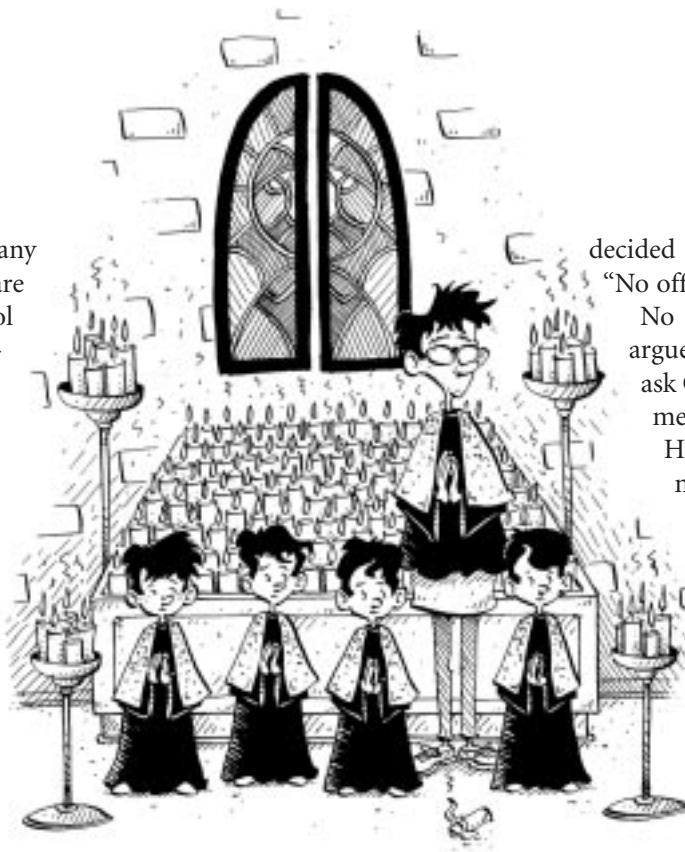


The World's Oldest Altar Boy: Yet Another Confession

BY FRED STENSON

Except for the fact that many of my favourite people are religious, I am very cool toward, even dismissive of, religion. Except for the thorough decency of these religious friends, and the fact that they seem to be the ones, out of the people I know, who are the most inclined to try to improve the experience of living on this planet—except for that, I find the notion of religion absurd, as though you'd filled a balloon with helium, hoisted it skyward, and decided to credit it with having programmed DNA and created all the self-regulating systems within nature. Yes, except for many of the smartest people I know believing in religion, I would find it stupid.

I came to my conclusions about religion at the pinnacle of my wisdom. I was fifteen. I was the world's oldest altar boy at the time, working Sundays for a parish priest who had been the local padre for several years. I told him in one of our candid conversations that being an altar boy at my advanced age was embarrassing, especially considering that, after a study of the world's foremost theologians and philosophers, religious and agnostic (I'm kidding), I had



decided that God was imaginary. “No offence, Father.”

No offence taken. He did not argue with me or threaten to ask God in his prayers to smite me dead as an illustration of His Vibrancy. But he did ask me to continue on as an altar boy. His argument contained nothing from Thomas Aquinas or Thomas Merton, but much about the loving mothers in our parish who were waiting in a long row with their cute little sons for the priest to train them in the art of serving up oil and water in cruets,

combining the incense burner and the incense in the right order to produce smelly smoke for ritual waftings, and lighting many, many candles without catching one's altar boy garments on fire. The mothers all had the same image of their little Billys and Toms in the black cloak half covered with the white embroidered chemise, kneeling in a row with heads bowed and hands pressed together in a little peak pointed at heaven. Altogether now: “Aaagh! Isn't that just the cutest!” None of the mothers imagined their sons on fire or dumping the precious oil down the priest's valuable ecclesiastical vestments.

My poor friend the priest could not quite bear the prospect of teaching these little boys, and all that stood in the path of them and their mothers was yours truly, the world's oldest altar boy. His final plea was that I stay as long as he was planning to. He had a bid in to the bishop to go back to university to become, I believe, an educational counselor. If I could just hang on another six months, we both could fly the coop. Amen.

Don't I know what some of you are thinking. At fifteen he was an altar boy because he was friends with a priest? How does the old joke go? Evel Knievel's next stunt? Putting on an altar boy's outfit and walking across Newfoundland?

Let me add fuel to the fire of your imagination. The priest I am describing as a friend used to take us altar boys in his car to the big city once a year. He would take us to a drive-in theatre where we would watch all-night horror movies, and then to a motel!! The next day, rising very late, he would take us to a Phil's Pancake House and then to "The Labour Day Classic," a Canadian Football League game between the Edmonton Eskimos and the Calgary Stampeders, at a time in history when the rivalry between the two was exciting and extreme.

What depths, eh? What depths these damn priests would stoop to? Providing a bunch of farm kids with experiences they could never hope to have otherwise? That their parents would never even dream of giving them? What an abuse of power, don't you think?

He never laid a glove on me. Were you expecting me to say something else?

Other experiences I had with the Catholic Church were not so good. I did leave the faith after my friend the priest left for higher education. My belief in God was gone, and it never came back, even at times when I was in considerable life pain and would have been most delighted to have it back. But, as a religious friend once

said, "You don't get faith by needing it."

One of my recent brushes with religion has to do with our old parish church, St. Henry's, that a bunch of southern Alberta pioneers, including my grandfather, built in 1907. Legend has it that my grandfather was the mad fool who carried a great big cross to the very tip of the very high steeple and anchored it there in a blazing chinook wind. Somehow having missed out on the family's bravery gene, I get severe vertigo thinking about him doing this, and have to go lie down.

Anyway, the Catholic Church's Calgary Diocese has decided to shut the old church down, and after a raging battle with the local community, has declared it will do with the church and the land whatever it feels like. The diocesan stance is that the church is theirs. It does not belong in any way to the local people whose ancestors built it and furnished it with stained glass and imported stations of the

cross and statuary, et cetera; who paid and fed the priests and did their laundry and cleaned their church. The Catholic Church owns it and therefore does not owe the local people any say or explanation as to what they choose to do with it. Amen, again.

It is for reasons like these that I am not much of one for religion.

It is for reasons like my old friend the priest, who risked snide comment to show some farm kids the bright lights, that I don't like to see religion and all religious folks automatically trashed.

I feel almost noble not to have mentioned Stockwell Day anywhere in an attempt to be witty about religion. But then again, I guess I did just mention him, and shouldn't feel noble after all.

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 produced films and videos, and eight published books of fiction and non-fiction.