

A Not So Divine Intervention

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Priests are a permanent fixture in Philippine society and culture. There's at least one in every barangay leading the town church and acting as a pillar of the community. You'll see them in mainstream media too. You can watch outspoken bishops sharing their opinions on live television, biopics of priests showing in cinemas, or iconic fictional characters in books.

Priests are everywhere and they're usually celebrated or at the very least well-respected in the community. In my provincial town, people treat priests like rock stars. Priests are stopped on the streets for a "*Mano po, Father.*" They get to skip lines at the clinic regardless of how many people are in the waiting room. They are reserved the best portions at fiestas and invited to all the houses. Priests have it pretty good here.

Most priests I've encountered take the special treatment with grace and humility. Others, not so much. I've had the misfortune of meeting some not so pleasant priests like a stern and entitled Monsignor who liked glaring at parishioners and expected deferential treatment simply because he was a priest. And then, there was an overzealous visiting priest who said non-Catholics automatically go to hell no questions asked when sharing his opinion on matters of religion.

I'm not sure why I keep meeting priests with not so agreeable personalities. Perhaps, fate has a sense of humor and enjoys putting people in uncomfortable situations. Although, who fate is trying to mess with, me or the priests who also have the misfortune of meeting me, is anyone's guess.

My rocky history with priests goes way back. The first unpleasant encounter happened when I was at the tender age of four. My mom brought me to an early *Simbang gabi* mass because she thought it would be great for me to experience this tradition at such a young age.

We attended mass at the small chapel closest to our house since it was more convenient than going to the parish church downtown. This barangay chapel could fit about seventy people at most and only had the bare essentials: a couple of pews, an elevated area as the altar, and a table with a cross. Since the chapel was so small, Mom wanted to arrive early so we could get good seats and we did. We got the best seats in the house, front row, right in front of the altar.

The presiding priest of the *Simbang gabi* was the newly ordained Father D. Even though he was only a few years out of the seminary, he already had a reputation for being strict and surly. I learned all this a decade after the incident during my mother's retelling of the tale.

In my mother's practiced rendition of "Ela and the Mean Priest," she would start with what Father D was known for around town. See, when Father D celebrated mass, he expected everyone to take it as seriously as he did. His reputation as a tough and uncompromising man stemmed from his habit of kicking people out of church (or chapel, or wherever he was holding mass).

Father D had a three-phase process when kicking people out. If he saw a child walking around or heard a baby crying during mass, he would first give his target pointed glances. His gaze would stray from the audience and towards the child-sized disturbance. Like an early warning signal. His subtle yet effective way to call the parents' attention, as if to say, "Keep it under control... or else."

Then, if the subtle glances were a bit too subtle, the second phase kicked in which was the silent glare. Father D would stop the mass. He halted the organ music, singing, and prayers in favor of glaring at the crying child or rambunctious toddler. If the parents still couldn't get their child under control or simply didn't get the hint, Father D would go into phase three—the ejection.

Father D had the kicking people out of church part down pat. He would simply point at the child and ask the churchgoers, "*Kanino pong anak 'yan? Sino ang magulang ng batang ito?*" When the parents timidly and reluctantly reveal themselves, Father D would tell them in no uncertain terms, "*Lumabas po kayo ng simbahan.*"

Father D would then wait for the parents to leave. Simply staring at them until they recover from shock and finally flee the premises.

After the parents make their hasty exit, Father D would remind everyone that the church is a place of worship—it was no place for rowdy toddlers or crying babies. "*Simbahan po ito. Kung hindi niyo kayang patahimikin ang mga anak ninyo wag na lang po kayo magsimba,*" he'd say.

I've always thought that discouraging people from going to church was a counterproductive position for a priest, but that's just me.

My mom saw Father D kick people out many times while attending mass at the parish church. She told me she always felt bad for the parents because they were just trying their best. She was also confident that such a thing would never happen to her. So very confident, in fact, that she didn't even think twice when she sat at the very front of the chapel with her child during a mass presided by Father D, a notorious child-kicker-outer.

In my mother's defense, her faith in me wasn't entirely hubris. Growing up, I was a quiet kid. I kept to myself and didn't talk to anyone unless spoken to and sometimes not even then. I was the complete opposite of rowdy which made it easy for my mother and grandmother to take me anywhere. This worked wonderfully in my favor because I was a particularly clingy child who wanted to be anywhere my mommy and *lola* were.

Mom was a lawyer so she would take me to court with her, and I'd entertain myself by coloring pictures in a corner while she did her lawyering. *Lola* would often bring me along her many prayer group meetings and weekday masses, and I'd silently sit there and observe. Every adult who met me was impressed by how well-behaved I was.

I was the last kid anyone would think of ever getting into trouble. And then came Father D.

The *Simbang gabi* incident started innocently enough. My four-year-old self was sitting in the chapel minding my own business, as usual, when a little girl around the same age I was sat next to me. I don't know why but when I saw that little girl, I decided to make it my mission for the evening to befriend her. I started talking to her and we got on like a house on fire. We talked, we laughed, we were kids being kids.

My mom probably would have been happy that I made a new pal if it weren't for the fact that the mass was starting, and my new friend and I didn't stop talking.

Father D began the mass with the Introductory Rites, a short procession from the entrance of the chapel to the altar accompanied by an altar boy and a lay minister. Music filled the chapel which drowned out our chatter.

My mother was concerned but didn't panic yet. She whispered to me and asked politely to "Please be quiet, *anak*. The mass is starting *na, oh*."

Because I was an obedient daughter, I stopped talking to my new friend. This lasted for about a minute as the four-year-old short attention span won out. I got bored and started talking to the little girl again.

At this point, the mass has started in earnest. Father D greeted the whole congregation, standing tall at the front of the chapel. He commenced with the first reading while I was talking to my seatmate about our favorite food. We were getting to know each other and discussed our favorite colors, our favorite shows, and where we went to school. All compelling stuff to a bunch of kids but an annoying and disruptive noise to Father D.

My mother knew what happened to parents of noisy children. She asked me periodically to hush and I would for a little while until I started talking again. Mom abandoned the polite requests route and decided to use the tried and tested parenting staple of scare tactics. She said a mix of "Quiet *ka na*. *Sige ka*. *Lagot ka kay* Father," "*Anak*, stop talking *na*. *Papagalitan ka ni* Father *kapag maingay ka*," and "*Hala sige ka* if you keep talking *magagalit si* Father. *got ka masungit 'yang si* Father."

Father D was mean. That was a sentiment she used to get me to stop talking. It wasn't even an exaggeration. Mom knew firsthand what Father D would do if I didn't stop talking. Unfortunately for her, my four-year-old self did not.

By the end of the First Reading and the beginning of the Gospel, my mother was in crisis mode. She tried and failed to keep me quiet. The father of the other little girl was doing nothing to stop us. And the Father at the altar's mood was souring quick. Father D was getting increasingly annoyed if the pointed glances he sent our way were anything to go by. The first phase of Father D's ejection plan came and went over my head.

When the Homily started, so did phase two of Father D's Get Out of My Church Plan. He stopped the mass and the whole chapel fell into an uncomfortable silence. All except for the chatty four-year-old seated right at the front row. Father D was glaring at us and my mother was praying for divine intervention.

My friend and I were still talking a mile a minute unaware that we were testing Father D's patience. Mom already gave up on trying to keep us quiet and was too busy fearing the wrath of Father D.

Meanwhile, Father D set his eyes on me, a firm frown on his face, gearing up to execute his well-practiced diatribe. He has been kicking people out of mass for four years at this point. Everyone knew what was going to happen next.

And my poor mother, whose only mistake was believing in her daughter's ability to behave, was going pale beside me. She made peace with our inevitable expulsion from the chapel. She has accepted the fact that she will be one of those people who got kicked out of mass. She told me that when Father D stopped the mass, she asked herself, "*Saan kami lalabas? Sa kaliwa o sa kanan? Saan mas hindi nakakahiya?*"

As my mother considered our options, I was getting increasingly confused. A lot of things were confusing to me when I was four, and chief among them was why a grown man was staring daggers at me.

I finally stopped talking to my friend when I realized that the whole chapel has gone quiet. Eerily so. I noticed that Father D was looking at me and so I looked back at him. When staring at him yielded no explanations as to why everyone was silent, I turned to the rest of the congregation. The people avoided my gaze. I looked to my mother who had her head bent down just staring at her feet. I tried to get her attention by poking her arm, but she just shook her head.

Mom was waiting for phase three. The kicking out. Father D was gearing up to deliver his infamous *Get Out of Church* speech. It would be an impressive one too because the mass was jam-packed, there were people spilling out into the streets.

But before Father D could utter a single word, a question popped into my head. So, like the curious child I was, I asked my mother in a loud, high-pitched voice, "Mommy, *bakit po masungit si Father?*"

I remember a strained silence fell over the chapel. The feeling was uncomfortable and awkward for an entirely different reason than it was a moment ago. Merely seconds before, the congregation was anticipating the inevitable expulsion of two chatty little girls and the parents who couldn't get them under control. Then, I opened my big mouth and changed the script.

Everyone was afraid to make even the slightest sound because Father D might finally explode. Maybe the people were in shock too because who would have thought a four-year-old would call the priest out on his bad attitude? No one at that chapel, that's for sure.

The divine intervention my mother prayed for did not arrive. But as soon as I said those five little words, my mother knew she was right all along. We will not be kicked out of mass.

After asking my question, I looked back at Father D who was fuming. I don't think you can ever forget the first time someone directed a death glare solely at you. It becomes extra memorable when the person doing the glaring was a priest. I can still recall Father D's furious face. His lips were in a firm line, face going red, and the hand holding the microphone was shaking with tightly controlled rage.

I should've been frightened but I wasn't. I was only confused because why was he staring at me that way? I've never had beef with anyone before. I wasn't aware of the signs.

If looks could kill, I would have been incinerated on the spot. I hoped mass would pick back up after I stopped chatting with my brand new best friend. It was weird that it didn't. Father D continued to glare, and I did what came naturally. I gave Father D an encouraging nod with a flourish of my hand urging him to continue mass. It's a gesture combo my mother often made to jittery witnesses on the stand.

It only made Father D angrier, a feat I didn't know possible. Just when I thought he was going to lose it, Father D exhaled loudly into the microphone and turned his attention back to the rest of the mass goers. The *Simbang gabi* continued business as usual. The chapel breathed a sigh of relief.

I didn't talk to the other girl for the rest of the mass much to my mother's joy. The mass ended without any interruptions and I thought we were just going to go about the rest of the night like nothing happened. In a surprise move, Mom took me by the hand, and led me straight to Father D. She told me, "*Mag bless ka kay Father.*" I was a well-behaved child, previous incident notwithstanding, so I did what I was told.

I remember Father D smiling down at me, he put his large hand on top of my head, shook it a little, and said in a tone of voice filled with frustration and affection, "*Hay nako, itong batang ito oo.*"

Whenever Mom tells this story and I'm in the room, she'd emphasize how she was blindsided by my sudden chattiness. She'd lament on how of all the nights that I would find someone to talk to, why did it have to be when we were sat right in front of the chapel and why, oh why, did it have to be with Father D?

I think what frustrated my mother most about the whole encounter was not that I almost got us kicked out of mass, but because I never saw the other little girl ever again. I don't even remember her name. "*Hindi mo naman kilala 'yung bata pero ang daldaldaldal mo,*" Mom would say. Maybe it was fate.

It was during one of Mom's attempts at a dramatic retelling that I found out, the story of Father D did not end with just that fateful *Simbang gabi*. The whole family was at my grandparents' house and mom just finished recalling that time I called a priest *masungit* when my grandmother started to reminisce about Father D. *Lola* described him as too strict and had an unfriendly personality, though no one dared tell him that to his face. There was a fondness in her voice when she said, "*Hindi man lang ngumingiti. Hindi mo man lang mabiro.*" She thought it

was funny that such a serious priest would be confronted by a four-year-old. And even funnier that that four-year-old was me. *"Akalain mo 'yun,"* Lola said.

My grandmother told me she was in attendance during Father D's last mass in our community. Priests have this rotation where they stay in the same town for a couple of years then they get reassigned elsewhere. This system was supposed to discourage priests from getting too attached to the locals, and vice versa. Apparently, when I called him out, Father D's time in our small town was up.

During his final mass, Father D said all the usual things *"Marami pong salamat sa inyong lahat."* And *"Marami po akong natutunan sa aking mga taon dito na kasama kayo."* And of course the, *"Hinding hindi ko po kayo malilimutan."* But then, Father D did something completely out of character. He stood in front of the altar, in front of everyone, and bid adieu with these self-deprecating final words: *"Aalis na po ang masungit na pari."*

I don't know what became of Father D after he left town. I don't know if he still kicks people out of churches or if he's grown softer and more understanding with age. What I am sure of is the same priest who tried to kick out a chatty four-year-old was also the same person who gave our town one of its most memorable farewells.

If there is a lesson to be learned from my encounter with Father D, maybe it's about how we're all just people regardless of status. Sometimes we get blinded by titles forgetting that at the end of day we're all just humans capable of making mistakes and growing for the better. Perhaps all it took for Father D to finally loosen up was a little four-year-old girl naïve enough to tell him something everyone else was too afraid to.

