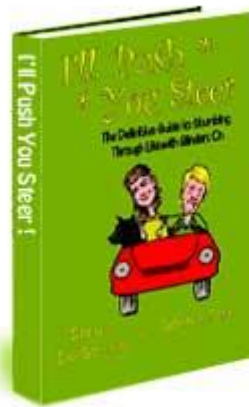


An Angel Came

By Ronda Del Boccio

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I'm not always great at following the rules. Oh, the ones that make sense, sure, but sometimes there are stupid rules. Those just beg to be broken, in my opinion.

A bunch of years ago I was "shadowing" a hospital chaplain to see if it was something I might like to do. A college classmate of mine worked at a nursing home and arranged for me to go around with the chaplain there.

The chaplain I went with was a wonderful, caring person, very good with the patients and family members, but we had a difference of spiritual opinion one time during my visit.

We went in to see a woman whom I'll call Martha. She had been in a coma for twelve days and showed no sign of recognition of her family. Martha was Catholic. The doctors did not expect her to awaken.

There was at the time – and perhaps there still is – a rule in the Catholic church that if someone is not coherent, they are not allowed to receive the holiest of holies – the Body of Christ, otherwise known as the Eucharist.

The chaplain was a Catholic Deacon. He explained before we went into Martha's room that we were going to have a Communion service with Martha, but that he would not be able to give the sacrament to her because of her condition.

I could easily understand why a comatose person couldn't receive one of the dry, crackly wafers, but I did not believe she should be kept from

receiving the wine that represents Christ's blood. Who needs to feel the presence of the Lord more than someone who is desperately ill?

If a Catholic cannot take the wafer, the minister uses a special dropper to administer the wine on their tongue. Surely she could partake this way. I asked, "You can't even put a drop of the wine on her tongue?"

"She can't understand that she is receiving Holy Communion."

"How do you know she can't understand?"

I could feel what my Italian family would call "the evil eye" on me – figuratively speaking, of course -- from the Deacon. He argued that she couldn't talk and wasn't coherent, so she "obviously" wouldn't know what she had in her mouth.

"That just means she can't express herself. How can you, or any human, know for certain that she does not understand?"

He started off his next phase of the argument with, "The Church doctrine says..."

"She is over ninety years old and has been Catholic her whole life. Don't you think it would mean something to her to receive the Sacrament?"

"I'm sure it would mean a lot, if she knew she was receiving it. But I can't give it to her."

I'm very intuitive, and I could feel that Martha was much more than an empty shell. I could feel her presence in the room, even though she was unable to express herself in a way people could comprehend.

I guess I shouldn't have expected the Deacon to think outside the Catholic box. I know that people who appear to be incoherent often know what is happening around them; they just can't tell you that they know.

I recently heard disability activist Sherry Watson say that one of the most frustrating things for her when she was recovering is that she could hear and understand, but not talk, and people kept talking around her, as if she wasn't even in the room.

At the time of my visit with Martha, I did not have that information, but I thought, Who are we imperfect humans to know what another person understands when we so often don't even know our own mind?

It doesn't matter whether we're talking about Catholicism or any other spiritual path, all religion is a human contrivance. At its best, it is a way for us to feel a connection to that greater power. At its worst, it is a series of rules that aren't all relevant.

We went into Martha's room and the Deacon opened his prayer book. Just after he said hello to her, one of the nurses called him to another room. I stood beside Martha's bed. She looked so frail there. I took her cool hands in my warm ones and talked with her as if she understood me.

When I knew the Deacon was down the hall, I leaned close to Martha and whispered, "We are going to have a Communion service with you soon. The Church says you can't receive, but God knows what's in your heart. God loves you very much and wants you to receive the Sacrament. When it's

time for Holy Communion, I will take it in your place. I will receive it for you because I know you understand." I prayed with her until the Deacon came back.

When the time for the sacrament came, I said in my mind, "Lord, this is for Martha" as I received the wafer and wine. I also prayed that she would feel God's presence with her.

A couple of days later I talked with the friend who had arranged for me to make rounds with the chaplain. "I understand you and Deacon had a disagreement."

She didn't sound upset with me. In fact, I had the impression she had something exciting to tell me. I told her what had transpired, then asked, "Have you seen Martha?"

"Yes, I have. I talked to her yesterday."

"Good. I hate it when people talk around someone simply because they don't think she understands."

"Yes, when I went into her room, she was sitting up in bed! She smiled at me and we talked for at least fifteen minutes."

I was thrilled!

My friend continued, "I told her that Deacon had been there yesterday to pray with her and give her Communion. She said, 'Yes, I know, and an angel came to pray with me too. She gave me the wine on my tongue.'"

Who says miracles don't happen anymore?

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