

The Irish Goodbye



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An affable man named Father Quinnlack was in charge of Gary's Carmelite home, a haven and school for orphaned children. He was about 5'8" with the stocky build of a middle linebacker. His short, curly hair and well-groomed beard were the color of fire and his eyes reminded one of the emerald hills seen along the Ring of Kerry. The kids adored him and affectionately referred to Father Quinnlack as the "Candy Man" because he'd routinely sneak them Tootsie Rolls (his favorite treat) before lunch, which he purchased with his spare change—meager though it was.

I met Father Quinnlack at a parish picnic; he walked in playing the bagpipes. The kids paraded in behind him. The sight reminded me of a mother duck and her ducklings...like a shepherd leading his flock. Father Quinnlack then circulated among the families with ease before helping grill hamburgers. When he thought no one was looking, Father Quinnlack snuck off to feed the scraps of food to a stray brown lab, Lucky. She was often seen sleeping on the church steps and wagged her tail whenever Father Quinnlack petted her. He even convinced Ms. Bolka (a widow who hadn't so much as two-stepped since losing her lifelong jitterbug partner and husband of 51 years) to dance the polka as the children did the "Hokey Pokey." His boisterous laughter was heard throughout the park during this silly and carefree afternoon.

Parishioners quickly discovered Father Quinnlack's love of sports because his greatest stories revolved around them. He incorporated Notre Dame football into his homilies whenever possible and taught all ages with the help of parables of sports competitions, which afforded his lessons with a tangible quality that was moving and powerful. He'd embellish his stories and bring them to life; Father Quinnlack's eyes

would sparkle with an excitement he could barely contain as he arranged chairs around the room with each one corresponding to a football player. Everyone and everything became a part of the game. I remember hoping he would “draft” me to play for the Irish, especially since Notre Dame always won! Father Quinnlack would avoid the wicked snares and temptations of sin with the agility of a natural athlete by dodging one chair as he slid by another, his cheeks rosy from the exertion. An opposing linebacker from Miami would represent evil while the Notre Dame quarterback stood for all that is good. His infectious personality and energy were contagious and no one wanted Father Quinnlack’s stories to end.

This man was so compelling that a routine developed where I’d stop by to see Father Quinnlack every couple of weeks to talk and catch up. An inviting smile would spread across his face whenever I walked into his office. Knowing my love of sports, Father Quinnlack would turn to me and say, “We’ve got another one, wouldn’t ye know...one for Notre Dame...and one for God. The new recruit comes from California and runs a 4-4.” All the while he’d be rubbing his hands together like a little boy presented with the gift of a new toy truck.

It was also during these times that I learned about the tribulations he tried to keep hidden behind a face of serenity and warmth. The orphanage was suffering financially: the lack of toys (so that the kids could have bikes to ride in the church basement on rainy days), books (to foster the children’s education), and the upkeep of the entire Carmelite home (a brick building more than a hundred years old that needed lots of work) were taking a heavy toll on him mentally and physically. I often saw a rickety, wooden two-story ladder propped against the tool shed. I shudder to think of him climbing it to patch the roof that leaked after each rainfall. Or how Father Quinnlack was nearly late when he showed up to Stations of the Cross one Friday night with dirt smudges framing his left brow because he had just spent two hours trying to fix the furnace ... It was a cumulative effect and Father Quinnlack started to change before my eyes, with the subtle differences reflected in his countenance; it was a painful sight—like watching a flower blossom before withering from frost. He looked haggard and pale as each day bloomed ... and bled ... into the next.

With the help of a friend, I secured a ticket for him to attend a football game at the University of Notre Dame. Father Quinnlack lived ninety

miles from campus; yet, he'd never been to a game because the boys and girls were foremost in his thoughts as he constantly sought ways to improve their situation. Although Father Quinnlack had adjusted to a life of austerity, he believed it was not right for the kids. He wanted more for them given that the kids had already lost their families and lacked the simple things that other children took for granted (like their own blankets or a new pair of shoes that weren't worn or plagued by holes). Not only did I manage to get him a ticket, I scored one for the Southern Cal game and both teams were undefeated! The Notre Dame coaches, having been informed "anonymously" of Father Quinnlack's hardships, agreed to let him sit on the bench at the fifty-yard line. The game was scheduled for October 26, with the best imaginable forecast: sunny, clear skies with a high of 75.

I expected a deluge of grateful tears when I told Father Quinnlack about the ticket, but he just smiled. Tossing a football signed by the players of Notre Dame's 1988 championship team between his hands he said, "Seventy years are behind me but you have made this old man very happy, wouldn't ye know." He continued to discuss how he had heard about the Basilica, with Our Lady donned in gold, Grotto lit like a fireworks display on a quiet summer's night, and the beauty of campus: the red, orange, and yellow leaves falling from the trees on a fine autumn day. Father Quinnlack wanted to get there early to see it all. He went on to discuss his plans to eat a hot dog, meet fellow die-hard fans, and listen to the student band clad in kilts as they marched across campus. Father Quinnlack laughed and said, "Each time Notre Dame scores a touchdown, wouldn't ye know, I will get a vicarious thrill as if I am the one crossing the goal line."

The 26 of October was as warm and as beautiful as the forecast predicted, and Notre Dame won in an exciting, last-minute upset! Our Lady was radiant in her golden glory. Autumn leaves scuttled here and there across the ground. They were like ships attempting to sail in the doldrums, their meaningless movement oblivious to passersby. But the candle intended in petition for the boys and girls of the Carmelite home went unlit at the Grotto. And the Irish were missing one of their biggest fans that Saturday as one less person cheered Notre Dame onto victory. The spot on the bench designated for Father Quinnlack remained vacant.

I later found out from the nurse at the Carmelite home that Father

Quinnlack had died peacefully in his sleep...and with a smile on his face on October 23, but I know his spirit lived on in Notre Dame's football team that day the Irish beat USC...And he had the best seat in the whole stadium in the skies above the field!

Father Quinnlack had, in fact, *crossed* the goal line.