

Altar Boy

That morning in church my worst fears were realized. I was a newly minted altar boy in St. Bartholomew's Roman Catholic Church in Philadelphia. I had arrived on a cold, dark morning to serve at the daily 6:30 a.m. Mass. This timing was not random but rather had been selected by the overseers of the altar boys at our church, the Sisters of St. Joseph, as a proving ground for novices such as me. The mass was lightly attended by regular parishioners but was the starting point of the day for the Sisters. We fledgling servers could be observed, criticized and, in exceptional cases, admonished by the head trainer, Sister Miriam Xavier, without too much disruption to the service. As a first-timer, I was to play second fiddle to a much more experienced boy and thus my worst fear. As the clock in the sacristy ticked to 6:29, I was alone. No first fiddle to be seen. In another minute my life as I had lived it to that moment would be forever changed.

The clock struck 6:30 and my descent into embarrassment and humiliation began. I, terribly alone, led the way from the sacristy to the altar trailed by Father Brandt in all his priestly regalia. I was attired in a long, black cassock, covered by a white, lacy top called a surplice. Around my neck were a stiff, white cardboard collar and an oversized black bow. Quite the outfit for a sixth grade boy. In the social circles of Catholicism, I had entered into a level of acceptability just short of the priesthood. Handpicked for this honor by no less than Sister Miriam herself and approved by the pastor, Father (later to be Monsignor) McMahon, I was now part of a unique group of boys. We were well above the choir boys in the pecking order, from which the girls were totally excluded. So today was my moment in the candlelight and to my horror I was alone! No older, mature veteran to guide me through the intricate dance between priest and altar boy. No slightly deeper voice to obscure my feeble attempts to pronounce the Latin words that were to be uttered in response to the priest's unintelligible Latin phrases and all this in full view of the Sisters of St. Joseph, shrouded in black and white and with stern faces that would redden at the slightest error on my part.

My final memory is kneeling at the foot of the altar, body quaking, with my Latin cheat sheet shaking in my hands and then it was over. That I am able to recount this tale is testament to the presence of a force larger than me that guided me through that service, sparing me from the wrath of the Sisters and allowing me to return home shaken but reassured that life would go on even if my calling would not be the priesthood.

Dan Leahy

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