

Good News

I've been reading lately about the plight of orphan boys in the 19th century. Many sold newspapers on the street to keep from starving, and they were often at the center of mischief.

Toward the end of World War I, my grandfather and fellow townspeople eagerly awaited news that the fighting in Europe was finally at an end. So, when a newsboy came dancing down the street shouting, "Extra, Extra, War Is Over," Gramps quickly handed the youngster a coin and grabbed a paper. The lad skipped away, leaving Grandpa with a copy of yesterday's newspaper. He'd been duped by an ambitious and probably hungry young charlatan.

From what I've read, there's a good chance that a legion of social agencies and church organizations tried to help that young boy. There were so many orphan newspaper sellers at the time, some of the homes for indigent boys actually had the term Newsboy in their names, such as the St. Vincent's Newsboys' Lodging, opened in 1870 on Warren Street in Manhattan, and the Newsboys' Home in Brooklyn. "Industrial Schools" for young males sprung up in the 1870's and 80's. These were run by Irish Catholic orders of men ... usually the Christian Brothers. Their purpose was to house and feed the boys, but also to teach them the Three R's and basic industrial skills, so they would have a trade to support themselves in a manufacturing society. But the Brothers had another, higher purpose. They were part of an national effort to prevent young Irish Catholics from falling into the hands of Protestant orphanages and Protestant orthodoxy. *

Today, many of us laugh or roll our eyes at the ill will that existed among religions in 19th century America, seeing only small differences between men's souls, and overlooking what was really a vast divide between the social and political classes.

And frankly, the remnants of this division existed into my generation of children, born in the 1940s. Working fathers and mothers, barely able to afford much more than food on the table, sacrificed money and time to build private schools in the name of their

religious affiliation, whether Catholic or Protestant. These were people who held their own faith sacred and mistrusted that of others.

Growing up in a Catholic household, I never heard a single negative or derogatory comment about any of the Protestant denominations, nor of Jews, for that matter. Except, of course, they were wrong in their religious views. To my parents, the Catholic Church was the only true church, and the only way to salvation, unless one was a really, really good "non-Catholic." God would make allowances when, for example, a Methodist or Presbyterian showed up at the Pearly Gates and fainted dead away upon discovering St. Peter was Catholic, as was the rest of heaven. The old boy might even be wearing a Rosary around his neck.



We children were schooled daily in our religion at one of the thousands of Catholic Schools that were common landmarks in the eastern cities of the 1950's. Here in school also, one would never hear scurrilous comments about other faiths, but it was somehow made quite apparent to us that Protestants were "not like us." and in fact we were better, since our religion had more rules to follow and required attendance at church. I might add that the Vatican hysterically regulated sex. How perfected could an adherent get? I have to wonder how many old Irish priests got to giggling when they considered that in training young Catholics to think themselves better than Protestants, they were paying direct retribution to the damned Brits who lorded over the Old Sod for centuries, starving the Irish into submission and decimating their culture. And in my town, it was payback to the generation of Teutonic Europeans who had arrived before the Irish and in the 1940's and 1950's held positions of power and importance in the city. It amounted to plain reverse snobbery.

I remember one particular incident from my childhood that should serve to illustrate the subtle prejudice. I call it, "Religion Matters, Even In A Snow Storm."

As I trudged up Sunset Avenue carrying a canvas bag with "The Observer Dispatch" emblazoned on the side, I never realized I was marching along in the tradition of those orphan boys 100 years before who eked out a living selling newspapers. I was not an

orphan, but the Rev. Mrs. Gasek ... her husband the pastor of Utica's Grace Episcopal Church ... may have thought so when I came to her door during a blizzard on that wintry evening in 1955, to collect the bill for the week's newspapers. The storm would turn out to be one of the city's worst of the decade. Over 5 feet of snow fell in less than 24 hours. Adults would worry and fret, but to me a heavy snow was simply an event that required I lift my feet a little higher to get where I was going through the drifts. At eleven years of age, a big snow was just plain fun, especially when it closed the schools. I thought of myself as a boy of the north, a strapping Son of Utica, born in a blizzard so I was told. But to be honest, this storm was indeed beginning to worry me as I aimed toward home. There were no cars left on the roads, and it looked like folks had given up the frozen battle to huddle around their stoves and radiators. I was totally alone, out in the dark in a blizzard.

The Gaseks were the last customer on my route, and they lived in a comfortable house on the corner of Sunset Ave. and Newell Street, just three blocks from my home. As the wind rattled their window panes and snow piled up on the front porch, climbing its way to the window bottoms, the pastor's wife answered the ringing door bell and opened her front door to behold young Dave, swaddled in six layers of clothing (none matching) and probably missing one glove, as was often the case in those days. "Forty cents, please," squeaked out from my midget apparition while the snow swirled past me and blasted against the poor woman, poised before me and resembling a windblown Donna Reed.

The Reverend was just arriving home, having had a harrowing drive up Genesee Street from his church. I would not accept the woman's offer to step inside. After all, they were as Protestant as one (or two) could get, he being the minister of a downtown church, she being the hostess of no doubt over a thousand covered dish suppers. She insisted her husband take me home in his car. He looked a bit rattled but indicated he was game to head back out on the road. I declined that offer also, not wanting to be dropped off in front of my home by a non-Catholic clergyman, even in the middle of a howling storm of biblical proportions. Besides, how would I explain it to my parents? I tried to withdraw from the porch, stepping backward into the eye of the storm. Mrs. Gasek refused to let go of my arm, her feet firmly planted on the threshold as she stood shivering in the doorway. Today I chuckle as the vision of a couple standing in the gaping maw of a Stargate comes to mind, she pleading with him not

to go. I could see the snow building up on her black woolen dress.

"You can't leave," she shouted into the wind, though barely inches from my face. "You'll be lost in the storm! We'll find you in a snow bank tomorrow! Frozen!"

The Reverend Mr. Gasek, perhaps hearing a whisper from the Holy Spirit, was suddenly inspired to ask for my phone number. He called my mother and asked her permission. She was embarrassed, but assented, and I rode home in a wonderfully warm and commodious black Buick. I was so comfortable when we arrived in front of my house, it's a wonder I wasn't ready to forsake the faith of my fathers and turn Protestant immediately.

The only mention of the episode that evening was from my Dad. "That was very nice of the Gaseks," he said. "But the next time it snows so hard, come right home." Yeah, sure, OK Dad.

I suppose it's unnecessary to say the Gaseks were terrifically nice people. But all the same, I remained Catholic a few more years.

The Good News is that my generation of Catholics continued to meet and mix with more people like the Reverend and his family as we transitioned from Catholic schools to public colleges and acquired knowledge of the liberal arts and the wider world. Many of us married so-called non-Catholics and all of us probably count among our friends people from a variety of religions. And today, finally, from different races.

While I may be lighthearted in my memories, I'm not one for belittling my ancestors and their beliefs or traditions, having not lived in their time or faced their unique problems. But I have seen the hopelessness of men and women as everything around them undergoes change ... except themselves. If there would be a universal prayer among religions, it should be, "Lord, change me."

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* See John O'Grady's "Catholic Charities in the United States," Chapter 7, 1930, Ransdell, New York. Also available on-line at Google Books.