

The young priest looked nervously at his watch, and another gentle sigh of impatience escaped him. He'd been waiting in the overstuffed wing-back chair for almost forty-five minutes. It was a pleasant enough room to wait in, with dark paneling and subdued carpet. An incongruous brick fireplace from another era stood beside his chair, filled with a spray of freshly cut flowers. The building's first owners must have installed the fireplace largely for visual effect. Only rarely did it turn cold enough in this part of Florida to warrant a fire. A sedate ship's clock on the mantle-piece continued to mark the passing seconds with a low, resonant ticking.

The entire room had a sleepy, hypnotic effect which the young priest would have found relaxing and reassuring just about any other time. But not today.

Closing his eyes, he laid his head back against the fabric of the chair. He tried to remain calm. His hand wandered to the silver pectoral cross which hung around the young man's neck. Rather than the Crucifix worn by so many, this young priest wore a Celtic cross as a sign of his vocation. A slender silver cross with a bright circle around the center, it had been a present from his grandmother on the day of his ordination. The young man's family was deeply rooted in the Lowlands of Scotland. So it was only natural that he carry the Cross of St. Keswick, the first Christian to evangelize the Celts. Everyone who came to know the young priest learned that this unconscious massaging of the silver cross on his chest meant he was troubled by something.

Had it been a mistake to organize this meeting with the Bishop? For some months now, the young man had been so unhappy. In its beginning, the days of his first pastorate here in the Arch Diocese of Miami had flowed into each other like the gentle curves of a beautiful river. What an exotic, adventurous ministry, to be in the warm climate of Florida among such a mix of different cultures! The tiny church where he was sent to minister, just off US Highway 1, on the border of the Everglades had been built in the previous century by a wealthy landowner. The planter had wanted to provide religious services for his own extended family, and the dozens of Cubans and Haitians who worked in his sugarcane fields.

But the wealthy family had died out, the migrant workers had moved on, and now only a-dozen-or-so worshipers came to the little church for Sunday Mass. And that was on a good day. Many Sundays, there were just five or six in the congregation. Oh, he had tried to be faithful in ministering to his tiny flock, but increasingly, the young priest had come to feel that his life was being wasted. He wanted to do so much more for God's Kingdom.

And so, this meeting with the Bishop had been arranged. The young man wanted to ask the Bishop if it were possible to move him to a bigger church. Perhaps a church in the city of Miami itself, where he could be involved in the lives of numerous people. A church where he could serve to bring many souls into the fold of God. That's what he dreamed of doing.

He heard a soft footfall on plush carpet. As he opened his eyes, the Bishop's secretary glided through the doorway into the peaceful waiting room. "Father Douglas, the Bishop will see you now." She beckoned to the young priest with the air of a person who is used to being obeyed.

His left knee creaked slightly as he stood. Straightening his shoulders, he took a deep, steadying breath and followed her out of the quiet room. A narrow Karastan runner divided the sea-green wallpaper down a long hallway, toward a distant paneled door.

Shoe leather crushed carpet pile stained the color of Christ's blood. Now he wished he'd taken longer to find out more about the man he was going to meet for only the second time. The Right Reverend Piet van de Gelder, Bishop of Miami.

Had he done so, he would have discovered that Piet van de Gelder was something of a legend in the Catholic Church of these parts. Now in his seventies, Bishop van de Gelder had been born near Amsterdam a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War. His father, a non-practicing Dutch Jew employed in the Amsterdam jewelry trade had fallen in love with and married a beautiful, dark-eyed Spanish woman. So van de Gelder spent his boyhood in Holland attending Mass with his mother, and speaking Spanish at home.

These Catholic influences had brought young Piet van de Gelder into the Priesthood. And his fluent Spanish language skills led him to a pastorate in Cuba in the mid 1950s. He had been one of the few Catholic priests to remain behind in Cuba after the revolution of 1959. His life there had been one of epic intrigue.

It was whispered that he had secretly conducted over 200 Baptisms not more than four blocks from Fidel Castro's Presidential Office. People also claimed that van de Gelder helped smuggle out of the country vast numbers of those Cubans who had made their home in southern Florida. When he was finally evicted from the country by Castro in the late 70s, it was only natural that MonSignor van de Gelder come to this area of the United States, and continue his ministry to so many of the families for whom he had helped win their freedom. Consecrated Bishop of Southeast Florida in 1993, he was tremendously popular in the Cuban-American community. Hundreds of the faithful flocked to wherever Bishop van de Gelder said Mass in Spanish on any given Sunday.

With one more flourish of her hand, the secretary swept Father Douglas through the doorway into the Bishop's office and softly closed the door. At first, the Bishop said nothing. He remained intent on finishing a note he was writing in a yellow legal pad. The young priest noticed that the elderly cleric was left-handed. The Bishop finished his scribbling, and placed the fountain pen into the holder by the leather desk-blotter. Looking up, he smiled with genuine warmth, and motioned Father Douglas to take a seat in one of the two high-back chairs in front of the desk.

At first, the Bishop asked the young man about his family history, and his time in Seminary at Loyola. The few minutes of small talk went some way toward putting the young priest a little more at ease. Finally, the Bishop asked, "Well, Father Douglas, how may I help you?"

With that, the young man began to tell the Bishop of his unhappiness. He confessed how he seemed to be spinning his wheels at his tiny parish in the swampy boonies of South Florida. Finally, he explained how he felt that he needed to be in another place, a larger congregation so that he could truly make a difference for the Kingdom. A place where he could lead many souls to Christ.

When the young priest had finished, for what seemed like a very long time the Bishop said nothing. He simply stared at one spot in the center of his desk blotter. Although Father Douglas didn't know it, the Bishop was actually praying for guidance. Finally, the old man looked deeply into the younger man's eyes, sat forward in his chair and said, "You know, when I was growing up in Holland, there was this Catholic priest in our neighborhood. He used to wear

a silver Celtic cross, much like the one you're wearing. And this priest had a congregation much the same size as your own. The tiny town on the outskirts of Amsterdam where he ministered didn't have all that many Catholics. And very few of those were actually practicing. So this priest, like you, had only a few parishioners at his church on a Sunday.

"In 1944, the persecution of Jews by Kurt Döring at the Amsterdam **Gestapo** Headquarters grew particularly bad. Every week, more and more of these ragged people with the yellow Star of David sewn on their tattered clothes were rounded up by the State Police, and herded onto cattle-cars, bound for the death camps. So members of this tiny congregation near Amsterdam felt led by the Lord to form their own Underground Railroad. They meant to save as many of these Jews as they could from being sent to the concentration camp at Westerbork.

"Members of the congregation built two hiding places in their church, a closet in the nave for adults, and a smaller space for children concealed underneath the Altar. Whenever the Gestapo patrols were sent out to round up more Jews for deportation, the church would hide as many adults as possible in the closet, and place the children in the smaller hiding place beneath the Altar. The Gestapo's informants never learned about these hiding places. But they did find out about the Catholic priest who was helping those desperate Jews escape. The priest became wanted by the authorities. Soon, he himself was hiding in the secret closet within the wall of the nave, every time the Germans sent out a death squad.

"Very late one night, in August of 1944 a Gestapo patrol caught the inhabitants of the town unaware. They had only a few precious minutes to run to the hiding places in the church. The priest got all the adults secreted away in their closet, and thought he had taken care of hiding the children in the Altar. But one little boy had been slower to reach the church than the rest of the children. You see, this little boy had two birth defects on the right side of his body. He had a withered right hand, and his right foot was a clubfoot that caused him to limp painfully along, much more slowly than the other children.

"With only seconds left, the priest ran to the child, and lifting him in his arms thrust him into the hiding place beneath the Altar with the other children. He had just closed the secret door there and was midway across the nave when an SS officer entered the church. The priest was recognized immediately as the clergyman the Gestapo had been searching for. He was arrested and taken to **Flossenbürg** prison. He died there in April of 1945, shortly before the war ended.

"The priest's mother went to visit him in **Flossenbürg** several times in the winter of 1944. She said that her son was strangely happier than he had ever been. It was, she said, as though saving the life of that one little boy with the withered hand and the clubfoot had been everything he needed to do.

For the young priest, saving that one child had given every possible meaning and focus to his ministry. You see, Father Douglas, building the Kingdom of God is not always about numbers. We never know how saving even one soul is going to be a great victory for the Lord."

Bishop van de Gelder and the young priest talked a little more. Then, they both prayed for God's guidance about how Father Douglas could best be used in his ministry. At the end of their conversation, the Bishop rose slowly from his chair and extended his left hand across the desk to the young priest.

At first, the young man thought the Bishop was offering his ring to be kissed. But when the priest reached out, the old cleric grasped the younger man's hand with surprising vigor and spoke with great feeling. "Remember, you will never really know what a blessing your ministry is in the lives of your congregation. You will probably never even glimpse what a huge difference your ministry is making."

And then the Bishop looked at Father Douglas for a long moment of silence. He seemed to be debating as to whether he should tell the young man something. Finally, he said in a low voice, "Father Douglas, you may have been called to save just one single man, just one human being who will then go on to devote his entire life to doing great things for the Kingdom. You'll never know if that's the case. But I assure you, it has happened before. Yes, it has happened...Go in peace my son, for the Lord is with you."

For a long time after the young man had left, the Bishop sat very still at his desk. The room was by now falling slowly into the deep shadows of late afternoon. He rose from his chair, and opened the curtains behind his desk to let more of the day's fading sunlight into his study. As he limped back to his seat, the old man was massaging his right leg, a gesture that was by now almost as regular to him as breathing. The various surgeries had done much to repair his right foot, but it still pained him late in the day. The Bishop sat down and opened a drawer in his desk. With his left hand, he drew out a small box from the very back of the drawer. To open the box required the Bishop to use both his hands. So he brought out his right arm from below the desk.

Over many years, he had learned to do things in such a way so that the withered fingers of his right hand were rarely noticed by people. But he needed both his whole left hand and the withered fingers of his right to draw off the top of the little box. In it were two objects. One was a dog-eared, black-and-white photograph of a young Catholic priest, a picture taken in Holland more than sixty years before. And the other item was a tarnished silver Celtic cross, the same cross that the martyred priest had worn, the young Dutch priest who had saved the tiny boy from a terrible fate all those years ago.

That young boy had indeed grown up, and gone on to dedicate his entire life to God. And while the office drifted gently down into the dark rich loam of night, the Bishop prayed God's blessing on the lives of all those who had been given into his care. Every single one of them.

***It's Not about Numbers (Reflections on Lk.15:1-10):*** This story and the characters in it are fictional, but it is based on factual history which was tragically documented during the oppression of the Nazis. Catholic clergy were not immune to paying the ultimate price during the Holocaust. In Poland, the Nazis murdered over 2,500 monks and priests, while many more were sent to concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> The *Priester-Block*, or Priests' Barracks in Dachau lists 2,600 Roman Catholic priests.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Chadwick, *A History of Christianity* (Thomas Dunne, 1995) 254–5.

<sup>2</sup> John Vidmar, *The Catholic Church through the ages: a history* (Paulist Press, 2005) 329.

***It's Not about Numbers*** comes from a deep longing that so many pastors encounter sooner or later, the desire to win many souls for God's Kingdom. Additionally, regardless of denomination the earthly structures of churches are subject to numerical appraisal. Any pastor will eventually be evaluated according to the fullness of his church's pews on Sunday morning or the ability of his congregation's collection plates to meet the yearly budget. But the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in Luke 15 tell a different story. Not only do these parables specify that ministers of the Gospel need to be spending their time with the lost. They also clearly point out that it's all about building the Kingdom of God **one person at a time**.

That's not necessarily something we want to hear. But it's quite Biblical. During the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21:1-9, Mark 11:1-11 and John 12:12-16, Jesus is seated on a young donkey. Now, someone had to raise that donkey and place it right there at that exact moment in the history of the universe. Someone's entire witness was probably to raise a donkey and tie him to a certain tree outside the walls of Jerusalem, so that Christ could fulfill the Old Testament prophecies about Him which appear in verses, such as Zechariah 9:9, Isaiah 62:11 and Psalm 118:26. Similarly, the greatest thing that any pastor does for the Kingdom of Heaven may consist in directing the path of just one human being toward the Cross.

The same can be said for any Christian witness. A well-known example here is the life of Albert MacMakin, a vegetable-farm worker who persuaded a young fellow to accompany him to a revival meeting in 1934. The person who Mr. MacMakin drove to the tent meeting that night was a young man by the name of Billy Graham. It is difficult to believe that MacMakin's entire Christian witness ever accomplished anything else which compared to what that one night's simple act of charity meant for God's redemptive plan in this country.

The Sanhedrin Rabbis writing in their Talmud said, "for this reason was man created alone, to teach thee that whosoever destroys a single soul... scripture imputes [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed an entire world; and whosoever preserves a single soul..., scripture ascribes [merit] to him as though he had preserved an entire world." (Sanhedrin Talmud, 37a). So, maybe what was written inside Oskar Shindler's gold ring was right!



Detail from *The Holy Family with St. Anne and the Infant John the Baptist* by Agnolo Bronzino (The Louvre, Summer, 2009). Are the infants exchanging the apple of original sin for the dove of the Holy Spirit? Notice the impossibly long and elegant fingers of Mary, typical of the Mannerist School. Is The Virgin's right eye-lid drooping with disapproval or with tenderness?