

For I have Sinned

“Bless me father, for I have sinned. It’s three months since my last confession...”

How often had I heard those words? Today, I listened as a young man – in his twenties I’d say from his voice – reeled off the usual litany of peccadillos: improper thoughts, envy, lust...nothing special.

“But father, what about you?” he asked, following absolution. “There must be something that *you* desire, something you’ve always wanted?”

I laughed. “No, my son, nothing. Poverty, chastity, the chance to serve, are all I’ve ever desired.”

“Come on, Father. Try harder! Just *one* thing.”

“Well,” I whispered conspiratorially to the grille, “I would give anything to be able to look into a person’s soul.”

“Anything?”

“I have few possessions – none I treasure – so, yes ...anything.”

At that I heard footsteps rapidly retreating from the confessional box, the creak of the old church door, then shivered as an icy blast filled the nave – it was July!

The tolling of the bell confirmed it was time for home. I wended my way up the aisle, shaking my head, chuckling at the young man’s comments. The cheek of today’s youth! When I was a youngster, never would I have-

“Afternoon, father.” It was the church warden.

“Alfred. Good day.”

Then I recoiled – startled by what I saw! Bared in a way that I simply cannot explain was his soul, in all its foul extremities. Hypocrisy, envy, cruelty and greed, a dark vortex trying to suck me in; kindness, compassion, honesty and hope, like shining stars – dwarfed, but infinitely strong.

“I’m sorry. Have to go,” I stammered, then hurried home to the rectory for a tumbler of something strong.

My ministry lasted many years more and I must have met tens of thousands of parishioners, young and old, saint-like or foolishly-strayed, who unbeknown to them revealed more to me than they could ever have dreamed possible. Like so much in life, as I have discovered, I became more used to, more skilled at, manipulating, my new-found ability. I learned to focus on those bits of a person’s soul I wished to see, masking any I found repulsive or upsetting. I gained local fame for ‘understanding’ my flock in ways no other priest was able and, unsurprisingly, rose to be bishop.

My 70th birthday was to be my last as vicar of Christ. Retirement called and I sat, for the final time, in the cathedral’s confessional.

“Bless me father...” His voice hadn’t changed. Still a young man’s. “We made a deal. You said you’d give ‘anything’ for the power that I granted.”

“But, I...” I could scarcely breathe and ripped away the grille. There he sat, a smartly dressed man in his twenties - a pitch-black void where his soul should have been. I fell to my knees. “But that was 25 years ago!” I felt my whole being empty, my spirit flying to him across the few dark feet separating us; then watched, agape, as he rose, turned, and tipped his hat in thanks.