

True or False

A short story by B. E. Scott

THE PRIESTS AT ST. ANDREWS were still in the habit of hearing confessions before the 5:30 Mass on Saturday, though indeed not *every* Saturday the way it was in former times. Hardly anyone now ever came except old ladies who belonged to the altar society when there used to be such things, and very occasionally a parishioner with some sort of real problem, usually of a domestic turn not having anything to do with sin exactly. And sometimes a stranger would enter the confessional, someone the priest had never seen before. Someone from a neighboring parish who didn't want to be recognized more than likely. These latter confessions would generally involve something more recognizable as sin, like cheating on a spouse, or abortion or something. But this was pretty rare.

Based on the general disuse of this sacrament, Fr. Reilly, pastor of St. Andrews, decided confessions need only be heard once a month, on first Saturdays, from four to five in the afternoon. Fr. Reilly's assistant, Fr. Tim, the parochial vicar, for his part welcomed the chance this gave him to get away early on Saturdays. People with a pressing problem can always call the rectory and make an appointment. That sort of thing still happened once in a while.

It happened on one of those Saturdays when confession was not scheduled and the parochial vicar, Fr. Tim, was already dressed in sweater and jeans for an evening out. It was close to five o'clock and Fr. Reilly, the pastor, who had the 5:30 Mass that particular Saturday, was in his study with the door closed. Fr. Tim was on his way out when the phone rang.

Confessions are held on the first Saturday, he said when he heard the reason for the call.

To tell you the truth I really don't know if any of the parishes are hearing confession today, he answered pleasantly, his foot up on the desk. Probably not this late. He noticed there was a spot of something on his new Reeboks.

Well, it is pretty late now, Fr. Tim said looking at his watch.

No, he said laughing, we don't hear confessions over the telephone. That's one thing we can't do, at least not yet. He laughed again.

Well, he said, is it something that can't really wait? How about tomorrow before one of the masses maybe?

No, sure, fine, no, hey it's OK, he said, his voice masking the sour look on his face. That's what we're here for. Are you nearby?

All right, just come to the rectory, he said. I'm Father Tim. I'll be here.

He hung up and immediately dialed another number. Joe, he said, I've gotten tied up here for a bit. No, I don't think so. Maybe ten twenty minutes tops. If it's more than

that, you guys go ahead. I'll catch up with you at Luigi's. Save some Calamari for me, he said with a laugh and hung up.

The penitent, a man of in his early forties, the age of Fr. Tim, arrived ten minutes later, looking rather glum. Shall we go into my office, Fr. Tim said pointing to a door, or we could go over to the confessional in the church. Suit yourself. We still have a few minutes before Mass.

This is OK, the penitent said, moving to the office.

I haven't been to confession for a while, the man said when they were seated.

That's OK, Fr. Tim said with a wave of his hand. He liked to get people to relax.

It's been a real long while, the man said.

Well, how long?

About twenty years, maybe longer, he said.

Well, said Fr. Tim with a nod, at least you're here now. That's good.

We're supposed to go once a year, isn't that right? the man said.

It's not a bad idea, Fr. Tim said. Gets things off your chest. You married?

Yes, he said.

So, Fr. Tim said, shifting, what can I do for you?

I'd like to go to confession, he said.

Right. Fr. Tim hesitated. The man was staring at the Reeboks. Let me get my stole, Fr. Tim said. He got up and rummaged through a closet. It's in here somewhere, he said absently. Ah, he said, hitting his hand to his head, it's in my bedroom closet. Be right back, he said.

Now, what's on your mind? Fr. Tim said back in his seat across from his visitor, his purple stole slung incongruously down around a green turtle neck and blue green sweater.

Help me out, Father. It's been so long. Isn't there something special I'm supposed to say to get this started?

Well, Fr. Tim said with an effort to smile, you usually tell the priest how long it's been since your last confession. But you've already done that.

The man sat forward a little. I remember it, he said brightening. Bless me father for I have sinned. It's been twenty years since my last confession.

Very good, said Fr. Tim. Just go ahead now. Tell me what's bothering you.

I don't know how to say this, Father, the man said. It's hard for me.

Well, something is bothering you, right?

Yes, Father, definitely.

Can you tell me what it is?

That's just it, Father. I'm having trouble finding the words.

Have you committed some sin?

Like fornication, Father?

Fornication, whatever.

Not really, Father. I don't screw around or anything like that. I look at the girls at the plant once in a while maybe the way I shouldn't, but not really. I mean I don't do things with them in my mind, like. You know what I mean? Maybe I used to but I'm past that sort of stuff now. Getting too old for one thing.

You said you're married?

Yes, Father.

Well, is everything all right there? Are you fighting with your wife?

Nah, we hardly talk to each other. I mean we get along OK. She stays in her corner. I stay in mine. I'm married almost thirty years, Father. I've already said everything I'm gonna say to her probably a hundred times over.

OK. Well, where does it hurt, like the doctor said. Something's bothering you, it seems.

What's sin, Father?

Fr. Tim blinked and tried not to smile. That's a good question actually, he said. I often ponder that myself, he added with a laugh.

Sin is you go against the ten commandments. Right?

That's a good place to start, Fr. Tim said.

I don't steal, I don't really lie much, I don't hurt anybody, I don't fornicate. Does that mean I'm not a sinner?

Hey, I'm just a priest, not a judge. That's the job of your conscience. I can see that something's bothering you.

Yeah, but I can't put my finger on it exactly. I thought maybe you could help me.

Fr. Tim hesitated for a moment. Sin, he said, is something you do that is against your own best interests. That's the bottom line. You sin when you do something that hurts you yourself, the inner you.

What about others, what about God, Father?

Well, when you sin against others, against God, who are you really hurting? You hurt yourself. You can't hurt God, right? If you cheat on your wife or something like that, who's getting hurt the most in the final analysis, you or her? You. You hurt the relationship. You destroy your right to that relationship. That's the bottom line far as I can see.

What if you kill somebody? It's the other person dies, not you.

Well, you can take a person's life but not his soul. But a person who does that could be destroying his own soul.

I see what you're getting at, Father. Maybe that's what's bothering me. He paused for a moment. Do you have a Bible, Father? he asked.

I happen to have one right here, as a matter of fact, the priest said taking one from his desk.

Could I see it, Father? the man said.

The priest handed him the Bible.

Father, I never read this thing but the other day I picked it up and just started with the first page. I read about Adam and Eve and the Garden, you know. They committed the first sin, right? he asked.

We don't know exactly, the priest said. It's a story meant for our instruction.

A story, Father, the man said. You're saying none of this happened? I think you're wrong there, Father. It happened. It says so right here.

Father Tim looked at his watch. You know, he said, you've caught me at a bad time. I was just on my way out. We could talk about this some other time.

The man seemed not to hear. And there's this tree in the middle of the garden, he said. He had opened the Bible and was pointing to a page in early Genesis.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the priest said mechanically.

Yeah, that one too. But this other tree, in the exact middle of the garden, Father, the tree of life. What's that all about, Father?

You know we should talk about this some other time, Father Tim said making as if to stand.

And after they sinned, the man went on, God puts this angel in front of the tree with a flaming sword so nobody can get at it. Why'd he do that, Father? Isn't God supposed to be a good guy? I mean everybody else does things like that to protect their turf but why God? He's supposed to love us, right?

Look, the priest said more severely. I really have to go.

Just let me get this off my chest, OK Father?

No problem, Fr. Tim said obligingly after a moment's hesitation. He sank back in his chair and reflected for a moment. The tree of life is a figure of speech, I suppose, he said. The writer had to explain the presence of death in a world that God created and said was good.

So he puts that flaming sword there so we couldn't eat the apples or whatever from that tree, so that we would die? Is that the idea?

Well there's got to be some connection between sin and death, Fr. Tim said trying to hold his interest. This is pretty abstract stuff. Is this what you came to see me about?

No, Father. I just wondered about it. Like there's something missing in my life. Maybe God's just blocking it off from me.

What do you mean by "it"?

Life, Father. Real life. You know what I mean? Half the time I feel like something that's gone sour in the fridge, like I been just rotting away most of my life. I never seen nothing, nothing you could really call life. Did you ever think we're all rotting apples? Know what I mean?

I'm not sure I follow you exactly, the priest said.

Well, Father, take today. I got up at seven. I eat breakfast. My wife doesn't talk to me except to remind me to take out the garbage. The kids are fighting. I start out the day yelling. My wife makes a face and goes upstairs. I have to make my own sandwich. And this is supposed to be my home. A man's home, you know? He shakes his head. I can't even take the couple of dollars to buy a sandwich 'cause I got to replace the roof this year and there's no way I'm gonna be able to do that.

Where do you work?

You mean where did I work, the man said.

You're unemployed?

I lost my job today.

You got laid off?

I got fired. I called my boss an asshole.

You know this isn't exactly a confessional matter. The priest stood up. You need to talk to somebody who can help you with these problems.

I need absolution, Father.

The priest stood there for a moment looking at him. The man was bent over, plowing callused fingers through thick rough hair just beginning to gray around the edges. What have you done? the priest asked at length.

The man looked up at the priest and gave him a strange smile. He picked up the Bible and flipped to the back. Here, Father. In the last chapter of the Bible, in the book of Revelations, Christ is talking about this tree again, the tree of life. The same tree. It's the first time we hear of it since Genesis. I looked. It ain't nowhere else in the Bible I could see. It's in Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bible and it comes up again on the very last page. It ain't anyplace else. Just at the beginning and end, right?

I'm not really sure.

Believe me, Father. I went through it last night. It ain't there. But it's at the beginning and at the end of the Bible. So it's got to be pretty important, right Father?

The priest sat down again and was peering at the man. I have to go now, he said quietly. If you want to talk about these things we can do it some other time. Make an appointment. I'd be happy to chat with you.

I'll tell you what I think, Father. Look, here's what Jesus said. He says he's the beginning and the end, and that he's coming soon and he's going to pay every man for what he's done. But he says the ones who wash their robes will be able to eat the tree of life and enter the new city by the gates. You read it too, right Father?

The priest took the bible from him and looked at the passage. Right there, Father, the penitent said, getting up and pointing. Ain't that something? There's gonna be this new Jerusalem that will come right down from heaven, all shining with diamonds and precious jewels and stuff. It looks like the angel is still there guarding everything but now he lets certain people through. These are the good guys, the ones who cleaned up their act. They can walk right in and eat that tree all they want.

He sat down and shook his head. Neither of them moved for a time and then the man said to the priest. Any of this make sense to you, Father? The priest looked at him curiously and said nothing.

Let me have that for a moment, will you, Father? the man said reaching for the Bible. Here's the other side of the story. It says that certain kinds of people will be kept out. That angel ain't gonna let them in. He began to read: "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murders and idolaters...." The man stopped reading and looked up. No problem for us there, right Father? he said with a strange smile.

The priest just looked at him and said nothing.

But here's this other thing, Father. This is the part that gets to me. Those who have led a "false life" will also be kept outside, along with the dogs and fornicators. The man studied the priest. What's that mean, Father? A false life.

The priest blinked and started to say something but stopped. It could mean a number of things, he said after a moment.

Father, can I have your absolution?

You have to tell me some sin first, the priest said.

I just did.

What sin was that? the priest said

A false life, Father. That's me. I've been living a false life.

I'm sorry. You'll have to be a little more specific? False in what way?

I'll be specific, Father. My life stinks. Lately I look at my self when I'm shaving and want to throw up. He rubbed his hand across his chin. I'll give you details, Father. I get up in the morning. It starts there. I go to work glad to get out of the house. I get to the plant and wonder how there could be such stupid people in the world. I'm talking about my ex-boss. Lunch time I throw my dumb sandwich away and spend five dollars I don't have on a beer and a plate of spaghetti. In the afternoon my boss tells me I didn't do something the way he said and I tell him, it was dumb to do it that way. He tells me I'm going to do it his way anyway, and I tell him he has his head up his asshole.

So it's your anger that bothers you?

Naw, I wasn't angry. I was just mad. He was partly right you know. I knew that. I didn't like him coming up to me that way, that's all.

So you want to confess a sin of pride?

Father, I want to confess I been living a false life. That's my sin. I can see it.

I'm having trouble with what you mean by a false life.

Father, do you believe there is such a thing as this tree of life.

As a figure of speech, I guess I do.

Do you think that "figure" or whatever you call it is going to be for you?

I certainly hope so.

Me too, he said. So how about it, Father.

The priest looked at him quizzically.

Absolution, Father, abolution.

The priest smiled, hesitated for a moment, then raised his hand and slowly began to recite the words of absolution as he made the sign of the cross.

The man interrupted him at once. Father, excuse me. Don't I have to make an act of contrition? I want to do this right.

If you wish. My feeling is that just your coming in here is an act of contrition.

I'd like to do this the way I was taught as a kid, Father. But I don't remember how it goes.

Just tell God you are sorry. It will be enough.

The man hesitated. OK, Father, if you say so. He knelt down in front of the priest and began to pray. I'm sorry, Lord. I'm sorry for being a phony, for living what you call a false life. Lord, forgive me. Jesus, help me to be different. Give me a real life.

OK, that's good, the priest said. He recited the words of absolution, again making the Sign of the Cross. God bless you, he said putting his hand on the man's shoulder. I think God is pleased with you, he said.

I'm clean, the man said with a broad smile. His face was lit up. It's been twenty years he said.

God bless you, the priest said getting up and helping the man to his feet.

They each turned away and made separate moves to depart. The priest neatly folded up his stole and placed it carefully on the desk. The man was on his way out when he stopped and turned back to the priest. Father, he said. There's something at the end of the Bible could be for you too, Father. He picked up the book from the priest's desk and pointed to a particular verse. Read this sometime, Father, he said, thumping his finger on the page. It's got your number.

They left, the penitent to his new life, the priest to Luigi's and his calamari. But the confession the priest heard that late Saturday afternoon stuck with him. He was not his old self that evening with his friends. They asked him if anything was wrong. He laughed it off, but he wasn't the usual cut-up. When they broke up and he was back at the rectory later that night, he went into his office and got the Bible. Before turning out his light, he turned to the Book of Revelation and looked up the passage he had been told had his number. It was the last few lines of Scripture, really a footnote to the Book itself, written by the author, St. John. *"This is my solemn attestation., John wrote, to all who hear the prophesies in this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him every plague mentioned in this book; if anyone cuts anything out of the prophesies of this book, God will cut out his share of the tree of life and the holy city which are described in this book. The one who attests to these things says: I am indeed coming soon.*

The priest did not sleep that night but instead reviewed his life. Was it a good life? Was it possibly a false life also? How many times had he called his superiors an asshole? Not in so many words, perhaps. How long had it been since he had been to confession? He, a priest of God.

The following week was not a good week for Fr. Tim. You all right, Tim? Fr. Reilly asked him one morning observing the younger priest over the rim of his coffee. The pastor liked his assistant but they never seemed to really connect. Different generation, different wave lengths. It made the older pastor a little sad.

I'm fine, Fr. Tim lied.

Sure? You look a little wan.

No, everything's great. Guess I'm tired. He poured himself another cup of coffee.

I can take the funeral this morning if you want, the pastor said.

Thanks, Fr. Tim said shaking his head and smiling, I'm OK. Guess funerals aren't my thing, he added after a time.

The older priest, back into his newspaper, looked over at his assistant for a second, made a sound in his throat and went back to his reading.

But that's what I'm here for, Fr. Tim said absently. He got up and went down the hall to his room.

The funeral was for a middle aged woman who had died of cancer. Someone from the old neighborhood surrounding the Church. She never came to St. Andrew's far as he knew. She had three children living and they all had kids. Her oldest boy was killed in Viet Nam. Her husband was there at the funeral along with what looked like scads of uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters on both sides, and lots of kids. There was an old, old lady that must have been the grandmother. The deceased must have been loved. Probably a terrific cook. A big woman in a big lively family like in the old days. The kind they don't grow anymore.

She was a good woman, Fr. Tim heard himself saying from the pulpit. She lived a good life. He usually said that even if he knew nothing about the deceased. He could tell from the faces of the surviving family what kind of life the dead person had lived. He liked to preach. He liked reaching people. For him the homilies at Mass were more important, more real than the Sacrament. The Church is people not sacraments one of his seminary professors used to say and he couldn't agree more. But today the words he was speaking seemed to him to just fall flat. They left a bad taste in his mouth. What was going wrong with him?

At the cemetery after the interment, one of the family members came up to him. An uncle probably. Fr. Tim recognized his face. Back of the Church at the seven o'clock Mass Sunday mornings. Sometimes he ushered. The parishioner kept shaking his head as he told the priest about her end. She wouldn't see anybody, Father, he said. She was angry for a long time. At the end I think she was just scared. She should have seen a priest. She didn't have the last rites, nothing.

Wasn't she a good woman? Fr. Tim asked.

She was OK, Father, don't get me wrong. But she wasn't a happy person, know what I mean?

Seems like a good, happy family, the priest said.

We got our share of problems, Father. Don't you kid yourself. People ain't themselves at funerals, know what I mean?

I suppose you're right.

Pray for her, will you? And while you're at it, do me a favor, Father, and mention my name too, OK? I'm Anthony.

Of course, Fr. Tim said. Anthony. He realized he had already forgotten the name of the deceased.

By the end of the week, Fr. Tim had a bad cold and headache that would not go away. I'll take the morning Mass, Fr. Reilly said at breakfast. It was Saturday and there was only the eight o'clock. You go back to bed. Get some rest.

Fr. Reilly took confessions that afternoon too. It was Fr. Tim's turn but Fr. Reilly insisted. One of the altar ladies was already there waiting for him at four o'clock. She was there every month. The trouble this time was her daughter in law yelled at her and she gave it to her right back. It took all of about three minutes to get this off her chest and be absolved. After her there was no one, not for forty minutes. Fr. Reilly sat there in the Reconciliation room and read his office. He didn't mind the solitude. It was a pleasant little room. The late afternoon sun shone behind a small stained glass window, creating a lovely colored rainbow effect. The air in the room seemed liquid with color. There was an empty chair for the penitent to sit facing him, and a chair behind a screen if the penitent needed privacy. Every few minutes Fr. Reilly turned the page of his breviary. He'd read a few lines and then close his eyes. Sometimes he couldn't tell if it was prayer or sleep. He felt at peace in a world he knew wasn't peaceful any more.

He must have been dozing just before the hour was up when the door to the confessional opened. Fr. Tim was standing before him. Fr. Reilly looked up at him. Tim, he said. What's up?

Fr. Tim let out a huge volume of air and sat down on the chair facing his boss. This has been hell week, he said, shaking his head.

Fr. Reilly studied him for a moment. Cold any better, he said?

I'm in some kind of hole, Fr. Tim said. I need something to get me out of this funk.

Want to talk? Fr. Reilly said, putting down his breviary.

Fr. Tim shook his head and looked at his boss. I haven't been to confession for three years, he said meekly.

Fr. Reilly raised his eyebrows and nodded. That's too long, he said.

Someone came in for confessions last Saturday, Fr. Tim said. He hadn't been to confession for twenty years. When he left, with the absolution, he was like a new man. It was beautiful.

Fr. Reilly nodded and waited.

Fr. Tim looked at his boss with a kind of lame smile, leaned forward putting his head into his hands and began speaking to the floor. You and I kind of keep to ourselves, he said. We don't talk much. Maybe we should. We sort of stay in our own corners, so to

speaking. He looked up at his boss. A soft light had crept into the eyes of the older priest. The colored light from the stained glass window was falling on his face. The old priest's face seemed to be glowing. They sat looking at each other in the silence of the little room for an interminable minute. Then the young priest slid to his knees and he said, Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been a whole lifetime since my last confession.