

A priest with a gambling problem
and a large donation.
What could possibly go wrong?

HOLY ROLLER

A SHORT STORY

W-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-28-29-30-31-32-33-34-35-36-37-38-39-40-41-42-43-44-45-46-47-48-49-50-51-52-53-54-55-56-57-58-59-60-61-62-63-64-65-66-67-68-69-70-71-72-73-74-75-76-77-78-79-80-81-82-83-84-85-86-87-88-89-90-91-92-93-94-95-96-97-98-99-100

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WARNING

If you are deeply religious, you may find this story in poor taste. I do not, however. I was raised Catholic and *Holy Roller* was written in jest.

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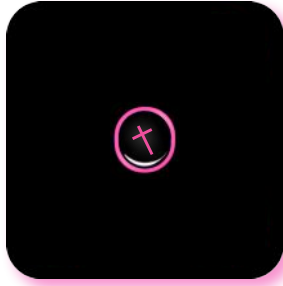
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For the Priests and Nuns of My Grammar School
You added humor to religion

“Priests killin’ priests. What kinda frigg’in church is this?”

Bruno
A Loan Shark



FATHER MARTIN BLACK couldn't place a communion host on a parishioner's tongue without thinking of a casino chip. But what could you expect from a priest who had joined the seminary on a lost bet?

The priesthood had seemed as square as any other place to start over in life. He'd read the Bible, had passed all his tests, had learned how to sing in monotone, and had taken a bunch of vows that were as guaranteeing as an infomercial. Soon enough, Martin Black had become a "man of the cloth."

All had been going well for Martin, and then, not knowing Martin had formerly been a "man of the shuffle," the Diocese had assigned him to Our Lady of Bettors, located one mile off the Vegas strip.

It's been a losing streak ever since.

Martin had quickly learned that his collar didn't make much of an impression on the local loan sharks, and he often held service with an eye the color of his last name.

Around town, Martin Black was known as the Holy Roller, but he couldn't win a bet if he were throwing weighted dice. Unfortunately, the current wager on the checkered table was his life.



THE WALK FROM the rectory to the church was only the width of a street, but the jaunt felt like an odyssey to Martin. He drank, smoked, barely slept, was out of shape and overweight, and coughing up a phlegmy wheeze that would echo through mass by the time he walked into the church offices.

Nina was in and, my god. He had to take a moment to bite down on his knuckle every time he saw her. She was a sin to look at.

“It’s a temptation keepin’ you around, Nina. You’re like the apple in Eden,” he said, as he passed her desk.

“And I’m just as delicious.”

Her words were short and sexy and made Martin wince.

“You got two messages,” she said. “One’s from Father Cross. He wants to see you immediately. The other’s from a rough-sounding gentleman named Bruno.”

Martin choked. “Did he...say anything?”

“He did. He said if you don’t settle up your alms with him by tomorrow, he’s comin’ to give you your last rights.”

His wheeze more erratic, Martin said, “Is that all?”

“He also asked if you’ve ever been the *one* inactive participant at a funeral before. I told him you’re no Lazarus, and he said, ‘You catch my drift.’ I told him drifts were more of something you smelled than caught. And then he asked me on a date. I told him to catch his tie around the arm of slot machine as it snapped back, if he smelled my drift.”

“Did he?”

“He did.”

Flushed and panting, Martin headed for the hallway leading to the church, saying, “Nina, if he calls again—”

“Oh, he won’t be callin’. Said he’ll be lookin’, for you.”

Martin disappeared into the dimly lit hall, on his way to spread hope into people’s lives.



OUR LADY OF BETTORS was far enough from the Vegas Strip to not be stained by its muddled lights, yet close enough to be under the cloud of sin that invisibly floats over its clear sky.

Twenty years ago when Father Francis Cross came to Our Lady of Bettors as pastor, he'd made it his burden to make the place...better. After years of dedicated service, under a constantly strained budget, Our Lady of Bettors had become Cross' own Vatican, where he was Pope. Still, it was hardly free from sin.

Every time Cross saw Martin, the famous plea "Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do" came to mind. However, his patience for his defunct and defiled priest eluded him lately. Tomorrow a low-interest loan was going to shoot through the roof and break the church's budget beyond repair, crumbling Cross' Vatican.

"You wanted to see me, Father Cross?" Martin said from the doorway of Cross' office.

Cross glanced up from a pile of paperwork on his desk. His eyes were bloodshot from reading through a Diocese mandate about the loan. The

menacing file put a weight on Cross' desk that it had never felt before. At least so far as Cross knew. There was that thing with the stripper and Martin once, but a stripper, it had turned out, was even better at keeping the sins of others secret than a priest in a confessional, and Cross had never found out about the stripper named Robbie who'd used the desk as a stage once.

"Come in and take a seat," Cross said. "And please shut the door I didn't hear you knock."

Cross was a mean, old cuss with a last name that suited him nicely, so Martin did as instructed. A priest with red eyes was not a good omen to start the day. Frankly, Cross plain scared Martin. On the wall behind the desk hung a black-and-white of a platoon huddled in front of a tank during the Korean War. A very youthful Cross stood in the middle. He wore a rosary around his neck and held a Bible in one hand. Stamped on the front of his helmet was a black cross and the words: HEAVEN'S DEMONS.

Cross said, "Do you have today's sermon prepared?"

Martin patted around his jacket and extracted a crumpled cocktail napkin. He handed it to Cross. The napkin was scribbled over with unintelligible markings. The only words Cross could read was the print HARRAH'S around the fringe.

"I only had time to jot a few notes," Martin offered, sheepishly.

Cross shook his head, never failing to be amazed by Martin's incompetence.

"Don't worry," Martin said. "It's all up here." He tapped his head, which Fr. Cross rightly assumed was foggy with hangover.

Cross flipped the napkin back to Martin, saying, "The Lord has answered my prayers, Father Martin, but I fear they've come with a test of faith."

After an uneasy moment, Cross explained that a very blessed parishioner had donated twenty-five thousand dollars to the church.

"That's wonderful," Martin said, hoping some enthusiasm would soften Cross. "We can pay off the loan before it really kicks us in the—"

Cross glared at him.

"*In*," Martin corrected. "Before the rates kick in."

"Yes, we can," Cross said.

"So what's the test?" Martin said.

Pained, Fr. Cross said, "The donation was given in casino chips. I need you

to cash them in.”

Martin’s stomach slipped into his lap, his toes clenched, and a rush of anxiety flooded him. He called the pangs “Gambling Cramps.”

“No. You can’t ask me to exchange the chips,” Martin blurted. “They’ll end up in the collection pot under a craps table.”

“You know your weaknesses,” Fr. Cross agreed, “but I have no one else. Nina’s not allowed to handle church assets and the nuns are on retreat.”

“Sister Anisa isn’t.”

“Sister Anisa is mostly blind and a hundred-and-five-years-old.”

“The Lord will show her the way, then” Martin tried.

Cross pressed his hands down on his desk. When he removed them, two wide prints were left fading on the polished wood like a miracle come to pass. Cross said, “I’m renewing vows in ten minutes, and afterwards, I have an Anointing of the Sick. A dedicated parishioner is in his final hours and the family wants me to sit with him until he passes. It could be an hour or twelve.”

“And the Diocese? Why can’t they send a representative to handle it?”

“And tell them I can’t trust my priest because he has a gambling problem? We may be men of the cloth, Father Martin, but this is the real world. We have a business to run and are expected to run it efficiently. Your mistakes are my mistakes. My mistakes are the Diocese’s mistakes. And there’s no more room for error. This donation saves the church.”

“This is like asking Judas to play John,” Martin said. “I’m no John.”

In fact, Martin had always thought with a sickness in his stomach, that if he’d been at The Crucifixion, he’d have probably been one of the Romans throwing the dice for Jesus’ clothes.

“If there were anyone else, I’d ask them,” Cross said. “But there isn’t. If that money is not at the bank by the end of the day, we’re ruined. I’m trusting that for the first time in service, maybe your whole life, Father Martin, that you’ll do the right thing.”



THE LINE WAS LONG at the exchange window in Kings Casino. It was hard enough keeping his eyes off the cocktail waitresses in skirts roughly the size of a dinner napkins, but waiting made the temptation unbearable. Time to think was not what a man with a gambling habit, twenty-five K, and a loan shark on his tail needed in a casino.

Martin had already done the math. Twenty-five thousand times double or nothing equaled fifty grand, which would cover what he owed Bruno and more than half for the church. Or half left over for the church and a bit to line his own pockets. He had other debts besides what he owed Bruno.

Everybody's a winner, Martin thought.

And, as if his thoughts were made manifest, he heard "Everybody's a winner" echoed back from a stickman at a nearby craps table, which Martin's weak constitution accepted as a sign.

Being a man of good faith, Martin took the thrower's position and placed the chips on the table, saying, "Double or nothing." Before the words were out of his mouth, the chips were gone, and he had a pair of dice in his hand.

The sight of a priest at one of the tables immediately drew a small crowd,

and Martin was joined by a gathering of excited onlookers, phones out and trained on him.

An old man at the table, who looked like he hadn't seen the sun in a century, said, "You're going to need the luck of the devil with a bet like that, Padre."

Feeling lucky, Martin said, "The Lord works in mysterious ways, my brother." He flashed the old man a smile, shook the dice, relishing that familiar tinkle in his palm, then with a jab of his arm, sent the dice hopping across the green felt to a flourish of cheers and claps around the table. A woman in a halter that sparkled like a disco ball winked at him.

"Hail Mary full of Grace," he said, drawing smiles and chuckles all around. For all of his flaws, Father Martin Black could work a crowd.

The dice tumbled and bounced and clacked. Everyone stilled.

Martin's eyes were moons. His mouth hung open and something that resembled the words "come on" repeatedly croaked out. Only the "n" was nowhere to be heard, so the noise came out more like, "Comma...comma...comma...comma, comma, comma, comma-comma-comma."

Soon the "ma" fell off, leaving just a series of "coms." Next, the "ms" went away and the only thing left flowing from Martin's gaping mouth was, "Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka."

The dice hit the bumper, bounced, landed, and, "*Christ, god damn it! JESUS-MARYHOLYMOTHEROF...OF...NOOOOO!*"

"I told you you needed the luck of the devil," the old man said, chuckling as if he'd seen a prediction come to pass.

Martin was unable to mutter anything but a slew of blasphemes at the sight of his dice landing one and two dots up, which equaled three and meant that Martin was in serious trouble.



“HIDING BEHIND CHRIST won’t help you now, Father Martin!”

The voice echoed so loud through the church the organ pipes vibrated.

Martin had never been good at hide-and-seek and right now wished he’d picked a better place than behind the statue of a robed Jesus standing with outstretched arms in the far corner of the church.

Martin peered over a plaster elbow and saw Cross coming his way.

“What crime did I commit,” Cross shouted, slowly walking toward the statue, “to deserve a punishment such as you in my house?”

“This is the Lord’s House,” Martin said from behind the statue, as if the plaster Jesus were speaking in Martin’s tongue. “And it’s open to everybody, even sinners.”

Hearing Martin’s voice resonate from Christ only enraged Cross more. “The Lord’s House?” he screamed. “The *Lord’s* House?” The man was incensed. “This is *my* house and you desecrated it. It’s time for your penance.”

In no way was Martin going to receive it. This wasn’t exactly a say-ten-Hail-Marys-and-a-Glory-Be situation. Cross was old and tricky, and Martin felt more comfortable with Jesus between them.

“‘Forgive us thy trespasses.’ That’s what the Bible says Father Cross, right? What do you say?”

“Forgive? You’re the earthquake that crumbled this church. Your presence here has chipped away at its foundation for too long and now you’ve destroyed everything I’ve worked for. Twenty years, Father Martin. You remember that on your way to Hell.”

Tricky the old man was. With a screeching howl, Cross charged the statue, which looked braced for an emotional reunion.

Martin tried to wriggle himself out from behind it but his foot caught on the base, tripping him up, and he went down hard, knocking his head on the church’s marble floor. His thoughts spilled out immediately and left him in a thick haze as he stared up at the cathedral ceiling with its stained-glass skylights and arched rafters.

Then cross came into view. He looked down at Martin, put his arm around Jesus’ shoulders like he and the statue were old pals.

“You can settle your debts with Satan, Father Martin,” Cross said. “After all, he’s your maker.”

Cross disappeared from Martin’s view and a moment later Martin saw Jesus slowly leaning forward, His arms outstretched, as if to pick him up.

In his daze, Martin raised his arms to receive the body of Christ in an embracing hug as it fell. Their reunion was a crushing one.



FATHER CROSS STOOD THERE, rasping heavily with a stretched grin on his face. It always felt good to watch a man return to Christ.

The statue had broken in to four pieces, and Cross went about picking up the arms and head, when he heard a thick Italian voice come up behind him.

“Look at this. Priests killin’ priests. What kinda friggin church is this?”

In the house of a religion that preached “Seek forgiveness and you shall be saved,” karma had just entered.

Cross dusted his hands off on his pants and turned around to meet the stubbly mug of a short and stocky man he’d never seen.

“It was an accident,” Cross said with little conviction. “A terrible accident.”

Bruno studied the bodies, plaster Jesus’ stone cold, Martin’s getting there.

He then knelt down and pressed a finger to Martin’s neck. The pulse beat in perfect rhythm with the statue’s.

“This was no accident,” Bruno said. “And now you owe me twenty-five thousand dollars.”

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S.R.



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