

Not all religious education takes place in Sunday school

A MORNING'S ENCOUNTER

(part one)

“Good morning, Bob. Anything interesting in there?”

Looking up from his newspaper, Father Bob sees Fay Kramer standing at his table. Rising, a gentle, somewhat apprehensive, smile ambles across his face.

“Hello, Fay,” he says, setting his newspaper aside. “...you know ... same ole stuff, different day ... something I can do for you?”

“Well, yes, I’d like to ask you a question if I might?”

“A question ... sure ... what’s on your mind?”

“Tell me, why does Rome treat women with such contempt?”

Tony Baggz here. Today’s early winter morning here in Sam’s Bistro finds Father Bob scanning the morning paper. He met Rabbi Josh and Reverend Daniels for coffee earlier and they left a couple minutes ago.

Seems someone has intruded on the pastor’s mid-morning calm. One Fay Kramer, a local attorney, well known to the clergymen.

They've all had encounters with her as she seems to take delight in attacking any and all religions. And, from the looks of it, this morning it's Father Bob's turn.

A passionate advocate of women's rights, Fay specializes in family law. A single mother herself, she's tenacious in her advocacy and defense of women and children. A self-proclaimed atheist, as a young girl, Fay was raised in the Church in Rome; one she abandoned in college. An outspoken, some would say, radical, feminist, she refuses to pay any respect to members of the clergy, regardless of denomination. And, in Bob's case, going so far as to refuse to address the priest as "father."

I'm a bit curious to see where this encounter goes. Think I'll grab some coffee, a lemon Danish, and take a seat at the next table.

Care to join me?

Sliding a chair out, again Father Bob smiles gently. "Please Fay, have a seat. Can I get you some coffee?"

"That would be nice," she says, her tone, guarded.

Calling Leslie, Sam's assistant manager, over, Bob orders a carafe of coffee and a couple cinnamon rolls.

As with the service Sam's is noted for, they appear almost instantly.

"Please, Fay, have one. You know they're the best in town."

"I agree," Fay says, a small appreciative smile rising in her eyes. "Thank you."

"Now, please, tell me the 'why' behind your question."

"Well, I have a client, a divorce case ... husband just walked out ... left her ... affair with a coworker."

"An age-old story," the pastor says, shaking his head. "And, I take it, a sad one?"

"Oh yea, he left her with two kids to fend for herself. He's a business executive so at least I'm confident we can reach acceptable custody and financial settlements.

So then, your concern is?

Well, she's Catholic ... says she can't remarry. ... says it's against church law. And to me, it's just another example of your Church's prejudice against women."

Looking out the front window, a faraway look crosses Bob's face. I think it's an accusation he's heard before.

"First off, Fay," he says, "according to Church law, neither party has a right to marry again, in, or by, the church, unless something existed prior to the marriage that would have precluded one or the other from freely giving their consent to the union."

“The textbook definition of annulment,” Fay says. “I get that. But how about the divorce?”

“A civil one? What the state has joined together, the state may divide.”

“Okay, but isn’t it unfair the church won’t allow her to get married again since her husband walked out?”

“Well, Fay, it isn’t the church being unfair, so much as it is taking seriously Christ’s words; ‘what God has joined together, no man may divide.’ In some instances, infidelity may be cause for a decree of nullity ... that’s what the process is to determine.”

Saying nothing, a look of disdain crosses Fay’s face.

“I offer you that this second-rate treatment of women as you call it isn’t particular to Rome, but something endemic to mankind since Eden,” the priest says.

“And your rationale for that ...?”

“That maybe, to God, His greatest disappointment has been the manner in which women have been treated through the ages.”

A look of astonishment creeps into Fay’s eyes. “I’m not sure I follow,” she says, confusion replacing the animosity in her voice.

“Well, much of Christian thinking is an extension of Jewish thought and tradition,” Father Bob says.

“... Jewish ...” Kay asks, “I thought Jews and Catholics were ... well ... enemies.”

“No, far from it. Much of our faith is an extension of Jewish teaching and tradition. As Pope John Paul the Second said, the Jews are our elder brothers in faith.”

“Go on ... this extension you refer to ...?”

“Well, according to Genesis, as God created, his individual creations took on a greater dignity. It’s a tradition in Jewish thought.”

“And man is God’s ultimate creation,” Fay says.

“Adam, yes, partially,” Father Bob replies, an impish look crossing his face.

The look in Fay’s eyes betrays her amazement. “Are you saying Eve is God’s ultimate creation? His most dignified?”

“Exactly. It certainly is something the Church understands”

“I didn’t know ...” Fay says, shaking her head, her words trailing off. “So how do you reconcile the historical treatment of women, and what you just said?”

“Well contrast that understanding with how women have been treated in almost all societies since the expulsion from Eden.”

“How women have been treated?” she says, repeating Bob’s words as a question. “Me ... I’d say a cross between a brood mare and a domestic servant, with a considerable amount of culturally accepted abuse

added in for good measure,” derision again heavy in the barrister’s voice.”

Smiling gently, the priest sips his coffee and sets down the cup. “Well, I might be stretching the point a bit, but if you understand Genesis in that exalted sense, woman is the Creator’s most cherished and precious creation; surely not inferior to Adam. Definitely not a brood mare or domestic servant, and certainly not an object of abuse. Woman was made to be something much, much more than she has been historically treated. And the transgression of that intention has been mankind’s greatest collective sin.”

“Transgression?” Fay asks.

Pausing, the priest again sips his coffee.

“At least if you expand the definition of sin as a transgression against the intent of the Creator,” he says.

Holding her cup to her lips, her face suggesting she is deep in thought, Fay’s eyes dart to the clouds over the river. “Interesting thought,” she says. “I’ve never heard anything like what you’re saying in talking to any clergyman of any persuasion. But ... why mankind’s greatest sin?”

“Because only a woman can make the most important career choice open to mankind.”

“And that would be?”

“Fay, humor me for a minute, Bob says, chuckling. “In His kingdom, what human career choices does heaven ... does God ... need?”

Pausing, Fay says nothing, a curious look ambling across her face

“Does Heaven need lawyers, doctors, or bricklayers ... or... cab drivers, policemen and women, firemen - well maybe hell could use a few of those - or any other career we choose?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think of one,” Fay says, chuckling at the humor in the priest’s words.

A smile crosses the priest’s face. “I can.”

“And that would be ...?”

“Mother.”

“Mother?” Fay says, surprise registering in her eyes. “I was expecting pope or bishop; maybe rabbi.”

“No, mother ... God needs mothers to populate his heavens. Mother is a choice, and a lifetime career; the greatest one available to mankind.”

“So, you’re defining woman by her uterus,” Fay says, caution returning to her voice.

“Define ... no. Value ... yes.”

“Okay ...” Kay says a hint of disbelief in her words as the trail off.

Again, a smile rises in Father Bob's eyes. "When saying 'yes' to that incredible invitation, a woman chooses to partner with the Creator to bring forth something eternally precious to Him. A gift, a new and unique life ... one for a heavenly Father to love for all eternity. And in doing so, a woman acquires an esteem in God's eyes that no man, and no other career choice can match."

An astonished look creeps into Fay's expression, as the conversation lapses, momentarily. Then, hearing the sound of her phone, she looks at Bob.

"Would you excuse me. I need to take this call. I'll be back in a minute or two if you can wait."

"I'd be happy too," the priest says, standing, as Fay turns and walks toward the ladies room ...

An interesting morning, to say the least. Knowing Father Bob, this is the sort of encounter that energizes him; the chance to dispel some incorrect impressions of the Church he loves and serves.

Meanwhile, lets take a break, freshen our coffee and wait for Ms. Kramer's return ...

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A MORNING'S ENCOUNTER

(part two)

“All’s well, I take it, Fay?” Father Bob asks as she returns to the table.

“Oh, yea ... just needed to shuffle a few appointments.”

Chuckling softly, the priest nods, “I know the problem. In my line of work, tight schedules are virtually impossible.”

Taking a seat, Fay nods in agreement as Father Bob refreshes her coffee cup.

“So, back to our discussion, she says, “please, tell me; women who choose not to have children ... somehow they’re less valuable in your God’s eyes?”

“No, not at all. That a woman has talents beyond the maternal and domestic is a given. To limit women to those roles would deny the church, not to mention society, much talent. But it is my contention the greatest act of creation we share with our God is producing new life. All other jobs are expendable ... everyone can be replaced ... except a mother to her child.

Fay sips her coffee; a look of intense interest in her eyes.

“Wouldn’t you agree that to a child, a mother is the most important person in the world? A thought our God shares with us?” Bob asks. “Like I said earlier, mother is the only human career choice God ... heaven, needs. That makes woman both precious and sacred to Him.”

Saying nothing, curiosity rises in Fay's eyes.

“Greater love than this no man has, that he lay down his life for a friend’ ... Christ’s own words,” Father Bob says, expanding on his previous thought. Ask yourself, don’t virtually all mothers do this from that first moment she knows she’s blessed with that great opportunity?”

“You do realize, Bob, I was raised Catholic, but I now consider myself an atheist,” Fay says, laughing gently. “So, I don’t know, you’re the theologian.”

“I think God does see it that way,” the pastor says, chuckling softly. “In bringing life into the world and raising a child to adulthood, a mother, in a very real sense, lays her life down for her child ... or children.”

“I never thought of it that way ...,” Fay says, softly, again, her voice trailing off.

Gently smiling at the look in Fay’s eyes, Bob continues.

“You have a little girl. I’ve seen the two of you together and I know some of the teenage girls in the parish babysit for you. Tell me, which is more important, your child or your career? If you had to pick one or the other.”

“My little Brittany was born out of what people call, wedlock,” Fay says, sidestepping the question. “... illegitimate in the eyes of the world,” defiance palpable in her voice.

“Fay ... no child is illegitimate in the eyes of God,” Father Bob says, compassion in his eyes.

“Nice thought, but that isn’t the reception I’ve received along the way.”

“And that’s a shame. Bringing to God a new life makes you unique and precious in His eyes. And, like I said, sacred. But I understand your frustration. So, let me offer you some other words our Our Lord ...

‘... You are thinking as man thinks, not as God thinks.’”

Fay doesn’t answer; the look on her face says she doesn’t need to.

Sipping his coffee, the pastor continues. “And something else we believe and teach, at least at St. Kate’s. A wife is a man’s sacred honor in living form.”

“How so?” Fay asks.

“People, like water, seek their own level. A man shows the world his most essential and cherished values in the woman with whom he chooses to spend his life. She is the mirror of those values for the world to see. I see it in so many of the men in my parish; their attitude toward their wives reflects that idea.”

“And the same can be said for a husband?” Fay asks.

“Of course, the dignity of both man and woman as envisioned by the Creator is something that needs to be emphasized far more in society today. To denigrate

anyone, women especially ... denying them the dignity to which they are entitled by the nature of their life and their creation ... may be mankind's greatest sin. At least from a societal standpoint."

The look on Fay's face mellows briefly, then again turns adversarial.

"Then you know my next question," she says.

Before she can ask it, another gentle smile creases the priest's face. "... why can't women be priests in my church?" he says, a tinge of resignation in his voice.

"Yea. I mean other Christian churches have women ministers. And women rabbis. Why is Rome so insistent on remaining behind the times?"

"Well, it's a complicated theology, something I can't encapsulate in a few dozen words. In some of our sacraments, a priest actually stands in the person of Christ. So, let's just say Rome follows Christ's example in choosing his first apostles who went on to establish the first churches. And as I said before, women in our church occupy all but a few positions of importance and influence. Something, that is continually evolving."

"But given history, and maybe even your own thoughts about the dignity of woman, isn't that somewhat irrelevant ... maybe even hypocritical?"

"Well, I can see how someone might feel that way. I won't argue that point. I would however offer you that

men and women were designed to have specific roles ... by the Creator, Himself ...

“Oh, and you do realize, being you were raised in the Church, that the Catholic Church considers the most perfect purely human being, is a woman named Mary?”

Inclining her head slightly, Fay smiles gently, saying nothing.

The conversation lapses momentarily as the priest tops off both coffee cups, then continues.

"As far as modern church life, women consecrated to a life of service for God, nuns or sisters as we know them, are vital to the life of the church. At the local level, women play numerous vital roles in the life of a parish, and you'll find women contribute to the formation of priests by teaching in many seminaries."

A slightly cynical look rises in the barrister's eyes.

“For instance, Fay,” the priest continues. “I can never assume that most dignified role a woman plays in the structure of God's world. I can never partner with God Himself, to bring a new life into existence. That is not open to me.”

“True.”

“But as a man, a male, it is my place be a provider, a leader and a protector both in the physical sense and a spiritual one. I've chosen the latter. There are aspects of this calling I think would be extremely difficult for most women. And, we believe Jesus' words that the Holy

Spirit, God Himself, guides His Church. It might not satisfy the thinking of some today, but maybe Christ has a better vision of mankind than we do ... just looking at our own little corner of the world and the problems in it.”

The conversation lapses, both Bob and Fay seemingly lost in thought.

“I have a couple of meetings this morning and I better be on my way,” Fay says after a moment. “I’d love to talk some more with you. I have a number of other questions and it seems I’ve found a source of ... well, let’s just call it, enlightenment. One I would have never expected from my past experience. You’ve shown me something I never thought existed ... things no one’s ever said.”

A warm smile creases the pastor’s face. “I’m glad you stopped by, Fay. Thanks for the opportunity to talk. Oh, and if she cares to, have your client call or stop by, I’d be happy to talk to her. There might be some things in Church law pertaining to her situation unknown to us at this time.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that ... have to go ... got a case to try. Thanks for the coffee and the roll.”

“You’re welcome. It was a pleasure talking to you, Fay” Bob says, standing and smiling. “Feel free to stop by, anytime.”

Extending her hand, a smile graces Fay’s face.

**“The pleasure was mine ...
... Father.”**

Do you ever wonder if God laughs? I think he does. For instance, does the almighty look down and think to Himself, “one day a year they have Mother’s Day. Heck, it’s Mother’s Day up here every day.”

Could it be ...?

In Jewish, and by extension, Christian thinking, God’s most dignified creation is woman. Given that divinely ordered, exalted, dignity inherent in all women, and the eternal love God has for her, especially mothers, can any man who takes a wife and chooses to start a family, see her in any different light?”

And if any man sees women only as a means to simply indulge his desires and inclinations ... treating her in a manner less than the honor and dignity she deserves as seen in the loving eyes of her Creator ...

... isn’t it time he stop ... and reconsider?

Thinkaboutit, I’m Tony Baggz.

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