

Part II Chapter 37 Parish Priests

Father William Quarters

Since 1839, St. Mary's Help of Christians on Grand had been their parish church. Tom and Bridget had gotten to know the pastor there, Father William Quarters, also from Ireland, and only a few years older than Tom. The two men had talked, briefly, about their experiences in seminary. Tom was almost embarrassed to tell him of being sent to the Catholic Free School in Tuam, and then Jarlath, at the diocese's expense, to prepare for Maynooth.

"I'd have been a priest myself, if I hadn't met Bridget."

Father Quarters laughed and reassured him that he was building up the Church in another way, with his large family. "For my part," he continued, "I never wanted to be anything but a priest, from the time I was a hedgerow pupil in Killurin, near Tullamore,. Like you, when I was eight I was singled out and was sent to a boarding school, only it wasn't a Catholic but a retired Presbyterian minister who ran it. There are more educated Presbyterians than Catholics in Ireland as there are here. Under him I studied the classics—he was one of the best classicists in the country, I was told."



Tom wanted to tell him that he too had loved the classics, but was too embarrassed as it had all led to nothing.

"Like you," Father continued, "I had planned to go to St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, but, I too got a different call-- not from a pretty girl like Bridget but from Fr. McAuley from Broughal, Kilcormac, who often visited our thatched cottage and spoke to us of the dreadful plight of Irish Catholics in America. I was so moved that I decided that I was needed by the Irish in America more than in Ireland! I immigrated with my parents, through Canada, and entered the seminary in Baltimore, where my previous studies in the classics got me promoted almost instantly to professor of Greek and Latin. Educated priests are as scarce here as they were over there." He shook his head in disbelief.

Tom would have liked to talk on and on, but he could tell the priest was pressed for time, with many people lining up to talk to him. He told Father he was welcome to visit their home any time, but knew that such a busy man would not have any spare time.

Over the years, Tom had grown to admire their pastor, who since his ordination in 1829, had devoted himself to the poor in New York. He had taken over St. Mary's almost at its founding in 1833. He had immediately recruited the Sisters of Charity to staff the school that Lena attended and in 1835, the same sisters

began teaching at the Academy of St. Mary's at 447 Grand, the school Nell had attended and which Lena in her turn looked forward to attending. He had begun a Rosary Society in 1837, which Bridget had joined, but in which she wasn't as active as she wished. He had overseen several other parishes, including a German one, which had spun off from St. Mary's. He called St. Mary's "the mother of churches."

Tom had not been too surprised when Father Quarters was recognized as too valuable for one parish. Educated and experienced priests were often promoted to become bishops and sent elsewhere. But Tom had been very surprised when he discovered where Father Quarters was needed more than in New York. The announcement had come at a Sunday Mass in the spring of 1844. Father Quarters would be the first bishop of Chicago! Again that magical connection was made in Tom's mind. New York to Chicago seemed to be becoming a trend.

Tom managed to tell Father before he left to be sure to look up Michael O'Shaughnessy, who had relocated there the previous year. "And you'll be seeing us there one day, I hope," he added. In their letter to Michael, they had asked him to look up Father Quarters. Bridget told Tom that he was wasting his time. "Michael hadn't gone to Mass in New York, so the chances of his going in Chicago are slim."

Father William Starrs

The new priest in the parish was Father William Starrs, also from Ireland--Drumquin, County Tyrone--and only three years older than Tom. He had actually studied at the renowned Maynooth before finishing at the seminary in Baltimore. Tom was curious about what it had been like to study at Maynooth, what he might have missed. He thought of a way to become friends with Father Starrs, so close to his age and experience.

After Mass one Sunday, he asked the priest to stop by and dedicate their family to the Sacred Heart. Father Quarters had already begun the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart in 1840, but Tom hadn't been especially interested back then. Now he decided that they all needed to be dedicated to the Sacred Heart, a practice that was gaining popularity among Irish families in Ireland and in America. He had seen the familiar picture of the Sacred Heart with the candle ever burning before it in many homes. His family would have one too.

Father agreed to stop by on the last Sunday in October and Tom insisted that he must stay for tea after the consecration.

"Maybe if we're all consecrated to the Sacred Heart, Will will do better," Bridget agreed.

Lena was the only one who showed the slightest interest in the arrival of the priest. She had met Father Starrs when he came to their classroom and introduced himself and told the girls of his plans to begin a May crowning. He invited all the girls to join the Sodality of our Lady, which he was forming. There was already a Rosary Society, but every parish needed a Sodality as well, he told them. One of the girls in the Sodality would be chosen to crown the statue of the Blessed Virgin in the church on May Day, he promised. Lena knew all about May Day. She had witnessed the May crowning at the Cathedral which already had a Sodality. The day Nell made her first communion, the day the twins were born, she had been in awe of the devotion of the girls in the sodality, as they filed up—most of them also making their first communion that day. Lena felt that she had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin already and was therefore one of the first to volunteer when Father Starrs asked whoever would like to join the Sodality to raise their hands. She would help her mother keep the children quiet while Father was visiting, in the interests of some day getting to crown the Virgin's statue herself.

The children were promised that there would be a very nice tea if they behaved and followed Mama's rules for how to act in public again, which they hadn't heard for a long time.

1. Never talk back to older people, especially your father and mother.
2. Never whine or frown when spoken to by your elders.
3. Never argue with your elders for they know best.
4. Never do anything that is forbidden by your elders.
5. Do as you are told in a pleasant and willing way.
6. Never contradict anyone under any circumstances. It is very impolite.
7. Always greet members of your family when entering a room.
8. Always bid good bye to members of your family when you leave the room.
9. Always rise to a standing position when a visitor enters.

Will sat in a corner with his arms crossed and scowled through the whole recitation. He would address the "never argue" rule by not speaking to anyone. He was so angry at having to stay inside when he could have been playing in the street that he would surely explode if he opened his mouth. Dan could be counted on to do as he was told in a pleasant and willing way. The girls would have to be woken from their naps when Father came. Usually their only problem was their tendency to look at each other and giggle, unless they hadn't had their naps, and then they would become cross and fussy. Bridget had found a picture of the Sacred Heart and Tom found a prominent place on the wall to hang it up.



The children were introduced to Father, and Tom indicated that the boys were to shake hands and Lena knew enough to curtsy. Will scowled again as Father took out a pamphlet and began to read the consecration of the family.

“O most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Thou didst reveal to the blessed Margaret Mary Thy desire to rule over Christian families; behold, in order to please Thee, we stand before Thee this day, to proclaim Thy full sovereignty over our family. We desire henceforth to live Thy life, we desire that the virtues, to which Thou hast promised peace on earth, may flower in the bosom of our family; we desire to keep far from us the spirit of the world, which Thou hast condemned. Thou art King of our hearts by our love of Thee alone, with which our hearts are on fire and whose flame we shall nourish by frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist.

Be pleased, O Sacred Heart, to preside over our gathering together, to bless our spiritual and temporal affairs, to ward off all annoyance from us, to bless our joys and comfort our sorrows. If any of us has ever been so unhappy as to fall into the misery of displeasing Thee, grant that he may remember, O Heart of Jesus, that Thou art full of goodness and mercy toward the repentant sinner. And when the hour of separation strikes and death enters our family circle, whether we go or whether we stay, we shall all bow meekly before Thine eternal decrees. This shall be our consolation, to remember that the day will come, when our entire family, once more united in heaven, shall be able to sing of Thy glory and Thy goodness forever. May the immaculate Heart of Mary and the glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph vouchsafe to offer Thee this our act of consecration, and to keep the memory thereof alive in us all the days of our lives.”

Glory to the Heart of Jesus, our King and our Father! “

Tom and Bridget said “Amen.” The children stood around parents, hoping that the tea would be forthcoming immediately. Bridget asked Father to sit down and Tom offered him a “wee drop,” which he accepted.

“I wonder that I haven’t seen Will here at Sunday school for some time,” Father mentioned after he was sitting comfortably in their best chair. “I think Dan has been once or twice, but I don’t remember ever seeing Will. Of course I’ve only been here a few months.”

Bridget looked at Will, unwilling to start anything in front of Father.

“Will is a good boy, Father. He knows his catechism already.”

Mischievously Lena said, “Show Father how well you know it, Will. Who made you?”

No answer from Will. Dan spoke up, “God made me.”

“Lena wants to become a teacher, Father,” Bridget explained, “And she likes to practice with the children.”

Feeling that this was her opportunity to secure a spot at the next May crowning, or at least in the May queen’s court, Lena continued,

“Who is God?”

Will was persisting in his vow of silence. He may have known, but he wasn't letting them know he knew!

"God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things," Dan offered again.

"That's enough catechism," Tom interrupted. "Father hears enough of that at school. Lena, take them into the bedroom until Mama's got the tea ready." Lena dutifully led them into the other room, where she would have to find a way to keep them quiet until they were invited back.

Tom took the opportunity to ask Father when he had arrived in America. When he heard 1831, he was amazed. "That was when Bridget and I were married. We came in 1833." He realized that Father probably wasn't interested in their personal history, so he quickly asked for news of Ireland, a topic that was always interesting, especially now that desperate immigrants were leaving in ever greater numbers. "We're from around Galway," he added.

"Galway's a big center of emigration," the priest said. "You probably know that there's another potato blight starting this year, in Ireland and over here. I read in some of the Irish papers that there's a disease which has attacked the potato crops here in America in 1843 and is starting here again,—a blight that's largely destroyed the potato crops. A coincidence? I'm sure it's not doing any good, all this traffic between the countries, ships from the eastern United States-- Baltimore, Philadelphia or New York—relying on potatoes to feed the passengers." He changed the subject, "Have you heard from your own family?"

Tom and Bridget hadn't heard from home in over a year. No one there could write, but usually they had found someone to send word, but nothing.

"We send them money, but have heard nothing."

This was too depressing. Father wasn't at all chatty—Talk about old times in Ireland seemed increasingly impossible with him. Tom was longing for the joy that tea would bring, so asked Bridget if it wasn't ready. She had been waiting for them to conclude whatever it was that Tom had wanted to talk about in private, so she quickly brought out a plum cake and some soda bread and jam spread the tea service out on her dog rose tablecloth, which had been washed and ironed. The children came back sat in more or less silence as they ate. The meal passed without incident, except when the baby spit up on Bridget's good dress as she was holding him on her lap.

Encountering here in his own parish two men nearly his own age—Father Quarters and Father Starrs were both in their mid thirties—and both from poor rural Ireland, had led Tom to measure himself against the two men. Had he not met Bridget, he too might have finished at Maynooth, been ordained, and

perhaps have come to America as a priest, to help build up Irish communities here. Perhaps the pressing needs of the Church in America might have asked him to shoulder the responsibilities of a new diocese as they had Father Quarters who now headed the Church in Chicago.

What had Tom accomplished in his turn that could compare with what these men had achieved? “Born with a caul,” he laughed to himself. He had always been a bit taken with himself as a lad. Things came easily to him then and he had assumed they always would. The irony of his occupation now—a humble laborer doing the only work he could find, as a carter, lucky to own his own horse—never left him thinking he was important in that regard. His contribution, as fate seemed to have ordained it, lay not in any work that he himself was doing. As Father Quarters had quietly told him, he was building up the Church through his family. Well, so be it. Another was on the way. Ten children, he imagined, would be an ample contribution to the Church. “Ah, Tom! You have brought me ten souls,” he could imagine God saying to him in heaven. “Well done, my son.” Ten souls might not seem many compared with all he could have brought as he could have brought as the head of a diocese like Father Quarters, but it was what fate seemed on course to bring him, at this rate.