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Bishop Morrie tells you how to vote

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

"When are people going to learn? Democracy doesn't work." -- Homer Simpson

I was having a halibut dinner with the bishop of Paris, Kan., on the marble balcony of Michael Jordan's Steak House in Grand Central Station. Below us hundreds of people moved in perfect harmony around the famous clock, like figures going in and out of the Munich Glockenspiel. I said to my classmate, "I assume you'll be voting Democratic this year."

"Assume nothing," Morrie said. "The only assumption you can be certain of is Mary's, and she was the mother of God, you know."

"Aren't we 'all meant to be mothers of God'?"

"Meister Eckhart. Well done ... 'for God is always needing to be born.' "

Above us the curved mural sky ceiling sparkled with lights that connected all the signs of the zodiac, promising a certain future. The commuters marched forward, looking straight ahead or at the ground. "I did that for 25 years," I told Morrie. "Hardly ever looked at the beauty that was above me or around me."

"You had other things on your mind," Morrie said. "So do they. That's life, you know. You want some of my fries? They're still hot."

"You know, Morrie, we hardly ever talk about politics. I want to know how you're going to vote next month. Opus Dei accused you of being a communist a couple years ago so I assume you're still a Democrat."

Morrie gave me his wickedest Jack Nicholson smile. "It was March 7, 2010. The Sunday after Glenn Beck told his audience, 'Look for the words *social justice* or *economic justice* on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can.' My sermon was on Acts of the Apostles, chapter four, written March 7, 110."

"I didn't know the date but let me guess: That's the one about how the followers of Jesus put together all they owned and shared it with the poor among them?"

Morrie held up a long fry like an orchestra leader about to strike up a symphony. "Do you know the difference between communism and Christianity?" he asked.

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Three elderly alpha males in silk suits at the table next to us turned their ears toward Morrie. "I'm about to find out," I said. "So is everybody in Grand Central Station."

"Communism," he said *sotto voce*, "says you *must* be good. Christianity says it's good to be good."

"And didn't Chesterton say, 'Christianity hasn't been tried and found wanting, it hasn't even been tried'? So will you settle for less and try the polls on Nov. 4?"

"Oh, I'll be there. I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look -- wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build -- I'll be there, too!" "

One of the businessmen, a big guy, did a double take.

I overlooked Morrie's reference to *The Grapes of Wrath*. "So what did you tell your congregation after the Beck thing?"

Morrie must have felt the attention from the man next door. "You know," he said, "you're right about that ceiling. It's beautiful how those images connect to each other. The lion lies down with the ram. The spider gets along with the crab. The fish and the water are one. The water bearer gives drink to the bull. The virgin ..."

"Quit changing the subject, Morrie!"

"I'm not. Catholic social thought isn't political, you know, it's spiritual. We live and move and have our being in Love -- we're all literally in Love -- so each of us is connected to all of us and all of us are responsible for each of us. I just told my people, when a family in Paris gets food stamps, the city is richer. When a family in Kansas gets health care, the state is healthier. When taxes from a business in Wichita give shelter for the homeless on the Gulf Coast, our country is stronger. And when any country sends AIDS medicine to families in Africa, the entire world is blessed. That's the Catholic principle of solidarity, you know. That's all I said."

"Isn't that what the Democrats say? That we're our brother's keeper?"

"All the time, but there's more to it, you know. Cain asked if he was his brother's keeper after he knocked

Abel's skull in. Jesus said we *are* our brother before turning a little bit of fish and bread into a meal for hundreds. We're here to love everyone, even our enemy, as our very self because we're all aspects of the same Love. Jesus meant it literally, you know. Tom Joad never went to school but he knew, 'All men got one big soul everybody's a part of.' " Morrie forked a bit of fish and a scrap of roll and stuffed both in his mouth. "There's no separation between anythin'."

I waited for him to finish chewing. "What happened next? Did everyone in the congregation sell their property and distribute it equally?"

"Collections were up that morning. Confessions were higher next Saturday. The Paris police blotter had nothing to report all week. Not so bad."

"It's a start," I agreed. "If someone asked you how to vote on Nov. 4, what would you say?"

"Vote for the candidate whose values are closest to the values you value most."

"Doesn't everybody do that?"

"Not nearly enough." Morrie pointed his fork toward the ceiling. "The fault is not in our stars or even in our selves but in our values. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our political philosophies, you know."

I smiled. My food was getting cold. And I felt an energy coming from the table next to us. I looked more closely at the elderly businessman who now seemed larger than life. He had blonde strands of hair swept forward from the back of his head to the middle of his forehead as if they were weaved from straw by the miller's daughter in *Rumpelstiltskin*. He was staring at Morrie with steel-blue eyes. He was the man who used to own the hotel next to the terminal, and I was afraid he was going to throw the bishop of Paris on the tracks below the restaurant.

"Morrie," I whispered. "Don't be obvious, but look who's sitting across from you."

Morrie took a sideward glance, then called the waiter. "Check, please."

The large blonde man smiled. "No, Father," he said. "This one's on me."

Morrie smiled back. "Thank you," he said. "It's a start."

[Michael Leach, who shepherds Soul Seeing for *NCR*, is also editor at large for Orbis Books.]

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