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Scotch at midnight with the bishop of Paris

Michael Leach | Jul. 17, 2012 Soul Seeing

Paris, Kan., is one of the smallest dioceses in the U.S. You won't even find it on a map. My classmate Morrie (name changed) has been a bishop there since (can't say that either). But I can say that in the seminary Morrie was a nice guy who never hurt a soul or ever made waves or rocked the boat. While some of us survived the stormy seas of seminary life on leaky lifeboats or in subversive submarines dodging depth-charges, Morrie was like most guys, a dutiful passenger on the Ark of Peter who made it with little fanfare to the end. No one expected that one day he would be an admiral while the jet-ski guys who buzzed around with unexpected initiative and derring-do would someday be insurance agents.

Anyway, here we are four decades later, Bishop Morrie and me, sitting in his manse late at night, and drinking Scotch. It is Bewitching Hour.

"Morrie," I reminisce, "we had good times, didn't we? Do you have any regrets after all these years?"

"I wish I had taken better care of my teeth."

"That's a line from 'Peggy Sue Got Married,' " I remind him.

"Life's a movie, you know."

We sit back and watch the newsreel of our lives play on the movie screens of our minds. "Let me ask you something, Morrie. When you were a parish priest, what did you say to women who felt they had to practice birth control? Did you recommend rhythm?"

Morrie drums his fingers on the end table, out of synch with his movie's standard 24 frames per second. "No," he says, "my parents had six kids that way. I told people to follow their conscience."

"What do you tell them now?"

"They don't ask now."

"What about your fellow bishops?" I ask. "Do you think they did the same?"

"Sure, most of them. Our biggest secret is that all of us know that birth control is usually a blessing and rarely a sin. But we don't talk about it to each other. It's the old meat on Friday thing, you know."

"The church taught that eating meat on Friday was a mortal sin till 1966 when Paul VI changed the rule."

"Yeah, and you have to wonder about all those poor bastards who had a Big Mac the day before. Where are they now?"

"The bottle's empty, Morrie."

"There's another Johnnie Walker in the cupboard. Help yourself. Me, too. Help me help you."

"Jerry Maguire," I tell him, and pour for both of us. The warm Scotch has the aroma of a woman settling for second best, comfort rather than passion. I'm beginning to talk in my head like Philip Marlowe.

"Tell me," I say. "If you had to give a seminarian today one piece of advice, what would you say?"

Morrie takes a sip. "Don't settle," he says. "Life is too short. Fly your kite and don't take any crap."

"Fly your what and *what*?"

"When I was in the seminary I spent two summers counseling at a camp for kids who were wards of the state. At the end of the camp season the priest handed out all these little trophies for the best athletes -- best swimmer, best water skier, best ballplayer, fastest this, strongest that. There was nothing for the non-athlete -- the puny kid or the fat kid or just the slow or arty kid. So when I got to be in charge the next summer, I saved the best award, a new one, for last. I gave out the first Soren Kierkegaard Award for the Boy Unafraid to Go Against the Crowd. It went to 12-year-old Jabbo Jablonski who even though he wasn't the toughest kid in the group always stood up for the kids who were bullied. He never did anything just because everyone else did. He did what he thought was right, no matter the cost to himself. You know, I was never prouder than the day I handed that trophy, with the inscription *Fly Your Kite and Don't Take Any Crap*, to Jabbo Jablonski."

"That's sweet, Morrie."

"I'm getting old."

"We all are."

"Too old to change, you know."

"Why's that?"

"Life is too short."

It's time to change the subject. "What do you make of the nuns' revolt?" I ask. "What's your stand?"

"Can't stand 'em. The way they look at me. Judging all the time. They should walk a mile in my shoes."

"What's the hardest part about wearing your shoes?"

"The criticism. It's constant. It kills."

"From the sisters?"

"No, most of it comes from the far right, you know: Opus Dei, Republicans, fringe groups like that. The nuns don't criticize. They just stare at you with those hot grey eyes that can burn through walls."

We're silent as we sip our glasses dry. "More?" I ask.

"*No más*," he says. "I'm tired."

"Tell me something," I ask Morrie, "just one more thing."

"Who are you now, Columbo?"

"Just one last thing, please. Tell me: Why do so many bishops pretend to be so unyielding against contraception, divorce, homosexuality and even masturbation when you know they'll tell a friend something completely different over Scotch at midnight during the Bewitching Hour?"

Morrie slips lower in his chair and waves his glass like a surrender flag. "It's no secret, you know. It's what Eugene Kennedy calls the pain of being human. We spend our whole lives, not just bishops but all of us, making up histories and personalities we think will protect us from the world. Don't kid yourself. The world is a horrible place. It's all about self-defense. You make yourself up all the time and you can't go back, you know. To deny what you've been your whole life would put your whole existence in doubt. Your past life would be worthless. You can't do that. You wouldn't exist anymore."

"What would happen if you did?"

"You'd be free. But you wouldn't exist."

"I understand. But wouldn't it be good for somebody to stand up and cancel the soap opera?"

"Somebody is," he answers.

"Who?" I ask. "Jabbo Jablonski?"

"No," Morrie says. "Those revolting nuns."

[Michael Leach's book *Why Stay Catholic?: Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question* won first place for Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith in the Catholic Press Association book awards for 2012.]

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