

## Chapter XXIII

The group that gathered in the conference room down the hall from the bishop's office included Prygocki and the bishop.

Aside from a few phone calls, this was the first time that Grimaldi got to see the bishop in action.

He had heard all the stories. How the bishop had come to the diocese from the West and sold off the bishop's mansion to live in relative simplicity at a home for retired priests. He stopped entertaining the way the previous bishop had. The guy chose to drive a Ford Falcon, rather than allow himself to be chauffeured. He even changed the oil himself, at least while he could.

It was common knowledge that the bishop was a cancer survivor. He'd been in remission for several years, but the operations had taken their toll.

The only time Grimaldi saw him was in short interviews. The meetings were precise, and never went beyond one half hour. Grimaldi learned to be prepared when the two of them met.

Today Grimaldi felt on top of things. It would be fairly straightforward. He'd tell the people what the problem was, propose possible options, and get a consensus on how to proceed.

The bishop opened the meeting himself and asked Father Sullivan to begin with a prayer, which the chancellor performed with a certain élan, dignity and certainness.

The bishop presented the situation. The school was closing, he said. It was unfortunate, but the diocese was in no position to start supporting schools if parents and parishioners were only going to contribute pennies when dollars were needed.

“It is a harsh and unpleasant task,” he said. “That is why we have enlisted your aid, to make sure we cover all the bases, and that is why the diocese, in grappling with the vagaries of the age, has hired a professional communicator in Jack Grimaldi. Mr. Grimaldi will take over from here.”

Grimaldi began by telling them that the school, since it was closing, required a game plan. It was in the best interest of the diocese to bring together the best minds and the best people to help carry that message.

“You are not only experts in your field of endeavor, you are experts in that you know the people of the diocese and what makes them tick. In light of this, how should we proceed?”

The first three people who spoke inquired about the history of the problem at St. Benedict's. They deferred to the bishop and the chancellor.

The fourth, a religious in a black habit, complained that this decision was unfortunate. The people had not been allowed to take part in the decision or make a public appeal.

“If I were going to do this, I would give the school and the community it serves fair notice and let them decide how to make up the deficit. This school is a Catholic witness to the inner-city. We're not there to make money, but to witness to the kingdom.”

Grimaldi watched the group. No one's face was quite as volatile as that of Prygocki. The man's emotions appeared to rise and fall with each speaker, with each

word, depending on what was being said. Four more people spoke before Prygocki got his chance, though. And when he did, he stood and began to lecture.

This reminded Grimaldi of the old classroom and the old coach, challenging, abrasive, caustic, and at the same time, coaxing, welcoming. But there was much more of an edge tonight.

It was then that Grimaldi realized the man was only six years older than he was. Maybe in his fifties. He had his whole life in front of him and he was acting as if this was the end.

"With all due respect," Prygocki said, motioning to the bishop and extending his arms to all present, "what we have here is a replay of a meeting I sat in a year ago. The problem then was low enrollment. We made it though and most of all we kept our promise to the community. We've made our contribution. And it always doesn't come down to money, to dollars and cents. It has to come down to sweat, blood, tears. While the community profits, so do we. Because it is in the doing that we feel God's presence."

As he spoke Prygocki stood in one place, adding emphasis to his words with arm and hand movements. He rocked back and forth on his heels. He walked around the table. He stopped behind the chairs of one of the advisers and grabbed the back of the chair. He perched there for a moment, making his point. Then, he moved on to the next perch. When he came to the bishop, Prygocki spoke directly to him as if there weren't any other people in the room. When he finished he reversed direction and headed back the way he came.

"If we are to be leaven in the world, witnesses to the kingdom, don't we have to be planted in it, kneaded into it, ground into the world. Of course, we do. What better

place is there than an inner-city school? The kids come from homes where there isn't much to shout about, except when they are abused, either by drugs, by sex, or by hunger. Our school provides them with something to be proud of.

He moved to his own chair and sat down.

For at least a minute, he held his head in his hands.

Finally, he said, ``the last time we sat here the only thing that held up the closing of the school was an unfortunate incident where a man, a homeless man, was found murdered. People couldn't stomach the thought of sending their kids to a grave. I believe there were intimations that the murder had to do with some kind of satanic ritual. Well, the memory is still fresh. People know where the school is going. They aren't blind. The silent cries of that dead man are a reminder of our obligation to the inner city. He is crying out loud for us to stay put so that there aren't more like him. It is in the inner-city that we help turn the tide by crating educated, socially-minded young people who end up making substantial contributions to society.

``There are some people who would advocate the closing of schools, the building up of our outreach to public school kids, through CCD programs, etc. I question the commitment of these people, one of whom had been stationed here at the cathedral and left the priesthood. Others who advocate this method scream bloody murder about the money that is wasted in the school system when it could be used for addressing something else.

``Nothing is more important than our presence and witness to young people. The voices we should be listening to are the voices of the Chris Brown's of the world. The ones who remind us of the tragedy that awaits them, despite their promise, their

character, their grace. These are the ones who will cut a path into the future and lead the church there. They can only do this if they live long enough to make the difference, to start cutting down the barriers, and laying the bricks for the new road. Chris Brown didn't live long enough for that.

``I'm sure I talked too long," Prygocki said.

``Not at all," Larry DeLauro assured him.

``That was an admirable presentation," DeLauro added. ``Thank you, Mr. Prygocki. I'm a big fan of yours. However, the diocese is in the unenviable position of having to support all of its schools. This will, in just a few years, deplete our reserves, and put one of the best managed dioceses in the country into a deficit situation. It is unfair to keep this school going when so much is at stake."

Sullivan explained that the decision was final. The school administration was aware of the situation. The thing for them to do as a group was to control the damage that could be expected when such an announcement was being made.

``You will see damage beyond your control, if St. Benedict's closes," Prygocki said.

``Mr. Prygocki, you've had your chance to speak," Sullivan said. ``Now it is time for the others to have a chance."

``Chancellor, I would be silent on this issue if it were at all possible," Prygocki said. ``But I can't. There is a population of people out there who have been at odds with the diocese and its bishops since they came over on the boat, and I don't mean the blacks. No we have an entire population of minorities to deal with and we would be abandoning them.

“The ones who fill the collection baskets will walk and the ones who have a chance to improve their lives will become enemies. This will not pass.”

“All things pass,” Sullivan said.

“I would like to stay here,” Prygocki said, “but in good conscience I can't sit here and let you fool yourselves into believing what you are about to do will simply pass because you say so.”

He got up and walked out.

“If there are any others among us, who feel the same way, I suggest that they leave, now. What we are about to undertake is a process of communicating a harsh reality. Beginning the process of dialogue, we hope, will lead to healing,” Sullivan said.

“Very well,” Grimaldi said, but he couldn't get Prygocki out of his mind. It was more than the fact that he had walked out.

He outlined a plan which included meetings with faculty and administration and ended with students and parents. The media would be well aware of what was happening at each juncture.

“The point is to guide and direct, and as always to allow for the spirit to work through us,” he said.

Bishop Finch looked at his watch and cleared his throat.

“I think that's all the time we have,” he said. “Thank you for all your help. I expect Mr. Grimaldi will keep you all apprised of what's happening and, in that respect, if he is in need of further consultation, that you all will be at his disposal.”

He motioned for Sullivan to lead the closing prayer.

Grimaldi would have liked some feedback, but he didn't protest.

He waited by the door as the people left.

When the school super approached, Grimaldi pulled him aside.

“I hear your life has been threatened.”

The superintendent smiled.

“That's right. I haven't had this much fun since the last time I was involved in restricting a system. They only slashed my tires then.”

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