Opinion

Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Jeremy Wong)

by Michael Leach

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Editor's Note: Bishop Morrie is a fictional character columnist Michael Leach created in 2012 as a trope to discuss contemporary issues in the church. There is no Diocese of Paris, Kansas. The Bishop Morrie columns have been very popular with regular NCR readers, who understood he was fictional. New readers to the site did not realize this, and too many did not see the disclaimer at the bottom of this column. We apologize to people for whom this column caused confusion.

On Sunday, Aug. 19, the day of his 78th birthday, Bishop Michael (Morrie) Morrison announced at 10 a.m. Mass in the basilica of Our Lady of the Prairie in Paris, Kansas, that he had submitted a letter of resignation to Pope Francis. The congregation, according to the bishop's secretary Maude Frickett, was "in shock and awe."

Morrie, as you may know, is my classmate from Mundelein Seminary (1966) and oldest friend. I was there because he phoned a few days before: "Mike," he said, "This is it. I can't keep it inside anymore. It's like the alien is eating my soul." I flew from New York on the first plane to Kansas City, then took a rental to Paris, where we stayed up all night drinking scotch as Morrie revealed his secret. His small, two-room suite in the diocesan center he had converted from an abandoned meat packing plant still had the smell of sheep. The next morning Morrie made his announcement.

The news made the front page in the next morning's Prairie Messenger. It got only three paragraphs on Page 6 of The Kansas City Star. You never heard about it on FOX News or MSNBC. What follows is an edited transcript.

"I am so sorry. I am so ashamed," Morrie told the congregation of some 300 people, who loved him with the same love they loved their father or grandfather. "I have betrayed you," he said. "I have sinned.

"Many years ago, there was a priest who abused a child. … I chastised him. I wanted to slap him silly. I didn't understand how anyone could do such a thing. The taboo alone should kill you. I went to the family's house and begged forgiveness and offered help and helped them and continue to help to this day.

"I didn't call the police. … I sent the priest to a place in Maryland for counseling. And when he came back with a clean bill of health … I sent him to another parish."

The congregation gasped. Morrie paused, his head dropping down as if there were a millstone around his neck.

"He did it again," Morrie said. "*He did it again.*" Morrie held back a tsunami you could see swelling in his chest. "Then *I* did it again! I sent him to Holy Family Hospital to be chaplain. … I never heard of anything again, he left the priesthood two years later to live in Mexico. But then … in 1989 … there was another …

"I should have called the cops. I wrote Rome to get the guy kicked out. They didn't. I told him to leave. He found a diocese out west where priests are fewer than even here. I warned the bishop. He took him anyway.

"The next one … the early '90s …" A man in the third pew got up, crawled over the people in his way, and stormed out of the church. A few others in the church followed.

"I called the cops this time," Morrie said in a loud voice as if trying to reach the people who left. "But we hushed it up. We hushed it up. That's what we did in those days. Don't ask me why.

"*No, ask me why.* Children's lives were not as important as the church's life! That's why. Only women's lives were less important than theirs. That's how we were trained. I went into the seminary when I was 14. We were taught that girls were temptations. We were warned not to look at the magazine section in the Sunday papers. There were lingerie ads. We were warned about the solitary sin. We felt so guilty that we played solitaire all the time. Don't let anyone fool you: bishops polish their croziers too. It's insane. The rector of the seminary, the disciplinarian, the teachers, our spiritual director, they were all insane. They drove us insane. Our sexual maturity froze at 14.

"All I can say in my defense, and there is no defense for what I did and didn't do, is that I never broke my vow. I never hurt anyone. I would never hurt anyone. I'm insane but I was a good priest. I wanted to burn myself out for Christ before I was 40. I had a heart attack when I was 39. That wasn't good enough. I had another one at 42. So they made me a bishop, right here, in Paris, Kansas, where I feel like I lived before I was born and where I never want to leave. I love you so much!"

Men, as well as women, were in tears.

"I am so sorry.

"I don't know when I will be leaving Paris. I'll be going to Connecticut to stay with my best friend for a few weeks the day after tomorrow. I hope you will allow me to come back, at least for a visit now and again."

A woman stood. "Don't leave!" she cried. "Stay!" said others. "Stay!" A little boy, about 10, said, "We forgive you, Father."

Morrie wiped tears from his eyes. "There's just one more thing," he said. "I've also written the Holy Father with a request to leave the priesthood."

You could feel the question mark flashing above the heads of the congregation.

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"I'm 78," Morrie said. "It's been a long time. While I have time left I'd like to experience the intimacy of holding a woman close to me and brushing her face with the palm of my hand, and feel her fingers running through what's left of my hair. I don't think I can have sex anymore, but would so love the intimacy that I have seen and appreciated in so many of your lives. I don't want to be a lonely guy. I don't want to grow old with one of the biggest regrets any of us can have: not taking the chances we wish we would have taken in our lives. I regret my sins as a bishop. I don't regret loving you."

Morrie went back to the altar. "Let us pray." No one left. There was no catcalling, no applause, just quiet, sincere worship.

After Mass, the bishop of Paris, Kansas, stood in front of the basilica, the early morning breeze blowing the prairie grass this way and that, and one by one and two by three the parishioners hugged him or shook his hand and whispered words of benevolence. Everyone patiently waited their turn. Especially the six elderly ladies standing to the side.

[Michael Leach, publisher emeritus of Orbis Books, has been shepherding NCR's Soul Seeing column since its inception in 2011. His columns about the flawed, lovable and (we note this now because of the increased volume of our abuse news coverage) *fictional* Bishop Morrie have been reader favorites. You can see them all at **NCRonline.org/feature-series/bishop-morrie/stories**. All Soul Seeing

columns can be read at **NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing**.]

This story appears in the **Bishop Morrie** feature series. View the full series.
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