

A vacation journey through the deep South provides the gang with an interesting reflection on an age old teaching of the Church.

INSIDIOUS

“Nice tan, your holiness. So, how was the vacation?”

Reaching into the cooler, Father Bob grabs a can of cola. “Great. Got in a couple rounds of golf, took my brother John, his wife and the kids to the beach for couple of days. Did some deep-sea fishing in Florida with my youngest brother, Greg, and his three boys. Had a lot of fun.”

“Sounds like you really enjoyed the kids,” Martin Williams says.

“Oh, definitely. Especially when I didn’t have to put them to bed at night. It’s nice to enjoy them, then give them back to mom and dad.”

“Where’d you go again?”

“Charleston ... South Carolina. “Then to a golf resort in Florida, and eventually the Keys.’

“Bet it’s pretty this time of year.”

“That it is. Had good weather all the way around.”

“Drive or fly?”

“Drove, Martin. I love back roads ... off the beaten track you might say. Stopped in Myrtle Beach first.”

Rabbi Josh laughs. “So, beyond ‘let the little children come unto me’, what other great theological truths did you dabble in?”

Sipping his drink, a devilish smile lights up the priest’s eyes.

“Well, I saw sin on the wind ...

... and death in the trees.”

Hi, Tony here. We’re in the back room at Spinelli’s tonight. Seems a bunch of the gang got together for some good Italian food, and to welcome Father Bob, back from his vacation to Florida via the South Carolina shores. Most of the neighborhood gang is here and I sense a party coming on.

Father Bob has a penchant for finding hidden meanings in the world around him. Something all these men of the cloth often do. I think Rabbi Josh was kidding with his question, but then again, finding a sermon in the world around them isn’t uncommon for any of these guys.

There is always an interest each other’s propensity for seeing beyond the obvious. From the looks on their faces at Bob’s last sentence, that interest’s been piqued. Big time! Seems everyone wants to hear more. Come to think of it, so do I ... and you?

What say we grab a cup of coffee and join the gang?

“Whoa there your eminence ... say that again. Sin on the wind and death in the trees? ... you witness, a lynching or something?” Mike Daniels asks, chuckling at the thought.

Laughter ensues around the table.

“No Mike,” Pastor Williams says, a twinkle in his eye. “I think our friend here is embarking on a second career.”

“And that would be,” the priest asks.

“Antebellum South mystery writer ... shades of Anne Rice.”

Sipping his coffee, Martin’s trademark booming laugh echoes off the walls. “Tell us Bob, see any vampires in your travels?”

“Or bats; maybe a werewolf or two?” Bullets chuckles.

Grinning broadly, the priest sips his drink. “No, nothing quite that dramatic. But sin and death was just hanging there in the trees for all to see.”

“What sin?”

“Spanish moss.”

Silence ensues as a stunned look wanders across Bobby ‘Pretzels’ face; not to mention a few of the others too.

“Spanish moss is a sin? Pretzels asks, the stunned look remaining. What’s next, padre, spider webs are felonies?”

“No, Pretzels.” Josh says, a knowing look in his eyes. “But I’ve a feeling I know where our friend’s going with this.”

“And that is, Josh ...?”

“That Spanish moss, while not deadly in itself, contributes significantly to the death of a tree that is otherwise healthy.”

Saying nothing, a twinkle lights up the priest’s eyes as another confused look wanders across Pretzel’s face. “I think you’ll have to explain that,” Bobby says.

“Well, Bobby, the good pastor says, several years ago I noticed a tree in my brother’s yard in Charleston. It had a little Spanish moss on a few small dead branches. It was a little thinner than the others and shaded by some taller trees. But at that time, the rest of the tree was healthy.”

Pretzels shakes his head. “Go on ...”

“Well, nobody ever pruned the dead branches and eliminated the moss. This time around, I noticed more branches are dead, half of the tree is infected, and the moss now blocks the sunlight to the newer branches. The moss won’t directly kill the tree, but they’ll probably lose it in time.”

“The room falls silent, waiting for the priest to continue. Chuckling at the looks around the table, the pastor sips his coffee then sets the cup down.

“Okay, how does that figure in?” he asks. “Well, to my way of thinking, Spanish moss in nature, is similar to what the Church calls ‘venial’ sin; those ‘small’ sins that if allowed to fester can, one day, lead to disaster.”

“I see what you are getting at,” Martin says, helping himself to a healthy serving of Carmine’s sausage lasagna.

“Sure you don’t have a cat at home, Reverend?” Bullets asks, chuckling at the Baptist minister’s heaping plate.

Martin’s booming laugh again fills the room. “No, Vince, but if I did, Garfield isn’t getting any of this.”

Shaking his head and laughing gently at the exchange, Father Bob continues.

“The truth is, Spanish moss is not a parasite, at least in the strict sense. It doesn’t kill the tree, but as healthy portions die off, the moss takes over more and more. And as the infestation grows it increasingly saps the nutrients the tree needs to remain healthy and vibrant. And eventually obstructs those things the tree needs for growth; particularly sunlight.”

“Bob has a point,” Josh says. “Rachel and I go to Florida occasionally and, now that I think of it, that’s where you see the most Spanish moss. In the dead and dying trees; especially in swamps.”

“And your correlation with venial sin, Father?” asks Bullets. “That’s how you see it?”

“Well, like I said, the infestation of the moss itself can deny its host those things necessary for life, health, and growth. Same with the “small” or venial sins men allow into their lives. Things like the white lie, that third drink, the ‘harmless’ piece of gossip, or the lingering look, tainted with an inordinate or maybe unhealthy desire, at the man or woman next door, in the next cubicle, or at the beach. Seemingly harmless thoughts or actions that gradually and surreptitiously corrupts respect and honor, replacing them with malice and intent.”

“So, you’re saying things we see in nature, in a way, are God’s way of teaching us how seemingly insignificant things we allow into our lives, can be unhealthy? Pretzels asks.

“And need to recognize and eliminate when they first appear,” Martin adds.

“Yea, Bobby. I think it’s one way God quietly speaks to us. In this case, if we pay attention, we can come to understand that, like Spanish moss, those “venial”, sins we allow in our lives eventually, can blind us to the larger more deadly sin that insidiously creeps into our lives. Given time and complacency, those seemingly harmless, and all too often enjoyable, thoughts and actions can and will, like Spanish moss on a tree, lead to something larger, a full-blown killer ...

... of a tree ... or a soul.”

“Go with the flow.’

A popular cliché. But think about it. Dead things go with the flow, the dead flow downstream. After all, it takes something alive and with a purpose to swim against the current.

Today, society feeds us its “truth”; that what was once considered morally decadent is now touted as an innocent and even acceptable pastime or lifestyle; simply a normal and natural part of man’s experience. But, like any of the seven deadly sins, it will eventually wound the human heart and mind, and left unchecked, ultimately destroy a soul deprived of the light of God’s truth, His Law, and His love.

We've all heard the saying, "God works in mysterious ways." And oftentimes, maybe not so much mysterious, but in the quiet and subtle way nature speaks us. I like to think, like Father Bob, that Spanish moss is one of those whispers in the wind. Like the one Elijah heard on the mountain. The voice of God, gently teaching us a lesson in the quiet beauty of nature.

"Not all sin is fatal." The apostle John's words in his New Testament letter. But, if left unchecked, those "venial" or "minor" sins, have the potential to lead to something far more serious. Ask yourself, do those little, "venial," sins, as the church calls them, weaken your heart, your soul, and your resolve to the point that one day, you can no longer determine what is healthy, and...

... what is deadly?

...Thinkaboutit, I'm Tony Baggz.

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