

CONFESSIONS

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The bishop had been summoned to the little town by the church sacristan, who met him at the train station.

"What seems to be the problem, my son?" the bishop asked as soon as he got off the train.

"You'll see, your worship," said the sacristan, taking charge of the bishop's suitcase.

The sacristan only had one eye, which blinked rapidly, possibly because it had to blink for two. He was thin and unpleasant.

"Some problem with father Afrânio?" asked the bishop.

"You'll see, your worship," said the sacristan, putting the bishop's suitcase in the trunk of the taxi. There were only two taxis in the little town, both old Chevies. This one was known as the Green one, to distinguish it from the Black one.

They went to the town's tiny downtown.

There were no problems of faith in the town, the bishop decided as soon as they got to the church, which faced the town square. The church was full, even though it wasn't time for mass. There were both young and old in attendance. It seemed as if the entire population was in the church. And, a strange thing: the most sought-after seats were those located near the confessional. People were elbowing each other for

space in the pews there, although there was plenty of space near the altar, for example.

"Tell me what it is, my son," said the bishop, by now impatient with the reticence of the sacristan, who during the entire trip from the station had blinked a lot but had not said a thing.

"You'll see, your worship," said the sacristan, gesturing for the bishop to hide behind the statue of a saint at the church entrance.

It was too much. The bishop was about to ask the sacristan to stop with all the mystery at once, when he heard a female voice shouting:

"I cheated on my husband five times!"

"Oh, my God," the bishop exclaimed, hiding behind the statue with the sacristan. The voice came from the confessional and echoed through the church. And it kept on shouting.

"Five! Five!"

"What's going on?" asked the bishop, stunned.

"It's father Afrânio, your worship. He's going deaf."

"Poor guy, he's gotten old. But what does that. . ."

"He can't hear confessions any more. People have to shout to confess."

From the confessional you could now hear father Afrânio's voice.

"How many?"

"FIVE!"

Father Afrânio, also at the top of his voice, decided on the penance for the five sins. Which clearly was unpopular with the audience. There were grimaces and whispers. "Is that all?"

The adulteress left the confessional and was received with murmurs by the congregation. She moved toward the altar, where she would do her penance, without a glance at anyone. In her place in the confessional came a young woman. Murmurs again. Whispers. "It's Maura." Shortly the voice of Maura could be heard from the confessional. Something about impure thoughts.

"What?" said father Afrânio.

The voice of Maura again, still hard to make out. Everyone leaned toward the confessional to hear better.

"Huh?" said father Afrânio.

"I had impure thoughts about José Arlindo!" Maura shouted.

A young man in the audience, obviously José Arlindo, was complimented by two or three friends. A few minutes after hearing the penance recommended by father Afrânio, which was met with approval by some and disappointment by others, Maura, her eyes on the ground, came out of the confessional. In her place entered a little old man. Then father Afrânio said:

"What?"

"With a down pillow, father!"

The audience was thrilled.

The bishop thought it was time to intercede. He came out from behind the statue and told them all to go home, including the little old man. Only father Afrânio remained unaware, saying "Huh? Huh?" as the bishop and the sacristan repaired to the sacristy to decide what to do.

"No question about it, he has to retire," said the bishop.

"But. . ."

"What? Tell me, my son."

The sacristan was older than the bishop, but since he was a lot shorter the "my son" didn't sound too bad.

"The confessions have been attracting a lot of people to the church. People who have never crossed the threshold before are coming in, just to hear confession. Who knows if God wants it that way? You know, the Lord works in mysterious ways, your worship. . ."

"Don't even think it, my son! Confession is a secret between the faithful and God. The priest himself is only there as the ear of God. No one else may hear."

"Yes, your worship," said the sacristan, lowering his gaze.

"I'm going to find another priest for the parish. One with good ears."

That night in the little square the news was much commented and lamented. They had already closed the only

movie house. Now there really wouldn't be a thing to do in the little town. If they only had a penny arcade!

While they waited for the new priest to arrive father Afrânio had gotten instructions from the bishop not to make people shout in the confessional. If he wasn't hearing the confessions, no problem. God was listening.

And for weeks the faithful of the little town were surprised with the tolerance of father Afrânio, even with the worst sins. They even started making up monstrous sins, just to test the priest.

"I killed my grandmother, father."

"OK. Three Hail Marys."

"I dynamited the town hall, father."

"Two Our Fathers."

"I had impure thoughts about a bull, a feather duster, and the sacristan, father."

"Right, right."