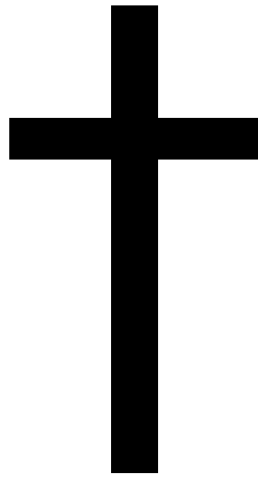


The  
**God**  
Business



© Copyright Jason Roth

# I

“What we really need, Monsignor, is a few more holidays.” Father Feinstein’s ass stuck to the vinyl desk chair. He resented that. “I mean, look at our best days: Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday. Let’s face it, they like getting free shit— Oh. Sorry Bish.” Father Feinstein stared at the telephone in his hand. He was hoping it would disappear. It didn’t. “Don’t worry about it, Bish-man,” Feinstein continued, “we’ve got a good four weeks. Besides, the supernatural is making a come-back. We can sit here all day and the pews will fill up by themselves, so to speak.”

Father Feinstein sat alone in his office, his pupils scurrying across the surface of his eyeballs. It seemed that whatever they found on one side of his face scared them off to the other. Frankly, Father Feinstein had no clue how he was going to meet the bishop’s parishioner recruitment schedule. Until today, he thought he’d be safe as long as he kept the bishop believing in the mythical marketing plan. Now the senile old bastard wanted answers.

Father Feinstein wiggled in his chair. The window was down, but the rectory was still nearly as hot as it was outside. He fidgeted with a binder clip between his dirty, goldfish-dropping shaped fingers, and with the other hand, rubbed the top of the phone against his second chin. If “plump” implied a jolly sort of man, then Father Feinstein was a fat disgusting slob.

Several beads of sweat survived “the great rubbing”, and continued their pilgrimage down the grooves of Father Feinstein’s face. Younger droplets were sucked into Velcro eyebrows, which convulsed randomly, pulling in nearby particles like two linear black holes. Two more beads of sweat braced the edge of eyeballs the color of faded jeans, the pupils squirming like exposed knee caps of a hyperactive child. A more daring droplet accelerated down the length of Father Feinstein’s drooping nose, almost providing enough pressure to snap it right off. Unfortunately, the joyride was over for the young droplet when it landed on a hanging lower lip, then rolled to its doom inside an ever-open mouth. For a bead of sweat, Father Feinstein’s face was the amusement park from hell.

“God dammit.” Father Feinstein pulled the binder clip off his forefinger. Holding the phone between his head and shoulder, he examined the red pinch mark. “A stigmata if they had missed,” he thought to himself. He grinned resentfully, and exhaled through his nose.

“No, of course not Monsignor... Yes, of course I do. Well, Bish, what I’m proposing is a slight *modification* to the Church calendar. No, nothing radical, of course. Not even anything new, really. Let’s just say a more modern way of celebrating the old crap. Something with the pulling power of a Christmas or an Easter Sunday.”

Father Feinstein leaned back, and looked curiously at his painting of Christ dispelling street vendors from a temple. He put his feet up on the desk, and swung his head around to face an open window. He felt the spring breeze on his face and smiled. What could be a better combination for a B.S. artist, he thought, than religion *and* marketing? He was on a roll and he knew it.

“But Bish-man, a little glitter here and there helps people convince themselves that what we’re spouting at them actually adds value to their lives. I mean their lives *here*, on earth. See, they can *hold* a palm reed. They can *see* their presents on Christmas morning. They can *smell* flowers decorating an altar and *feel* the sprinkle of the holy water. Christ, even the generic stained glass is here for the same reason. Let’s face it, if someone offered you a Holy Spirit or a gold crucifix, which would *you* pray to?”

The bishop mumbled something about “the lowest common denominator” in a heavy Italian accent. Father Feinstein pictured his own congregation having to listen to the man babble during the Annual Appeal, and for the first time felt a sensation similar to what the Bible liked to call “pity”. Probably those refried beans, he told himself.

Sister Susie’s head shot through the door. Seeing the door open, Father Feinstein juggled the phone between his hands, nearly dropping it. He grabbed the bible lying on his desk and threw it into his lap, mimicking a similar reaction as an altar boy, when the pastor had caught him in the confessional. A moment later, his mind registered Sister Susie’s face, and he blinked slowly in relief. He asked the bishop to hold, and covered the phone’s mouthpiece.

“What is it?!” Father Feinstein threw the words at Susie like a spear. Whatever she was about to tell him was obviously her fault.

“Father Kevin from St. John’s is here to see you! Hee hee!” Sister Susie had the face and manner of a cheerleader. Long spirals of blond hair fell out of the sides of her black habit, and her naturally red lips helped to make her rather attractive when she wasn’t moving or talking. She perpetually acted as though her team had just scored a touchdown, ensuring that her current audience would not boo, hiss, or throw half-empty beer bottles. Privately, she regurgitated thoughts about “the love of God” to muffle the relentless echoing between her ears. In Father Feinstein’s eyes, she was one of the most devoutly religious people he knew. She looked so natural on her knees.

Father Feinstein groaned, “Yeah, Susie. Send him in.” Father Feinstein looked both annoyed and relieved, much like he had just wet his pants. He wasn’t crazy about seeing Father Kevin, but at least it was an excuse to get rid of the bishop. With no attempt at sincerity, he mouthed his vow to the bishop and hung up the phone.

Father Kevin brushed aside the partially open door and walked in. His posture was casual; only his face seemed tense, as if it awaited the signal to smile. His hair was straight and black, neatly combed back, and the dress-shirt he wore was also black, except for its white priestly collar. With the addition of a black leather briefcase in his hand, he had the appearance of a fashionable European businessman. A shiny gold cross hung on a delicate chain around his neck, and above, he raised a dark eyebrow. In general, he presented himself as being much taller than he really was, and as usual, was quite convincing at it.

Father Kevin reminded Father Feinstein of his mother. He felt the sudden need to confess an unknown sin anytime he and Father Kevin were in the same room. It was as if the arrogant bastard actually enjoyed doing God’s work— whether God wanted him to or not.

“So, how is the recruitment coming along?” Father Kevin asked.

“Same old shit,” Father Feinstein answered. “You know how bishops are.”

Upon hearing the priest's unusual choice of language, Father Kevin's double take gave him the appearance of a mute turkey. He had tried to glance twice at Father Feinstein, who remained directly in front of him.

“Bishops? Not really, but I can imagine,” Father Kevin responded, taking a breath and looking around Father Feinstein’s office. The first thing he noticed, nailed above Father Feinstein’s desk, was a large religious calendar. The majority of the holidays had been highlighted, some with notes scribbled below them. A fax machine sat on a stand next to Father Feinstein’s desk, now in the process of printing a menu from the local “Burrito Libido” restaurant. Spanning the length of the wall next to it was a metal filing cabinet, on top of which was a stack of church bulletins and an empty software box which contained nothing. The floor of the office was covered with little paper circles and, presumably, some type of brownish-red carpet underneath. Then there was the desk. It seemed to have no drawers, because all of Father Feinstein’s paper, pens, and Pretzel Pencils were scattered between his lamp and photo cube. Father Kevin looked at the nearest photograph and saw several gray-haired women with their arms around a sanguine Father Feinstein. They were posing in front of a broken, moss-covered statue of the kneeling Virgin Mary. The words “Parish Retreat” and last Spring’s date were written in the bottom corner of the picture. Father Kevin remembered who he was dealing with.

“I’ll get straight to the point, Father,” Father Kevin began. “I have a very simple goal which I’d like you to help me with. I want to save religion.”

Father Kevin spoke in the tone of a company president negotiating a contract. Oddly, it was this utter seriousness which made Father Feinstein curious.

“There’s a fact we have to recognize if we want to preserve our way of living. That fact is that people are unable to reconcile their earthly desires with our spiritual rules. They lack the conviction to practice consistently what we preach. For example, last Sunday a little girl asked me if it was wrong of her to spend her allowance on a Barbie doll when people are living on the streets. On one hand, she really wanted it. On the other, she knew that someone else could have easily used the money. This is just one example, but everyone asks the question in some form. Too many people still waver between

what they know is right, and what they'd rather do. It all comes down to a battle between heaven and earth, Father. We have to take sides once and for all."

Father Kevin's face was tight and emotionless. He spoke like a soldier dutifully accepting an enemy's torture, without conceding top-secret information. He looked to the side, his dark eyes moving to the rhythm of his thoughts. A strand of black hair now hung loosely over his brow.

He continued, "I think you'll agree that this is a problem too large for one church. That's why I've come to you. I propose that we join our congregations to initiate the start of this battle. I'd like to arrange a mass where parishioners from both our churches can come together to hear two perspectives on rediscovering the passion in their spiritual lives. It's a bit unusual, but I think we can overlook the minor disagreements between our churches for just one day. Father, I'd like to ask for your participation in a community-wide *mass of renewal*. The two of us working together may be just what the people need."

Father Feinstein winced. He leaned back in his chair and rolled his head, as if squeezing himself between two large prickly bushes. "Yeah, it sounds great. But do we really need to do this thing together? I mean, it would take a lot of rearranging schedules and changing plans, that sort of thing."

Father Kevin nodded slowly, "That's true..." The unnatural tension across his forehead made him look like Bill Clinton or a career social worker. "However," Father Kevin said, "this is something we should deal with as a community. And with you and I each presenting sermons, we'll give parishioners the opportunity to accept a new approach to spiritual life. People will most likely return to their old churches, but with a feeling that they've chosen a new beginning. Many may immediately start to experience the kind of renewal I'm hoping for. Inevitably, a few people may prefer the style of a new priest, and decide to switch churches. But even if that happens, so be it. All a priest is concerned with is the spiritual best interest of his community. Wouldn't you agree?"

Father Feinstein's eyebrows raised up like the flicker of a dying light bulb. "Uh, yeah... community. Very important." Whatever the hell Father Kevin had been talking about was starting to

make sense. *What if* a few people decided to switch churches? After all, the bishop never did mention where Father Feinstein had to *find* the new recruits.

Father Kevin added, “As I’m *sure* you’ve guessed, I decided against using the ideal method of strengthening the faith of my congregation. The only practical thing to do was to go with the joint-mass idea.”

“Oh, sure. That’s understandable,” Father Feinstein improvised. He strained his facial muscles to look concerned, but still couldn’t help looking confused. “But why, may I ask, did you decide against it?”

“Well, Father,” Father Kevin answered, “I realize that you can’t expect everyone to make the leap from earth to heaven in one jump— or vice versa. Ideally, you should help bridge the gap for them. You know, by offering material rewards as a *means* for encouraging spiritual renewal. But the last thing I wanted to do was to turn the church service into some kind of religious auction house. With all the people suddenly turning ‘religious’, we’d have to be darn sure that God had enough room up there for all of them, right Father?” Father Kevin laughed.

“It would amount to mere bribery, wouldn’t it?,” Father Feinstein said, returning the expected acquiescence and forcing a laugh. “Then again... you could look at it as more of an investment...”

Father Feinstein silently pondered the new revelation...“why even beat around the bush...” It was hard to tell if the pulled muscles near the corners of his mouth were the rudiments of a smile, or if he was just trying to unscrew his own head. “...the way to attract someone to spirituality...” He thought to himself, “...is outright materialism.”

Father Kevin was offering two ideas for the price of one. Actually, Father Feinstein wasn’t so sure the ideas were for sale, but either way, he wasn’t going to pay a dime. “I have to say,” he said, “I do agree with your objection to that scam—scheme—uh...*strategy*. I firmly believe that church should remain the house of God, not the shopping mall of God.”

“You don’t know how right you are,” Father Kevin smiled gently. “The only question is— where to have the mass. That is, if you *are* interested?”

“For the sake of the community, I’d be happy to participate, Father Kevin. And I’d also be willing to let you take advantage of my, shall we say, *more comfortable* church.”

“That would be very generous, Father. But you don’t think my parishioners will be so impressed they’ll want to stay permanently, do you?”

Father Feinstein was caught off guard, and stared at Father Kevin cautiously. Then Father Kevin gave him a friendly smile, and they both laughed at the joke.

Father Kevin got up to leave. He was about to say goodbye, when Father Feinstein mused, “By the way, Father, whatever was the answer you gave to that little girl?”

Father Kevin stopped smiling. “Oh, that?” He squeezed his jaw together, and with a small, staccato shake of his head, waved his hair to the side. “I just told her to start acting like a big girl. I told her that as long as there were people digging through trash cans for dinner, and living in boxes made for shipping little girls’ dolls, the most evil thing she could do is enjoy a moment alone with a God-damn toy.”

Father Kevin nodded and walked towards the door. “Goodbye, Father. I’ll call you tomorrow to set up the arrangements.” He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Father Feinstein sat at his desk silently. He felt a strange chill in his chest and stomach from the words left with him. Suddenly, he was conscious of the feeling and felt somewhat relieved. He considered it a sign of his own virtue when he encountered someone else with the ability to terrify him.

He leaned back in his chair and stretched his shoulders. With one sweep of his hand, he gathered the papers lying in front of him and dropped them in the trash can. He picked up the phone, and called the bishop to tell him the good news.

## II

Two and a half weeks later, the Mass of Renewal was filled to standing room only. Both congregations were still squeezing into the back of the church as the two priests started their

procession to the altar. Diagonally across the front wall, the sun projected an artificial rainbow through stained glass windows. The large wooden crucifix that hung on the front wall was illuminated with a multi-colored spotlight.

One parishioner caught a glimpse of a familiar light-haired lady from the church across the street, who had always arrived at her church when he arrived at his. But today they were praying together, and it just happened that they finally had the chance to say hello. All throughout the magnificent church, there was a feeling that the Holy Spirit himself\* was visiting that day.

Halfway into the seventeenth pew on the left, an eight year old boy whispered into his younger brother's ear:

*Our Father farts in Heaven,  
while angels pull his thumb.  
The devil comes in,  
smells their sin,  
and says "that's where clouds come from!"*

The boy got a good whack on top of his head for that one, but not before getting a decent laugh out of his brother. The body connected to the hand that did the whacking joined a dozen other mothers in asking what she had done to deserve "this". The only answer she received, however, was an illustrative sound effect made by her youngest son's right palm and left armpit— and more giggling. Had the world been created as she believed, she might have heard three voices laughing instead of two.

Father Feinstein and Father Kevin approached the altar with two readers, two altar boys, and a few hobbling senior citizens. On a piety scale, the odd bunch ranked somewhere between Noah's Arc and a parade sponsored by the Ronald McDonald House. The priests stepped onto the raised platform and turned to face the crowded hall; the others took their places along side the altar. Barely visible on

---

\* It is common etiquette to refer to the Holy Spirit as a "he". Whether or not the Holy Spirit actually has a penis, and whether it has a use for one, being a ghost, remains in question.

Father Feinstein's face was a strange crease across his left cheek. It was a lazy smile, the one of the bully waiting for his sister to find the snake in her bed.

"Good morning," Father Feinstein said.

"Good morning, Father," the congregation responded in unison.

"Today, we welcome Father Kevin and his parishioners to a very special Mass of Renewal."

Father Kevin stood at Father Feinstein's side, and gave a small, austere nod of acknowledgment.

"We've come together today to solve the problem of sustaining our faith in a materialistic world. How do we find a medium between a world dominated by money and material pleasures, and a world in which material objects have no value? In God's world, the realm of the spirit, people are not judged by their bank accounts. And God doesn't accept Visa or MasterCard.

"No, to get into heaven, you'll have to pay with another kind of currency. The currency of the conscience. After you die, God will read your soul like a magnetic strip on an ATM card. The most ironic thing of all will be the rich man who owns a big-screen TV and sports car on earth, then stands at the gates of heaven, reaches into the pockets of his soul, and finds nothing but lint. What will he say then? That he didn't know? That he *thought* he was doing the right thing? That he *thought* it was right to push aside the weak and the poor, and bow down to the hundred dollar bill instead of the Lord?

"I think to that question, we know the answer. But what about *us*? What about the trip to the convenience store when we come back with a gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, and one lottery ticket? What about the summer day at the beach, on a day which is *usually* observed as the Lord's day? The Lord's day, that is, when we have the time.

"My friends, the question at hand is whether the lottery ticket and a Sunday at the beach are so bad that we must deny ourselves of them completely. Is it possible to partake of these material pleasures and still have time for God? How do we reconcile these interests? How do we find the right *compromise*? Ladies and gentlemen, that is why we are here today."

Father Kevin swung his head towards Father Feinstein. Still holding his hands solemnly in front of himself, he dropped his mouth open like he was accepting Communion. With all he knew about Father Feinstein, even this surprised him.

“Are you sure you want to make that compromise, Father?” Father Kevin asked bluntly, offering Father Feinstein a second chance.

Father Feinstein continued facing the audience. He began to lose restraint and smiled patronizingly. “Sure, Father Kevin. Just like we discussed. We’re here to find a practical balance between the world of matter and the world of the spirit.”

Father Kevin checked the eyes of people in congregation, then waited for Father Feinstein to make the point.

“Come now, Father Kevin. We live on earth, don’t we? You don’t think God would want us to pretend otherwise?”

"In matters of the spirit, Father, there can be no compromise."

People started turning to one another for answers. Was something unplanned taking place on the altar? Even the altar boys, who were surprised they were paying enough attention to notice anything unusual, were puzzled. So the congregation sat quietly and curiously, feeling the tension that comes before a nice full-fledged argument.

Father Kevin continued, "Now, Father, let us decide. Are we going to discuss how we can renew our devotion to God, or aren't we?"

Father Feinstein chuckled. “Well, of course, Father Kevin. We’re going to discuss how we can live up to God’s wishes, while rewarding ourselves with the gifts from the earth. After all, the earth itself is a gift from God. It would be one hell of a sin to waste it.

“And as an example of this progressive approach,” Father Feinstein turned back to the congregation, “I’m offering a free clock radio to any visitor who joins my parish today. Yes, for one day only, you too can become a member of St. Mary’s, the church with the practical approach to religion. Membership is absolutely free, and the clock radio is yours to keep. So sign up today after mass. As you can see, my spacious church offers air conditioning, a wide range of colorful murals, the

hippest Stations of the Cross in town, and free coffee and donuts every Sunday. The beautiful Sister Susie will be waiting in the back to enroll you today. Then please, feel free to join me downstairs for a champagne brunch, featuring fruits and pastries, leg of lamb, and the best tasting eggs benedict you've ever had."

Father Kevin stared out into the congregation. His muscles were no longer tense. For the first time in a church, he slouched. All he saw, in aisle after aisle, were daydreaming, drooling faces. They were hungry, and according to Father Feinstein, God wanted them to eat. Father Kevin marched off the altar, stopped, and declared sternly to the congregation, "Church can offer you only one thing: a promise of something beyond your earthly existence. If that's the kind of religion you're interested in, please join me across the street." He walked down the center of the church, not stopping or looking back. The few people who would return to his church the next week were either too dumb struck to move or too afraid they would be the only ones to stand up.

Father Kevin reached the vestibule and saw Sister Susie sitting behind a table piled with stacks of forms and a handful of pencils. There were five large cardboard boxes next to her marked "Deluxe AM-FM Stereo Alarm Clock". A professionally produced sign above the table read, "Renew your spirit and wake up your soul... with a free clock radio when you join today." Father Kevin shook his head and gave a quiet, bitter laugh. From the table, Sister Susie saw him tilt his head upright again. With a black blur from his hair above and shoes below, and between the darkness a white gown blowing behind him, he exited the church like a puff of smoke.

Several weeks later, Father Feinstein sat in his office, spinning around in his new swivel chair. Sister Susie was busy polishing a large decorative mirror that had just been mounted opposite the filing cabinet.

"Yes Bish, you're quite welcome," Father Feinstein said, continuing to wind himself in the telephone cord, "Yes, the holiday program has been keeping the old recruits quite satisfied. It's managing to pull in a steady 4 to 7% per week... Yeah, usually from other churches, but what do you care? I'm getting them, aren't I? Besides, we're also seeing a few horoscope readers, astrology

hotline regulars, and I'd expect a good number of sports fanatics in April or so. As far as the ROI goes, those clock radios have brought us in enough revenue to nearly double our monthly donations to MUDPITT\* *and* fix up the place.” He cursed under his breath as an alien on his new computer screen blasted his arm out of its socket. “Just like I told you, Bish-man, toss 'em a bone at every step. Let 'em pretend they're fetching it for what we say is at the end of that walk. But you and I both know they'll fetch it just for a chance at another bone.”

Sister Susie was squatting near the bottom of the mirror. By this point, the sweat on her back was starting to make her skin show through her white blouse. She wiped her forehead, brushed the wet dirty-blond hair out of her face, and pulled the blouse out of the back of her tight grey sweatpants. She squatted there, rubbing the mirror, wiggling and bouncing side to side, humming the chorus of *Let It Be*.

In virtual reality, one of Father Feinstein's other limbs had been blown to eternity. He was no longer watching the computer screen. He continued admiring the lustrous mirror, his mouth hanging open. “Hmmm,” Father Feinstein reflected, “In this office, every day should be casual day.”

The phone was sputtering with sounds of the bishop's shouts. Either the bishop was reciting a recipe for a good meat sauce, or he was running through a list of Italian swear words. “Huh?” Father Feinstein said, still mesmerized by the undefiled mirror. “Bones? What about bones?” Father Feinstein rolled himself in the swivel chair over to the windowsill. “There's a hell of a draft in here, don't you think Susie?” Father Feinstein said, closing the window. He leaned back in his chair, never taking his eyes off the oblivious nun. With his hands behind him, he found the knob of the radiator with his fingers, and turned counter-clockwise.

Outside the window, the street was quiet. Last week's leaves were being pulled out of the corners of the window ledge by the arthritic hand of an aging wind. A car door slammed. A trunk unlatched. There was a drop of a heavy box, a brief wobble, then silence. Father Kevin walked back to the front of his car and stopped.

---

\* The Mandating Under-Developed Peoples Instead of Thinking Team

"Hey Chris," Father Kevin called out to someone still inside his church. A lone hand waved to him from an open window, the red fingertips briefly visible, perhaps numb from the autumn wind. Father Kevin looked at his watch; the truck from the demolition crew was just turning the corner. He glanced over at the church across the street, wondering what sort of sordid plan Father Feinstein was up to.

He slowly stretched his neck, extending it a few millimeters toward the sky. He pulled it down, then moved it slowly to the left, then back to the right. His hands were still, but somehow his patient movements before leaving his church for the last time looked very much like the sign of the cross.

### III

Months later, Father Feinstein stood at the altar of his cathedral. (That's what he'd been calling it lately.) He faced the congregation and tightened the hanging flesh around his jaw. The screwed up expression, his attempt at solemnity, made him look more like an actor in a Maalox commercial than a holy man. Truthfully, the spirit within him was gas, not God.

In front of Father Feinstein was a wide podium covered with a heavy white cloth. On top was a golden wand lying next to a large urn. Like an ice bucket from the Waldorf Astoria, the urn was decorated with jewels; its sheer elegance seemed to make its function more dignified. Father Feinstein grabbed the wand from the podium, and began to wave it vigorously in circles above the urn.

"And now, for my next trick" he began, "When I say the magic words, this *ordinary* water will turn into... *Holy* water! I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, no mirrors or camera tricks will be used. Now, silence, please. I must now concentrate." He closed his eyes, and slowed the pace with which he waved the wand. In deep, resonating tones, the priest chanted:

*O God in Hea-ven...please hear our prayers...*

*we ask thee to change the atomic structure of this wa-ter...*

The molecules sat there, quite bored. “Here we go again,” one remarked, not really in the mood to be holy.

The priest made several more circles with his wand. When he was finished,\* he opened his eyes, and refocused them on the unchanged water in front of him. Not quite as impressive as a bunny rabbit, he thought, but it’ll do. He looked out into the audience, and again put on the expression that said God was stuck in his lower intestine, and too stubborn to come out.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen. Please hold up the symbolic wooden fragments which you selected before mass. These fragments— once bare, unpolished branches— remind us of the pain endured by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Many years ago, on a day in spring much like today, God’s Son carried His own cross. He knew full well the destination of His journey, as do we. But as we’ve seen in the past few months, it is unnecessary to relive Christ’s suffering. We’ve concluded that it is perhaps the most serious of all mortal sins. Instead, let us be thankful for the life Christ has given us. Let us give new meaning to the crosses *we* bear. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to *plaaaayyyyy ballllllllll!!!!!!!!!!*”

The crowd cheered. Every man, woman, and child in the packed cathedral held a brand new baseball bat proudly over his head. Dispersed throughout the crowd, one could see baseball caps of various professional teams, multi-colored banners, and big foam hands with a finger extended to signify “We’re #1!”. Along the walls on each side of the cathedral were huge white sheets with large, red lettering:

“BAT DAY AT ST. MARY’S: A NEW ANNUAL TRADITION”.

The crowd went wild as Father Feinstein descended from the altar, carrying the urn of holy water and golden wand. Dipping the wand into the urn, he waved sprinkles of water out over the crowd. People anxiously pushed their bats higher, hoping to get a drop or two, like fans in box seats waiting for a fly ball that promises to be a homer. Father Feinstein walked down the center aisle in his

---

\* The new atomic structure of the water was said to be H<sub>2</sub>HO<sub>1y</sub>

priestly robe, carrying the golden ice bucket, and sprinkled every last churchgoer with dirty, lukewarm tap water. It was a sparkling shower, glorious and golden.

The donation baskets that were passed around afterwards paid for the baseball bats 10 times over. The crowd was in a frenzy. The parishioners felt as though they were participating in a shopping spree, some not realizing how much they were actually spending, others forgetting that they didn't even like baseball. "If this is religion," one newcomer wearing a mustache and catcher's mitt remarked, "sign me up for season tickets."

Father Feinstein stood in the vestibule after mass, shaking hands and saying hello to each member of the current congregation. "Remember, folks," he said, though looking at only one person, "Those wishing to make their donations by credit card may see Sister Susie at the table over in the corner, or can call the Guilt Hotline at 1-800-GOD-CASH anytime during the week."

Sister Susie posed, not lying down on a shiny, competitively priced sports car, but standing behind a cheap brown card table. She kept herself busy all morning long, collecting credit cards and issuing receipts, and occasionally letting out a surprised "Oooo!", then playfully scolding the moment's culprit. But she smiled and pushed the pinching claws away. The guilty fingers seemed satisfied with Sister Susie's back side, though, because for the days of the following week, and the week after, the Guilt Hotline didn't ring once.

Father Feinstein shook hands with the last few parishioners. The only people left by this time were a few from the old days— grey haired, fidgety Republicans, still mumbling to themselves about faith, family, and country.

"Say, Father, it's a shame about Father Kevin, wouldn't you say?" a wrinkled, half-conscious woman chirped. She was pointing through the double doors to the construction site across the street. A glistening, black tarp was covering the frame of a new building where Father Kevin's church had once stood. The tarp hung like a mask, covering the face of whatever new department store or apartment building that was being erected.

"I hate to say it, m'am," Father Feinstein said casually, "But he kind of set himself up for that." Father Feinstein grinned, staring at the building's skeleton under the tarp. As a priest, he felt proud when he saw skeletons. They helped to justify his career.

Suddenly a truck drove up in front of the covered building. Father Feinstein stopped breathing and his eyes opened up like they actually had something to see—the word “GOD” was printed across the truck’s side. A man got out of the truck with a small package, and walked around the back of the building. A few moments later, he came back empty-handed. As he climbed into the truck, Father Feinstein noticed what his eyes had missed the first time. Printed next to “GOD” on the truck’s side were the words “Guaranteed Overnight Delivery.”

That explained the truck, but Father Feinstein’s stomach was still tingling. He cursed himself for never considering the question. “What *is* that building?” he wondered.

## IV

Father Feinstein kneeled by his bed in his underwear. Those three letters were burning in his brain like the image of the sun in his eyes.

GOD

Like the sun, the letters wavered and changed colors, from red to orange to yellow. The anxiety Father Feinstein felt in his stomach that morning had now spread into his chest and arms. What if the new building is another church? What if another priest with as much money and as few scruples had come up with a better marketing promotion? What if his congregation falls for it? Father Feinstein’s hands trembled.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.” Father Feinstein clasped his hands and timidly glanced at the ceiling. A piece of peeling white paint, which at that moment was the omnipotent creator of the universe, looked down in disgust.

“I didn’t mean it!” Father Feinstein pleaded aloud. “It was for their own good!” The ceiling hung menacingly above him. Shadows of unknown origin flared on the ceiling like black flames. He

was afraid the shadows themselves would collapse on him at any moment, wrapping their long, blurry tentacles around his body.

“Forgive me, God! I didn’t want to run him out of business! I just wanted to give people something to tide them over until they die. You understand! Look how many are coming to church now. And the old ones, they have faith like never before. Please, God, just make it a lousy department store. I’ll go back to the old holidays. The fun and games, it’ll all stop. No more Open Bar Bingo, I promise. No more Thursday night *Dark Ages* tournaments (you know, that fast paced board game where participants use torture, imprisonment, and execution to beat the fear of God into the inhabitants of their territories, while using slave labor to build sanctuaries and cathedrals. But watch out! Be careful you don’t land on an opponent’s space or you’ll be tithed! Also comes with Acts of God and Penance cards. Will *you* be the player with the least number of black marks on your soul? Or will you end up burning in the fiery pits of hell? *Go directly to hell. Do not pass Go. Do not collect 200 God Bucks.* ) Oh God! It will all stop! I promise!”

Father Feinstein made the sign of the cross and jumped into bed. He lay there, shivering, staring at the ceiling. The black flames danced above him. He hid himself under his blankets.

The ceiling creaked. It was suspended above Father Feinstein by four measly walls. He prayed it didn’t fall. He hoped someone was listening.

Someone had to be listening. Otherwise— would it hold? Would he be safe from the shadows?

“There has to be more than brick and steel,” Father Feinstein whispered. “There has to be.”

The priest fell asleep, his soul momentarily at ease before the nightmares came. He was not crushed by the ceiling that night. The brick and steel had all the strength he was hoping for. They required no help from a bearded man, no ghosts or goblins, and not one shred of a priest’s consent.

“Father! Father! Wake up! Have you seen it?” Sister Susie’s voice scratched across Father Feinstein’s raw, sleeping brain. It wasn’t until the words “wake up” that he realized he wasn’t listening to a pair of Siamese twin Siamese cats getting popped underneath the wheels of a station

wagon, but Sister Susie's virtuously humble singing voice. Father Feinstein looked down at his body, and seeing his stained underwear, concluded that he was awake. His foolproof method of distinguishing sleep from consciousness was the following: If he was naked during the nightmare, he was asleep. If he was clothed during the nightmare, he was awake. This method saved him the trouble and medical expenses of having to flap his arms and attempt to fly out the window.

Father Feinstein shook his head to wake up. "I'm up," he groaned. "What is it?"

Sister Susie pounded on the door. When the pain sensation was communicated from her knuckles to her brain, her brain triggered the "stop knocking" enzyme, then nudged the eardrums to do their stuff. "What do you want?!" the priest was screaming.

"Father Feinstein! Across the street. Look out the window!"

Like a giant human leg struck by a doctor's mallet, the priest flailed towards the window in one movement. Lunging at the windowsill, and still half kneeling, he threw open the blinds.

He saw it. Cold sweat began to flow out of the pores of his forehead and underarms. It crept slowly, synchronized with his tense refusal to believe what he saw. "Ho-lee shit," he said.

He threw on a robe and rushed out of the room. Sister Susie ran after him as he bounced down the stairs and out the front door. He stopped on the front steps and looked. The building wasn't a skeleton after all.

Crowds of people lined up at double glass revolving doors. There was laughter and talking. Father Feinstein noticed a few of his own parishioners among the crowd. On the roof of the building, a line of men stood like royal soldiers, pulling the ropes of the huge tarp. Smoothly and quickly, the cover climbed up the glass walls. The black mask was coming off.

The building was three stories high, covered with rows of windows as wide as a man's outstretched arms. On a modest plot of land, it managed to tower above the street. Lamps from within and along the upper outside walls made it a glowing box of solid light, though some escaped like steam from the building's surface.

The growing crowd stood on the sidewalk, circling the building like a moat. They watched the mask rise above them, revealing a thin horizontal line of glass in perpetual upward motion. The black

mask was not revealing the building as much as it was creating it, one horizontal glass line after another. The walls climbed higher and higher. Two symmetrical golden crosses grew on the face of the building. They were imbedded into the front wall itself, and extended across all three floors. Father Feinstein's intestines contracted. He squinted his eyes to look. The mask rose. The thin golden crosses seemed to give off their own light. Were they laser beams? He couldn't tell. The mask neared the top.

Now visible was an enormous banner, draped around the top of the building, beginning to show under the tarp. Father Feinstein tightened his jaw as the letters drew themselves on the banner. With one quick tug, the men yanked the tarp up onto the roof. The building stood naked. Father Feinstein tensed his shoulders, and read the banner. Then he read the sign on the roof.

"Huh?" he said, dumbfounded.

A short alarm sounded, and the crowd rushed through the revolving doors like horses at a starting gate. At the same instance, a tall woman came out of one of the doors. She stood in front of the building and smiled, and greeted people as they entered. Suddenly, Father Feinstein noticed that nearly half the people entering the revolving doors were familiar to him. Half that crowd was his congregation.

He looked up again at the banner that stretched across the glowing structure. He scratched his chest, and read it silently again. "The Easter Sunday Grand Opening Extravaganza." He looked at the sign. Mounted on top of the building, in multicolored moving lights, was the sarcastic answer to Father Feinstein's prayers. "Jesus Christ Superstore - *Thou shalt not shop in vain.*"

Father Feinstein, still in his robe, walked across the street to the store. His body was on automatic now; he would have missed his own Easter mass even if there was anyone left to show up. As he approached the revolving doors, the tall woman stepped towards him and said, "Happy Easter. Welcome to the Jesus Christ Superstore. All of our party supplies are 25% off today, sir. It's our way of saying 'thanks for everything God, now let's party'."

Father Feinstein decided that nothing else would surprise him that day. He accepted the woman's words like a second shot of morphine, and moved to enter the store. He put his hands on the revolving door, then looked back at her. "I guess you work here?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm the owner," she replied proudly.

Father Feinstein nodded numbly, then swung his weight against the door and pushed.

Inside was a crowded floor and endless rows of aisles. There were all kinds of merchandise, from ladies' underwear to groceries. People were racing past him, throwing products into their shopping carts by the handful. As crazy as the sight was— Father Feinstein's congregation shopping on Easter morning— the people didn't *look* crazy. They looked happy. Not like conforming looters cashing in on a video-taped capture of a violent drug-addict. They were happy like starving men rescued from a desert island and taken to a four-star restaurant— where at last the menu contained more than Mary Ann's coconut custard pies and Ginger's cleavage.

Aside from the way people looked, Father Feinstein might have said the place was like one of the big department stores in the local mall. But there was a strange feeling here. The feeling reminded him of the first time he entered a gambling casino. It was during his junior year at the Priest's Instructional Seminary School. He saved up for the trip by spending his parents' money only on the Cliff Notes editions of his books: the Bible, *How to Keep the Poor in Their Place by Convincing Them that Being Rich is Evil*, and the textbook for Religious Film 101: *Other Realities as Perceived in Davey and Goliath and The Flying Nun*. On the surface, the casino was just like this: a room full of people having fun. But around him there was an invisible mist. Like the smoke, it was dirty. It carried a guilt and a shame that stayed with him for hours. It gave him the sense that what people were doing was shameful *because* they were having fun.

Father Feinstein stepped over a child playing with an action figure that resembled Moses. He looked ahead to the grocery department, and walked down the first aisle. It was apparently the beer and wine section. Standing on the floor was a cardboard cut-out of a long-haired man in a loincloth walking on a pool of water. He was holding up a bottle, and waving at a group of female swimmers

circling at his feet. On the shelf next to the cut-out were six-packs of bottles containing a bubbly red liquid. The *Blood of Christ Wine Coolers* came in strawberry, fruit punch, and passion fruit.

Father Feinstein would think later. He kept walking for now, just trying to take it all in. In the next aisle, he saw several flavors of breakfast cereals. There was cinnamon flavored *Apples 'O Knowledge*, the delicious *Eternal Pits of Hell Hot Oatmeal*, and the soon-to-be best-seller, *Chrispy Christs*, with pre-sweetened Eucharists and marshmallows.

In the toiletries aisle, there was *Second Coming* wrinkle cream and *Our Lady of Enema*, the “faster way to a cleaner soul”. On the second floor was the Hardware and Home Goods department. There was *Joseph's Grouting Supplies*, *Christ Our Lord* pin cushions, and *The Pope John* ceramic toilet series. “Because we all deserve a holy shit”, the slogan read.

The second floor also claimed a large Outdoors section. Hunting and fishing supplies included the *Jesus on Board* fishing net and *The Crucifier 10* shotgun. “It'll nail 'em every time”, the company claimed.

The third floor was mainly the Clothing Department. Habits, monk's garb, and miniskirts were the hottest sellers. The jewelry cases also seemed to be quite popular. The piece that caught Father Feinstein's eye was the diamond studded rosary beads. Nearby, several female mannequins wore some of the more provocative lingerie. A white sign above them displayed the manufacturer's name and, as if hand written in red lipstick, were the words “*He wouldn't dare not answer your prayer.*” A private room next to the third floor escalator housed more adult goods, such as the *Virgin Mary Blow-up Doll*, and the *Little Jesus* latex crucifix adult toy. “A Little Jesus can feel sooo good,” urged one of the testimonials, “Try it, for the love of God.”

Father Feinstein's head throbbed as he rode the escalator down. He rubbed his eyes, freeing months of dust particles from his hairy eyebrows. He looked at himself in the mirrored wall, and wondered what in God's name was going on. “A few free bats was one thing, but this?” he thought to himself. “At least I did it to keep the spirit of God alive.” But his words were as convincing as an infomercial for a haircutting vacuum cleaner attachment.

He followed the shoppers down one escalator, then the next. He felt like an extra for a liberal anti-business propaganda film, standing in line like a zombie, head facing straight ahead, marching single file to his pathetic office to do some unknown, tedious task.

As he exited through the revolving doors, he saw that the owner was still in front. He sneered as he walked past her, “Some people are in this business for God’s sake for God’s sake... for God’s sake... did I say that already?” He growled, dripping saliva out of his fleshy lips. He traipsed back to his office, his whole body now pulsating to the beat of his headache. He pushed people aside with his shoulders to get through the crowd still lingering on the sidewalk. Members of his congregation pushed by him in the opposite direction, not recognizing him.

Father Feinstein had no idea what to do next, so he went upstairs and went to sleep. The next morning, he thought about calling the bishop, but decided another nap would feel better. Since naps can be very tiring, he recuperated afterwards with a day’s rest. He felt revived by nighttime, so he knew he finally had enough energy to go to sleep. The next morning he wasn’t so sure, so he collapsed back on the bed. When he woke up the next day naked, he thought he was dreaming, so went back to sleep. At last, with a new found motivation, he got up, got dressed, ate breakfast, and slept for another three days.

## V

Things were quiet lately. From across the street, two parallel crosses of light lay shimmering on the pavement. The powerful sun was reflecting off the gold crosses embedded in the glass storefront. There was a good size crowd flowing in at a regular pace, even for a Sunday. Saturday afternoons had quickly become the prime shopping hours since there was no longer a need to wake up on Sunday morning. Whatever people could buy Sunday, they could buy Saturday.

Many who had once gone to Father Feinstein’s and Father Kevin’s churches now carried Shoppers Club Cards from the Jesus Christ Superstore. Some ex-parishioners were there now, most

with their families. They came out to enjoy the peaceful summer air, some time with each another, and a few hot-cross-buns from the JCS bakery.

A visitor walked up in front of the revolving doors. With a hand loosely in the pocket of his fading jeans, and a blue collared shirt rippling in the breeze, he glanced up at the new superstore. He raised a glowing red light in the air—the color of wine, but not of blood. He held the red orb in the air for a moment. Then, with a quiet laugh of sarcasm, Kevin bit down on the crunchy red apple.

Kevin's shirt was untucked and his dark hair was now allowed to rest where it fell. He watched a few of his old parishioners walk past him through the doors. They were too intent on getting a great buy to take notice of him. He laughed.

Feeling a tug on his ankle, he looked down. An old advertisement was clutching his pants leg like a beggar, held firmly by a momentary breeze. Looking at the sidewalk, he saw the two giant golden beams reflected across the concrete and across his feet. He stepped out of the rays' path, and picked up the crumpled paper. There was a mysterious headline on the flyer, and a familiar address. The headline said "Treat your evil soul to something delicious." The address was Father Feinstein's church.

The headline did make him curious, Kevin admitted it. He folded up the flyer and put it in his pocket, turning to the church behind him.

When he pulled open the outer doors of the church, he saw that the dimly lighted hall was empty. He stepped in, the floor creaking beneath him. He passed through the vestibule, then noticed that there was one other person in the church, all the way at the far end.

The lights were on above the altar, but barely. Kevin squinted his eyes, and on the other side of the church, he saw a strange covered cubicle. The altar remained at the center of the front wall, but now a large square island stuck out awkwardly from the front wall next to it. Kevin walked up the center aisle. As he approached, he noticed there were seats—chairs or stools—around the cubicle, and a counter around the outer edge. The person sat behind the counter—just a head and chest were visible.

Getting closer, Kevin noticed the same menacing wooden crucifix still hung on the front wall. With the curtains covering the windows, it was nearly invisible. There was another symbol hanging next to it. Above the new pagoda-like cubicle was a yellow crown—a crown of thorns. Now Kevin could also make out the broken neon sign beneath it. “Burger Messiah” the empty glass tubing read. And there sat Father Feinstein slouched behind the counter, his fat head resting on his hand, and on his head a cute little fold-up paper crown of thorns.

“Oh, Christ,” Father Feinstein groaned.

“So, how’s business?” Kevin asked, sitting down on a stool at the holy hamburger stand.

“Just great,” Father Feinstein answered, “if I was a collector of kangaroo meat.” He nodded back at the refrigerated tabernacle, which stood by the french fry machine. “The last devoted sons of bitches that still worshipped here were the conservative ones. Well, this little second altar was the final straw. Now I’ve got zip. The bishop wanted me to close up two weeks ago, but I told him things were under control. What the hell have you been doing?” Father Feinstein was sincere. He wanted to know what a washed up priest did with himself besides watch videotapes of old CYO championships and get acquainted to life without the pretense of celibacy.

“Oh, I gave up the priesthood for a more lucrative field. You didn’t leave me a choice, remember?” Kevin smiled, his cheeks finally receiving the signal they had been waiting for.

Father Feinstein activated his automatic social/afraid-of-disapproval response mechanism, and blurted out, “Oh, that? Look, Father—” his eyes settled upon a gold ring on Kevin’s fourth finger, “Look, Kevin, it was all a big misunderstanding. I got screwed for the same reason. See, in the long run, a priest just can’t compete with a guy who sells salvation in *this* world.” Father Feinstein adjusted his paper crown.

Kevin nodded, and spun in quarter turns on the stool. “You should have followed my advice, Father. I told you that in matters of the spirit, there can be no compromise.”

“Look who’s talking,” Father Feinstein reacted, then hiccuped a greasy reminder of the Kids’ Holy Meal he ate for breakfast.

Kevin looked down at his hand. “Oh, this?” he asked, displaying his wedding ring.

“Now *that’s* not compromising the holy life. Did you plan to change the wine into blood with one hand and your kids’ diapers with the other?”

“Actually, we’re not married yet,” Kevin replied matter-of-factly, “Not officially, anyway. You can’t expect me to make the leap from heaven to earth in one jump.”

Kevin waited for Father Feinstein’s trademark look of confusion to appear, then continued, “No, I’m just like our former parishioners. When I chose this world over God’s, I needed a damn good incentive and plenty of time. Oh, I got one, but before you think. Sometimes, the incentive appears as the reassurance that maybe God likes this world a little, too. What takes some getting used to is that in this context, ‘God’ is really your own sense of moral judgment. For a while, you’ll still call it God, but that’s ok.”

Here we go again, Father Feinstein thought. He switched his headrest to his other hand. Kevin was a little too lighthearted—for a change. He didn’t have the same authoritative power in his voice as before. Whereas before Kevin might have been negotiating a contract, now it sounded like he was revealing the loophole.

“What could provide the spark to make people give up God, you ask?” Kevin began, while Father Feinstein hopelessly tried to remember if he had asked anything. “Well, it helps if God himself is handing out the incentive. If it’s *God* who’s giving the permission to ignore him, people listen. He just needs the chance, or shall we say, the *forum*, to give people a taste of what the good earth has to offer. Or, as I like to say, a forum that uses material rewards as a means for encouraging spiritual renewal.”

Father Feinstein’s brain was gripped tightly and wrung like a wet, slimy washcloth. He winced in pain, but somehow a few drops of knowledge got left behind.

“Are you saying that you *wanted* me to—” Father Feinstein started. He received a confirmation notice in the form of a smile on Kevin’s face, and hung his head. He stared at the minuscule crevices running through the Burger Messiah countertop. He tried to let the fear stop him from trying to understand, but his attempt failed.

“You thought you could compromise,” Kevin said. “You thought they’d worship God if he allowed them the earth. But once you convinced them that it was ok with God to enjoy themselves, what did they need God for? They were too busy having fun. You thought they might worship a cross if it were made of gold, but you never counted on them worshipping gold. You never counted on them worshipping the earth. Now it looks like they’re so impressed, they don't want to leave.”

Father Feinstein was playing with one of the toys that came in a Kids’ Holy Meal box. It was a plastic Job, holding a baby in his left arm. When a button on the bottom of the toy was pushed, Job swung a blade to the baby's throat. Father Feinstein pushed the button and the blade swung.

Another person had entered the church and was waiting by the doors. It was a woman. Kevin heard the floor creaking and turned to leave, then looked back at Father Feinstein.

“By the way, Father,” Kevin said. “Remember what I said to the little girl about the Barbie doll? Well, I've done my penance, Father. I gave her one for half price.”

Kevin walked to the door. The woman waiting there was the owner of the Jesus Christ Superstore. “I’m done, Christine,” he whispered.

He took her hand. Her warm, soft fingers pressed the top of his knuckles. The polish on her nails made little red polka dots against his skin.

The owner and the president of Jesus Christ Superstores, Inc. burst through the church doors. They walked down the steps, ready to greet their next customers.