

Midnight Mass at St. Liborius
A Mostly True Memoir by Curt Smothers



As I walked from the wrong side of the back of the large altar while holding onto the giant candle mounted on the ornate brass holder, my right heel became entangled in the cassock hem. Unable to disentangle my foot, I had to compensate by affecting somewhat of a Big Bird-type limping gait as I proceeded to the front of the vast altar, genuflected and stumbled forward.

People in the Pews Were Gasping

I heard audible gasps from the crowded pews and saw looks of shock on the faces of the three priest celebrants standing off to the side entry from the sacristy. My brother Sam made his annoying snorking sound in a vain attempt to avoid laughing, and flatulent Ted Wyczoric, who had probably eaten Polish sausage earlier, couldn't help himself.

A Really Big Deal

It was Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Liborius Catholic Church in North St. Louis, Mo. The year was 1952 and I was ten years old. Christmas Midnight Mass was a really big deal. St. Liborius Church. With its lingering odors of burnt incense, candle wax and Mogen David Wine in the sacristy, this monument to Polish piety had always been an intimidating place for me as a boy.

In this holy shrine, one only whispered and never laughed, except maybe when some old lady in a black dress and scarf happened to pass gas during the up-and-down, kneel-stand-and-sit routines of the Mass. Even then, the only thing you could get away with was muffled giggling – unless Sister caught you. (Back then they were still allowed to hit you.)

A Liturgical Super Bowl

Solemn High Mass on Christmas Eve was really the liturgical Super Bowl at St. Liborius. They pulled out all the stops and the three priests who celebrated this event donned their varsity gold-gilded vestments for an extravaganza of a Mass on steroids.

Accompanying the celebration were the familiar Latin prayers and chants, but this time sung to the music of popular Christmas hymns all sung by the first-string choir and organist. Who can forget Agnus Dei sung to the tune of “O Come All Ye Faithful”? (I remember wondering how the Credo in Unum Deo bit would have sound sung to the tune of “Jingle Bells.”)

We Acolites Were Like Cheerleaders

Nevertheless, my minor supportive role in all this religious pomp was to be a so-called acolyte (candle bearer). I was part of a group of 20 young altar boys. Our simple job was to emerge from the rear of the altar, half on each side, come together two at a time, genuflect and split off to sit in a double row of benches forward of the altar on each side near the communion rail. The whole effect was like cherubic young angels forming a cheerleading squad while the priests fussed over the inaugural ceremony ushering in the Baby Jesus (who would be sacrificed on the Cross during the upcoming Lenten season).

We Were Observers Only

After that, all we had to do was observe

the Mass and line up for communion later on. Then, when the celebration was finished, we reversed the process and exited stage left and right doing a double genuflect route. This had all been practiced thoroughly, and my younger brother Sam and I were part of this troupe of happy genuflectors.

Mom Woke Us Up Late...It Got Worse from There

On this particular Christmas Eve my brother and I got our first taste of Murphy’s Law (which was ironic, because St. Liborius was a totally Polish parish).

Our mother woke us up just 20 minutes before the mass was to start! My dad, who was sleeping soundly in his Christmas-cheer induced coma, was in no shape to drive us, and my mother did

not drive. So my brother and I had to get dressed, do the birdbath routine and rush down the stairs up the street, across the Natural Bridge Highway for the final half-mile trek to St. Liborius.

We Ran In the Icy Streets

The streets were glazed over with a coating of ice everywhere. My brother and I rushed, slipped, fell and got up again to repeat the process about every half block in what must have looked like the Three Stooges minus one.

When we arrived at the rear sacristy ready for duty five minutes before curtain call, the nun in charge, like a panicking stage manager-cum-seamstress, threw us into our acolyte garb (a red robe-like cassock with a white sleeveless, lacy garment called a surplus). She did not have time to hem up the cassock except for a few emergency stitches.

Stage Two--Exit Left...No, Right!

Stage two of Murphy's Law kicked in when I exited the back of the altar on the wrong side, causing an imbalance of acolytes. But the show must go on. Thinking back now, I realize I probably should have done a horizontal move for double genuflect and headed towards the bench that had room for me. But I was just an ingénue acolyte and didn't want to draw any more attention than I already had.

I Took One for the Team

It was at that point that I tripped as I was doing the 1952 version of Monty Python's funny walk. Fortunately, the fall was more of a stumble where I was able to catch myself before sprawling completely forward. I managed to save the candle and I retained my balance by using the candleholder to stop my momentum. I did bash my knee a bit on the marble floor, but I toughed it out like a trooper.

My Brother and Ted (Who Farted) Weren't Sympathetic

Then that I noticed that not everyone had gasped in sympathy or fear for my safety. Looking over to the other bench I noticed my brother Sam, red in the face and in a paroxysm of muffled giggling. As these things always do, it spread and caused his fellow acolytes to start in.

It was all made worse when one of my classmates, Ted Wyczoric sitting next to me, got so caught up in the muffled hilarity that he actually passed gas as loudly as any gag poo-poo cushion and in an odoriferous manner that actually, for once, masked the latent candle and incense smells of St. Liborius.

God Is Just

But God is just and Karma was satisfied. Sam's group of miscreants and despoilers of the Christmas High Mass dignity were awarded a punishment by the school's Principal, Sister Mary Nicotine (not her real name). Sam spent the rest of the Christmas holidays writing the text to the Act of Contrition over and over until it filled a roll of scrap wallpaper that Sister reserved for special punishments.

Ted "the gas" Wyczorik was sitting on my side of the altar and got away clean. Whenever I smell incense, I think of Ted.