

# So Very Much the Best of Us

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Prayers of Praise  
in Prose

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BRIAN DOYLE



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# THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

Look, is the Holy Roman Catholic Church in America, and surely abroad, a flawed often-greedy often-idiotic sometimes-corrupt corporation complete with fools and mountebanks and criminals and prim souls afraid of change and niggling for power?

Sure it is.

But that's the crust, the surface, a part of the package, not at all the whole package; and those who sneer at Catholicism, and tar all with the brush that should paint a few, are fools. For Catholicism in America, and surely abroad, is and always has been a wilder adventure than we admit. It's about men and women and children and how they live their lives trying to find the light and mercy behind all things. It's about people muddling along trying to find and share love. It's not about rules and regulations. It's not about Not. On the much deeper level it is not about what should be prevented but about what is possible. On the deepest level it is so revolutionary that we hardly ever whisper or acknowledge or roar that truth. But it's so.

At its essence Catholicism says that all beings are holy and Christ is a splinter in every single heart, even the twisted and brooding ones, and our job is not to wag fingers and pronounce judgment but to reach for the broken and the hopeless and the starving and the naked and the jailed and do whatever we can to witness and heal and celebrate them, for they are Christ, every bit the Christ that a pope is.

If you are like me you are delighted by Pope Francis, whose first words as *Il Papa* were *I am a sinner*. Now there's a guy with some refreshing humility, who gets it that a small tight cadre of rigid believers is so very sensible in a world so rife with chance and chaos, but that such a cadre will only change the world by demonstrating true humility while finding new ways through the walls that people

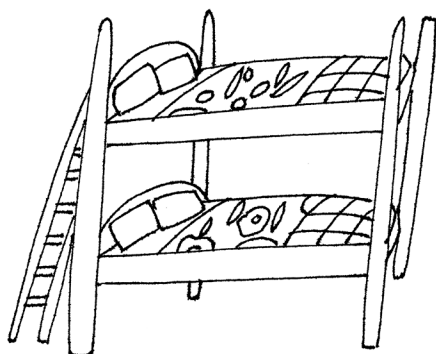
erect around themselves.

I have no patience with those walls anymore. This book is an attempt to find new ways through and around walls. I want to poke around mercy and love and tenderness and laughter and engagement with others. I think those are the weapons that will destroy greed and violence. I think those are the deep weapons of Catholicism. I think that's what Catholicism in my beloved bedraggled brave country is, at its best.

Maybe you do, too, in which case thank you for being my teammate.

Brian Doyle  
Portland, Oregon

I.





# CONFIRMATION DAY

The day I was granted the Sacrament of Confirmation and was admitted with full rights and privileges to the Church Eternal got off to a slow start, because the bishop was late; there had been a rain delay at the Mets game, but His Excellency couldn't just *leave* the stadium, because the Mets were playing the Pirates, and this was the Pirates team with Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell and Dock Ellis (who would pitch a no-hitter a month later while stoned out of his mind), and anyway the Mets were coming off their shocking championship the year before, so who would leave on account of a little downpour?

We waited in the school auditorium as our parents and grandparents and disgruntled brothers and sisters rustled in the searing heat of the church. It was a roaring hot day and someone in the choir fainted. My dad said later he could hear a hole exactly the size of an alto in the choir's subsequent performance, but we think he was teasing us. Finally the bishop arrived, having left in a huff when the Mets made their fourth error of the day, and the ceremony started.

Our older brothers and sisters, who had already been Confirmed and were pretty smug about it and claimed there were secret rituals and code words they could never reveal to us on pain of death, had filled us with stories of the bishop slapping kids in the face as part of the ancient Sacrament, and while none of us could figure out why exactly a slap figured in a ceremony that seemed to be about welcoming new members to the army, we were suitably forewarned, and there was a lot of loose talk about slapping the bishop back, and ducking his hand, and bobbing and weaving like Muhammad Ali, or catching his hand as it came hurtling toward your face and leaning in companionably and whispering *not this time, big fella*, and remarks like that, mostly from the boys, although two of the girls, I remember, were coldly intent on slapping anyone who slapped them, and one girl said she would accept the first blow and turn her other cheek for a second

slap, but we thought she was just trying to impress Sister Marie.

The Mets lost the game finally 7 to 4, and just as we started up the aisle, two by two, boys to the west and girls to the east, a flurry of fathers and older brothers arrived in the back of the church and the heat rose noticeably. The choir started into Onward Christian Soldiers and someone, we think our dad, said the words *breakaway Anglican cult* loud enough for the whole back of the church to ripple. I looked at my older brother as I went past our family's pew and he made a gesture like a bishop slapping a kid so hard the kid's spectacles flew off and my heart quailed. It was a good thing the boy in front of me had new shoes that squeaked so loud when he took a step that everyone on our side of the church laughed as we marched forward which made me happy even though I was sure my spectacles were going to be smashed to smithereens when the bishop knocked them off and we didn't have the money for another pair and I would end up destitute and living in the blackberry thickets by the railroad station with the other hoboes, drinking lighter fluid and eating mice for a living and having only the *New York Post*, a terrible newspaper, for a blanket.

His Excellency was no pixie and he was from the Bronx and he looked like he was eight feet tall and a thousand pounds of muscle when I got within range and got a good look at him. I had seen missionaries before, so I was used to priests not wearing the straightforward black uniform, but I have to say it was unnerving to see a guy who looked like a wrestler wearing bright purple silks and a hat like a huge golden thumbnail. He wore spectacles, which cheered me up for a moment, because no guy with glasses would ever slap another guy with glasses, guys with glasses are like teammates in the dim murk, but then I remembered my brother telling me that His Excellency wore glasses so he could land his slaps with precision, rather than be scattering them all over the place like French artillery officers.

We approached the bishop two by two, as I said, but as we detoured around the altar the lines then merged, so that we

approached Slap City boy girl boy girl, and all of this for some reason was in height order, for reasons known only to Sister Marie, who was also a stickler for spacing, so as we climbed the altar and marched ever closer to the bishop we were all discombobulated, trying to keep our spacing right, trying not to think about living on mice and lighter fluid, trying not to laugh at Herman's squeaking shoes, trying to merge properly between glaring girls, and all this on the hottest day anyone could ever remember, despite the brief thunderstorm, which was probably the reason the Mets' pitcher lost his rhythm and ended up walking five Pirates.

The girl in front of me was named Corita and she was one of the tallest girls in class and she had a head of the thickest curliest hair you ever saw, so I couldn't really see what was happening with her and the bishop. I tried to peer around her but she stuck her elbows out angrily and all I could see of His Excellency was the far east and west edges of his purple robes. You never saw anything so purple in your life, and the cloth was some shimmering fabric that reflected light in remarkable ways, so that staring directly at even the edges of the rippling brilliance of his robes was mesmerizing, which is probably the whole point, robewise, when you think about it. Never forget, as my dad likes to say, that the Church Eternal has been around a very long time and it has thought about every tiny detail of the theatrical milieu, and milled it for maximum effect, which you have to admire, as long as you remember it is colorful melodrama, which is to say mannered performance, reflective of substance but not actually, of course, substance itself. This is how my dad talks, which is also mesmerizing.

Finally Corita stepped aside, glaring at me, and I climbed the final step and stood in front of the bishop. He was sitting in the pastor's immense wooden chair, with his crosier in his left hand and his right hand, the slapper, coiled and ready on the arm of the throne. For an instant I got absorbed in his crosier — the crosier is his shepherd's crook, essentially the badge of his office, and to me it looked eerily

like a pike or a battle-ax, despite the friendly curls and coils at the top — but then His Excellency leaned in on me and smiled and asked my name. His voice was surprisingly gentle but this too I expected as my brother had told me bishops liked to lull kids before the slap. For another instant I thought about giving him one of my younger brothers' names but then I realized that it was all one and the same to him, another name wouldn't save me, and if I lied to a bishop *on the altar* I would burst into flames and Sister Marie would be upset about spacing.

So I told him my name. He smiled and then, more loudly now, asked me what name I was choosing to bear as a member with full rights and privileges in the Church Eternal. Again I hesitated, and I have to say all these years later that I am still ashamed to say that the first thought that went through my mind was *Bozo!*, but then I said *Patrick!*, as my brothers and I had agreed I would say, and the bishop, his voice now booming, said *Then Patrick I name thee in the Holy Spirit, and I sign thee with the sign of the cross, and confirm thee with the chrism of our salvation in Jesus Christ!* He said this so incredibly loudly that I was sure people a mile away could hear it; he was so loud, in fact, and I was so close to his mouth, that I was shell-shocked for an instant, which is why I lost track of his right hand.

I was never much for peripheral vision anyway, what with the thick spectacles — I have been hit with every sort of ball there is and was once struck a glancing blow by a swallow, which is not a phrase you hear every day — so I didn't see his hand looming until the last possible second. Did I flinch? Sure, I flinched — I mean, I have brothers, and you learn to go with the direction that the blow will carry you, to dilute its force — and as I bent sharply away from his hand, my glasses slipped, and I went for them with both hands; again an unconscious reflex, just like flinching, because there is nothing so important to a guy with glasses as his glasses, without them you are doomed, it's mice and lighter fluid for sure, and as my dad says thank God you are not living in the time of Our Lord Jesus Christ before there *were* such

things as glasses, unless you were living in a village through which He passed on His footloose voyages, in which case *you* would be in the New Testament in the place of the woman who touched his cloak, the story changing slightly to be something like *you* touching His cloak and whispering up from the dust a polite request for Him to miraculously invent not one but two pairs of glasses, one as an backup for when you lose the first pair, which we both know will happen.

My brothers told me later there was a titter from the audience at all this, me flinching away and my glasses slipping and all that, but I didn't hear it, for which I am grateful, because I would certainly have burst into tears. Maybe that was a miracle from Our Lord Jesus Christ, to cover my ears for a moment. Or maybe what happened next was a miracle also. I stood up straight, adjusting my glasses, and the bishop's right hand touched me ever so gently, ever so tenderly, on my left cheek, and he said *peace be with you, Patrick, peace be with you*, and he *meant* it, he meant it with all his heart. I could tell that, somehow. I am not kidding and I am not being literary and I mean it as much as I have ever meant anything. I never met that man before that moment and I never met him afterwards, but I tell you true that his eyes were so kind and gentle and merciful and amused that my heart leapt a little even though I was twelve years old and rattled and a little frightened and just beginning to be cynical. He left his huge warm hand on my cheek for another second or two and then he said it again, this time very quietly, just so he and I could hear it, *peace be with you, son, peace be with you*, and I turned away to the west and walked off the altar, and all the rest of my life, until the day I die, I will remember the absolute genuine heartfelt kindness in that man's eyes.

We are always going around looking for miracles and here they are right here waiting patiently for us.

# HIS DAD

One day when I was in college, many years ago, and our alarm clock rang at the crack of noon, and I lurched out of the bottom bunk and groggily thumped my roommate in the top bunk. He did not, for once, growl and slide his long legs over the side and leap down hurriedly to beat me to the shower so as to beat me to class, but lay in his bunk, silent and still.

I barked at him and ran for the shower so as to beat him to class but when I got back to our room he had budged not an inch.

This was weird because usually he was the soul of punctuality and he had never cut a class yet, a remarkable thing to say, as some of the young men on our floor had never been to class once, as far as we could tell, despite the fact that intellectual stimulus was ostensibly the product our parents were buying or borrowing for; these young men spent their time playing cards and records and basketball and football, and planning social expeditions and romantic conspiracies, and drinking beer and rum, and arranging dances and dates, and smuggling kegs and paramours into the hall against the rules, and etc. I remember one young man in particular who I do not think ever left the confines of our hall once in the years I lived there. He was thin pale young man with a drawl who said he was from Antarctica. His roommates brought him food, we thought, although no one had ever seen him eat, and there was a rumor that he never slept but prowled the attic in our hall all night long, dreaming of ice.

I asked my roommate if he was sick and he said no, and I asked him if something was broken and he said no, and then he told me that the phone had rung this morning, long before dawn, and that he had leapt down to grab it before I woke, because when the phone rings at four in the morning the news is never good, and indeed the news was bad: his dad had died. It was his mom calling. His dad had been sick but no one expected him to die, but he died, a thousand

miles away, suddenly, in his chair on the lawn, the chair with a view of the beach.

I had never cut a class either; I was just as alert as my roommate to the fact that our parents were scratching desperately to send us to college. But I cut class that day. I got dressed and climbed up into the top bunk and sat with my roommate all afternoon. I remember it was a glorious spring day and you could smell flowers and thick redolent plowed soil. Our college was set like Oz amid a vast sea of cornfields and the spring plowing was in full gear and you could smell the dense fat ancient patient soil and imagine it darker than brown, darker than black, composed of creatures that had died and were now preparing to enter creatures that lived.

Other guys came by over the course of the afternoon when they noticed we had missed class, and some guys brought sandwiches, and one guy hopped up in the top bunk with us for a while, which was a kindly thing to do, I thought. Some guys tried to be funny and some guys said religious things but mostly guys understood that just stopping by was enough. A lot of guys stopped by, I have to say. That's what I wanted to tell you about here, that a lot of guys stopped by the top bunk and put a hand on my roommate's shoulder or put a hand gently on his chest as he lay there weeping. That's all. I have been paying attention to prayer and grace for fifty years now, and I don't think I ever saw anything so moving as that.

Finally late in the afternoon I had to go to work in the dining hall, so I jumped down from the top bunk, but another guy said he would take over for me and he climbed up. As I walked down the hall I saw a ragged line of guys waiting to lay a hand on my roommate's shoulder. I have seen a lot of cool things in life, but I never saw anything cooler than that.

# THE PROTESTANT

The first Protestant I ever met was a silvery gentleman sitting at a table at my uncle's wedding reception, in New York City, when I was eight years old. This was 1964. I had been the ring-bearer at the wedding, and there had been a tense moment during which I clutched the ring so tightly in my palm that my dad, the best man, had to peel my fingers off it one by one as everyone in the church laughed, and then I had been forced by my mother to waltz with one of the demure flower girls at the reception, during which I thought I would die of embarrassment, so I was already rattled when I was introduced, by my dad, to the Protestant.

The Protestant was sitting alone at a table in the far corner of the reception, near the dessert table, and while now I suppose he was sitting alone because everyone else at his table was dancing or standing outside smoking and talking about the Mets, at that time I assumed he was alone because he was Protestant and no one would sit with him, probably because they didn't speak Protestant.

I had never met a Protestant before, and while I knew they existed, and why they broke away from Our Holy Mother the Church (the Anglicans had to leave because King Henry of England wanted to commit adultery, and the Methodists had to leave because John Wesley made them, and Lutherans had to leave because Martin Luther ruined a church door, and the Presbyterians were Scottish and didn't like anyone telling them what to do), I had never actually met one, so this was a fraught moment, made all the more so because it was my own dad who led me over to him and, talking as easy and friendly as you would to a regular person, introduced us. The Protestant stood and gravely extended his hand and I stood there like a slack-jawed idiot and then my dad said something quietly witty and he and the Protestant laughed and then my dad strode off to do best-man things and I was left alone, for a moment, with the Protestant.



He sat down and gestured for me to sit down which I did, terrified, and he said Now Brian, your father tells me that your great dream is to be a writer, is that right? An ancient and admirable profession, the scribe, the storyteller, the witness.

I was speechless; the Protestant had the same wry erudite tone as my dad! Was this some sort of plot, to get me off my guard so he could lure me to Methodism or something?

I myself am something of a writer, he continued. That is how I came to know and admire your father. We are both journalists, you see — your father for the Catholic press and me for Protestant periodicals. On our side we have the utmost respect for your father. I wonder if you know how esteemed he is in his field, in part because he has reached out to journalists in the other Christian traditions in ways no one in his position has ever done, to my knowledge.

I was still speechless, the very *idea* of being spoken to reasonably by a Protestant being new to me, but by now I had gotten a good look at the man and I saw that he was dressed just like a regular person at a wedding reception, except he had not loosened his tie or imbibed heavily, as yet. His hair was combed, his face was evenly and closely shaved, and he had just the same sort of caterpillar eyebrows as my grandfather. To be wholly honest he looked very much like my grandfather except that he, the Protestant, did not have a pink Racing Form in his pocket, or a diamond tie-pin, or a diamond pinkie-ring like the one Grandfather said was given to him by Divine Providence one afternoon at Belmont Park Race Track.

The Protestant did, however, have a slim silver wedding ring on his left hand, and he must have seen me staring at it, for he said, with some amusement, Are you also married, Brian?

This was such an unusual question that I was moved to speak, and I said no, sir, and he said Although it seems to me that the young lady with whom you danced rather fancied you, but perhaps you did not fancy her quite so much as she fancied you, and I said yes, sir, no, sir, which still seems to me like one of the most bone-

headed things I ever said.

Right about then my dad strode back into view and claimed me for Family Photographs but before we left he put both hands on the Protestant's shoulders and said I am deeply touched that you are here, that you made the effort and came all this way. It means a great deal to me. It's the human moments like this that will bring us all back together as a common force for witness and justice, perhaps. It is only history that divides us, and that's all in the past. Think what we might do if we all walk together again.

The Protestant said he too was touched to be invited, and honored, and said You can count on me as a partner in the long work, Jim, and maybe the time will come, when Brian is our age, that the walls have crumbled among the Christian traditions and we are joined in the work we were asked to do by the Founder, and Him a Jewish man at that.

My dad laughed and the Protestant laughed and we parted, but all these years later I remember the way my dad put his hands on that man's shoulders and the way they spoke to each other with real affection and respect and camaraderie. I am older now than they were then, and the walls among the Christian traditions have still not crumbled, for any number of silly reasons mostly having to do with lethargy and money and paranoia, and no sensible person would have the slightest expectation that they will in my lifetime, but sometimes I still wonder what it would be like if they did crumble suddenly somehow and the two billion Christians on earth stood hand in hand, for the first time ever, insisting on mercy and justice and humility and generosity as the real way of the world. You would think that two billion people insisting on something might actually make that thing happen, wouldn't you? And imagine for a moment, just a moment here as we come to the end of the story, what that would be like.