

We are amazed to find how often
a man who would be behind bars if he
were not a priest is entrusted with the
cura animarum.

– Father Gerald M.C. Fitzgerald
(1894-1969), writing in 1957 to
the Bishop of Manchester, N.H.

1.

MONSIGNOR BRENNAN always bought his cars from the Pontiac dealer in his old parish in Northwest Washington, trading them in every two years. He assured his auxiliary, Father Schmidt, that if he wanted a new car (and St. Jude's parishioners—he sniffed—would probably appreciate his replacing that battered old Ford of his), they'd give him a good deal, too. Perhaps on a nice Bonneville?

But Father Schmidt didn't want a nice Bonneville. He had his eyes on an altogether cooler vehicle. He conceded that Monsignor's Grand Prix in midnight

blue suited *him* exactly—fenders swelling above wheel skirts, the sheet-metal equivalent to his swirling monsignorial cassock with purple buttons—but said he preferred to buy within the parish.

In fact, he was talking with a bass in his choir, Mr. Grimes, sales manager at the Chrysler-Plymouth-Dodge dealership on Georgia Avenue in Wheaton, who showed him a brand-new 1966 Plymouth Fury III coupe that seized his heart.

At first sight several evenings earlier he expressed horror at the paint job.

“But it’s *purple*, Mr. Grimes!”

“That’s the lights, Father. No, it’s blue, almost baby blue. Best color for this model, I swear. Can put you in it on very easy terms.”

“I’ll pay cash when the time comes, Mr. Grimes.”

“All the better, Father.”

Father Schmidt had returned by daylight to confirm the Plymouth’s handsome blue (carried through to the carpeting, padded dashboard and vinyl upholstery grained to look and feel like leather), added five miles to the odometer’s eight, and agreed to buy it.

Today was the day. After lunch Father picked up his checkbook and drove the Ford out.

At the dealership, Mr. Grimes strode outdoors and took Father to where stood the gleaming Fury, headlights stacked on top of each other, the upper one jutting ahead. The car’s stance had it doing 60 standing still.

“Here it is, Father, washed and waxed. You like?”

“It’s beautiful, Mr. Grimes.”

They walked around it, Mr. Grimes caressing it

and murmuring about its features. Then they stepped indoors to sign the papers. Mr. Grimes awarding the Ford a big fat trade-in allowance, Father Schmidt wrote a check for the balance, acquiring his \$3,300 car with radio, white-wall tires, power brakes, power steering, air conditioning and undercoating for a tad over \$2,400 (it cleaned him out). Mr. Grimes said he didn't make many such deals, but credited the Man Upstairs with suggesting this one, and professed himself satisfied.

"Enjoy it, Father. It's a fine car, and you look good in it."

Father shook his hand, got behind the wheel and, pausing only to tune the radio to WINX and pull out a push button to preset the station, waved as he turned onto Georgia Avenue.

He couldn't resist just driving. Out in the countryside, only a few miles away, he began taking twisting roads at random through the March landscape. Spring was advancing, the trees flaunting new leaves. The white fences of horse country flew past as he shot forward: 230 horsepower, twice the Ford's. Mr. Grimes said to take it easy during the break-in period, but that when he accelerated to do it confidently. The radio played the Four Seasons' *Working My Way Back to You*. Father's expertise lay in liturgical music, but for driving he liked rock'n'roll or R&B.

Excited, Father also felt nostalgic. He'd been fond of the Ford he abandoned in the dealership parking lot. He bought it shortly after arriving at St. Abigail's, the girls' school in Northwest, a 1954 model only two years old, and took to it, too, even though it was never

the flashiest car, nor the fastest; no, not a fast car.

A year before that, at his first assignment as a newly-ordained priest—St. Christopher's High School, also in Northwest—he was still driving his own father's 1940 Chevy, a car he despised and one that won no admiration from his students.

A long time ago now, though ten years—eleven?—didn't mean that what happened at St. Chris hadn't happened. No, it happened all right, unfortunately.

But he still thought about it when he masturbated. Which wasn't often, for masturbation is a sin and Father faithfully confessed his sins to Monsignor, and that was an embarrassing one to have to mention. But his body—the body God Himself gave him—sometimes compelled him to do it, to think back and find gratification in what he undeniably did—though surely with no harm done?—in St. Chris' gymnasium late one afternoon when, a young priest teaching music, math and some gym classes, he lingered with his favorite student after everybody else went home.

Ray, a lively lad with a blond flattop, was 15 years old.

Ray started it.

"Want to wrestle, Father? Unless you think you can't handle it?"

Back and forth for a bit—Ray was a cheeky kid, fun to talk to, his insouciance irresistible—until Father, compelled by desire to say out loud what he really wanted, remarked, "I'll wrestle you, Ray—but only Greco-Roman style."

"How's that, Father?"

His mouth suddenly dry, eyes looking aside, Father couldn't say.

“You mean *nude*, Father?” asked Ray. “*Naked*, Father? Won’t help, you’re going *down*.”

The boy was that spunky. He and Father shucked shirts, pants, everything. When he summoned the memory, Father saw in slow, *slow* motion the revelations leading to Ray’s perfected nudity, standing there grinning, legs reaching to the power of his hips, the fact of his cock, the vulnerability of his belly, the story of his chest.

Usually in recalling it Father ejaculated before he could replay their tussling together, that long process of trying – but not *too* hard – to pin Ray, their trading of positions, muttering, groaning, their mutual enjoyment (Father was sure of it!) before the need to *take* Ray, *penetrate* him, overmastered him, and he got rough until, before he could quite accomplish it, the boy – scared now – slithered out of his grasp, scooped up his clothes and ran off.

Father Schmidt knew he’d gone too far – in fact, sinned. *Probably* sinned, though surely more a sin of *intention* than *deed*? (Had he confessed it? Surely he had.)

Never saw Ray again; overnight the boy switched, nobody knew why, to Bethesda–Chevy Chase High School. But something must have got back to someone (such was his dark suspicion), because Father soon found himself at St. Abigail’s, loosed among the young ladies to teach them and direct their choir. Its choir was never so celebrated as under Father Schmidt, performing at the dedication of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and frequently traveling to Baltimore and Philadelphia. God knows, he did his best for three long years before having the

unexpected good fortune to be selected by Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle’s great favorite, Monsignor Brennan, as auxiliary priest and choirmaster for his new parish.

St. Jude’s was carved out from two existing parishes in the fastest-growing part of the fast-growing Maryland suburbs. The Archbishop in naming Monsignor its pastor gave him the mission of building a showcase church and school. Monsignor, knowing how prestigious a fine boys choir is, vowed to have the best in the region, so engaged Father Schmidt, who would also do the parish scutwork. In addition, he recruited sisters from a progressive Minnesota order of Franciscan nuns to teach in the school.

Turning around, Father eventually hit the Beltway, got on and worked up to speeds the Ford never knew. No more losing face on the freeway! Beneath his glasses he kept his expression sedate and priestly, but inside felt let loose and free.

Nobody ever called Father Schmidt handsome. Of middle size, 39 years old – “same age as Jack Benny,” he’d taken to joking – he had acne-scarred cheeks and weak eyes. Hence the severe black-framed glasses that were his feature. When caught out without them, his face tended to look embarrassed. The glasses precluded much expressiveness anyway, but behind them his face was usually almost as rigid, a mask showing not much at all.

Except at choir practice, except with his boys. Music represented the best of Father Schmidt. He was perfectly sincere about making music to glorify the Lord. What he was able to do with his choir

(sometimes) after the hard labor of recruiting and instructing and rehearsing was to construct intricate but powerful structures of song that demonstrated – *illuminated* – the beauty of God’s creation; build a crystalline portal out of boys’ and men’s voices – a portal of sound that for a time (the length of a hymn, anyway) opened to the glorious world awaiting us and reconciled all hearers (he hoped!) to God and Mother Church.

Exiting at University Boulevard, he crawled along Teagers Mill Road, which, despite its widening, seemed slower every day, so fast was local growth. A few blocks from St. Jude’s he passed the rectory in Teagers Mill Estates; a new rectory was finally nearing completion behind St. Jude’s playground.

School was letting out when Father Schmidt returned, a few minutes later than he’d intended, children coming out to meet their carpools or board the waiting buses that would continue to the nearby public school. Some walked home, a few even roller-skated.

Father’s new Fury created a stir as he parked in the circle. He accepted compliments and promised future rides, but it was time for choir practice, so he strolled indoors to the choir room as choristers streamed in: Sixteen boys, five from 8th grade, five from 7th, six from 5th, including his prize soprano, Johnny Capistrano, possessor of the sweetest voice Father ever heard. None of the men, including Mr. Grimes, could make it to weekday practice; they caught up on Saturday. The room, concrete-block walls a glossy yellow, was a classroom like the others, but with folding chairs instead of desks.

They had their hymnals. Father took up his stance facing the boys in their school uniforms of gray corduroy pants—mostly too short and too tight—long-sleeved white shirts and plaid ties.

“Page 117,” he said, and they turned to it. Seeing in his mind’s eye Gregorian chant’s square notation, Father lifted his arms and the room filled with an ancient Easter sequence, feelingly sung by ordinary American boys molded into a choir he’d put up against any:

*Victimae paschali laudes
immolent Christiani. . .*

They were in good voice today, the 8th graders especially. Father heard more power from them at every practice—the intoxicating sound of hormones. They were getting so grown up and good-looking, too, the baby fat of their cheeks thinning, faces modeling newly adult expressions as they sang.

Today the tallest boy, Jeff Osborne, caught his eye, his expression dreamy, body tilted forward to inject meaning into the text. He was going to be very good-looking someday. Here in the practice room any temptation Father Schmidt felt he offered up like a good Catholic—turned it to God’s own purpose, shaping and projecting His songs of praise. It was Father’s own ecstatic hour.

After an hour, and some final pitch exercises, he ended the day’s session.

“Good practice, boys!”

Shepherding them out, his work day over, Father was itchy to keep driving, so took the Fury back up

Teagers Mill to the rectory driveway and, leaving the engine running but turning the radio off, ran inside to ask Monsignor if he'd like a ride in his new car before dinner.

Monsignor surprised him by saying, "Sure," clapping his skullcap to his head and getting in.

Father backed carefully into Teagers Mill Road.

"Nice," said Monsignor, breathing in the new-car smell. "Certainly a step up from the Ford."

"Engine's a Mopar 318 V-8," announced Father, playfully pasting them to the backs of their seats. They passed St. Jude's and its neighboring horse farm and, across Teagers Mill, two brick mansions surviving from before the Civil War atop knolls at the center of horse meadows. Soon they were in the countryside. Always aware that they might be seen, recognized, called to account, they comported themselves accordingly, sitting together expressionlessly.

Father hoped they were effective colleagues, but knew they weren't friends. Though he privately thought his superior resembled his beloved Irish potatoes in every respect—head, nose, belly, buttocks—Monsignor held himself out as somehow superior to his auxiliary, whether by virtue of family or education or, as Father put it to himself, simply by virtue of virtue.

It grated. So it wasn't very nice a few weeks back when Monsignor criticized Father's table manners.

"Father, you eat like a toddler in a high chair!" he thundered at table one evening, arms flying and fingers splayed in imitation. "It's enough to make one sick!"

Then he kindly demonstrated how it should be

done—not as an open-mouthed grabbing affair, food ending up everywhere, but a neat tabletop operation, deft manipulation of cutlery at the plate allowing discreet transmission of morsels to the mouth.

It hurt Father Schmidt's feelings. Coming from a big family where he had to fight for food, he was sorry, but thought Monsignor could be a little more tolerant.

Often one or the other had dinner invitations out, but not tonight; tonight they would eat their housekeeper's meal, tucked in the oven beneath a moistened towel before Mrs. Logan left for the day. But separately.

As the lovely old countryside rushed past Monsignor sighed.

"We Are Christ," he remarked.

Father finally prompted, "Yes?"

"Lobbied for this movie. Let's hope I don't live to regret it."

"Can't wait," said Father.

"Are you ready? The choir, I mean?"

"Oh yes. Chosen the music—some of our livelier hymns, ones the congregation knows."

"Good," said Monsignor, and sighed again. "It's a great honor, I know it is, but it's going to be exhausting, too. Guess we can announce it any time. Want the church packed for the filming."

"Oh, there'll be no trouble on that score. People will want to be part of it."

"Let's hope."

They passed through a crossroads of shanties that dated back 100 or 150 years, store windows only recently denuded of *NO COLORED* and *NO*

NEGROES signs.

“The stakes seem higher with this vacancy,” Monsignor said. He didn’t have to spell out that he meant Bishop Philip Hannon’s recent elevation from Archbishop O’Boyle’s sidekick to Archbishop of New Orleans. “Archbishop needs a new auxiliary bishop. Lord knows he’s taking his time making up his mind, but everything counts.”

It was a heady thought that Monsignor’s elevation could mean only good things for Father Schmidt, too – likely as the next pastor of St. Jude’s, probably as a Monsignor himself: *The Singing Monsignor*.

Father looped home by way of Randolph Road, Monsignor sighing, “Well, it’s an honor, this film, whatever happens.”

“I assure you, the choir’s ready to do our part.”

As they pulled up behind the Grand Prix – Father fighting the urge to show off the power brakes by plunging them into the windshield – Monsignor said, “It’s a very nice car, Father. No idea you were so sporty.”

– THE SINGING MONSIGNOR –

The Singing Monsignor

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