

Five Sundays

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There was once a priest named Fr. Bernard. He was the parish priest at St. Gabriel's in Kansas City. The parish had a modest, well-meaning congregation that usually meant to add something to the collection basket. This meant that Fr. Bernard's church had to dip deeper and deeper into savings every month.

When he was just starting out as a priest, Fr. Bernard had the delusion that the quality of his homilies directly correlated to the amount people would put in the collection basket. He quickly learned this wasn't true. Over time, he spent less and less time preparing his homilies. He generally scheduled homily-writing time between the Saturday family movie and nightcap. When he was particularly tired, he'd pull homilies from his first parish and adjust them for the next day's readings.

This all changed when Fr. Bernard met Herbert Laos.

One Sunday in early spring, Fr. Bernard was shaking hands with parishioners as they exited the church after Mass when he was approached by a tall man in a dark suit. He stood out because the only men who wore suits to St. Gabriel's were octogenarians, and this man couldn't have been a day over 40. He had thick dark hair that was matted to his head as if he had just taken off a helmet.

"Fr. Bernard," the man said, his grip firm, "a word? I'll be waiting over there." He pointed to a bench off to the side of the chapel entrance.

He was standing there blocking the empty bench when Fr. Bernard had finished his duties.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mr...."

"Laos. Herbert. The pleasure is mine."

Fr. Bernard wasn't accustomed to this level of formality. He straightened his back and prepared to talk business with this stranger.

"I don't mean to keep you. I merely have a proposition that I'd like you to consider."

"A proposition?"

"I won't bore you with the details of my circumstances. I hope you understand."

Fr. Bernard nodded, not at all understanding.

“And I assure you that I enjoyed your homily today. Your words had great promise.”

“Yes, well, thank you,” the priest replied, deciding to take that as a compliment.

“Next Sunday, I would like you to deliver the best homily that I’ve ever heard. If you can deliver on that, I will write a check to St. Gabriel’s in the amount of \$10,000.” The man looked Fr. Bernard hard in the eyes as he said this.

“I’m—I’m not sure that’s ethical,” said the priest.

“Possibly. And it’s entirely subjective. However, the worst-case scenario is that I don’t pay you anything. I’ll walk away and never speak of this arrangement to anyone.”

Fr. Bernard wanted to decline the man’s offer, but he made the mistake of looking around as he gathered the words for his response. To his right were the chapel walls, covered in ivy because the parish’s part-time gardener didn’t have the hours to remove them. To his left was a parking lot that hadn’t been paved in years. Even the bench behind Mr. Laos was in need of repairs that St. Gabriel’s could not afford.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

Fr. Bernard spent the next 6 days trying to think of a brilliant insight or theme for his homily. He read religious magazines and daily newspapers in search of something relevant, applicable to the lives of the parishioners. He called priest friends who had fallen out of touch, saying nothing of the proposition as he peppered his peers with questions.

Finally the day of reckoning arrived. Fr. Bernard hadn’t slept at all the previous night, which was filled with furious bouts of writing and memorization. He wasn’t sure that Herbert Laos would consider his homily the best he’d ever heard, but he was confident it was the best he’d ever give.

His fears were wiped away after Mass when he spotted Mr. Laos’s head above the crowd. The tall man smiled, made the motion of writing a check, and then used his fingers to tip a hat that wasn’t there.

Fr. Bernard was inundated with parishioners after Mass that day. By the time he was finished, Mr. Laos was nowhere to be found. It was not until he retired to his office for lunch that he discovered a check written to St. Gabriel’s in the amount of \$10,000. It was accompanied by a note on creamy, expensive paper.

“Can you top that? I’ll double it if your next homily is even better. –H.L.”

Fr. Bernard leaned back in his chair, exhausted. He didn’t know if he could physically go through another week like that. But for \$20,000? It would be a sin not to try.

After taking the rest of the day off, he started preparing for the next week's homily on Monday with renewed vigor. The words and ideas seemed to come easier this time, and by the end of the week, he had to cut out two stories and a clever metaphor to keep the homily a reasonable 12 minutes in length.

The delivery was easier this time as well. Although the pressure should have been greater, Fr. Bernard actually felt more at ease in front of the congregation. People were nodding in agreement, laughing at the right times, many even crying when he finished a particularly poignant segment. He made eye contact with the tall man near the end. The response—the same motion of an invisible check being signed.

Again, Fr. Bernard didn't speak with the man after Mass, but just like the previous Sunday, a check was waiting for him under his office door.

"I will continue to double this amount every week that you deliver the best homily I've ever heard. –H.L."

Fr. Bernard breathed deeply and exhaled. \$40,000! And perhaps \$80,000 the following week! He could single-handedly solve St. Gabriel's financial problems.

For 3 weeks this continued. When Fr. Bernard wasn't writing his homilies, he was authorizing payments and improvements. The gardener was upgraded to full time, the parking lot was paved, several pews were replaced, and St. Gabriel's hosted its first fish fry in years. No sweeping changes—chapel renovations would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars—but little things that had gone neglected for too long were rectified.

By the time Fr. Bernard received the check for \$160,000, he wasn't sure what to do with the money. He could put it into savings, but that just seemed like a waste when there was more coming the next week.

He then thought of the ancient pickup truck that had been assigned to him by the Archdiocese for personal transportation. It worked about half the time and rumbled incessantly the other half. *I'm the one putting in the hours for these checks*, he thought. *Why shouldn't some of the money go to my ride?*

So he went out and bought a Mercedes.

There was still plenty of money left over after Fr. Bernard bought the car, so he decided to renovate his house. Well, it wasn't *his* house—it was the church's—so it made sense for St. Gabriel's to write a check for a new kitchen, an extension for a new library and study, and a wrap-around porch. The down payment dipped a bit into the following week's projected earnings, but he wasn't concerned.

Fr. Bernard spent most of his week going over architectural plans with the contractors that before he knew it, it was Saturday and he hadn't written anything. He wasn't too worried. Words had been coming to him as if whispered in his ear by the angel Gabriel

himself. He was exhausted from the long week, though, and decided to relax in front of the television before putting pen to paper.

He awoke Sunday morning to a pounding on the door. He peeled himself off his new leather couch and shuffled to the front of the house, massaging the crick in his neck.

He opened the door to find the liturgical coordinator standing with hands on hips. “Father!” she gasped. “You’re not dressed!”

“Dressed? What time is it?”

She pushed her way into the house. “Mass starts in 5 minutes! Where are your robes?”

Fr. Bernard rubbed his eyes. “They’re in the sacristy. What’s this about 5 minutes?”

The coordinator grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “Mass! Mass starts in 5 minutes!”

It took a mad rush and the combined efforts of Fr. Bernard, the coordinator, and a confused altar boy, but everything started on time. When Fr. Bernard reached the front of the chapel after the opening procession, he was faced with a capacity crowd. *Here to listen to me speak*, he thought. He remained confident that he’d find the words for his finest homily even without preparation.

The first half of Mass flew by, and as if no time had passed at all, Fr. Bernard found himself at the podium, hundreds of eager eyes trained on him. He looked around at the faces in the crowd, some familiar, some new. He spotted the tall man sitting in his customary spot. The chapel was silent.

Words failed him.

He searched his recent memory for some story, some analogy to match with the day’s readings, but he came away grasping at air. Nothing. Nothing seemed worth saying.

So after at least 2 minutes of silence, he returned to his seat and motioned for the choir to begin the next song.

The reaction after church was mixed. Some people, convinced of Fr. Bernard’s genius by his recent homilies, assured him that today’s homily was brilliant and evocative. Others offered tepid compliments, while still more said nothing at all, just walked away with confused looks on their faces.

A part of Fr. Bernard thought that there would be a check waiting for him when he returned to his office. A part of him believed that his wordless homily *had* been the best ever. But there was nothing under the door—no envelope, no check, no note.

As for the tall man, Herbert Laos, he never appeared at Mass again. Fr. Bernard looked at his customary spot every Sunday, hoping to get another chance. But he never returned.

People still talk about those five Sundays as if they were the thing of legends. Fr. Bernard was transferred to another parish years ago, but his legacy remains. Not just in people's memories, but also in the crumbling walls of the chapel that the parish can't afford to fix, the leak in the roof it can't afford to repair, and the stolen computers it can't afford to replace.

All it took was five Sundays to set the parish back for years.