And bless you, Padre, for allowing me this humbly austere presence, this holy text of flesh....”

I was still in the moment, as folks say nowadays, and my hands were trembling, but when he opened his eyes again, I saw that they had teared up even as mine had.

I let my hands come back down to my sides. I felt relieved in some ineffable way, and he appeared to be close to the same mood. We stood there staring at each other for a minute, neither of us apparently willing to let go of the other, neither of us wanting to rush what had happened, but to let it play itself out naturally, releasing us to our own realities.

But then he spoke.

“You see, don’t you?”

I didn’t want to assume anything.

“It’s easy to beat up on yourself, but you can’t bless yourself. Ever. Someone else has to do that. Always. Have you ever tried to bless yourself?” He was speaking very slowly, almost whispering.

“It can’t be done,” he said. “This I know. The closest you can come is in trying to forgive yourself.” His whisper disappeared as quietly as his imagined presence.

...

Then I was back, still sitting in my modest mini-throne in the sanctuary of St. Patrick, the Cathedral of Fort Worth, Texas. My little play had played itself out, and I was back in that other Me, but a nano-smidgen wiser, I like to think.

“God bless us every one,” I heard myself quoting Tiny Tim.

“God Bless Everyone. No Exceptions,” I recalled from a bumper sticker.

After just a few moments more, I got up quietly to make my way back: back across Throckmorton and Houston Streets and through the doors to the Convention Center, back to the walking, the lines, the workshops, the crowds, the massive services, the crowds, the meals on the fly, the meetings, the politicking, the lines, the elections, the crowds....

...every one. No Exceptions.