

My Not-So-Sordid Life as an Altar Boy

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

With all the turmoil swirling around the Catholic church these days, it seems a rather one-sided affair of trashing the priests without an even-sided look at the many good people who don't go around putting their hands on innocent boys. I am not saying that there isn't a problem – and it's one that should have been dealt with long ago – but I do feel the need to tell the story of an altar boy who wasn't molested or abused, someone who took the lessons he needed from the church and made them into his own.

Once upon a time I was that altar boy ~ a boy with perfectly straight bangs, silky soft hair, and a wide-eyed innocent look that belied my true nature. For years Father J. had asked my brother and me if we would serve as altar boys at St. Mary's, and my parents gladly said that we would. Despite my misgivings at having to stand before an entire congregation of people, I had no choice but to don the altar boy drag and put my best foot forward.

Father taught us how to serve mass ~ from holding up the big-ass Gospel book to ringing the bells when he chowed down on the eucharist. More importantly, Father taught me about faith and forgiveness. I remember one Saint's day I was attending the service with my Mom. Father looked out into the empty church and signaled for me to come up and serve. It was the end of winter and I had a pair of clunky, rubber-soled moon boots that kids wear. I did not want to be seen in those boots under the black and white cassock and surplice ensemble – even at that young age I cared about image and appearance. But the real reason I didn't want to serve was that I was scared of making a mistake in a mass I had never served before. I told Father that I would rather not serve that night, and he didn't make me. A gentleman from the congregation had to go up and ring the bell during the eucharist part. I felt guilty, and spent the rest of my days as an altar boy making it up to Father, even though he didn't really mind. In a childhood in which I was accustomed to yelling and punishment, Father taught me that there was a different way, a gentler and perhaps more powerful way. That may have been the greatest lesson I learned from the church.

Of course, confusion and contradictions are inherent in the Catholic tradition. I went to confession to be forgiven for my sins, but I never told the really bad ones, substituting a few stock sins instead. Swearing instead of stealing, not honoring my father and mother instead of lying, using the Lord's name in vain instead of making a classmate cry ~ these were what I could safely confess. I didn't tell the priest about my burgeoning masturbation experiments. I didn't tell him about how

shirtless men started to arouse me or my interest in wrestling because of the oiled-up muscles and tight wrestling shorts. I figured I would confess these things directly to God during my prayers at night.

I knelt at the foot of the bed, made the sign of the cross, folded my hands, bowed my head, and prayed to be forgiven. If I said enough prayers, if I really *wanted* to be forgiven, then it would have to be granted. There was something magical in the process – magical and elusive. How sorry was sorry enough? And how to tell when and if God really did forgive you? These were the building blocks of my faith, and though they may not have been made of something scientifically solid, they proved a surprisingly substantial frame-work for my childhood.

The specter of abuse did not haunt my church. I was never molested or even looked at by anyone – priests or otherwise - in spite of my come-hither gaze. (And to be politically incorrect and frightfully honest, I don't know that I would have minded if I had been.) Instead of some hot, illicit man-boy affair, the priests were kind to us ~ a far cry from the tyrannical clergymen sometimes portrayed in the media. They were exotic creatures to me ~ the celibacy, not marrying, devoting oneself completely to God. It was, for a young gay boy, a possible road to acceptance. No mother would mind having a priest for a son. My non-interest in girls made this celibate way of life an alluring option.

Before too long boys would interest me intensely, and a life of celibacy and godly devotion was the furthest thing from my mind. Still, I remember those years with Father J. fondly. Though I don't agree with a lot in Catholicism and the way most churches go about their business, I do respect and honor the fundamental lessons I learned as an altar boy. It's easy to condemn the Catholic church ~ and organized religion in general. Sometimes it is justly called for. Preaching that our lifestyle is sinful, telling us our relationships don't merit the right of marriage, and otherwise invoking some arcane literal reading of the Gospel will never be acceptable.

But there was goodness in the church of my youth. I still attend mass when I'm visiting my parents ~ there is a sense of community there, a sense of faith, a haven for healing, forgiveness and meditation. I have nothing to do with the religious dogma, opting instead to take the morals and lessons and applying them to my own life in a way that confirms God's love for me. I even agree with some of the commandments. Killing, for example, is definitely wrong. But loving my boyfriend isn't. I'd like to think Father J. would agree.