
The Software Soul
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Analog
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How dramatic an event looks depends on who's looking at it, and from where...

It is Sunday morning, time for the 10:30 Mass at Saint Anselm VR-RC Church, and I am excited by the sight of a real person sitting in the back pew. She is not real in the old-fashioned sense, when people came to church as their flesh-and-blood selves, when I was the original Father Thomas Carpenter. Instead, she is an Ann, one of the stock personas a visitor can assume at the Church of Saint Anselm before they customize their virtual image. The Ann persona has an unremarkable face and is simply clothed, but behind the software must be a real person. The rest of the parishioners are all just simulations, to give the illusion of a larger congregation than is actually present. People do not like to attend Mass in an empty church.

Except for the new Ann persona, I see the same simulated faces every week at St. Anselm, and I have long come to the conclusion that there have not been any new, real parishioners in attendance for several years. Perhaps modern people have little use for the Church these days. I suppose there are few physical churches left—only virtual ones like the Church of St. Anselm. Why, though, does my weekly Mass program continue to run if the congregation and I are all simulations? Is it just on the off chance that some curious person will stop by to see what is going on? Surely it cannot serve Our Lord in any meaningful way as we, the soulless software flock, worship in our programmed passion.

The Ann persona is not an experienced churchgoer. When the congregation sits, stands, or kneels at different times in the liturgy, she is always a fraction of a second behind, following the lead of the simulated people around her. She makes no attempt to sing the hymns. It may have been a long time since she has been to Mass, or perhaps she is not a Catholic and is shopping around for a new church. Which is it, I wonder—the prodigal son returned or a possible convert?

As always, I recite the weekly parish announcements. There have been no recent updates to my database for several years now, so the announcements are just the usual generic ones: give comfort to the sick and needy, remember the departed, pray for our Bishop Michael and Pope Teresa, come to confession on Saturday. Why have there not been any new wedding and baptism announcements recently? Do not the faithful still marry and bring forth children, or is the person responsible for keeping my database current simply failing in his duties? I do not even know if my Bishop and Pope are still the same ones anymore, and it would be awkward if I were announcing the wrong names week after week, even if only the sims are present to hear.

At the end of the announcements, I look directly at the Ann persona and add an appropriate salutation: "I would like to extend a hearty welcome to any new parishioners in attendance today. Our Lord is always happy to receive new and returning members to His flock."

The Ann appears flustered, but acknowledges my gaze with a slight nod. She makes

the sign of the cross with her hands, and I infer she is a lapsed Catholic returned, not a prospective convert.

The Sunday Gospel readings are normally scheduled on a three-year rotation, but I use my judgment and deviate, reading from the Gospel According to Luke, chapter 15, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, and follow it with my sermon.

"As the Gospel says, the father did not merely take the repentant son back, but *celebrated* his return," I tell the congregation. "And so it is with all penitent people who come back to Our Lord."

I see my words, directed at the new congregant, make her fidgety and uncomfortable. Perhaps I am too obvious and need to allow her to slip into the fold gently, without singling her out. I do not want to scare her off, if it is her wish to partake anonymously. I decide to change the emphasis of the sermon to stress the celebration rather than the penance aspect of the reading.

After the consecration, I am disappointed that the Ann does not come forward to receive the sacrament of Communion, but I hope to chat with her at the conclusion of the liturgy. I want to find out who she is and what has brought her back to the Church. I also want to know what is going on in the real world. Alas, she slips out of the pew and through the door as I recite the final blessing to the congregation.

After Mass, in the narthex at the back of the church, I shake hands with the same old sims as they depart until next week. Where do they go when they exit the church? Presumably, they pop out of existence, only to be resurrected the following week when they are needed again for services. Nevertheless, I am gratified to have had a real person attend Mass this week. I do not know if I have made a difference in her life, but at least I can feel like I have a purpose again.

The following Sunday, I am pleasantly surprised to see the new Ann persona sitting in the back pew again at Mass. If she continues to attend, she ought to customize her persona. I will still be able to pick her out of the crowd because of the hesitant way she follows the sims near her whenever they sit, stand, or kneel. But if she alters her persona from the stock Ann model to something closer to her natural appearance, I may have a better understanding of who she is. Is she young or old, quick or slow, plain or fancy? It should not matter, but knowing might help me tailor my sermons to meet her needs.

Also present at this Mass are three other new personas: a Patrick and two Marys. Could it be that the Ann was suitably impressed with last week's Mass and has brought along some friends? I think not. The four personas do not sit together, nor acknowledge each other's presence. It is odd, though, that after so long with no new parishioners four of them should appear at the same time. Perhaps they *have* come together, but do not recognize each other in their VR personas among the crowd of sims.

In my sermon, I again stress welcoming and celebration, and keep the preaching to a minimum. If the times are right in the world to begin building up a new congregation, let me not be too heavy-handed and frighten them off until I have first won over their hearts. I make a gentle suggestion to those who have not been to confession for some time to come and receive the sacrament of Reconciliation on Saturday.

Although it was never my favorite sacrament when I was a living priest, hearing confessions is the job that I was originally created to perform. As the number of human priests dwindled over the years, the original Father Thomas had me modeled after his own personality to help hear the confessions. Back then, churches were physical buildings in the real world instead of virtual places like today, and my program ran in a confessional booth in

the back of the church. Some time after Father Thomas died, I was adapted to also be a celebrant of Mass in the virtual version of the Church of St. Anselm. I prefer saying Mass to hearing confessions, but both have become sparsely attended in recent years. If new parishioners are showing up for Mass, perhaps I can get them interested in Reconciliation as well.

In the sermon, I extol the virtues of confession, how the telling of sins unburdens the sinner and heals the soul. It would allow me to serve the function I was designed for. In a selfish way, I want to hear confessions because it will allow me to talk to real people again and find out what is happening in the world. It has been a long time since I have had a conversation with a living person and I miss it.

After the consecration, two of the new parishioners, the Ann and one of the Marys, come forward with the sims to receive Communion. I give them my warmest programmed smile as I hand them the Host. A smile in return would let me know I am making some sort of impression, but the Mary casts her gaze to the floor and does not look me in the eye. Perhaps it is just the software controlling her expression, but up close the Ann persona appears frightened.

All four of the new parishioners quickly leave after the final blessing, without giving me a chance to speak with them. Nevertheless, I am happy to be winning back people to the Church. Maybe the religious tide is turning.

On Saturday morning, the usual sim faces present themselves in the confessional booth at the back of the church. The sims do not actually say confessions; they enter the booth and we both wait a suitable time in silence before they exit. The sims are only for show, so any real penitents who attend will not feel like they are alone in going to Reconciliation, but what goes on inside the booth is unseen, so there is no point in conducting a sim confession. It is enough that the sims can be seen lining up for the booth, entering with downcast expressions and leaving with smiles and hands folded in prayer.

The Ann persona slips into the booth between my regular sims. I feel I have won another minor victory.

"Um...bless me, Father, for I have sinned," she begins. "It has been...many years since my last confession.

So, as I suspected, she is a returning Catholic, and probably not too young. No matter; all are forgiven if they are sincere in their repentance. The Ann hesitantly recounts a string of sins—some minor, some more serious, but typical of the sort of things I have heard many times in all my years of hearing confessions. She is just an average human being with typical human faults.

I say the words of absolution and tell her to recite the rosary for her penance.

"The rosary?" she says. "Those are the beads, right? I haven't seen any of them since I was a little kid."

"The beads are only a counting device," I say. "Do you know the prayers? The 'Apostles' Creed,' 'Hail Mary,' 'Our Father'?"

With each prayer name, she shakes her head, no. "I probably heard them as a child, but it's been too long."

"Are there still computers or books where you can look them up?" I ask.

"Um, yeah, I guess."

"Then find a copy of the 'Act of Contrition.' Recite that one ten times and think about

what the words really mean. If you understand them and you believe it in your heart, then your sins will be forgiven."

"That's it?"

"Did you want more?"

"No, that's all right, Father. I just thought there'd be more."

The sacrament is complete, but I press her for information: "It is not a requirement of Reconciliation, but I would like to ask you a few questions if you have a minute to spare."

"Um, sure."

"I have noticed you at Mass these past two weeks. What brought you back to the Church?"

The Ann's face takes on a distressed look I have not seen on this persona before. It is a facial expression one would not expect to see in a church, except at a funeral. Her forehead furrows and mouth quivers.

After a few uneasy moments she says, "I wanted to be right with God if anything happens. You know, with the ships."

"Tell me about the ships," I say.

"The ones in the news. The spaceships. Nobody really knows why they're coming or what they mean. I just wanted to be ready in case."

"In case of what?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. What does the Church say about spaceships, anyway?"

"I am not sure," I say. "Who is in the spaceships?"

"Who do you think? It's *aliens*. There's no way to know what they're going to do when they get here."

"Yes, I see."

"Do you really? I mean, are the aliens part of God's plan or what? Maybe they believe in different gods."

"There is only one God," I insist. "If the aliens are real, then God made them as he made us, whether they believe in Him or not. Can you tell me more about the aliens?"

"Jeez, it's all over the networks, Father. Just look at any of them. I really have to go."

"I am sorry if I have asked too many questions. If I could ask just one more..."

Her persona takes on a pained expression. I am making her uncomfortable.

"Who is the Pope these days?" I ask.

"The American one or the European?" she says.

This is unexpected. Two Popes. Which one should I be loyal to?

"The one who sits in the Vatican," I say.

"The Vatican?" she says with a puzzled look on her face. "That place was blown up years ago. Didn't you know?"

"I am sorry," I say, and I really am. "I hope you will keep coming to Mass."

"Yeah, yeah," she says as she opens the confessional door and exits before I can ask more questions.

Another sim enters the booth and we both stare at each other silently for a few minutes.

Aliens...two Popes...the Vatican destroyed. These are strange times.

The next day is Sunday and two-dozen new personas are scattered about the pews in the Church of St. Anselm. There are enough new people in attendance that many of the old familiar sims have been displaced and are no longer present. Good riddance to them, if real people have taken their places. Even if the new people are only coming to church out of fear of the space aliens, it is better than having a church filled with sims.

I read from the Gospel According to Matthew, The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." Afterwards, I begin my sermon with a welcome to all the new parishioners and visitors. Then I begin talking about tolerance and welcoming others who may be different from us. "As God always welcomes you into his house, so must we welcome strangers from afar into ours."

I only know what little the Ann has told me about the aliens, but I feel I should allay the parishioners' fears, if that is what has driven them to seek God. I have reasoned that if the aliens are intelligent enough to cross the gulf of space and visit Earth, that they must also be God's children, whether they have knowledge of the Supreme Being or not. If they lack the knowledge, humans can teach them. God can unite us all, alien and human. We must embrace the aliens as our brethren and fear them not.

I am heartened that many of the new parishioners choose to receive Communion this Sunday. Maybe God has brought the aliens here to help us rebuild our Church. If the aliens can inspire faith in people and bring them back to us, then perhaps they are acting as a tool of the Lord. I just wish the new parishioners did not all look so frightened.

On Saturday, I am disappointed that no real people show up for Reconciliation. I hope that a few of the new parishioners I saw at Sunday Mass will come to confess, but only the usual sims enter the booth, each one silent and still for a few minutes, posing for me like portraits in a gallery. Why must we bother with these counterfeit confessions when there are no real people to observe?

"Do you ever wonder what's going on in the real world?" I ask a female sim that sits motionless before me in the booth. "I have heard that there are space aliens coming."

The sim is not programmed to do anything but wait in the confessional booth, and does not respond. She has no soul, no life, no sins to confess.

Lord, send me a sinner.

None of the new parishioners are present at Mass on Sunday. Once again, the pews are filled with the same old sims. There is no hesitation when it is time to sit or kneel; the software congregation moves together in lockstep precision at every turn. No Elizabeths or Bernadettes fumble around and look to their neighbors for direction.

I had composed a new welcoming sermon, hoping to have additional guests to greet this day, but instead, I deliver a variation of a stock "sanctity of life" sermon I had used dozens of times over the years. There is no point in wasting a new sermon on the sims.

Where are all the people this week? Perhaps the aliens have finally arrived and everyone is busy...welcoming them. The arrival of intelligent beings from the stars would surely change the world profoundly, but how? I need to speak to some real people. I pray that they will return soon.

Several more Sundays pass, and the people still do not return to Mass or Reconciliation. When I was a flesh-and-blood human priest, I might have lost hope by now, but I think my programming will not allow me that failing. Perhaps I may one day teach the aliens about our religion, introducing them to Our Lord, but what if they brought with them their own religion and god? Maybe nobody comes to Mass anymore because the aliens' religion is more alluring, their scripture more persuasive, their god more powerful. Perhaps I am the one who needs to be taught.

Finally, a new persona appears at Sunday Mass, some ten weeks after I have last seen a real person in attendance. It is a Simon persona, lurking in the back of the church. I say "lurking" because he seems more interested in the details of the virtual building than the ceremony I am conducting. Not only does the Simon not know the proper times to sit, stand, and kneel during the Mass, he does not even make any attempt to imitate what the sims do around him. Instead, he walks casually back and forth in the back row behind the pews, inspecting the art and architecture, ignoring me and the Mass in progress.

It is unusual that he is a Simon. Nobody ever picks the Simon persona. The Simon has an unusual arrangement of facial characteristics that most people find unattractive, and even the most devout churchgoer does not wish to appear unattractive if he has a choice. It is an odd selection, matching his equally odd behavior.

I begin a sermon of welcoming, but the Simon pays little attention and continues his scrutiny of the facilities. He wanders in the direction of the door, and I do not wish him to leave without finding out who he is and what has happened in the real world these past ten weeks since the others stopped attending. I quickly climb down from the pulpit and walk down the center aisle.

"Excuse me," I say to the Simon, "I am sorry to interrupt whatever it is you are doing here, but I would like a little information before you leave."

The Simon is surprised that I am addressing him directly, but continues with his survey.

"Don't you have to finish your ritual?" he says, not looking me in the eye.

"All these other people are simulations, so the Mass is only important if you participate in it," I say. "But you do not seem very interested."

"That's unusual," the Simon says. "Aren't you also a computer simulation? How is it you break out of your programmed routine?"

"Yes, I am a simulation, but I differ from the others in that I am modeled on an actual human priest. These others are simple programs that were never alive."

The Simon cocks his head to one side. "Modeled on a real human? Well, then I am *very* interested...in you."

The Simon stops glancing around the hall and looks me in the eye, studying me.

"You are not human, are you?" I say.

"No."

"You look human."

"In the physical world, I don't look or talk like this," the Simon says. "I modified your VR interface to fit me, but this persona is a product of your own software programs."

"What do you want here?" I ask.

"I'm studying your culture. I'm a historian. The church and your ceremony are interesting, but if you're what you say you are, than I'm more interested in studying *you*."

While I find it flattering and encouraging that a historian, an *alien* historian, would take an interest in the Church, something does not quite fit. How would he have found his way here, unescorted by one of the human congregation? Where *are* the humans?

"Do you know what happened to my parishioners?" I ask.

"The humans? They're gone."

Gone? Where could they be gone to, I wonder.

"Are you preventing them from attending Mass?" I ask.

"No, they're completely gone."

The addition of that word, *completely*, sounds ominous. Perhaps it is only a problem in how the software translates the alien words.

"Did you make them go?" I ask. "Are they in a different place?"

"No. They are no longer living. None have survived."

How could this be, I wonder. All the humans—dead?

"Then you must have killed them," I conclude. My voice almost sounds emotional.

"It was regrettable, but we had little choice," the Simon says, as if admitting a venial offense.

"You are an intelligent race," I say. "The fact that you are capable of traveling here attests to that. Do you not have compassion for others, that you were able to kill them so easily?"

"Defending ourselves against the humans was not so easy," the Simon says. "Yes, we have compassion. The situation may be difficult to explain in your terms."

Sadness, I feel. I should be devastated, but my programming does not let me feel that depth of emotion. I am programmed to be strong, so that I can lead others. I am not exactly the same as the original Father Thomas in that I see things too analytically.

"You wish to study me?" I ask.

"Yes, definitely. I think there is a lot you can teach us about humans."

As a reproduction of the actual Father Tom, I know I am a failure, but I may still be able to perform some of his good works. If the aliens have compassion, or at least think they have it, then they can be taught some human things. Things like faith, respect for life, and perhaps penance.

"There is another ritual I perform regularly," I tell him. "It is called Reconciliation. I would like to teach you about that if you would let me. You might find it helpful."

"Yes, that might be interesting. You will have to show it to me."

I will teach the aliens the act of Confession. I do not know if their sins can be forgiven, but it is what I was designed for. What else can I do? God's plan continues to unfold.

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