

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 14, 2012 at 9:18am

Bishop Morrie says liturgy can be fun

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

We were on the 19th hole of the Paris Country Club, Morrie and me, slurping our third iced tea.

"I hate golf," my classmate said. "It's not fun."

"That's because you're not good at it," I said. "You're good at other things."

"Name one," he said.

"You're good at being the bishop of Paris, Kan." I raised my glass. "Nobody does it better."

" 'Nobody Does It Better,' " Morrie repeated. "Theme song from 'The Spy Who Loved Me.' " He raised his glass. "To Carly Simon!"

We clicked glasses and looked over the veranda at a foursome finishing the 18th. The golfers climbed the steps to the patio and one of them, an elderly gentleman in a grey and black Charlie Sheen shirt approached Morrie. "Your Excellency! How did you hit them today?"

The bishop shook the man's hand. "Not great," he said, "but I don't care. I love golf. It's good to see you, Charley!"



"Say, did you read about what happened up there in Illinois?"

Charley asked. "That priest who made up those words during the Mass? The bishop cut him loose. He can't say Mass anymore."

"We're a country of laws," Morrie said.

"Exactly! Well, Your Excellency, enjoy your lunch!"

After Charley left, I said to Morrie, "You know, you used to make up words when you were a young priest."

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"Not on purpose," he corrected. "I just had a hard time memorizing. Had to say something. Almost didn't get ordained, you know. Couldn't wrap my fingers around the chalice right. I have a trick thumb. That's why I stink at golf."

"Would you have fired that priest up in Illinois?"

"I hate conflict, you know."

"Morrie, you give pretty good sermons. Why are so many of the homilies I hear on Sunday so dull?"

The sun was at high noon and a waiter came with our table's umbrella. "Muchas gracias, Juan," Morrie said. "How's the baby? Got any pictures?"

When Juan moved on, as happy as a new day, Morrie leaned over the table and answered my question. "It's not the priests' fault, you know. We're a church of rules. The homilist has to connect an Old Testament passage to a letter Paul wrote to somebody and that to a Jesus story. It doesn't work, you know. It's all made up. There's no spiritual connection. Homilies are all explanations now. Folks need inspiration, not information."

"Why are your sermons different?"

"I'm a bishop. I don't have to follow the rules."

"If you could change the rules, what would you change?"

"I can't change anything. Who do you think I am? All I can do is encourage my priests to do a lot of spiritual reading and put into their homilies whatever idea is inspiring them that week. Give a sermon on something spiritual you're really hot about. You may not be accurate, but you'll be authentic."

"What's the best you ever gave?"

He didn't have to think. "My first one," he said. "It was for the children at the orphanage where I worked as a seminarian during the summers. I set up an altar next to this pond that had these big frogs popping out like Muppets. The kids sat on the grass as the sun rose over the altar. I don't know what the assigned Gospel passage was but I asked Jabbo Jablonski to read the one about the lilies of the field. For the homily I asked the kids, 'Each one of you, go and choose a flower and just look at it.' They scattered and each one found a dandelion and put it close to their face. 'Just look at it,' I said. 'And see how it grows!' The kids smiled and those little yellow lions smiled right back at them. I whispered, 'If I could look into your eyes right now, children, I would see a flower! God is everywhere, and each of you is baptizing a flower!' Shortest sermon I ever gave."

"I heard about it, Morrie. I also heard that at the consecration each kid had a balloon filled with helium that they let go into the sky."

"You should have seen it! Red and green and yellow balloons drifting across that beautiful Kansas sky and floating down to the ground as far as Kansas City!"

"The local paper reported that the balloons landed all over the county and some people picked them up and found a child's handwritten note tied to each one. Do you remember what it said?"

" 'God is everywhere.' "

We both took a moment to appreciate the Kansas sky, as blue as a crayon. After a while I said, "Morrie, you were more 'out there' than that priest in Illinois. What did you say to the bishop when he called you on the carpet?"

"I said to him, 'Why can't the liturgy be fun?' "

"And he said?"

"'You'll never go anywhere, son.' He was right."

"Have you ever done a Mass like that as a bishop?"

"I don't like conflict."

When we finished our teas, I asked Morrie, "Would you mind if I wrote about your first Mass in Soul Seeing?"

The bishop considered my question. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It's on the record. And that was a million years ago. It couldn't happen today."

" 'This happens,' " I said. " 'This is something that happens.' "

"Good reference!" he said. "Stanley. The boy wonder in the movie 'Magnolia.' Right after the frogs fell from the sky!"

"Yes, Morrie: It happened. And they were as big as Muppets."

Morrie reflected. "You're right. Exodus 8:2. It was a plague."

"Maybe that's how frogs get to be Kermits. They have to fall so we can be free."

A few drops of rain fell. "Maybe so," Morrie said. "And maybe Stanley grows up to be William H. Macy, the 'Quiz Kid' Donnie Smith who loses it all."

"But that's when the frogs save him."

The sound of thunder punctuated our conversation. Morrie looked to the darkening sky and held out his palm. "A hard rain's gonna fall," he said. "Let's get inside. It would be just my luck to get smacked by Miss Piggy."

[Michael Leach is the author of the book *Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question*, which the Catholic Press Association voted the best Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith in 2012.]

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