

Catholic Sex Education

Gene Fahey was a little, square-faced bulldog of the Faith and Father Spillone's right hand man in the parish. He made his living selling furnaces or air conditioners, depending on the season, and, in his spare time, helped out around the church. On Sundays he stayed for all four Masses, doing the readings, taking up the collections, even filling in as an altar boy if one of the regular guys was sick. But his main mission was to the Catholic teenagers in town, especially the boys. His door was always open if we needed to talk, he said. It was his real job.

We were on retreat. We were sitting around in the main lodge at Camp Diamond. In the kitchen we had hung up a red-and-white checked oilcloth for Father Spillone to sit behind. It was flopped over a rope strung between a stainless steel sink and a cabinet full of big, shiny cans. You had to kneel on the floor, which was cement.

"Who's first?" Mr. Fahey asked. He had a loud, boomy voice, really full of enthusiasm. None of the other guys moved, so I said I would go. I knew he wanted me to.

I was shy when I got to the kitchen. I was used to the confessional at St. Brigid's with its dark, carved wood and velvet kneeler and its curtain that you pulled to shut yourself in. You knew it was time to start when Father's panel behind the screen slid open and clicked, and you could hear his fat man's breathing.

"Go ahead," said the voice.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," I said. "It has been a week and a half since my last Confession."

The red-and-white tablecloth was distracting right in front of my face. I thought of an Italian restaurant and pushed the thought out of my mind. I concentrated on my examination of conscience, confessed anger, fighting, making fun of people, cursing, taking the Lord's Name in vain. As I

talked, I was staring at a drain set in a depression in the cement, imagining dirty mop water swirling down, the sucking sound.

"Is that all?" asked the voice.

"No," I said. "I was impure in thought and deed. With myself 15 times. With another five times."

"I see," said the voice. "And how old are you now?"

"Sixteen and a half."

"A very dangerous age. These sins of impurity are especially dangerous. You must learn to control them before they become adult habits of sin. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"The sins with another. Were they with a girl?"

"Of course, Father!" I was shocked.

"Did they involve -- touching?"

"Yes, Father."

"But no more than that?"

"No, Father."

"I see. That's a relief. And this was one of our Catholic girls?"

"No, Father. She's Jewish."

"Well." The voice made a long, whistling sigh. "That's another problem."

But he didn't pursue it. He gave me a stiff penance and told me to meditate on Our Lady's purity during the Hail Marys. Then he told me to make a good Act of Confession.

I sprinted into it.

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee..."

The voice galloped along in Latin.

"Go and sin no more," said the voice.

Back in the big room Mr. Fahey was talking about faith in foxholes for a couple of guys who expected to go in the service instead of to college. Mr. Fahey was a World War II vet so he knew about war. He said we had to stop the Commies

in Vietnam or we'd just have to stop them later -- in Japan or the Phillipines.

"Penance in there, Mike," he said, pointing first at me and then at the door of the coat room in which we had set up a kneeler. "Who's next? How 'bout you, Reidy?"

The guy he was talking to was a hood from Devon High. None of us had met him before the retreat, but he was supposed to be wild. He had dropped a 409 in his '62 Chev, and it went. He had a D.A. and carried a skinny comb in his shirt pocket to slick back the sides, which were shiny black slabs, and to tease the front, which jiggled like Paul Anka's. He straddled his chair backwards and looked like he's just woke up, except it was night time.

"Chop, chop," said Mr. Fahey.

Reidy rolled his eyes and unwound his legs and arms from the chair. He walked really slow toward the kitchen -- doing the stroll. Mr. Fahey stared at his back like he knew he had his work cut out.

Later we were sitting around on old ratty couches and easy chairs in the room where the camp counselors hung out in the summer. There was a beat up Coke machine, turned off, and two or three standing ashtrays, but we weren't allowed to smoke. Mr. Fahey hustled in, rubbing his hands together like he was freezing.

"OK," he said. "The name of this retreat is 'A Catholic Young Man's Guide to Life and Love,' but really it's about sex!"

A couple of the guys giggled. Pat McGrath, the redhead, blushed so hard his freckles disappeared.

"First of all, we're going to review the facts," he said. "I know you fellows think you know it all, but chances are you don't. I didn't at your age."

He unrolled some medical teaching charts that showed the female organs and pinned them to the wall. There was no woman in the picture, just the organs. The uterus looked like a fox face, and the tubes and ovaries were like ragged antenna ears.

Mr. Fahey talked about ovulation and slid his finger along one of the tubes to show how the eggs came down.

"The uterus is also called the womb," he said. "You know in the 'Hail Mary,' where it says, 'Blessed is the fruit of thy womb?'...Well, this is it."

Someone sputtered, trying to hold it in.

"No cracks or I'll murder 'ya," he warned.

He told how, if the egg wasn't fertilized, it came out every month with the menstrual blood.

"That's when a girl has her period," he explained.

"On the ra-ag," Reidy whispered, really loud.

Mr. Fahey snapped around like he'd been goosed.

"Mr. Reidy, I doubt you're such an expert," he said.. "Maybe you'd like to share your superior knowledge with the rest of us."

Reidy's face kind of darkened, but I wouldn't call it blushing. He closed his eyes half way like he was really bored and jiggled his pack of cigarettes up and down in his shirt pocket. I think he wanted to smoke pretty bad.

Mr. Fahey started talking about the vagina, which was pretty amazing to see up there on the wall. It looked like two mouths, one inside the other. There were lines that led to neatly lettered labels -- vulva, labia minora, labia majora, clitoris. There was no picture of the clitoris, but he called it "the seat of female pleasure." There were pictures that looked scrunched-up like belly buttons, labeled urethra and anus, but he didn't talk about those.

He showed how the sperm goes up the vagina to meet the egg in the uterus.

"Presto! Conception!" he said. "Any questions?"

No one had any.

"I guess you all know what a penis is and what happens when it gets excited," he said.

That got a laugh. Even Mr. Fahey joined in. Beside me, Reidy made a wicked lip fart, but it was drowned out by the laughter.

"This is where we come in," said Mr. Fahey.
"No pun intended."

More laughter. He grinned along for a second. Then his face got serious to let us know the jokes were over.

"As men, we have the God-given power, through the sex act, to create life," he told us. "The first thing we must realize is: sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreation within the blessed sacrament of marriage is a beautiful and sacred thing."

"A-a-a-men," rasped Reidy.

Mr. Fahey stiffened but didn't react. He started talking about his own marriage. He and his wife had seven kids, but they still loved the sex act. It was for reproduction, but it was also an expression of their love.

"Of course, you can do it in the normal way," he said. "But there's other things you can do."

"Like what?" Reidy asked, loud and clear.

Mr. Fahey glared at him for a long time.

"Well," he said finally. "Since Mr. Reidy is so immature, I'll have to leave it to your imagination."

Reidy snorted softly at the ceiling. His mouth hung open. His eyes were closed.

"But the important thing," Mr. Fahey went on, "is that we always finish in the normal way."

"What about the rhythm method?" asked Tommy Scalpello, who wanted to be a priest.

"I'm very glad you asked that, Tom," said Mr. Fahey. "The rhythm method is acceptable to the Church because it is a natural, not artificial, attempt to avoid conception. But, if conception should occur, we accept it as the will of God."

Blushing, Pat McGrath raised his hand and said he didn't understand the rhythm method. Mr. Fahey went back to the charts to explain the female fertility cycle. Then he told us he didn't want to spend any more time on birth control.

"If you guys need birth control, you're in big trouble," he said. "mortal sin trouble."

"What about rubbers?" Reidy asked suddenly. He sat up straight, eyes wide open.

"The Church rejects their use as artificial birth control," Mr. Fahey said.

"Too bad," said Reidy. He chuckled and settled back in his chair.

"The Church regards pre-marital sex, with or without birth control, as a grievous matter, Mr. Reidy," he continued. "Are you married?"

"Not that I know of," Reidy said to the ceiling.

"In that case, I would listen closely," he said. "And I would keep my mouth shut."

"I'll consider it," Reidy said. He folded his hands on his stomach and yawned.

There was a long silence while Mr. Fahey ran his palms, one at a time, back over his brush cut hair. No matter how many times he plastered it down, it kept springing back. He was letting his temper cool.

"OK," he finally said. "With the possible exception of Mr. Reidy, I suspect you fellows are confused about sex -- what's right, what's wrong, how can you have fun with girls without endangering your immortal soul? Well, let's talk about it. Who wants to start?"

No one did. We were all looking at the linoleum floor. Except Reidy. From the sound of his breathing, he was really going to sleep.

"OK," proposed Mr. Fahey. "Suppose you wake up from a dream, and you're -- aroused. Is that a sin?"

"No," I said.

"Very good, Mike," he said. "Why not?"

I shrugged like I wasn't sure.

"Because there was no intention to sin," he answered himself. "You didn't *decide* to have a sexy dream."

"But," he went on. "Suppose you do something to *prolong* the arousal? Or to *heighten* it?"

"It's a sin then," said Tommy Scalpello.

At that point McGrath cracked up. He put his fist in his mouth to stifle it, but the laughter

leaked out in snorts and high-pitched shrieks. He turned the color of a fresh brick, and it deepened, as though the brick had gotten wet.

I could see Reidy's hand behind the chair in front of him, moving up and down above his crotch in a blur. He was panting with his tongue hanging out, and his eyes were crossed.

"Oh yes, yes," he whispered in a high girly voice. "Oh please, yes!"

I think Mr. Fahey would have really blown up then. I think he might have punched the kid. But before he could do anything, Father Spillone walked in.

Father was normal in height and weighed about 300 pounds. Mr. Fahey claimed it was glands. He said Father had once been a football star. He defended him from people who didn't like the way Father cleaned the chalice after Communion, which was to suck the wine off his thick fingers with smacking noises you could hear all over the church.

We all stood up except Reidy, who was pretending to be asleep.

"Did I miss the part about petting?" Father asked, as a joke. Mr. Fahey laughed in short barks. A couple of guys chipped in giggles. We sat down.

"I'm sure Mr. Fahey will cover what you need to know," Father said. "I just wanted to add that we're proud of you boys. You've got a tough assignment out there. You're the soldiers of Christ, and it's a tough, daily battle. The enemy is all around, always there. Which is where your discipline comes in. An army can't win without its discipline."

He paused so we could think about our discipline.

"Fellows, we know it's not easy," he went on. "Sometimes the other kids might make fun of you. Sometimes they might call you squares or sissies. But they really respect you, let me tell you. And you're never alone either, don't forget. When you say no to temptation, Almighty God knows. You're a hero to Him...and now, let us pray."

Together, we touched our foreheads, solar plexus, left and right shoulders, and folded our hands.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven..." we prayed. All except Reidy. He was sitting up, staring around at the bowed, murmuring heads.

I guess he was really an atheist.

After the prayer, we took a break out on the porch.

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em!" Mr. Fahey shouted, fishing in his sport coat for his own pack.

That was a big deal, letting us smoke. I didn't smoke yet, but I needed the fresh air. It was late March, getting warmer. In the pine woods around the camp there were still piles of snow, pale smears in the darkness that gave off a chill. Some peepers were tuning up in a nearby pond or creek. Pretty soon, they'd be twanging away.

Mr. Fahey called me over. He was smoking like a fiend, dragging deep and puffing out big clouds.

"That's a bad apple," he said, pointing to the parking lot, where Reidy had gone to stand by his car. "He's on the fast road to trouble."

I guess I nodded.

"I want you to help me out, Mike," he said. "The other guys respect you. If you joined in more, kind of tried to get the discussion going, they wouldn't pay any attention to that clown."

He turned to face me.

"Or maybe you should just tell him to shut his dirty *mouth!*"

"Maybe," I said.

I hung around the lodge a little longer, then walked out to the parking lot. Reidy was lounging against his Chevy, smoking.

"The hell with that asshole," he said.

He tossed his lit cigarette into the woods. It did little flips in an arc, like a goofed-up orange comet. He got in the car.

"The hell with my old man, too," he said. "Hey, Mike, you wanna' go for a ride?"

I decided right away. I didn't think about it. The guy made me nervous, but I wanted to. It was like when Sarah let me touch her. I just wanted to.

I got in the car.

Reidy fired it up. The engine roar was like a bomb going off. A thick blast of blue exhaust puffed past the rear window. Reidy put in the clutch, floored the gas till the engine wailed, then popped the clutch. We burned across the lot, sliding sideways, rear tires smoking, onto the main road. The inside of the car smelled like a rubber factory.

"Where to?" Reidy yelled.

I looked across the parking lot at the brightly lit lodge and the silhouettes frozen on the porch.

"Take the--fast--road--to--trouble!" I yelled back, laughing crazy.

Reidy chirped it into second, stomped on the gas pedal and, arching up from his seat, howled like a maniac. The car shot away, roaring.