

26. The Hungry Priest

A hermit feeds on the sins of others.

In the small town of Castrovillari at the foot of the Calabrian mountains, there lived a former hermit, who called himself Vashpa, now a priest. He serviced the beautiful (to its inhabitants) church of San Giuliano.

In his days as a hermit, living in a cave in the mountains, he had learned to live off the land, had few needs except a few morsels to chew on every other day, and water from the streams that trickled down from the mountains. He spent his time meditating, sitting on his haunches, chanting chants that he made up as he went along, and reading ancient scriptures that were supposedly unearthed in the desert of Sinai. Actually, they were dried up and shriveled pages from a discarded copy of *Il Messaggero* that had washed down from one of the streams.

How many years had passed he had no idea. Certainly, his gaunt, unshaven figure looked the ideal picture of a hermit and a very wise old man, though he was not that old, he just looked like it. Yet his asceticism had not impressed the powers of above and below, for a drought descended upon all of Calabria, a place where there was never all that much rain anyway, and his source of water dried up. Hardly able to rise up from his haunches, he staggered down the foothills and emerged in the town of Castrovillari. And as it so happened, he staggered into the one tiny convent there, inhabited by sisters of the order of Mother Teresa.

The sisters were over-joyed to take him in, and in so doing, spoiled him like an only child, which he was—sort of. They told him of the abstemious ways of Mother Teresa, she gave or herself to many, a true saint. The least the sisters of the convent of Mother Teresa could do was to take him in and to set him on the same path as their unofficial (because she was Irish) patron saint,

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Íte. They marveled at his asceticism, indeed thought it a small miracle for one to have become an ascetic without the aid or even knowledge of the Christian faith.

More importantly for him, though, were the catechisms, biblical studies and readings, hymnals, and all the other paraphernalia of the catholic church. For ascetics of all religions, time, as we common people understand it, stands still. In fact, it might well not exist, for each day is like every other day. Of course, here is where appearances can be very misleading. Time does not stand still at all, it relentlessly pushes forward. But for an ascetic such as Vashpa, it appears so. Without full understanding of his existence in time, therefore, he was about to ignore his body and devote himself entirely to the Scriptures and rituals of the catholic days.

He showed such devotion, and acquired so much knowledge, that the sisters petitioned Bishop Giuseppe Fiorini Morosini to ordain him upon their recommendation, without his having to attend school in the Vatican. In their application they listed over one hundred pages of his studies, exceptional grades earned when they examined him, his dedication to the church and especially his renowned asceticism. This request was so unusual that the Bishop immediately forwarded it to the Vatican for His Holiness the Pope to examine and offer his guidance.

Meanwhile, the sisters, feeling that they had reached the pinnacle of what they could do with their adopted neophyte, broke with past practice and took it in turns of chaperoning him to attend mass at the local church of La Madonna del Castello. Here he learned to take communion (not officially of course, the wine he took was non-alcoholic), and to mingle with other worshippers, who, however, were puzzled at the sudden emergence of this hermit, whose fabled existence had been the talk of the town before he emerged as a real person. They knew him as Vashpa and asked the sisters of the convent who was this person and why did he have a strange name. There were many rumors about him, as naturally happens when a person lives as a hermit and never communicates with the outside world. In the absence of information, people will invent it, if they must have it.

And so it was that the sisters of Mother Teresa decided that

they must approach their apprentice and ask him where he got his name, and more important insist that he take on a real name, that is, an Italian name.

The trouble was that Vashpa liked his name, and he was very used to using it. He had many conversations with himself when he was a hermit, and always addressed himself as Vashpa. He could not imagine calling himself any other name. When asked where did he get the name, he replied that he did not know. It must have been the name given him at birth. Of which he, of course, had no memory. Did he not have parents? Did he not have a childhood? Where did he grow up? To these mundane, though obviously crucial questions about his existence and identity and who he really was, he answered he had no memory. In fact, he became very agitated when constantly asked his true name. He would reply Vashpa. And who were his parents? And he would answer with a shrug, "Mother Nature." This, the sisters took as near blasphemy, and they spent much time making confession to Jesus for their punitive thoughts and their unkind demands upon their charge. Fortunately, Time, a concept unknown to dedicated ascetics as we have noted, does not stand still but moves forward, relentlessly. And such a notion makes it possible for resentment to be overcome and for the healing of fissures by Time. Thus Vashpa learned from the sisters that "time heals all."

Had he still been an ascetic he would have responded with "it is healing that demands time, not the other way round." Such utterances befuddled and frustrated the sisters of Mother Teresa. Their outstanding pupil had become an obstreperous and heartless critic of their own existence and their lives. Yet they had devoted themselves to him, gave him everything he needed to become a saint. He appeared not to appreciate their good will. Such thoughts only made things worse, because they knew that it was a sin to expect gratitude from others.

Finally, Vashpa could stand the stress no more. And at breakfast (dry toast and sparkling water from the local spring) he announced that he would adopt a name well known to the church. The sisters became excited, and much relieved. Each of them looked up to heaven, crossed themselves and silently said, "thank you Jesus."

“And what name have you chosen?” asked the Mother Superior.

“Íte,” replied Vashpa as he munched his toast.

One could feel the air sucked out of the sparsely furnished room as each of the sisters put their hands to their mouth and looked up once again to Heaven.

“But that’s a girl’s name!” exclaimed Mother Superior.

“No. It’s a Saint’s name. Is not gender irrelevant to sainthood?” replied Vashpa once again noisily chewing his toast, then sipping water.

“But you are not a saint,” countered Mother Superior, unable to hide the venom in her voice.

Silence reigned. The sisters looked down at their empty plates.

Vashpa was tempted to say, “but I will be,” but knew that it was a sin to want anything too much, let alone sainthood. Besides, he had to admit that he had done nothing of good will at all that would qualify him for sainthood.

Mother Superior broke the silence. “God will be the final judge. Sisters, from now on we will call our wonderful neophyte, Íte. She is, after all, our patron saint.” She turned to him and said with a smile, such as it was, covered by her habit, “we are most honored, Íte, to have you among us, for you have allowed us to be part of your life. May the riches of God, Jesus and Mary lead you to a Heavenly place.”

All the sisters wriggled a little in their seats. They were not quite sure whether to clap or not. Íte was himself overcome. With teary eyes, he said, almost sobbed, “I am overjoyed sisters, my holy family.”

But then, a terrible, portentous thing happened. His tummy gurgled and he reached for another piece of toast. Right then he knew there was something wrong. He felt hungry, and had not felt hunger over his many years of fasting. Worse, it was the last piece on the plate and there was another sister still to come. It should be left for her.

Mother Superior blinked her eyes and looked down. “I think, you must make confession. I will accompany you to the church of San Giuliano. It is a dear little church, and it has a dear little

It was a typical hot and dusty day in Castrovillari, as they walked together through the small vineyard where sisters were already snipping and tending the vines, then stepped on to Via Giudeca. Mother Superior walked briskly, causing Íte to stumble a little to keep up. He was not used to such physical exertion. And his tummy gurgled some more. They walked in silence, broken only by the crunching of gravel under their feet. Íte felt the need to make conversation. This also came as a shock to him, another sign that there was something wrong. He had preferred silence for so long, and had broken it among the sisters when he conducted his studies and ask the sisters questions to explain this or that about catholic rituals, masses, catechisms and other ways of the church. He had never made small talk, as people call it.

Yet it was Mother Superior who broke the silence. “I will go as far as the door of the church. Father Bruno will be expecting you.”

They turned a corner into Largo Giuliano. Íte stopped briefly to take in the most typical scene of southern Italy: the historic, mildly ornate stone church, at the far end of the largo that was more or less rectangular, not a soul (literally) in sight, the hot wind blowing billows of dust around the square, a wall to his right plastered with the latest political posters and the occasional death notices. Mother superior led the way to the steps at the front of the church. Her well-worn heavy black shoes scraped on the cobblestones as they stepped up to the old wooden door.

“I will leave you here,” she said, “and may Jesus and Mary be with you.” She turned and left.

Íte struggled to open the heavy wooden door, painted an ugly dark green. And upon entering he immediately crossed himself as taught by the sisters. There were two confession boxes one on each side of the main altar that was painted white and edged with gold, surrounded by many trinkets, relics, and ornate cups and boxes on show. Both confessionals were located at the back of the altar, appearing as though they were actually doors to the rear. The question was, which one to enter? Íte walked silently forward, admiring the slender silvery organ pipes that rose up

from the altar on both sides. Of course, the entire altar was constructed around the magnificent display, if rather small, of the depiction of San Giuliano himself. He approached the altar, kneeled and crossed himself again. He then thought he heard a slight cough from the altar on the right. So he approached, and entered through the red drapes.

Unfortunately, the door was simply an entry to the various small chapels that were on show behind the altar. He quickly withdrew and came back to the main church and then spied the confessional in the apse, off to the side almost hidden behind a white column. He knocked lightly and heard the cough again. He opened the simple plain walnut door, and there found himself in what looked like a typical old fashioned telephone booth, only with a seat.

He sat and looked at the ornate grate that separated him from his confessor, who moved and shuffled a little.

“Bless me father for I have sinned,” mumbled Íte.

We need not recount all the sins he confessed. It is enough to say that he had not all that many to confess, since he had spent the last many years in silence alone with himself and his cave. So there was not a lot of opportunities to do anything bad, except of course, those things that had to do with himself and only himself.

What is most important however, is what came out of it. Íte left the confessional a changed person, or so he thought. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and each time he said a Hail Mary, according to the priest’s orders, the weight lifted some more. He was so happy with this first experience of confession that he hummed a hymn all the way back to the convent. And by the time he reached the convent he had a plan. A magnificent plan.

But it was interrupted.

Íte walked quickly through the vineyard nodding to the sisters as they worked. One looked up and informed him that the Mother Superior had asked that he go straight to her as she had important news from Bishop Morosini

“You are to be ordained by Bishop Morosini this coming Saturday at Holy Mass in the Church of San Giuliano. This is a great honor! No bishop has come to Castrovillari for at least

seven years! You must have truly impressed the Vatican. And to do that without having to set a foot in Rome. All of it virtual! We at the convent are so proud of you!”

Íte was overjoyed, another sin to reckon with.

Íte was duly ordained and informed by Bishop Morosini that he would be contacted soon with his orders, the diocese to which he would be allocated. Newly ordained priests were usually sent off to distant parts of the world, or tiny places in Italy, such as where Íte was already stationed, with his sisters in the convent. He almost requested that he be allowed to stay at the convent, but thought better of it. The Bishop might wonder what he was up to. His hope was that the sisters and especially Mother Superior would speak up for him and make such a request. For he could see that they very much needed him. There they were stuck in their little convent, with nobody to confess to. How could the church overlook such a serious need? His grand plan was to build a confession box, and then hear their confessions daily or as often as needed. They must have many, many sins all bottled up. He would free them from their sins! What better way to thank them for all they had done for him!

The wheels of the Vatican turn slowly. No letter of placement came. Íte was therefore free to pursue his grand design. He made the trek into Castrovillari and checked out the confession box in the church of San Giuliano. He took a photo and made drawings. He would make a replica for the convent. Where it would be placed, he worried a little, because the tiny chapel in the convent may not have room.

And so it was done. The confession box, the “dark box” as those who envied it (ex-catholics and non-catholics) called it, was placed just outside his own room at the end of the hallway. He had to modify the priest’s cubicle a little so that it could fit into the hallway space. The sisters were so excited when he invited them to come see his handiwork! They came, touched its freshly polished walnut exterior, took just a tiny peak at the confessor’s booth, not of course the supplicant’s booth.

The next morning at breakfast, Íte declined to take toast, had just a little sparkling water. Once all the sisters were at the table, he stood and announced, “The confessional will be open for

business this morning and will remain open until all confessions are heard.”

Mother Superior spoke, her face beaming, looking around the table. “Sisters, remember your chores and duties. Though confession is of course the most important part of a good Christian’s life, it must not be undertaken without due consideration of your other responsibilities.”

“Would you like to be first?” asked Íte, turning to the Mother Superior.

“I would be most honored,” she whispered.

Íte excused himself from the table, and Mother Superior followed him to the hallway. Íte squeezed himself into the priest’s cubicle, and Mother superior into hers. He made a small welcoming cough, and Mother Superior settled down to a long confession.

“Bless me father for I have sinned,” she began.

When Mother Superior stepped out of the confessional, she was shocked to see all the sisters lined up down the hallway, awaiting their turn.

“Now sisters, go off and attend to your duties. There is no telling how long each confession will last. We must rely on each sister, once she has confessed, to report to me, and I will send in the next. I will make up a roster. Of course, if you have something very urgent to confess, we can let you jump the queue.”

The Mother Superior was so happy that the sisters in her charge were able to confess daily, if they wanted or found it necessary. But she failed to notice that the confessional had become the central organizing feature of the convent. Nor did she, or anyone else notice that Íte did not show up for breakfast. He was, in fact, always available, always in the confessional.

Íte for his part felt no hunger for food. He was used, after all, to fasting from his previous life as an expert hermit and ascetic. He had arranged for one of the sisters to slip him a small glass of sparkling water each morning before he began the morning sessions. And each time at the end of the day when he went to bed, he took a small glass of sparkling water. That was all.

Yet over the days and weeks that followed, he began to

notice that, contrary to what happened to his body when he was a hermit, he was getting fatter, and fatter. None of the sisters noticed this because they never even caught a glimpse of him these days. He was entirely in the confessional or in his room. Nor did they notice that he ate nothing. All he took was a little sparkling water each day and that was brought to him by his first and last confessors respectively.

It took the sensitive and perceptive Mother Superior to suspect that something was amiss. She began to realize that when she did her own confession, Íte did not want to let her go. He kept pressing her to confess more and more, to the point that she began to make up sins in order to please his appetite that seemed to be insatiable. But she said nothing, until one day she heard a cry from the confessional, from the last confessor of the day. She hurried to the confessional and found Íte, his face twisted in pain, wedged in the doorway of his cubicle. He had become so fat that he could no longer fit through.

“Father!” Cried Mother Superior. “What have you become?” And immediately she fell to her knees and asked for forgiveness for having asked such a prying question, lacking in empathy.

“Oh! I knew I should have made the doorway wider. But it would not have fitted in the hallway,” answered Íte. “Just push me back in, and I’ll be fine. I can sleep here for the night.”

“But you can’t do that. What will you do if you...” Mother Superior’s voice trailed off, embarrassed.

“I have no need. It’s a kind of miracle, I suppose,” he said with a saintly smile. “Now off you go, get your sleep. I will be here waiting for you in the morning, and come as early as you want.” The earlier the better, he thought to himself. For he had a great hunger. Not for food. But for confessions. He gobbled up all their sins, and with each confession, he became fatter and fatter.

It finally dawned on Mother Superior that Íte had gone through some kind of conversion. His extreme asceticism had become its opposite. He grew fat on all their sins. She pictured him vomiting up all their confessions, the sins coming out of his mouth like the words in a 16th century bible illustration. What was the equivalent to putting a finger down his throat? Or maybe

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it was too late for that. Maybe what was needed was an enema?

The next morning, Mother Superior brought Íte his sparkling water. In it she had mixed a triple dose of Epsom salts. She forbade any of the sisters to attend confessional until further notice. She went back to bed and dreamed of Íte whose likeness had taken on the shape of the devil itself, gobbling up the sinners in his huge mouth, spewing out the sinners from his anus, just like she had seen in a Bosch painting.

Moral: Punishment is the insatiable tie that binds . .

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