

Bless Me, Father



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BLESS ME, FATHER

by

David B. Reid

Bless me, Father for I have sinned: A plea John Michael Brennan longed to hear from the other side of a confessional screen. The authority to forgive another's sins—a privilege sanctioned by Christ himself—that was power. For as long as he could remember, John Michael Brennan desired that kind of power. The same kind of power that comes from being a cop, a judge, the President of the United States, or a Roman Catholic Priest.

"It's a Calling from God," Father Sullivan once explained to him. But to a nine-year-old altar boy, the thought of the Almighty calling him was not at all comforting. It was terrifying. *What would I say? What would I do? How would I know it wasn't the voice of the Devil tricking me?*

Father Sullivan laughed at that last one. "Don't you worry about that John Michael. Satan's not in the business of doing God's recruiting."

John Michael didn't quite know what the pastor meant by *God's recruiting*, but the message was clear enough: don't sweat it.

So he didn't.

He was never certain if his was exactly a *calling*, but the day he was ordained a priest, and henceforth introduced himself to strangers as Father John Brennan, he felt the power.

Over the past three years, as the pastor of Our Lady of Fatima, much to his dismay, Father Brennan felt his power fade. Like a flickering fluorescent bulb on the verge of its last kilowatt-second, he sensed the power was about to be cut off. It had been nothing more than an illusion, he thought. He reconsidered his vows, wondered if he even had a calling. Maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe he wasn't meant to be a priest. Maybe that power wasn't meant to be his.

Fatima had been Father John Brennan's baby—more like a wild child that no foster-parent could tame—since the day he arrived. Archbishop Murphy was direct with him about Fatima and he appreciated the sincerity. It was a church in serious disarray, in dire need of a steadfast leader who could unite the misguided and disgruntled parishioners. The Archbishop forewarned him: three of his predecessors had been chewed up and spat out like bad pieces of meat.

Through gritted teeth his mentor added, "Watch your back, John. Fatima goes through priests like a newborn goes through diapers."

Unlike the dejected priests preceding him, when he arrived at Fatima, Father Brennan ignored the dysfunctional church-family dynamics, and instead immediately embarked upon a beautification project involving the painting of all parish buildings. The two-story Rectory, Elementary School building, and original church structure erected in 1917 were all in need of a fresh coat of paint to cover the blemishes caused by years of acid rain and scorching ultraviolet rays. Hoping to unite the squabbling members of Fatima, the new pastor took advantage of a much needed facelift, and enlisted the

assistance of the parishioners for one common goal: giving OUR church home a new look.

His empowering strategy worked. Before he knew it, Church committees were sprouting and multiplying like dandelions in an open field. The buildings were painted in a matter of three weeks. The only snagging point during the entire process was the Beautification Committee's unanimous choice of color: Passion Pink. Church bylaws forbid a Pastor veto, but even if permitted, Father Brennan would have let the decision stand. He wasn't about to rock the boat and risk becoming another Fatima castoff. Not this soon. Passion Pink it was.

By the time the first coat of paint dried, the uniformed, plaid-clad elementary school children boldly expressed their immediate disapproval and aptly christened it "The Pink Prison." Like the acrylic paint sprayed onto the concrete walls, the name stuck.

Despite that minor glitch, momentum was building; people were working together; the stewing hostility was cooling off. But Father Brennan wasn't so naïve to believe a prettied-up church home was the answer to all of Fatima's problems. After all, even a Mary Kay makeover couldn't transform the Mona Lisa into a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model.

The level of emotional disturbance within the parish became abundantly clear within the first two weeks after his arrival. During that time, Father Brennan received more complaints about the dishonest, backstabbing, two-faced hypocrites of Fatima than he did welcome packages of brownies, cakes, and floral arrangements from well-wishers. One self-anointed whistleblower went so far as to generate a list of *Counterfeit Catholics* whom she snidely reported talked the talk but failed to walk the walk. "Each and every one of them, a disgrace to Christ and His passion," the note read. The most reprehensible of these, according to the castigator, was Maggie Deavers.

Maggie Deavers, past-president of the Ladies of Sodality, apparently had a propensity for swilling sacramental wine and helping herself to the stash of communion wafers stored in a locked cabinet in the sanctuary. The anonymous tipster indicated that Maggie believed consuming the body of Christ brought her closer to her Lord and Savior. What puzzled Father Brennan, of course, was how the author of the note was privy to Maggie's delusional dietary habits. Did the two of them regularly picnic on a box of whole-wheat altar bread and cheap bottle of Cabernet?

With the indictment list and other whispered and written finger-pointing FYIs, Father Brennan offered his congregation a gentle reminder about the seventh verse of the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to John: "He who is without sin shall cast the first stone."

Initially, the homily seemed to be well received (at least no one tossed a rock his way). All eyes were on him, shifting left then right and back again as he casually paced before them, sharing the Good Word. Synchronistic head nods told him he had them right where he wanted them. In a matter of minutes, as if mesmerized by a stage magician, the attentive eyes turned to a collection of blank stares. They were biding time, he thought. To them, Mass was nothing more than a weigh station where tickets were punched before making that final trip through the Pearly Gates.

And so it was, Sunday after Sunday, baptism after baptism, confession after confession: the good members of Our Lady of Fatima, like Maggie Deavers, talked the talk but didn't walk the walk.

To his surprise, his Friday evening Penance service remained popular. Most evenings he was there until at least eight PM. One by one, they'd enter the confessional, kneel before him, and from the other side of a private partition speak the words that granted him the power: *Bless me Father for I have sinned . . .* And in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, he forgave them. Every last one of them: the little white lies to parents, the shoplifted baseball cards from Wal-Mart, the angry curse words, the pornographic perusing, the taking of the Lord's name in vain, and even the coveting of Miss Perry's hooters (Ryan Sanders couldn't help himself. He was in the fifth grade, and fact was, Miss Perry was stacked).

Eventually, he realized the service was nothing more than a good conscience cleanser for those planning to receive the Eucharist the following Sunday. Their lame revelations were an insult to his holy robe.

There were no affairs, no murders, no sexual molestations, not even a closet homosexual seeking the Lord's forgiveness. It was all rather silly. There simply was no power in forgiving Timmy Robinson for copping a look up his Aunt Jennifer's skirt, or absolving Julie Frazer (whose lisp always gave her away) for failing to feed her pet goldfish.

Penance wasn't living up to his voyeuristic expectations. There was no clout in granting forgiveness for the mundane venial sins these people confessed. He craved the mortal violations. Then he could decide if the penitent expressing remorse deserved absolution. Then, and only then, would he have the power.

And at approximately 8:45 PM on Friday April the 13th, three years to the day after taking the helm at Our Lady of Fatima, life fortuitously changed for Father John Michael Brennan. The opportunity to seize the power came after Penance Service when he walked into the Rectory and discovered that someone had paid him an unexpected and most uninvited visit. Unfortunately, his guest or guests didn't hang around long enough for proper introductions. But before slipping out the back door, they helped themselves to a number of his personal possessions including his Dell Inspiron laptop, a flat screen TV, surround sound stereo system, three bottles of Chianti, and his collection of John Wayne DVDs. There was little evidence left behind from what he could gather, but he was pretty certain he saw Carl Belanger's Ford Taurus pulling off the church parking lot posthaste, just seconds before he entered the Rectory.

A police officer and two crime scene unit agents arrived twenty minutes after Father Brennan placed the 9-1-1 call. An Officer Phillips took his statement and itemized list of missing valuables, while the two uniformed agents initiated a quick dusting of doorknobs, countertops, and light switches. As the CSI hopefuls twirled their powdered brushes and scoured the carpet one last time for any sliver of evidence, Officer Phillips asked Father Brennan if there was anything else he needed to report. The priest paused. *He who is without sin . . .*

Hell with that, he thought. One way or the other, Father John Brennan would lay claim to the power he craved, yet had foolishly squandered over the past three years. If he couldn't garner his power through the forgiveness of sins, he would summon it through the accusation of a sinner.

And so, with the speed of a Clark Kent phone booth wardrobe-change, Father Brennan reclaimed his power. With a proverbial rock in one hand and an accusatory

finger extending from the other, Father John Michael Brennan felt a surge of power course through every living cell in his body.

“Yes, officer come to think of it, there is one other thing. I’m pretty sure I saw Carl Belanger’s car speeding off the church lot tonight. I don’t mean to point fingers, but I have a feeling he may be responsible for this.”

Pushing the bill of his hat with the end of a capped pen, the officer replied, “Belanger? Is that with an E-R or A-R?”

“I believe it’s E-R,” he replied. “I don’t know the man very well, but I’ve always had this sneaking suspicion that he’s up to no good.”

What he failed to tell Officer Phillips was that sneaking suspicion of his came from the same list he received three years ago revealing the poop on that no-good Maggie Deavers and 43 other Counterfeit Catholics including Carl Belanger. *Carl Belanger has sticky fingers*, the note read.

“We’ll look into it, Father. Is there anything else we can do for you before we take off?”

“I don’t think so, son. I thank you for all your help tonight.”

“That’s no problem, Father,” he said. Turning to leave, Officer Phillips stopped in mid-stride, and with the trademark afterthought questioning of Lieutenant Columbo asked, “You know Father, if this fella Belanger is responsible for this, the District Attorney will be pressing charges and he could go to jail.”

A sinister grin grew beneath the priest’s nose. “As well he should.”

The accusation by Father Brennan cost Carl Belanger three hours of his life, and the embarrassment of a messy fingerprinting. By Sunday service, word had spread around the congregation that Carl Belanger broke into the Rectory and managed to steal most of Father Brennan’s personal belongings. The list of stolen goods grew as the days went by. Father Brennan half-expected his anonymous rumormonger, who over the years kept him apprised of any Counterfeit Catholic Club happenings, to post a list of additional Carl Belanger accusations, not to mention a scolding *told-you-so* note. That memo never arrived.

In the meantime, a revitalized Father Brennan capitalized upon his victimization by subjecting his congregation to an ample helping of force-fed guilt. He’d call them out—every last one of them. Make them accountable for their behaviors. One way or another he’d force them to bended knee and coerce them into revealing their daily evil misdoings. Then they would need his forgiveness. By God, he would have his power.

He found his crinkled Counterfeit Catholic list, and started with Carl Belanger. Though never mentioning him by name, anyone tuning into his Sunday sermons knew exactly whom he was referring to when ranting about *The Thief* amongst them who *shamefully hides behind Satan’s cape*. He made a point to let them know that all sins can be forgiven. But no sin shall go unpunished if the sinner lacks genuine remorse, or is too fearful to confess.

Every Sunday, he selected an unwitting suspect from the dirty laundry list and publicly denounced their sinful behavior. Like a parent forewarning a misbehaving child with the *Santa won’t bring you any toys* proclamation, Father John Brennan held his people hostage with the threat that they would be damned to Hell or, at best, waylaid in Purgatory while the souls of practicing Catholics who made good use of the confessional passed them by on angels’ wings. Soon enough, the confessional lines lengthened, as did

time spent in the musty box where his coerced subjects bore their darkest secrets. Finally, he was hearing the smut. Finally, he was able to grant forgiveness, knowing he had good reason not to. Finally, he was able to impose a punishment fitting of the crime. Usually it was no more than a couple decades of the Rosary, but on occasion he happily mandated forty hours of community service at the local soup kitchen. Either way, Father John Michael Brennan had the power.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. And after six months of delivering fire and damnation from his bully pulpit, the tides of Our Lady of Fatima once again turned on Father Brennan. All charges against Carl Belanger were dropped. Mr. Belanger was off the hook, and found himself a new church home two counties away where no one would know of the crimes he apparently didn't commit. Several dedicated parishioners went with him. The congregation was talking. Father Brennan now had the staying power of a wet noodle.

Penance service was a bust. Attendance was down, and those seeking forgiveness reverted to confessing the silly secrets no one really cared about. With his power fast fading, he knew he had few opportunities left to revitalize his authority. He knew it would require the manipulation of the most vulnerable, impressionable and defenseless of them all: the children.

His timing couldn't have been better. The second and third graders were in the midst of diligently preparing for First Holy Communion and the sacrament of Penance. This time, unlike Baptism, where a Godparent vouched for them, the kids were on their own. Their active participation in the sanctioned ceremonies was required. Hitler had his junior Nazis; Father Brennan his captive sacramental lambs.

For the next four weeks, Father John Brennan manipulated their malleable minds, planting and fertilization in each of them, a guilty conscience that would take years of psychotherapy to uproot.

He convinced them that life without confession wasn't a life worth living. God was keeping tally, he informed them, and if they let the numbers get away from them, they would find themselves on a one-way fast track to Hell. That got their attention. But that wasn't quite enough. They needed to know their secrets were safe with him. Without this assurance, they'd never spill the beans on their dastardly deeds. Just then, as if pre-ordained, and on perfect cue, a freckle-faced, strawberry blonde in the last seat of the third row threw her arm in the air. It was the perfect set-up.

Wanting to ensure that her sins wouldn't be blabbed across the schoolyard, nine-year-old Kelli Metts sought a verbal guarantee from Father Brennan that her confession was a *cross your heart, hope to die, stick a needle in your eye* secret. He explained to her and the other children that confession was a bond with God: A sacred promise between a priest and confessor that all disclosed sins are protected. They could never be revealed to anyone.

"Not even your parents," the priest whispered through a cupped hand. "That's the agreement we make with God," he said. "When a priest hears your confession, he can't ever tell anyone anything about what you confess. Your secret is always safe in the confessional."

"What if you've killed somebody?" Jacob Welsh boldly inquired.

"Still can't tell anyone. Not even the police. It stays between you, the priest, and God."

A collective “*WOW*” filled the room.

“But that doesn’t guarantee that the sin will be forgiven,” he cautioned. “Breaking one of the Ten Commandments is serious business, children. And if a priest believes he can’t forgive the sin, he won’t. He’ll leave it up to God.”

Gearing their minds to the importance of telling all, even at the expense of personal embarrassment, he added, “It’s very important to confess *all* your sins, children. Otherwise, you take the chance that God won’t let you into Heaven. If the priest says your sins are forgiven, then they’re forgiven.”

Later that evening, as he leaned in to tend to the service’s first confession, he sensed a pained hesitation on the other side of the obstructive screen. He waited patiently, knowing forced confessions never yield productive results.

“Take your time, my child,” he whispered. “God is patient.”

“Bless me Father . . . for I have sinned,” the shaky voice started. She could be no more than twelve or thirteen, he estimated. “It’s been . . . four months since my last confession.”

Four months, he thought. This should be a good one. Ample time for the Devil to make due with a vulnerable soul. “Go ahead my child. You may confess your sins. God’s compassion is with you.”

“Father, I’m not sure how to say this,” she said with a heavy sigh.

The voice was unfamiliar. “Say it anyway you like. Your God is a forgiving God.”

“Yes Father, I know. It’s just . . . well, I just wanted you to know that . . . it was me who took your stuff a few months ago,” she finally spat out. “Not just me, but some of my friends too. We saw the light on in the Rectory, and knew you’d be over here for the Penance service. We knocked anyway, and when no one answered, we checked the door to see if it was unlocked, and when the knob turned, we walked in. That’s when Kenny and Billy took the flat screen TV, and I grabbed your laptop. J.J. took some other stuff, but I’m not sure what all he got.”

The confessional fell silent.

“I feel kinda bad about it,” she continued, “but I knew if I came here tonight and confessed what happened, you would at least know who stole your stuff. And knowing you’re not allowed to tell anyone, I knew I wouldn’t get into any trouble.”

The lingering incense from a funeral service hours earlier filled his nostrils. Looking to his closed Bible, her voice grew faint; the walls of the dark booth crowded him. Gripping the Good Book, bringing it to his chest, trying to silence his pounding heart and racing mind, he sensed the lid closing on his casket.

“I guess it kinda it works for both of us,” he heard her say. “I’m off the hook, and now you know it wasn’t Mr. Belanger who ripped you off. I suppose that’s the cool thing about confession It has to stay between you and me.”

“And God,” he said, finally speaking.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“And God. It’s between you, and me, and God.”

“Whatever,” she smirked.

Before he could inquire about her intentions of returning his belongings, he heard the door to the confessional creak open, then slam shut. He didn’t have the chance to

absolve her sins. He didn't give her the obligatory penance. No Hail Marys. No Our Fathers. No decades of the Rosary. He sat there, alone in the dark. Powerless.
THE END