

## WETCH

“You’re kidding me. He said what?”

“Yea, Nick, He turned around in the middle of the hymn and told Bobby to “either sing it right, or leave.” Ace says, shaking his head and chuckling softly.

“Sounds like our Carl,” ‘Bullets’” laughs.

“C cubed did what?” ‘Hammer’ asks, overhearing Ace and Bullets as he joins the group.

“Darryl was telling us Carl told little Bobby to leave mass if he didn’t sing a hymn the right way,” Nick says.

“Can’t say that surprises me,” Walt mutters, a trace of animosity in his voice. Seems Hammer’s had a run-in with “the cranky catholic” himself.

“Which hymn?” Hammer asks.

Again, Ace chuckles softly.

“Amazing Grace”

**Hi, we’re in the great room here at St. Kate’s for coffee and donuts after Sunday morning mass.**

**Darryl ‘Ace’ Martinson, Nick Kossarides, Walt ‘Hammer’ Robinson, and Vincent ‘Vinnie Bullets’ Baldachino have gravitated to each other as the wives gather to help the younger children with the puzzles on some of the outer tables.**

**Seems during Mass, “Ace” had a run-in with an older gent named Carl. A fella the gang calls, C cubed – short for “The Cranky, Catholic, Curmudgeon.” Every so often, guys like Carl can be found in a parish; you know, the self-appointed guardian of orthodoxy. But at St. Kate’s, Carl takes cantankerous to a new level. More than a couple of the gang have been in the headlights**

**of his diatribes, and it looks like it's Ace's little boy, Bobby's, turn this morning.**

**From Ace's laughter and Nick's eye-roll this might be an amusing five minutes or so as the guys swap stories. Or compare notes. Who knows? Probably a little of both.**

**Anyway, what say we listen in ....**

Hammer tops off his coffee cup.

"I remember Carl bawling out my son one Sunday a few years ago, because he didn't like the way he genuflected when he left the church," he chuckles.

"He harangued Kristi about the kids making noise in the pew behind him at mass a few months back," Darryl adds.

"Try this on for size," Nick says, shaking his head. "Some years back, he had my oldest girl, Aliana, in tears because he didn't approve of the skirt she was wearing. Said it was an occasion of sin for the teenage boys. Called her a little 'temptress.' When I heard that, I wanted to find the guy and give him a piece of my mind."

"Sure it wasn't a piece of your fist, Nick?", Hammer laughs.

A rueful smile crosses Nick's face. "Well ... no, he says, somewhat unconvincingly. Andrea calmed me down, before I ... oh, forget it."

If you don't already know, Nick is known to be fiercely protective of his girls.

Bidding goodbye to several ladies, the pastor, Father Bob, ambles over to join them.

"What's so funny, gents," he asks.

"No joke, Father," Ace says, shaking the priest's hand. "We were just talking about our mutual friend Carl."

“Okay, what’s it this time?” the priest asks, rolling his eyes.

The grin still on his face, Ace shakes his head gently. “He told Bobby to leave mass since he didn’t meet his approval with the way he was singing a hymn”

The shake of Father Bob’s head matches Darryl’s. “What hymn?”

“Amazing Grace.”

A curious look crosses the priest’s face. “Amazing Grace” he asks. “I mean, doesn’t everybody know the words?”

Nodding slowly, Darryl looks upward, probably trying to figure where his words might take him.

“Father, when Bobby and I sing it, we change one lyric.”

“Which one?”

“Instead of ‘saved a wretch like me,’ we sing ‘saved and set me free.’”

The interest in the priest’s eyes, intensifies. “Tell me why, Darryl. Not that I mind. But I’m curious as to why you would do that?”

“Well, when Bobby was five, he asked me a question after mass. We had sung “‘Amazing Grace’, and he was looking at me with those eyes little kids have when something troubles them. Then he asked, ‘what’s a ‘wetch’, Daddy?’”

“I didn’t know what he was talking about, so I asked him what ‘wetch’, he was talking about”.

“You know, Daddy, in the song, when we sing, saved a ‘wetch’ like me.”

“Oh you mean, wretch,” I said. “Well, a wretch is someone who is nasty, not nice or kind, and really just a bad person. And the minute I said that, I knew where he was going with his question.”

“So I’m a ‘wetch,’ too?”

“Well, the look on his face cut deep. I could see he was thinking he was singing the hymn because he thought that God thought he was a bad person. A wetch.”

“So, what did you do?” Father Bob asks?

“Well, immediately I hugged him and explained that the man who wrote the hymn lived a really bad life. But one day he realized his mistakes and so he made up the song about how God’s grace saved him.”

“Did, he understand?” Nick asks.

“I think so, but I decided later that I was going to change that lyric when we sing that hymn, and told the kids that they could do the same.”

“Did it work?”

“Well, from the smile on the kids’ faces, I’d say yes. And now every time we hear that hymn, we sing it our way ... together. ...kind of a special bond between us.”

Nodding his head slowly, a look of understanding crosses Father Bob’s face.

“You know, Ace’, I’ve sometimes wondered much the same thing. I imagine people give that lyric little thought, but I’ve occasionally wondered if there is some harm in it. From what you’ve said, there may well be, especially for the younger people.”

“And maybe newer people to the faith?” Hammer asks.

The nod of Father Bob’s head tells me he agrees with Walt.

“You know, Father, I think maybe the bigger point here is the idea of definition,” Ace says. “How we define ourselves and others. Something that is definitely a consideration and a challenge with children. Especially the little ones. They might not seem it, but they’re always watching, listening, and learning, and we need to be careful how we present the ideas of self-worth, evil, and sinfulness to them.”

“We need to be both careful and vigilant with our words and actions?”  
Father asks, more in the tone of a statement than a question.

Ace smiles. “Exactly, padre.”

“From my experience, I know a lot of damage is done to the little ones we don’t realize,” Nick adds. “They may not verbalize their thoughts, and impressions, but they’re making them. I know all three of my kids asked questions when they were little that floored me as to how they perceived things they were exposed to.”

A look of dawning awareness deepens in Father Bob’s face. “Thank you, fellas, for those thoughts. I’ve often wondered what our words, not only in mass, but in our classrooms, have on children. We don’t always get feedback from the kids. They’re sponges at that age, and you’re telling me there’s a potentially serious problem we teachers aren’t tuned into.”

Pausing a moment, the pastor looks toward the altar.

“I think I’ll start paying more attention to what our children, and adults, hear, both in church, and the classroom,” he says.

... “and make some changes ...”

**The average 60-year-old understands the context of ‘Amazing Grace’. But, the average 6-year-old?**

**Ask yourself, does our God see us as wretched? Do we overemphasize sinfulness too much, and goodness not enough? And should we place greater importance on the truth we are made in the image and likeness of He who is perfect Goodness. After all who wants to be called wretched by anyone, especially oneself? How sensible is it to attempt to influence anyone to do good by defining them as evil, corrupt, wicked, or wretched? As the little boy asked, a wetch?**

**Reputable polling companies have compiled surveys citing the precipitous decline of religious faith worldwide. In the Catholic**

**church in America, those baptized into the faith but no longer regularly practice or even attend weekly mass is around seventy percent and that percentage is higher among young adults.**

**Sure, one can write those statistics off to the allure of a materialistic and even hedonistic culture. But is that simply the easy way out? True, there's some truth in that, but it is also fair to place a healthy dose of blame on the overly simplistic and all too often poor teaching and even worse impression teachers of the faith foist on the young.**

**Many of us have probably heard the saying, 'preach the gospel always; use words if necessary'. It's a nice thought, but when you get down to it, words are generally all we have.**

**Example is important, but when we speak, especially to the young and impressionable, isn't using the right words ...**

**... just as important?**

**Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.**