SAINT MARGARET AND THE DRAGON
by Margaret McCloskey

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ACT ONE:

The rectory office of Saint Ignatius Parish on the far northeast side of Chicago. The room is currently inhabited by Father JOE Keneally, pastor, around age 35.

JOE is sits at the desk. The door opens and CATHERINE Dougherty appears, in her early 30s, dressed conservatively. She carries a sheaf of papers.

CATH  
Just dropping off the musical selections for next Sunday for your approval. I thought we could do “Onward Christian Soldiers” as a change of pace. What do you think?

JOE  
It is the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time. We could all use a little pick me up. Attendance has been dwindling.

I’ve noticed.

JOE  
You have?

CATH  
People have been talking.

JOE  
They have?

CATH  
About you. I mean, I love you, I do, I think it’s wonderful that Father Walsh chose such a young and vibrant successor. But people aren’t quite used to you yet. You have a very different style from Father Walsh.

JOE  
They’ll get used to me.

CATH  
And your homily about doubt this morning… I found it very, um, you know, interesting and um modern but it rubbed more than one person the wrong way. I heard Jeannie Nolan and Kathy Myers talking about it in the social hall.

JOE  
It wasn’t about doubt. It was about faith.

CATH
I also noticed you don’t drink the wine you bless.

JOE

I see.

CATHERINE

I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just that I can see the altar from the canter’s pulpit.

JOE

Yes. Of course.

CATHERINE

It’s very unusual. And I wondered—

JOE

Well. Thank you for your honesty.

CATHERINE

Can I ask why—

JOE

No, Catherine.

(pause)

You understand.

CATHERINE

I didn’t see you in the social hall today.

JOE

I had another engagement.

CATHERINE

The socials are kind of a mark of pride, everyone taking time after mass to visit with their neighbors. People bake. I made a spinach dip last week. In a bread bowl.

JOE

Oh yes. I remember.

CATHERINE

I hope you weren’t feeling sick or anything like that.

JOE

As I’ve said, I had another engagement. One I hope will continue.

CATHERINE

You mean you won’t be coming to any more socials after Sunday mass?

JOE
It remains to be seen.

CATHERINE
The socials are important. It’s tradition on Sunday. Your presence makes an impression. Everyone goes. People in the neighborhood want to feel like you’re part of our community, like they can talk to you. How can they do that if you don’t come?

JOE
I’ve attended nearly every social. No one has ever approached me to talk about a football score, much less a homily or a reading.

CATHERINE
People are still… feeling you out.

JOE
I’m sorry I was unable to entertain the parishioners’ criticisms of my homily. But everyone is certainly welcome talk to me anytime they want, even if it’s not at the social. You’ll encourage them to do so? Especially Ms Myers and Ms Nolan?

CATHERINE
I will, yes.

JOE
Wonderful.

CATHERINE
What is it you’re doing that’s more important than spending time with your parishioners?

JOE
I was saying a mass, Catherine.

CATHERINE
Saying a mass?

JOE
Yes. At the east parish.

CATHERINE
What east parish?

JOE
In the Rogers Park Community Center on Sheridan.

CATHERINE
Oh.

JOE
There is a small group of people who meet there to worship. They call themselves the Members of Dignity. I’m working on getting approval from the archdiocese to administer the Eucharist to them.

CATHARINE
Is that allowed?

JOE
It’s not unheard of to perform a sacrament outside the walls of a Church. To the very sick or very old…

CATHARINE
But at the community center, they’re not sick. I mean, not ill.

JOE
No, they’re not.

CATHARINE
So they should come to Mass. On Sunday morning. In the Church. Like everyone else.

JOE
There are certain reasons why they don’t feel comfortable in the Church. And yet they still want to worship.

CATHARINE
That’s ridiculous.

JOE
You think so?

CATHARINE
How could anyone not feel welcome here?

JOE
Perhaps other people are not as… open minded as you are.

CATHARINE
And the Cardinal approved this?

JOE
I’m waiting on a response from State Street.

CATHARINE
Oh.

JOE
But even if the bishops don’t approve it, I still plan on sitting with them on Sundays.

CATHARINE
After saying mass here?

    JOE

Yes.

    CATHERINE

Because you are still the pastor of St Ignatius. Not of St. Ignatius East.

    JOE

Catherine.

    CATHERINE

I’m sorry to be so harsh, but as a resident of this community and as a paid employee of this Church, not to mention the vice chair-person of the Vestry, I feel like it’s my duty.

    JOE

You’re not being harsh. Just a little… narrow.

    CATHERINE

I’ve lived in this neighborhood my entire life. I know the names and faces of everyone in the parish. I walk my dogs all the way from Clark to Broadway every day. I don’t think anyone would call me narrow.

    JOE

An outreach program will hardly affect my ability to properly act as pastor.

    CATHERINE

I thought the soup kitchen was your outreach.

    JOE

It’s a start.

    CATHERINE

They should join the parish like everyone else.

    JOE

I have suggested it.

    CATHERINE

Well?

    JOE

It’s up to them, I think.

    JOE returns to his desk.

    JOE

I’ll see you later.
Catherine nods and exits. Joe sits behind his desk. A moment later, Bishop Francis Oswald, a stoic man in his 60s, enters.

Afternoon, Joe.

Bishop! What are you doing this far north?

Joe and Francis shake hands warmly.

Thought I’d come up and check on my protégé. It’s been at least six months since Walsh turned the reins over to you.

Eight.

Eight months? Really?

Joe nods.

Sit, sit. Can I get you some coffee?

Joe motions toward a chair. Francis sits.

No, no coffee. I can’t stay very long. Just dropped in to see how you’re doing.

Good. Things are going well, I think.

Are they? That’s good. I would think it would be incredibly difficult to replace a pastor as beloved as Father Walsh was.

Well, any transition is hard.

True.

I’m starting to implement some changes that I think will be of great benefit to St. Ignatius going forward.
FRANCIS

Changes?

JOE

It’s very exciting to me, Bishop, to be in a parish in such a diverse neighborhood. I’m hoping to reach out more into the community. We’re the only parish for miles—the closest one is Queens, way over on Western. There is such opportunity to diversify within the parish.

FRANCIS

How do you mean, diversify?

JOE

I mean making everyone feel welcome. I’m thinking of having an open house, where people can come and learn about the Church.

FRANCIS

(pause)

Do you know the history of St. Ignatius?

JOE

The parish or the saint?

FRANCIS

Did you know this rectory survived the fire?

JOE

No.

FRANCIS

The archdiocese spared no expense building churches in the 19th Century. They were criticized at the time, but when the fire came through, it was these structures that survived, and provided shelter for people who had lost everything.

JOE

It’s exactly that spirit that I want to recapture.

FRANCIS

But it’s not 1871. We’re not missionaries, Joe. You need to protect the flock you already have.

JOE

(pause)

I heard you’re Eucharistic ministering at Barnabas.

FRANCIS

A couple times a month.

JOE
Barnabas is a big step up, Bishop. How many Cardinals have come from there? Four of the last six?

FRANCIS

It may be.

JOE

You always said you didn’t have your eye on the mansion.

FRANCIS

It may be that the mansion has its eye on me.

JOE

What do you mean?

FRANCIS

I’ve been asked to join the Council.

JOE

You?

FRANCIS

I’ve been standing in for Bishop Ford and they’ve offered me full membership.

JOE

Are you going to accept?

FRANCIS

I’ve already accepted.

JOE

I see.

I think I can do some good there.

FRANCIS

JOE is silent.

FRANCIS

It’s important that we represent ourselves and our faith well, Father.

JOE

Of course.

FRANCIS

I’ve known you a long time, Joe. You were my favorite student at Quigley. You never failed to move me with your enthusiasm and insight. I see you haven’t lost any of that.
Bishop— I’ve written to the council.

FRANCIS

I know.

JOE

Then you know what an important matter it is.

FRANCIS

I’m here to invite you to an audience with the full council.

JOE

And?

FRANCIS

They’ll hear you out, confer and inform you of their ruling on the matter.

JOE

Do you have a feeling for what that ruling will be?

FRANCIS

It doesn’t look good.

JOE gets to his feet.

JOE

This could change everything about the Church! Change the reputation of Catholics, of the Archdiocese.

FRANCIS

That may be, but under Vatican 2—

JOE

We can’t deny sacraments to people who want them because of something as arbitrary as sexual orientation or because a woman has given birth out of wedlock! I won’t do it.

FRANCIS

You are bound by the same rules that I am.

JOE

These people at the community center are good people, Bishop.

FRANCIS

I’m sure they are. You wouldn’t care this much if they weren’t.

JOE

I want to do right by them.
FRANCIS
They must join the Church. If they trust you, they will. Then they can repent.

JOE
Repent for what? They’re not sinners.

FRANCIS
A child out of wedlock—

JOE
Yes, yes. But there’s more to it than that.

FRANCIS
You must understand, Joe. There are groups of people who want to destroy the Archdiocese. We must protect ourselves and the people who have been faithful. I’m afraid you will be taken in.

JOE
I won’t deny anyone who wants to strengthen their relationship with god.

FRANCIS
I’m worried about you. You’re young still, you have your whole career ahead of you. These changes you’re talking about are important, yes, but change doesn’t happen overnight. You can’t come into one of the oldest and largest parishes in the city and in 8 months expect to change everything. Vatican 2 was 96 years in the making, Joe.

JOE
Didn’t god create the world in 7 days?

FRANCIS
(pause)
They’re not going to budge on this one. Pick your battles. Something smaller.

JOE
Thank you for your opinion.

FRANCIS begins to exit.

FRANCIS
I’ll take you up on the coffee soon. If the offer still stands.

JOE
(forcing a smile)
It certainly does.

FRANCIS exits.