

Newfoundland Trip

John's, Newfoundland

February 15, 1969

Dear Mike,

Thanks for your letter of February 1. I'm sorry you are feeling so isolated in Chicago. Let's try to get together somewhere between Chicago and Toronto during the March break.

My Normanite confrere Sammy Silver and I just finished preaching three one-week missions here in Newfoundland. We had a few spare days before coming here so we left Toronto early and stopped in Quebec City so Sammy could visit his parents and two sisters, Brigitte and Marilyn.

It was the first time I had been in the city and I was very impressed. Sammy's mother cooked us huge, delicious meals and his father, who has a part-time job as a tour guide in addition to his regular job at a factory, gave us a great, insider tour of the old part of the city one afternoon. One evening we went to a disco with his sisters and their friends but I was shy, not much of a dancer and didn't like the noise.

Of course, in Quebec City everyone seemed to be perfectly bilingual and could slip back and forth effortlessly between French and English. I made the weak joke that I didn't want to appear snobbish by speaking French with a Parisian accent, but in fact I was embarrassed by being only able to speak English. I kick myself for not spending a summer or two at the French Normanite Seminary to learn French.

One morning we went down to visit the Normanite Parish and high school which Sammy had attended and where he still knew many of the teachers. He was very glad to see Sister Agnes of God, who was a member of the very strict teaching order, the Little Grey Sisters of the Little Way of the Little Flower or the “Little Grey Flowers” as they were usually called. She was also the sister of one of his old classmates, Sean O’Brien who, said Sammy, “was more Irish than the Irish,” having actually taken out Irish citizenship although still living in Quebec City. They had an animated conversation for twenty minutes or so and it was obvious to me that there was a real connection between Sammy and the young, attractive nun who had previously taught in New Brunswick and New York City. As we drove back to his parents’ house, Sammy said, “Boy, I can see how she got the name Agnes of God, she’s got a divine figure. I never saw a nun fill out a habit like that!”

“As we say up in the Valley, Sammy,” I said, “I wouldn’t arg with you about that. But you better take a cold shower when we get back to your parents’ place.!”

He just laughed and when we got to his parents’ place we packed up to fly out that evening to St. John’s. When we got there, Brother Al, who was a native Newfoundlander, met us at the airport and took us to the large Normanite Parish. There Father Cork, the pastor and the other priests and brothers gave us a warm welcome topped off by a couple of drinks of high proof British Navy rum from Miquelon, the French island just off the Burin Peninsula. To the question, “How do you drink British Navy rum?” the answer is, “sitting down and very slowly.”

The only way to get the couple of hundred miles to the place where we were to preach the first mission starting the next Sunday was to take a taxi with a couple of other passengers. The first part of the drive on paved highway went quickly and smoothly, but then we turned off onto a very rough, gravel washboard road. The car, a new Dodge, took a real beating as did the passengers. After twenty miles or so on this road, the driver said to me, “Do you want to drive for a while, Father?”

A little surprised by his question, I nevertheless said, “Sure.” So I drove the rest of the way.

The driver and the other passengers were our introduction to “real” local Newfoundlanders. They were animated and friendly with a delightful accent and witty conversation. A lot of the talk centred on “Joey” Smallwood, the Liberal Premier of the Province and “Only Living Father of Confederation” who had led the campaign to bring Newfoundland into the Canadian Confederation some twenty years previous. Jack, the taxi driver, was a big fan of Joey’s and felt that joining Canada was the best thing that Newfoundland had ever done. “Sure, look at all the benefits we get,” he said, “the family allowance and much better education and health care. We’re some better off, I say. And all that’s thanks to Joey who criss-crossed the rock a thousand times and got his message across to the people with his radio show, ‘The Barrelman.’ “

“I couldn’t disagree with you more,” said Mrs. Murphy from the back seat. “Sure we got some goodies, and of course Joey worked it so that the first baby bonus cheques arrived before the crucial vote that he won so narrowly, but we’ve lost control of our own destiny and one of these days our taxes will go sky high and there’ll be not a damn thing, I beg pardon Reverend Fathers, not a darn thing we can do about it. It’ll be just like Joey’s main opponent said twenty years ago, ‘Them as burns their arse will have to sit on the blisters!’ “

At this I laughed so hard I almost took the ditch. “Whatever Newfoundlanders are, they are not boring,” I thought.

“Well, if there’s any problem,” said the other passenger, a fisherman named Gerry, “Joey can always solve it with a Cabinet Shuffle. My third cousin once removed, James McGrath, was once Joey’s Treasurer and when he got the cancer bad, he finally told Joey that he had to resign. When the announcement of Cabinet changes ‘due to ill health’ came out, not only was my cousin out of the Cabinet, but two other ministers that Joey wanted to dump were out as well. One of them said to a reporter, ‘I’m perfectly healthy, Joey just wanted to dump me.’ “

“No problem,” says cousin James, “I’m sick enough for all three!”

At this everyone in the car roared with laughter and the trip seemed to go very quickly, even if the ride was rocky.

When we got to our destination, Father Mullally, the pastor, greeted us warmly and showed us up to our rooms. After washing off the dust of the road, Sammy and I got together to plan our schedule for the busy three weeks ahead of us.

We had the same basic schedule each week. On Sunday morning we would preach at all of the Masses both in the main parish and the mission churches. Then beginning Sunday evening, we would give a ten minute instruction on some important practical topic and a half hour sermon on one of the great themes of the Second Vatican Council. Then there would be a lengthy question and answer period, as we believed that it was important for the people to take an active role, questioning us and stating their own views. This format was repeated every evening from Sunday until Friday.

Some of the topics were: Moving from a religion of fear to one of living the Gospel Message in a positive way, Encouraging personal responsibility instead of blindly following rules, Religious Freedom and respecting other religions, Finding ways to deepen Faith in the modern world, etc.

Regarding the topics for practical instruction, it was obvious to us that the most crucial topic for people in Newfoundland, where families of ten, twelve and even eighteen were not unusual, would be birth control. In light of the Council's teachings on the value of conjugal love, the Canadian Bishops' Statement on Birth Control and Father Haring's writings, we felt that the best way to treat this subject was in an instruction on conscience.

During the days our time was taken up saying Masses, visiting both grade and high schools, visiting the sick, etc. Sometimes local professional groups like doctors, nurses and teachers asked for meetings with us to discuss the particular problems in their work.

In all three parishes, the turnout was tremendous, with 600 and even 700 or 800 people coming every night for the mission. Depending on which could hold more people, the talks were held in either the church or parish hall. The question sessions were very popular and at times funny. One gentleman was upset and confused by a recent announcement from Rome that the patron of travellers, St. Christopher, was not a historical figure. "Sure," he said, "the nuns told us to pray to him for a safe journey, and now it looks like he's off the road altogether!"

The parish priest eased the tension and brought down the house by saying, "Well, Tommy, the Pope decided to have a Cabinet Shuffle, just like Joey."

When someone asked what was the 3<sup>rd</sup> secret of Fatima, Sammy said, "The bill for the last supper!"

At the first parish there was a large number of widows because dozens of men who had worked underground in the nearby mine had contacted lung cancer and died in their thirties and forties. Sammy, who with his thinning hair, long sideburns and aquiline nose, bore a striking resemblance to Pierre Elliot Trudeau in this era of Trudeaumania, was a little shaken up one evening when one of the widows was extremely friendly and wanted him to visit her at her house for a drink.

“I didn’t want to pull a Simon McLeod,” Sammy said to me later. Simon was a Normanite from Northern Ontario who had taught piously for thirty years in the Minor Seminary. At the age of 60 when he was assigned to a mining town in Nova Scotia as the parish priest he shocked everyone by throwing away his Roman Collar and establishing an apostolate to the grieving widows unique for its emphasis on the corporal works of mercy.

“Don’t worry about it, Pierre, you survived unscathed,” I teased, “but I think you’d better hit the cold shower again.”

After the first week where everything had gone well, we moved on to the second parish. Sunday morning Sammy preached at all the Masses in the main parish and I went around to the three mission churches. I was green with envy when I arrived at the priest’s house to discover that Sammy had just had breakfast that morning with the great Joey Smallwood, who had entertained him with fascinating political stories for more than an hour. He even related how he had come to be the first major Canadian politician to back Pierre Trudeau for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada.

“Wellsir,” said Joey, “I had done my due diligence, studied him up and I told my Cabinet I was about to support him publicly as I was convinced he was the best man for the job. I also told them, ‘If I’m the first Premier to support him and he wins, that isn’t going to do Newfoundland any harm, now is it?’ “

“After the Cabinet Meeting, two of my young straight arrow ministers came to me all in a lather, ‘You can’t endorse Trudeau, Joey,’ they said, ‘he’s queer as a three dollar bill!’ “

“Wellsir, I was some shocked by what they said. Not that it matters to me personally if someone is gay. But I knew that if what they said was true, it would be political suicide to publicly back him in Newfoundland, where social values are still pretty conservative. So I jumped right on a plane and headed straight to Ottawa. ‘Pierre,’ I said, ‘a couple of my cabinet ministers say that you’re homosexual, and if that’s true, as Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, I can’t back you for leader.’ “

“Pierre was upset by what I said, but then he said, ‘I tell you what, Joey, ask them if they’re willing to leave their wives alone with me in a hotel room for a couple of hours.’ “

“Wellsir, that was good enough for me. And that’s how the Only Living Father of Confederation became the first Canadian Premier to back Pierre Elliot Trudeau for Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

It turned out that the success of the first week lulled us into a false sense of security. About half way through the second week, much to our surprise, the pastor, Monsignor Moore, began to argue with us during the question period in front of 600 people. What surprised us was that we had discussed with him in detail months before coming to Newfoundland what our approach and topics would be. As I said to him later, “Why did you invite us here, if you didn’t agree with what we were going to say? And by the way, have you noticed that your rectory and the convent are far better houses than everyone else has in this town? Why did you interfere when we were trying to offer helpful advice to the people?”

He apologized, in private, of course, but we remained dubious of his motives and sincerity.

One of the most admirable things we noticed in the people was the way they treated older folks with the greatest respect and affection calling them uncle or aunt even though not related. We saw a good example of this in the next town. There was an 85 year old gentleman who had spent many decades in New York City, part of the time on the famous Bowery, before returning to his native town. Known as Uncle Jack to the whole town, he had a pleasant, outgoing personality, always glad to share a story about the Bowery. Wednesday evening, after the services, one of the young nuns gave Uncle Jack a ride home. So all the next day he told everyone he met that he had a date with a nun the night before. By the time of the meeting Thursday evening, practically the whole town had heard about Uncle Jack's "date."

That evening it was my turn to give the instruction on conscience and birth control and I was very nervous about it. The reason was that on the first evening we were in town, Father John Murphy, the big friendly pastor who reminded me of Friar Tuck, had taken us over to meet the local doctor, an intense 45 year-old man named Doctor Flynn and to have a drink with him and his wife. At one point the doctor said, "When women come into my office and ask for a prescription for birth control pills, I say, 'you're RC, I'm RC, no pills for you!'" "

I was about to disagree with him, but since we were guests in his house, I bit my tongue.

Thursday evening the hall was jammed full with 800 people and Dr. Flynn sitting front row centre looking very severe. It was my turn to give the talk on conscience and birth control.

To ease the tension, I began with a story. “Back a few years ago there was a good Newfoundlander named Jack living down on the Bowery. One day he came along to his favourite pub and was surprised to see a young nun standing outside. ‘Sister,’ he said, ‘what on earth are you doing here?’ “

“ ‘Well,’ said the nun, I’ve always been curious about bars and I’ve never been in one. Do you think you could sneak me in just so I could have a peak?’ “

“ ‘Gee, I don’t know,’ said Jack, but being a kind man, he said, ‘Well, Ok, ‘ “

“ ‘Let’s sit at the back so no one will see me,’ “ said the nun.

“After they were sitting for a few minutes and their eyes got used to the dim light, the nun said, ‘Jack, I’ve never had a drink in my life, do you think you could get me a little taste of whiskey?’ “

“Jack was a bit shocked, but finally he said, ‘Well OK, I guess one little drink wouldn’t hurt.’ “

“ ‘And Jack,’ said the nun, ‘just so no one will know I’m drinking whiskey, could you ask the bartender to put my drink in a teacup?’ “

“ ‘OK,’ said Jack and went up to the bar and asked for two whiskeys, ‘one in a teacup.’ “

“ ‘Is that darn nun in here again?’ yelled the bartender.”

At that, the whole hall burst into extended laughter with Uncle Jack, sitting near the front basking in all the attention. Then I began my instruction on conscience:

I know that many Catholics are confused and concerned about the issue of birth control. After the Pope's Encyclical reaffirming the ban on birth control, the Canadian Catholic Bishops made a statement last Fall. Among other things, they said:

“Counsellors may meet others who, accepting the teaching of the Holy Father, find that because of particular circumstances they are involved in what seems to them a clear conflict of duties, for example, the reconciling of conjugal love and responsible parenthood with the education of children already born or with the health of the mother. In accord with the accepted principles of moral theology, if these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that, whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience.”

What does this mean?

We know that the Gospels and Catholic teaching have always insisted that every person must follow his or her own conscience: that is, after making a careful effort to find out what the right thing to do is, you must do what you believe is right.

Unfortunately, sometimes we have a conflict of duties. When that happens, we must do what we believe to be the more important duty. For example, suppose you are at home alone on a Sunday morning with a seriously ill three year old child. You have an obligation to go to Sunday Mass. Also, you clearly have a serious duty to take care of your child. Which would you do? I think you would realize it is more important to look after the child.

Would you then have to go to confession and say, “I sinned by missing Sunday Mass.” Of course not, you committed no sin by following your conscience and taking care of your sick child, the more important duty.

Now suppose you already have a number of children which you must care for and educate. And you have an obligation to foster love with your spouse. You also know that you can’t afford to raise more children.

What the Canadian Bishops are saying is that if you find you cannot follow the Pope’s direction on birth control and choose to meet your other obligations to your spouse and the children you already have, you are acting in good conscience and are guilty of no sin.

Now, let’s take a few minutes break before Father Silver’s sermon.

When I stopped talking, the room exploded into animated conversation and Dr. Flynn, who had been staring straight at me every minute I spoke, bolted towards me. “Oh no,” I thought, “he’s going to attack me right here in front of 800 people.”

Instead, the doctor grabbed my hand, shook it vigorously and said, “Congratulations! That’s the first sensible explanation of the topic I’ve heard. I will start handing out prescriptions for birth control pills right away.”

Take care Mike.

Spuds

P.S.: I know this is a very long letter, but I must tell you about something strange that happened.

Back at the first parish we visited, I noticed a slender, attractive, black-haired young woman in the front row every evening listening with great intensity to everything we had to say. During my talk on conscience and birth control, she was actually taking notes. Given my slightly paranoid nature and some of the difficulties we've had with people who did not agree with our views on change in the Church, her presence and note-taking unnerved me a bit.

My nervousness increased the first night we were in the second parish when, once again, I saw her sitting in the front row. This time she took notes throughout all our talks. The same thing happened the third week.

Saturday morning about ten o'clock just as Sammy and I were packing our bags and getting ready to meet the taxi driver for the return trip to St. John's, the housekeeper came to my room and said, "There's a young lady down in the parlour who is very anxious to speak to you for a few moments, Father Freeman."

"Well, OK," I said, "but it can only be for a short time as the taximan is due here in fifteen minutes."

When I went down to the parlour, I was shocked to see that the visitor was none other than the dark-haired note taker. "Thank you so much for seeing me," she said, "my name is Mary X and I used to be engaged to your fellow Normanite, Father Jonnie Y. From his letters (yes we have continued to correspond) where he mentioned you and Father Silver so often, I almost feel like I know you already."

"Well," I replied without thinking, "in a way, I feel I know a lot about you too."

I was relieved when she said, “Yes, I know you must have noticed me taking notes during all the sermons for the past three weeks. I hope you and Father Silver didn’t mind.”

“No,” I said, “it’s rare that we get that kind of interest and attention.”

“The reason that I’ve followed you around for three weeks,” she said, “is to be sure I understood what you were saying about birth control. Johnnie Y and I were engaged to be married for two years. We were deeply in love. I broke off the engagement because as the oldest daughter, I had seen my mother go through fifteen pregnancies. She had three miscarriages and a dozen children. She almost died with the last child and she was totally worn out at the age of forty. She died a few years later. I broke off our engagement because I couldn’t face that kind of a future... I just couldn’t,” she said, breaking into tears.

Well, Mike, my heart went out to her. “There, there,” I said, “I know how you feel. My mother’s mother died giving birth to her sixth child, my uncle Frank.”

For a few minutes she cried quietly. Then she said, “The thing is, what I’ve gathered from your talks, is that God only expects a married couple to have as many children as they can bring up in a healthy way and give a good education. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

“So nowadays, you can be a good Catholic couple without having sixteen babies?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Then in the saddest voice I’ve heard in my life she said, “But now it’s too late for Johnnie and me.”

You know, Mike, I think I have a bit of my mother's ability to read minds. But that wasn't necessary. Any fool could see that she was still totally in love with Johnnie.

"Well," I said, "I have to be going soon. But don't give up hope. Sometimes the Lord works in mysterious ways."

I gave her a quick hug and pat on the back and then I had to go.

