Catholic Laughter

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

"'Are you getting ashes?' Betsy whispered.
I hissed, "Yes!"

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Are you getting ashes?” Betsy whispered.
I hissed, “Yes!”
“Della Rosa! Powers! Stop talking this instant,” shrieked Sister Claudia.
I jerked in my seat and everyone around me laughed. Marvin Blulp, who looked just like his name, punched his fist in his palm, and snickered, “Pow! Pow! POWERS!”
“Drop dead, Blulp,” I replied.
Sister rushed down the aisle and yanked me to my feet. “Powers, outside!” I wobbled to the front of the room, then marched resolutely out. Behind me was laughter and Sister’s angry voice.

I would have to stand in the hall for a half hour as punishment. I threw myself against the cold green wall and slid down until I felt the freezing tiles under my uniform. I would really get it if the principal walked past. This time I’d be suspended for sure. Slowly from behind the huge yellow-brown door, a black leather toe dropped on the tiles. I jumped up. Oh Claudia, you sharp-nosed old lady, leave me alone, will ya?

“Powers!” The sound snapped in the air. No sign of a face. She spoke to the wall. “Come in here.”

I simpered, “Thank you, sister,” and returned to class.

The room was too hot. Outside the sky was sodden grey and the windows looked sweaty. The morning was dragging on, first spelling, then history and everyone wanted to get out of class. We’d have to go to Mass, but today, the ashes were extra.

Sister’s voice droned on and on about the Civil War. I hate the Civil War, the boring battles, Sherman’s march to the sea. I hate the Reconstruction too. The war promised to stretch on for another week, so I stopped listening.

Betsy squirmed in her seat. I refused to notice her. Although she is my best friend, she makes me mad, especially when I get blamed for something she does or when her long black hair sheds across my desk and sticks itself on the tip of my ballpoint pen. She also is so beautiful it is sickening. Her hair is shiny black, her skin the color of caramels, her eyes lime green. What was worse, she didn’t have to wear eyeglasses like half the girls in class. She knew it too. Every boy in class wanted to go out with her. Even gross Thomas Margoni, who made vulgar noises when I get blamed for something anyway. She knew I didn’t need help. It’s only cheating if you need help. Betsy cheated; I helped. Now Betsy would have to finish seventh grade by herself. I made a promise to myself after that. I would give up getting in trouble for Lent. I would change my life.

When I received the ashes, I would take on a new personality, a good, quiet one. I was going to be studious. I was not going to bring fried fish back to school every Friday afternoon and smell up the room. I would not send French fries down the aisles in paper boats. I would not feed the multitudes again. I felt a growing religious fervor. I wrote down my resolutions. I would not go up to the board and leave radishes next to the chalk. I would not put eggs in other

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people’s desks or tap erasers on Sister’s chair. I was excited about the great changes that would take place. I waited quietly during math lessons.

At eleven-thirty, Sister told us to rise and proceed to the door in an orderly fashion and to keep the noise down.

I walked solemnly to the front of the room as Sister watched me. Ah, let her watch me. She’d faint when she discovered the new Sandy.

We stamped down the stairs, across the parking lot and stood at attention outside the church.

“All right, girls, make sure you have some head covering before you enter church.” Out came all the plastic envelopes from green pockets, snap went the unsnapping, fifteen lace mantillas were bobby-pinned to fifteen heads.

“Powers, Della Rosa, where are your covers?” Sister Claudia pounced on us. We answered together. “Sorry, Sister, I left it at home. I forgot it!” Betsy giggled and punched my arm.

Sister gave us each a Kleenex and a bobby pin. The Kleenexes were dusty with age and almost shredded in our hands. Betsy pinned hers so that the crease gave a sharp point to her head. She purposely tried to make me laugh and I wouldn’t do it.

We entered the noisy church. There were row upon row of green and white uniformed bodies kept from spilling out into the aisles by the sisters, who sat like giant black cubes at the end of the pews. There was a loud, rustling noise from the younger students and the sharp sounds of the Sister’s metal clickers. The ones they’d use to give directions or warnings. The noise rose to the rafters and sank back down on us. Click! Click! We genuflected. Click! Click! We rose. Click! We shuffled into our pews. Sister Claudia, like an angry cicada, clicked viciously. She never was satisfied with our entrance. Suddenly, came the tinkling bells, the hush. The priest and altar boys had arrived.

The sun came out and hit the windows on a slant so that only the tomahawk above the head of St. Isaac Jacques blazed crimson and the two feathers on the Indian’s head flashed blue.

The sisters stopped clicking. The soft mumbling of the priest floated back to me.

The mood was perfect for the important change that was to take place.

I opened my missal and began to read. Betsy watched me. She thought I was angry at her because I had been so quiet. She always wanted me to be laughing and friendly with her. She didn’t fool me. She was afraid that if our friendship ended so would her good report cards. How could she understand the important transformation that was happening? Well, too bad. She’d have to get used to it, or she could drop dead.

Betsy lowered her head. I could see her shoulders shaking. I tried to fight against the tempting urge to laugh. It pushed against my chest. I counted up to ten. I bit my tongue. It rose, fell back, and rose again. My ears and face grew warm. It overwhelmed me in a gush. My nostrils flared and released short, rapid gusts of air. My shoulders shook with silent laughter. Betsy turned to me and blew greater snorts of air from her nose. I wasn’t mad at her! I laughed on and on until my nose was vibrating.

Thank God for Catholic laughter. My sister said Betsy and I had mastered it. Jeanie said that a person can say she’s a Catholic, wear a scapular and flaunt a medal of the Sacred Heart, and even know all the holy days of obligation, but unless she shows real prowess in Catholic laughter, she isn’t convinced at all. She said it only happens after years of kneeling in church. She said it’s the greatest asset a Catholic can take into adult life. Betsy didn’t believe her. She said she had a friend that was a Protestant and she could do the same as us and longer. And Betsy said if that was true, then Sister Claudia must be better than all of us, and she never caught Sister at all. I said that was the proof. There wouldn’t even be a wave in Sister’s wimple if she did it. Anyways, Betsy and I could laugh for fifteen minutes, non-stop without letting one sound, one gurgle of a laugh, past our lips.

Click! Click! Old Claudia would have jumped from pew to pew, if she could, to knock our heads together. She knew we were up to something. We froze and clamped our nostrils shut.

The priest was climbing into the pulpit. We stood and touched fingers to forehead, lips and heart. Betsy pretended she was punching herself instead and reeled back with each punch.

I was horrified that I laughed. Where did all my resolutions go?

We sat down and I started to listen, but it was only Father Hoofmann. I didn’t like Father Hoofmann. He was the new priest in the parish. My mother said he was one of the new breed. She said he wanted to change the church and he wanted the Mass to be one big encounter group. She said he wanted to set the church on fire and it was too bad, because he was bound to be disappointed. The parish was filled with old soggy, stodgy Germans who wouldn’t ignite for anyone.

I didn’t like him because he was always coming into class and trying to talk like he was one of us. He was always babbling about the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel and the religious significance of their songs. Everyone knew he was too old to really understand them. He was at least thirty-five years old. He even had this gross brushcut. He just tried too hard. He tried to be your best friend after he had met you once.

I opened my missal. I usually read my holy cards during the sermon. I liked the card that had “A Prayer Before A Date” on it. It asked God to protect a girl from doing impure things on a date in case she dropped dead right after she got home. I hadn’t gone on a date yet, so I didn’t really know if prayers were necessary. But then who would want to go to Hell just for a lousy movie, a hamburger and a milkshake?

I turned the next page and stopped. There in my missal, staring up at me in glossy black and white, wallet size splendor was...the photograph. I wanted to close the missal but I
shrieked with laughter when she saw us. She bashed through the people sitting in your life. Its head took up the entire top of the photo and its bottom trailed off out of the photo altogether. Underneath the St. Bernard face was written "Benny". If that didn't destroy Betsy, nothing would.

I thought about passing it all during consecration. I thought about it all during communion. I thought about it almost to the end of the Mass and then shoved it into her. She was not prepared. Her mouth was open. She shrieked with laughter when she saw the big, stupid eyes and dripping tongue of the dog looking at her.

Behind me, I heard rapid movement. Sister Claudia swirled down the aisle. She bashed through the people sitting next to us and swooped down on us. She grabbed Betsy, pulled at me. We were pushed to the back of the church. Benny was discovered and torn in half. We were ordered to leave the church and not to come back to school unless we had notes from our mothers. We were told to make sure there was some mention in the note concerning our "outrageous behavior in a sacred place".

Betsy shouted at me. "It's all your fault. Why'd you show me that dog?" "Whaddya mean it's all my fault? You started it in class. Why did you have your big mouth open?"

We argued on the steps of the church. She stamped her feet and slush sprayed up and stuck freezing on my knee socks. We walked home together but on opposite sides of the street. We called each other names. It was stupid. At the corner, where I turned off, she yelled that she'd meet me at twelve-thirty.

I didn't want to go home. It wasn't that I was afraid to tell my mother about the note. She wouldn't punish me. She would just look at me, sigh a giant sigh, and ask me why I couldn't be a good girl. Then she'd write me the note. She'd be disappointed and I hated that more than anything in the world.

I was in luck. My mother wasn't home, but Jeanie was. She wrote the note and signed my mother's name. She would tell my mother, too, and by time I got home, my mother would be too busy with dinner to sigh in my face.

I went back to school with Betsy. Her mother had slapped her face, so I invented a story about a deadly hairbrush so she wouldn't feel so bad.

Sister stopped us outside the door. She unfolded Betsy's note, looked at it and pointed inside. She took my note, read it and said, "Father Hoofmann wants to see you in the rectory." The door closed firmly in my face. I was in a panic. I thought of the various levels of punishment. The sister sent you into the hall; the principal suspended you for two weeks; oh my God, the priests expelled you! I stood staring at the door. I won't go. Should I throw myself at Sister's feet? Should I go home? There was no real escape.

I shuffled towards the rectory until I thought, maybe Sister was already talking to him. She'd tell him she sent me ten minutes ago and since I wasn't there, he should start the expulsion without me. I began to run and my uniform became dotted with slush stains. I was going to cry.

Father Hoofmann opened the door and there was no big friendly, "Hi!" and "Call me Father Bob." He looked down
opened and closed his eyes, as if he was trying not to laugh? "Follow me," he said over his shoulder. He walked into a small office. When I sat down, he closed the door with a bang. He looked me up and down as if he was wondering how I had managed to stay in school as long as I did. Behind him was a giant crucifix. The blood pouring from Christ's wounds was bright-red and gooey-looking. Father Hoofmann winked at the grey spots on my knee socks and the soggy hem of my uniform. I tried to wipe them off without his noticing. He opened and closed his mouth a few times. Each time my heart stopped beating. When he did speak, his words were quiet and careful as if he thought I wouldn't understand otherwise.

"Sister Claudia told me about her recent problem with you in Mass. She tells me this is not an unusual occurrence. She believes you are a constant disruption in class. She says you talk too much. You distract your classmates from their work by clowning. She tells me there have been a number of disruptive occurrences each day and while she cannot say they are your work, she believes you have been instigating, I mean egging, your friends on. What do you think about this?"

What could I say to him? I suppose I had done all those things, but I wouldn't put them in the way he did. I did a lot of things in class for laughs, like the radishes on the blackboard, but a lot I didn't. One day, I was told to read out loud and I pronounced "wholly" wha-llly. I hadn't meant to. I'd never seen the word before. Everyone laughed and Sister got mad. She took everything I did wrong. Anyway, why wasn't Betsy here or John or James or any of the others who did just as much as me or finished something I started? I was being blamed for every disturbance in class. Why wasn't that creepy Blulp here? He had put empty beer cans in my desk and, when I pulled out my books, they rolled to Sister's desk. She blamed me. Why would I put empty beer cans in my desk?

"Well, Sandy, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Father, I did talk a lot in class, but I'm gonna stop. I really want to be good but sometimes I feel out of it. I'm not failing any of my subjects. I don't lie to the Sister if I see she's really upset and I want her to know who did something. Father, she's not fair. She blames me any time something happens, just because I do some things, sometimes. Do you know what I mean?" I was going to cry because I knew my answers weren't good enough.

Father Hoofmann was picking at his shiny pink nails. He never looked up after that.

He said, "Sister seems to feel you have a perverse streak in your personality. Do you know what that means?"

"Father, I don't know, no wait, is it doing something even though someone else is trying to do it?"

I could tell that he wanted more than that for an answer.

"Well, what I mean is, last year Laurie O'Connor's mother didn't want me hanging around with her anymore, because Laurie got in trouble for talking to me in class. Laurie said she couldn't be seen with me any more. But she kept talking to me during recess and at lunch, and we walked home together too. Well, one day, we were walking home and way in the distance was her mother. "Cross the street, there's your mother." I pretended to hear her for a while and then I said, "No, it's not, your mother is taller." She kept telling me to get away from her or her mother would kill her. She almost begged me to go away. But, I walked right next to her all the way down the street. Her mother was mad and said, "Didn't I tell you not to talk to her again?" Wimpy Laurie said, "I told her to get away, she wouldn't listen." Then her mother dragged her into the house. "Father, I wouldn't do what Laurie did. If my mother didn't want me hanging around her, I wouldn't make her hide..."
behind a house if my mother came up. I mean, a friend's a friend."

After a few minutes he said, "Yes, I see." He started asking more questions, but never waited for an answer. He asked me if I had any inner drives that made me talk back to the Sister? He asked me if I had bad dreams and, if I did, to write them down and give them to him. He'd understand. He asked if I was angry all the time and did I have any imaginary friends? He asked did I have girl friends and if I ever broke things or hit animals or hit myself. He said he wanted to help me.

In the middle of that long hour in his cold, white office, I suddenly felt there was something very wrong. It wasn't the trouble I was in for laughing in Mass or even for the French fries I sailed down the aisles, it was something bigger and more terrible. I couldn't think what it was exactly that made me feel so cold and afraid, and stupid for not understanding what he was saying, or what he wanted me to say.

It was like the day that Betsy and I walked to my house. A man whispered to us from behind tall bushes. He was making some kind of movement under his coat. The man stood there, staring at us but never moving towards us. He was whispering softly words we never understood and yet we stood there and listened. It was a windy day and the leaves above made the same whispery sounds, until I couldn't tell if the man was even speaking any more. I just knew it wasn't right and I was afraid. Betsy and I ran away from the man. We never talked about it after that.

Father Hoofmann was still talking and then I knew what was so horribly wrong. I had been sent to him for just messing around in school and he thought I was crazy, Father Hoofmann thought I was crazy!

I bit my lips and my eyes were getting wet. I wanted to tell him, "No, no, you're way off. I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy!"

All I could think of was the old late movie I saw on television. It was called Snake Pit, with Olivia something or other, and she was really crazy. I wasn't crazy! I only talked in class. If sister told me to shut up, I shut up. Olivia would have kept on talking.

I sat there in the dim February light until he finished. He looked at me and blinked a great deal and said, "Well, Sandy, have your mother call me. I'm sure she'll want to work with me on your problems."

I felt dirty as I left his office. I felt that anyone could see that Father Hoofmann thought I was crazy.

I went back to class and sat there for the last hour without looking up from my desk. Betsy poked me and asked what did he do to you, and I never looked up. I never looked up all the way home. I looked up only in answer to my mother's greeting, and cried, "Oh, Ma, I'm not crazy, am I?"

My mother was furious. She called him up and asked him what did he mean by practicing amateur psychiatry on me. She told him she had no problems with me. She said I was a very intelligent girl who got bored easily in class because I probably had already read the books the Sister was teaching. She said she really told him off.

But then, what did she know? How could I trust her to tell me I was crazy? She loved me too much.

She tried to make it up to me and told me everything was all right and I could go to school after Easter vacation and this time really show them how good I could be. She said we could go for ashes and then buy coffee ice cream and go to the library for new books.

We did all those things and it was all
very nice but the afternoon with Father Hoofmann wouldn't go away. After that Ash Wednesday I lay awake for many nights thinking about it. I knew I was different from the rest of my friends. I knew I liked to read and sometimes I'd rather read than go outside and hang around. I knew I laughed a lot but not over things that weren't funny.

I had never thought I was crazy until Father Hoofmann said it. But after that I never was really sure I wasn't.