

SISTER MARY AND THE PAGAN BABIES

By Michael Zielinski

The curtain rises on SISTER MARY, who is pushing 70, and on 12-year-old JOHNNY JONES in an empty classroom. Johnny sits on a chair. Sister Mary circles the chair, brandishing a riding crop.

SISTER MARY

You always seem to be getting into trouble, Master Jones. But I never thought you would steal money from our Pagan Babies collection. Stealing from God is a terrible sin. (*She points the riding crop at a money can on her desk*). It's empty. There were twenty-five dollars in that can and now the money is missing. I kept you after school because I think you stole it. Do you have anything to say for yourself?

JOHNNY JONES

I didn't take the money, Sister Mary. I know I'm no altar boy but I'm not that bad.

SISTER MARY

Don't compound your sin by lying to me, young man! (*She smacks his arm with the riding crop*). You were alone in our classroom because I grounded you from recess today for dipping Margaret's ponytail in your ink well. Which is why I had to rearrange the sixth-grade seating assignments and sit you behind Billy because he has a crewcut. Nobody else was alone in the room today. You had to be the one who stole the money. (*She sticks the riding crop under his chin*).

JOHNNY JONES

I plead not guilty. And I refuse to answer any more questions until I'm represented by a lawyer. I watch Perry Mason and know my rights.

SISTER MARY

Considering the gravity of your crime, this is no time for levity.

JOHNNY JONES

I am dead serious.

SISTER MARY

Speaking of dead, do you want to go to hell, Johnny? (*She pulls his head back by his hair*).

JOHNNY JONES

I won't go to hell.

SISTER MARY

Let me remind you that your classmates save their pennies for our Pagan Babies adoption program. When their total reaches five dollars, they then ransom a child overseas, get a certificate and the right to name the child. Five of your classmates were doing the Lord's work when they reached five dollars each. Now their money is gone. That is five fewer Pagan Babies who will be purchased from the jaws of hell. And now it's doubtful we will be the top class in the 1957 St. Timothy's Parochial School Pagan Babies contest.

JOHNNY JONES

I don't believe all that crock. Who are these Pagan Babies? And because some kid in America forks over five dollars, some Pagan Baby they named Sparky is their adopted kid? And what does Sparky think about that? I think the nuns in this school made this all up to raid the children's piggybanks to fill their own pocketbooks.

SISTER MARY

You appall me, Master Jones, with your horrible, false allegations. Stick out your hands, palms down. (*He does so. She smacks her riding crop across his knuckles*).

JOHNNY JONES

Ouch! That really hurts.

SISTER MARY

The Pagan Babies are actual children being looked after by missionary sisters, brothers and priests in their countries. The money collected here in the United States goes to help feed, clothe and educate them. You are heading straight for hell. (*She sticks the riding crop in his face*). You need to go to confession with Father Sullivan so that he can absolve your sins.

JOHNNY JONES

I told you Sister that I am not going to hell.

SISTER MARY

How can you be so sure?

JOHNNY JONES

I wear a scapula. As I have learned in Catholic school, if you die wearing a scapula, you're a lock to go to heaven.

SISTER MARY

You can't fool God, Johnny. I knew another little boy who thought the same thing. But at the hour of his death his illness made him delusional and he thought his scapula was a snake strangling him. So, he ripped off the scapula right before he died.

JOHNNY JONES

And went to hell?

SISTER MARY

For eternity! (*She smacks the floor with the riding crop*). Tell me, Johnny. Is it worth going to hell for eternity over twenty-five dollars?

JOHNNY JONES

Don't ask me, Sister Mary. I didn't take the money. I know I get into a little mischief at times, but I'm no thief.

SISTER MARY

Since you won't fess up with the truth to me, I am going to call your father and ask him to join us. (*She smacks the floor with the riding crop*). Perhaps he can get you to tell the truth.

JOHNNY JONES

He won't come here.

SISTER MARY

Why not? He can't get off work?

JOHNNY JONES

He's in prison. For embezzlement. I think that's some sort of stealing.

SISTER MARY

Ah ha! Apparently, the bad apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

JOHNNY JONES

I'm nothing like my father. I never, ever will be a thief. I wish I was more like my mother. The woman is a saint. Her favorite show is Bishop Fulton Sheen. She forces me to watch it sometimes. But it's boring. The Pagan Babies are lucky they don't have to watch it.

SISTER MARY

I'm calling your mother.

JOHNNY JONES

Wait.

SISTER MARY

Are you finally going to tell me the truth and admit to stealing from the Pagan Babies money can?

JOHNNY JONES

No. Instead, I want you to say a prayer to St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost things.

SISTER MARY

I know who he is. But why? The money was stolen, not lost.

JOHNNY JONES

You don't have to be Sgt. Joe Friday of *Dragnet* to figure this out. If I didn't steal the money and I was the only one alone in the classroom, the money has to be lost or misplaced. You're not getting any younger and you are forgetful at times. The other kids make fun of you behind your back. But I don't. So, pray to St. Anthony that you find where you misplaced the money.

SISTER MARY

How dare you try to shift the blame to me! (*She smacks his arm with the riding crop*). You don't know your place, young man. But just to satisfy you, I will say the prayer. (*She sings it with a Gregorian chant*). "St. Anthony, who received from God the special power of restoring lost things, grant that I may find the Pagan Babies' collection money that has been lost. Or stolen by Johnny here."

JOHNNY JONES

(*He mimics her Gregorian chant*). Hey, that last sentence isn't part of the prayer.

SISTER MARY

It was part of my prayer. What next? Wait until the Pagan Babies money miraculously pops up on my desk? If you want, I'll close my eyes and you can replace the money you have stolen on my desk. After all, I didn't frisk you or search your schoolbag. (*She laughs*). We may be a police state at St. Timothy's but we aren't a police station.

JOHNNY JONES

Once again, I DID NOT take the money. Please help out St. Anthony and search your desk drawers. If you take me to the principal's office and report that I am a thief, you are going to look awfully foolish when you later discover the money in one of your desk drawers.

SISTER MARY

If you were this persistent with your studies, you would be a straight A student. (*She starts looking through her desk drawers with no success. Finally, she discovers an unmarked envelope in the bottom drawer. She opens it and finds the missing twenty-five dollars*) My Lord, here is the Pagan Babies collection money. Johnny, how did you hide this in my drawer since I've been with you all this time?

JOHNNY JONES

I didn't put the money in your drawer. You obviously did but forgot that you did. You should pray to St. Anthony hourly before you forget everything.

SISTER MARY

Why would you say something so outrageous?

JOHNNY JONES

Because you forget things all the time. You give us pop quizzes you gave us the day before. You assign reading chapters you already had assigned the previous week. You keep calling Tommy Billy because you taught his older brother Billy three years ago. And it's Harry, not Barry. Last week you forgot it was a Friday and you ate a ham sandwich for lunch. I'm sure that the Good Lord was not pleased. And I'm worried you will forget when recess is. Pretty soon you are going to think that your name is Sister Brigitte Bardot.

SISTER MARY

I know I am getting a tad forgetful but figured it's because I have a lot on my mind. Teaching sixth grade can be a chore for even a younger nun. Kids can be such monsters at your age. I miss teaching first-graders. The kids are adorable and the homework is much easier to check. I should pray to St. Jude that I get assigned to first grade next year. I can live with the occasional potty accidents first-graders have.

JOHNNY JONES

At least first-graders won't purposely lock you in the closet like Frankie did to you last month. But back to me. Do you still think that I stole the Pagan Babies' money?

SISTER MARY

I don't remember accusing you of that, Johnny. *(She smiles)*.

JOHNNY JONES

Well said, Sister Mary. And you owe me one. So, the next time you catch me staring at Susan's patent leather shoes to see up her dress, cut me some slack. I'm no thief but I'm no angel.

SISTER MARY

Impure thoughts are put there by the devil. Stay pure because perhaps you have a vocation to the priesthood.

JOHNNY JONES

I thought about being a priest one afternoon last year. But the pressure of being holy got to me and I cracked even before supper.

SISTER MARY

If you become a priest, imagine how happy your mother will be?

JOHNNY JONES

I can only imagine how unhappy I will be.

SISTER MARY

I will make you happy now and send you home. And try to be a much better boy in school. It's a quick, slippery slope from misbehaving kid to thief. It's in your genes.

JOHNNY JONES

Thank you, Sister Mary. I will ask my mother to pray that your memory improves. *(He exits).*

SISTER MARY

(Aloud to herself). Ha! I've fingered my fall guy if anyone notices how low our Pagan Baby funds are compared to what the kids gave. *(She takes the twenty-five dollars from the envelope and sticks it inside her habit and laughs).* If these kids weren't such brats, I wouldn't need to drink so much Scotch just to get through the day. *(She pulls out a flask from her desk drawer and takes a big gulp).* That Johnny Jones is the perfect alibi because he's practically a Pagan Baby himself. *(She laughs uproariously).*

(BLACKOUT)