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In the world of Catholicism, there are no degrees of separation

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 5, 2012

COLUMN

Six degrees of separation, we are told, is all that exists between any two persons on the planet. Will Smith, in the movie of the same name, used this phenomenon to execute a magnificent con, which proved to be a deeply humanizing experience, on Stockard Channing and Donald Sutherland. But I have found that within the vast world of Catholicism, the degrees of separation get down to three, sometimes two, sometimes one.

As I write, I am in Connecticut on a long-planned holiday. I had to come up two days early in order to attend the funeral of one of my aunts. I mentioned this to Ambassador Thomas Melady before leaving D.C. We were planning an event to be held in October with the American Jewish Committee on the political importance of poverty. I recalled that Melady was born in eastern Connecticut and mentioned that my aunt's funeral would be held in Jewett City, a small former mill town. He replied, "At St. Mary's? I was baptized there." So was my dad and all of my aunts and uncles. At the funeral, I went over to the baptismal font and offered a prayer for my friend the ambassador. At that moment, the sacramental life of the church and the bonds of friendship were intertwined in a way that seems to me to be a signature instance of grace.

This past week, my best friend, a priest from Washington, was visiting and we performed our annual pilgrimage to the We-Li-Kit ice cream stand in Pomfret, Conn., which really does have the best ice cream on the planet. As we stood in line waiting to place our orders, another priest came up behind us, an old friend of the family. I went to introduce the two priests but, of course, the two priests had already met, at my mother's funeral. Again, grace was not so much perfecting nature as embodying it. These two friends had met at the Mass in which all the articles of the Creed lost all their abstract quality and my mother's body became the question: Do you believe?

Last February, during the height of the debate over the Health and Human Services mandate, I got a call from a producer at CBS News. They wanted to interview me. I was already in Connecticut to do a radio interview and give a talk at the UConn Co-op bookstore about my biography of Jerry Falwell. The CBS crew would be driving up from New York City. To save them an hour of driving time, and wanting an advantageous backdrop, I suggested we conduct the interview at St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in New London. The pastor agreed and the next day, around noon, we did the interview in that beautiful church.

As the cameraman was collecting his gear, the CBS reporter asked me about the sex abuse trial in Philadelphia. I told her that I was no expert on the matter, but that my colleague Tom Roberts had unparalleled expertise on the subject and was someone with a good turn of phrase and a capacity for pithiness. She took down his name. Then the pastor of the church said, "I am pretty sure my sister, Ann, worked with Tom Roberts in Bethlehem, Pa., at the local newspaper, maybe 40 years ago." Who knew? On the drive home, I called Tom and he recalled my priest friend's sister, actually both sisters. The priest's other sister, Sally, had worked with Tom's wife, also named Sally, for the local diocese. Both sisters had, at different times, been my babysitter as a child.

Six degrees of separation. In the life of the church, we are all of us united at every sacrifice of the Mass. Our beloved dead -- and our unbeloved dead -- are there too. This is an article of faith, rooted in those magnificent

words of St. Paul: "For I am convinced that neither life, nor death, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). This article of faith I have long believed, indeed, it has always seemed to me that the best argument for our belief in the Resurrection, is that the idea that death will separate us forever from those we love is an intolerable idea. My heart rejects it and I bid my mind to follow. It is easier for my mind when the solidarity of Paul's Epistle to the Romans finds such explicit confirmation in a baptismal font in an old mill town, at an ice cream stand along the side of the road, and during a chance conversation after an interview with CBS. For the world, six degrees of separation. For Catholics, none at all.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic, first place finisher for Best Individual Blog in the 2012 Catholic Press Association competition.]

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