The Fallen

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The Fallen

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Click, click," echoed the sound of the button in Sister Justine's hand, as she stood with her back to the altar facing the kneeling children. "One click means that you should rise with your hands together," she explained. "Two clicks means kneel and pray. Remember, Bishop Day will be here and everybody will be watching you. You want to show them how good the children of St. Ambrose are, don't you?"

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The children nodded in serious approval. This was the last practice before the day of their first Communion. Nervous, some whispered to each other while others simply sat before the altar mesmerized by the huge bronze crucifix mounted upon an ebony cross. The spikes driven into Christ’s hands were tarnished silver contrast with the bronze patina. The crucifix was one of the few objects that remained from the last St. Ambrose which had burned down five years earlier. After that had happened, the priests had gone from door to door and received pledges as much as they could to Father O’Brien. When the church was rebuilt, Bishop Day had attended the dedication ceremony and the same crucifix that had looked on it all, was once more the center of attention.

“Let’s go through it again, for the last time. If you do it correctly,” stated Sister Justine, “I will give you all a holy picture for your missals.” The children’s eyes widened and they went through the practice eagerly.

Michael skipped home, the wind blowing his dark hair back. He ran upstairs to his bedroom to change clothes and, while glancing out of his window to see who was playing baseball, placed the holy picture down next to his prayerbook.

“Michael, can you come down here for a minute?” his father called from the basement. Michael bounded down the stairs and found his father seated before a table covered with all sorts of things. “I’ve been sorting out the junk down here. I came across this old souvenir I used to give her. Her boy had dark hair, just like yours, except he was younger. She gave Uncle Jack and me a gift because she wanted to thank us for helping her.”

“Did she give Uncle Jack a crucifix too?”

“No, uh, he got something else. I know it’s broken, but I thought you might want it anyway. Otherwise, I’ll throw it away.”

“Oh no, don’t throw it away,” Michael held the crucifix in his hands. “I want it. I’ll put it in my bedroom.”

“Daddy, what happened in Germany in World War II?” asked Michael, looking through his social studies book.

“Is that what they teach you in the sixth grade? I didn’t learn about World War I until eighth grade.”

“Frank, it’s the new way. That’s why they hired Mr. Hawkins to come to Rochester,” Mrs. Rossini commented. She stood at the sink peeling potatoes. She had dark hair and brown eyes like Michael.

“Aa, what do you Sicilians know about new ways?” he joked. “You still believe Palermo is the prettiest city in the world. I’ll tell him about World War II. Don’t worry, your son won’t flunk.”

Michael’s father explained the causes of the war to him, and told him that he had...
seen Germany before he had left Europe. “I’ll never forget it. I had just left France and still had your crucifix in my duffel bag. It must have been broken by one of the German porters who threw my bag on the train. I decided to keep it anyway, so now you have it.”

“Time to eat,” Michael’s mother announced, “clear the table.” They sat down to eat and Michael noticed that his father had become grayer.

In the sixth grade, he had begun studying the New Testament in religion class. His teacher, Mrs. Pasqua, had explained that sin is a state of mind, whether expressed in actions or not. Later, after class, Michael approached her.

“Mrs. Pasqua, you said that if you think something and don’t do it, it’s still a sin?”

“If it’s a bad thought,” she answered. “Why?”

“Sometimes I get real mad at my parents and wish I could hit them. Sometimes they make me so angry.”

“When that happens, you have to ask Jesus to help you understand your parents. Try to control your temper, because it’s a sin to think evil thoughts.”

Father McLoughlin was a tall man with curly brown hair and glasses, a Catholic evangelist who traveled the country conducting missions. He had not led an easy life, and the priest told his life story as a lesson to the faithful. He preached to the children of the public schools in the afternoon, after their regular classes. “I want you to all make a pledge to say at least three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers each night before you go to sleep at night,” he said. “Remember, that’s a pledge to be kept after I leave here. Every night, kneel down and say your prayers for yourself, your family, and for me. I’ll give a rosary to each of you who promise to do that.”

The boys and girls crowded around his desk. The priest asked each of them if they were going to keep the promise, then handed them their rosaries.

“Father, I’m going to say six Hail Marys and six Our Fathers for the rest of my life, I promise,” Michael declared. “I’ll be back next year,” the priest smiled. “Come and tell me how you’ve done then.”

Michael knelt before his bed underneath the crucifix his father had given him, as he had done every night for the past few months. After reciting the prayers he had promised Father McLoughlin, he said an Act of Contrition... “and I wished that my father were dead and,” he intoned. He ran his fingernails down the side of his face from hairline to jaw, causing the blood to run in tiny rivulets on to his nails and face. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. I’ll never get mad at my parents again. I’ll never wish bad thoughts about Sue again. Please forgive me,” he whispered, as he leaned upon the scarlet bedspread. By morning scabs had formed and Michael reached up to touch them, savoring their significance.

“What happened to your face?” his father inquired.

“I fell into the bushes playing football.”

“Try and be more careful so you don’t get hurt.”

“I’ve got to stop drawing blood,” Michael thought. Sometimes I feel like I’m wearing a crown of thorns.”

Michael spotted Tony in front of the high school. “Hi, what’s happening?” he shouted. Tony just nodded and kept on walking. What’s eating him, Michael thought. Just because I’ve got some new friends doesn’t mean we can’t still be friends. I haven’t changed that much, he thought, as he felt his upper lip for the first hairs of a moustache. Then he felt the sides of his face. “I’m lucky I don’t have scars,” he mumbled. “How stupid I was!”

When Michael entered the house after school, the evening paper was on the counter. The headlines read Nixon Bombs Cambodia. Underneath was a picture of a child running from his burning house, his mother aflame behind him. “They’re still bombing children. What kind of a war is this?”

“Who said a war is nice? You’ve got a lot to learn,” his father declared looking up from Newsweek.
My Suit, My Life

By Bob Muhlnickel

1
So there is no place safe
from this sharp-edged
pebble resting behind my eyes.
What then?

If I could, I would
bring suit against my life,
and trail behind the lawyers
into court; my life handcuffed
to the bailiff who
stands around waiting to begin.

2
By afternoon proceedings
are in disarray. My life stands,
screaming that I
should be convicted for having
lived it; I plead not guilty,
claiming this suit as my first
attempt to live my life.

"I have never lived you before!
Always some pale stranger
walked in front of me, creating my life;
before I could catch up,
I was one step behind."

The court, never
having had this sort
of thing done before,
waits and watches while
yellow dogs in from the street,
run yelping at justice, scattering
papers, briefcases and spectators
high in the air.

"I wouldn't bomb innocent people."
"The only innocent are the dead," his
father stated.

"What kind of a God would let such
things happen?"
"I said the same thing when I was
young. When you're old like me, you'll
understand."

"I'll never understand," Michael said.

He glanced at the article about the
tortures used on the Vietnamese. Shaking
his head, he went upstairs to his
room. The crucifix was still on the wall,
but Michael had hung an End the War
Now poster next to it.

"Haven't you seen the photos of the
children burning alive? We drop napalm
on people!" he shouted to his geometry
teacher, Mr. Vaca.

"So what are you going to do, go to
Canada?" Mr. Vaca shouted back.

Michael had seen Life pictures of the
tiger cages and the burned bodies in the
hospitals. Mrs. Von Zychler made a
collage of them and posted it on her
bulletin board. She taught Western
civilization during third period where
they spent several days discussing atheism
in class. "The gods can either take
away evil from the world and will not, or
being willing to do so cannot; or they
neither can nor will, or lastly, they are
both willing and able. If they have the
will to remove evil and cannot, then they
are not omnipotent. If they can but will
not, then they are not beneficent. If
they are neither willing nor able, then
they are neither beneficent nor omnipotent.
Lastly, if they are both willing and
able to annihilate evil, how does it exist?"
Miss Von Zychler read from Epicurus.
"Your assignment for next week is
to write a four-page critique of this
statement."

"Why is it a sin to think of sex?" he
asked Jeff.

"Because the Church doesn't want
anyone to have any fun," Jeff
responded. "I've never understood how
you can still believe in that stuff. Face it!
Everyone does what he wants and
usually gets away with it."

"I'm sick and tired of feeling guilty
every time I look at a girl. Anything to do
with sex is a sin. That's all the priests
talk about."

"Yeah, then after bombing children
Nixon has an audience with the Pope,"
answered Jeff.

"You boys will have to be quieter or
leave," the librarian warned. They
turned back to their reading.

Spring arrived and Michael stopped
going to church regularly. The war
continued and Michael continued to
talk and read as much as he could about
the Vietnam war and, most of all, the
anti-war protesters here. He lay in his
room thinking, then went downstairs to
get the mail. He raced upstairs with the
latest Newsweek in hand. Vietnam,
again, he thought. The magazine had
photos of the burned, maimed children
in Saigon hospitals. "15,000! 15,000
children burned!" he screamed. He
looked upward at the crucifix.

"No more. No more killing. What
kind of a God are you?" he demanded
as he fell to his knees. I'm not guilty. I'm
not. No more wars. No God would let
people suffer like this," he sobbed into
his pillow, "because there is no God."

After dinner, Michael climbed slowly
to his room. He gazed at the crucifix
upon the wall.

"No more," he whispered as he
reached up, "it's over." Holding the
crucifix in his hand, he felt the crack
more than he had ever felt it before. He
walked down to the basement and
there, in the large cardboard box which
contained the other moments of his
childhood, he placed the crucifix.