



## Episode 41

### At Least It's Not the Christian Coalition

This has to be done. He doesn't want to do it, but he has no choice. The bishop was right: Monsignor Lloyd must face the parents. And doing it quickly and getting it over with is the best way to go about it.

They have been gathering for nearly half an hour. Although the window is to his back, it is slightly open, and he has been able to hear them walking up the steps and into the building. What has been unusual for a parents' meeting has been their silence. Usually the parents enter talking among themselves, softly if there's a problem with their children, boisterously if it's an undemanding Meet the Teachers or Open House night. When the issue is a teacher/chaperone on an out-of-state field trip getting arrested on a morals charge, however, apparently mum's the word. It is the most unnerving silence Monsignor Lloyd has heard since Sister Martin passed away in the confessional.

In the complex skein of teacher-parent relationships, there are various roles the players can take, depending on the situation. No teacher, and especially no principal, is unaware of how easy it is to make a parent feel like a child again, and how close to the surface of the adult is that former child's sense of powerlessness in the face of authority. In a parent-teacher meeting, all the teacher has to do is put the parent in a hard, cramped, student's seat, and then sit behind his or her grownup desk -- that sacred object, that awe-ful teacher's desk -- and the game is already in progress.

But not all parents come to the teacher as supplicants. Sometimes there is belligerence, the jungle animal protecting its young. The little darling is always right, and obviously in whatever has happened, the teacher must be wrong. This situation almost inevitably revolves around little darlings who have never done anything right, and probably never will, and if there was a law that allowed the jailing of incurable felons prior to the commission of their crimes, these would be

the first to be convicted by it. No doubt their parents, in light of such a law, would also have been incarcerated, probably in time to prevent the birth of the junior felon in the first place. In these no-win meetings that the teacher wonders why it is worth the bother to take such large amounts of guff in return for such small amounts of salary.

In all these parent-teacher situations, regardless of any psychological gamesmanship, the playing field tends to be relatively level in one respect, an underlying sense of being if not compatriots trying to solve a child's problems, at least foes who start out evenly matched. But that is not always true at Veil of Ignorance, when often the teacher is also a priest. For the clergy, all bets are off. Belligerent parents are about as frequent as cicadas during the sixteen-year off periods. If a teacher reminds an adult of what it's like to be a kid again, a priest reminds an adult of what it's like to be a kid again who is going directly to hell. There is only one way to describe what surrounds the priest or brother or nun who is also an educator: call it the clerical force field. Nothing goes through it in either direction, and since it is well-known that nothing can go through it, few people ever try.

The clerical force field. Throw in a little of a monsignor's purple, and the power of that force field is turned up even higher. The Church knows this, so the position of monsignor is not given away lightly; it is a serious management position, comparable perhaps to a divisional vice president in an average company. It takes a man of stature, a man of presence and bearing, a man of devout and honorable character. Unlike the business world, discrimination is freely accepted: women need not apply. No, it takes a man like Harold Lloyd, a man who looks and sounds and acts like a monsignor at all times.

And he has to look and sound and act like one now, because it is seven-thirty, and time for the meeting. He stands up and straightens his cassock, catching his reflection in the mirror with satisfaction. Good. Serious expression, concern mixed with understanding, and obviously in control of the entire situation.

Except, of course, he hasn't got a clue. This is the worse moment of his tenure as principal, and he'd rather be anywhere else. At least, as he said to the bishop, Obomash wasn't a priest. That was about the only thing that could make this worse. Or if he had been arrested for picking up a male prostitute. Underage. Or doing something to one of his own students, such as--

All right. It could be a lot worse. But that is not the point.

The parents are gathered in the auditorium. There are about fifty of them, a reasonable turnout. They are scattered about, no more than four together in any one row. There is not a single student in the group. Monsignor Lloyd enters through the rear and walks up to the front, tall and straight and totally in control.

Yeah, right.

He walks up to the podium and speaks into the microphone.

"Good evening."

There is a smattering of cordial little replies from throughout the room.

"I know that, as a group, the parents of Veil of Ignorance are very concerned about an incident that has taken place with one of our teams, and I wish to address it without delay."

There are a few nods.

"Veil of Ignorance High School has had a debate team for as long as there has been a Veil of Ignorance High School. The tradition of forensics is a proud one here."

A girl enters through one of the back doors as he is speaking, a student. Oh, no. It is Tara Petskin. The star of the team. Monsignor Lloyd knows that she wasn't in school today, an unexcused absence. So what is she doing here now?

"Part of forensics," he continues, "is the participation in tournaments. Often those tournaments are far from home, as far away, in the most recent case, as Florida."

Tara walks down to the front row and takes a seat. Monsignor Lloyd finds her stare unnerving.

"On these trips, our students are supervised by at least one of our teachers. This last weekend, that teacher was arrested for what was, by any account, an embarrassing crime. To which he pleaded guilty."

"Did he have any choice?" Tara Petskin asks loudly.

Monsignor Lloyd looks down at her. "Excuse me?"

"Did he have any choice? Or was he railroaded?"

Under normal circumstances he would dodge her question, or better, punish her for having asked it. But these are not normal circumstances. "According to my understanding, there was no question of the committing of the crime. Only the level of the charges was in question."

"So he was guilty? Undoubtedly?"

"I'm afraid so."

With that, Tara stands and stalks out of the auditorium. All eyes follow her dramatic exit.

"As you can see," Monsignor Lloyd finally says, "this incident has had a strong effect on our students." He lets out a deep breath. "It's had a strong effect on me."

One of the parents stands up, a gray-mustached man in a red flannel shirt. "What is the school doing about it?" he asks, quickly sitting down.

"We have immediately suspended the teacher in question, pending further inquiry."

The bishop told him to fire Obomash, but there is paperwork that cannot be circumvented, not by a monsignor, not by a bishop, not even by a Pope, at least not in New York, subject to state hiring practices and a powerful teachers' union. Maybe it is too bad after all that Obomash isn't a priest: they -- like the makers of Hebrew National hot dogs -- answer to a higher authority.

"What more is there to inquire?" a woman calls out. The floodgates are opening. "You said yourself that he was guilty."

"This is an unusual situation. We do expect a dismissal of the teacher in question, but I am still working out the details with the diocese office."

"You cannot have this man ever teach our children again. The idea is incredible."

The monsignor raises his hands. "I agree," he says, "but I can't overstep my authority as principal, and I'm in the process of determining what that authority is."

"Does that mean you'll take further action against the man, other than firing him?"

"Perhaps." That sounded neatly threatening, although beyond firing Obomash, and assuming that his immortal soul is perhaps slightly more tarnished than it was a few days ago, the matter is out of the monsignor's hands.

"What about the debate team?" someone asks.

"The debate team will continue to go on as before."

"With the same level of lousy supervision?"

"According to the diocesan rules, one teacher is more than enough to act as chaperone for the number of students we usually send to tournaments. They are, I understand, reviewing that policy, but the real question is the chaperones themselves."

"So who do you have in mind to take Obomash's place?"

"I have already hired a replacement," Monsignor Lloyd announces. "She is a young woman, presently acting as assistant coach at Manhattan Lodestone High School. She is a woman of impeccable and demonstrable--" the word the bishop used was innocence, but that won't go over with this audience -- "ability." He doesn't add, as did the bishop, that she is unlikely to go off into the night with a streetwalker. "Her name is Miss Torte. Lisa Torte."

"Will she take over Obomash's classes too?"

"She is a trained educator, and she will be taking on Mr. Obomash's class load."

"When does she start?"

"I would like her to start right away. At the moment, it is up to her present employer. Neither she nor I wish to leave them in the lurch."

"How do we know that she'll be any better chaperoning the team than Obomash was?"

"We don't. But I have implicit faith in Miss Torte and her integrity."

"Didn't you also have implicit faith in Seth Obomash?"

The monsignor has to fight the urge to wipe the moisture off his brow. Never show them the flop-sweat if you can avoid it, especially when they ask the one question you don't have the answer to.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

"I did have faith in Mr. Obomash, but that faith was not rewarded. I am sorry for that. In fact, I am sorry for the whole incident. I do not know how it could have been prevented, but I have been praying for guidance to prevent it from happening again." Which is true. And which is hard for the parents to attack. He didn't deliberately intend to fall back on prayer -- he has honestly been praying for guidance -- but it is a classic clerical gimmick, and it has worked once again. "I have to emphasize that," he goes on. "I am sorry, the entire school is sorry for what has happened. We apologize to you, the parents, and we promise to do our best to prevent anything like that from ever happening again."

Words. Hollow words. At least that's what they sound like to Monsignor Lloyd. But the parents seem to accept them. There is a soft buzz and more than a few nodding heads.

"Are there any more questions?" he asks.

There aren't.

"I think it would be appropriate," he says, "if we concluded with a short prayer." He bows his head, and the parents do likewise.

The clerical force field is back on, and like a Star Trek phaser, it has been set on stun.

"Our Father in Heaven. Give us guidance at this difficult time. Help us to see the way clear to protect our children, to keep them on Your path. Show us mercy for our errors, and forgive all of us for our sins. Amen."

"Amen." The word comes back to him as a disjointed mumble.

This time he exits behind the stage, rather than taking the walk to the back of the auditorium. That way, he'd have to talk further to the parents. This way he can lay low at the back of the stage until they've all disappeared.

Cowardly? Yes. But the clerical force field is only so strong. It may take a man of stature, a man of presence and bearing, a man of devout and honorable character. But it also takes a man who knows when discretion is the better part of valor. A man like Harold Lloyd, a man who looks and sounds and acts like a monsignor at all times.

Or else he beats a hasty retreat until he can look and sound and act like a monsignor.

Welcome to the Bahamas. Catholic-style.

**Will Lisa Torte survive as the new debate coach at Veil Of Ignorance?**

**Are there any Catholics in the Bahamas?**

**Wasn't it Monsignor Lloyd who celebrated mass at Villiger while all the assorted pagans continued playing spades in the cafeteria?**

**How many Adam Sandler movies are enough?**

**Find out anywhere but in our next episode: "Giblets: Edible viscera or gravy gross-out?"**