

The Relic of St. Fastacrim

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The new library was beautiful and contained even more volumes than the old one, an infusion from the university along with the infusion of money from the state. The old Mt. Greenwood College was now Mt. Greenwood State, a branch of the state university and when the state purchased the old school a new library was built on park land and appropriately named Goldwood Library after the former professor who had bequeathed the land and his collection of books to old Mt. Greenwood. Furthermore, the former librarian of the College had acquired the position of Head Librarian. Belle Fenton was delighted as the position not only paid the rent and put food on the table but placed her again in the midst of what she dearly loved ... books and knowledge.

But all this is neither here nor there and has little to do with our story, which is actually a creature of several tales, some short, some long and some rather odd as tails are wont to be. Let us begin in the middle, the point at which Belle found herself involved. The person who introduced Belle to this particular quandary came into the otherwise empty library late in the afternoon of this very snowy day, coming in out of the cold, stomping the snow off his shoes and shaking it from his black hat and equally black overcoat. Getting his bearings, he made his way to the main librarian's desk, all the while looking about, an obvious indication that it was his first visit to the building.

Belle asked if she could be of assistance and he replied that he didn't know if anyone could but maybe she could help him in some way. It was then that Belle saw the clerical collar. Priest or a minister? ... was the question that entered her mind and soon answered by her visitor. "I am Father Rice, Edward Rice, from St. Fastacrim parish on the other side of town." Belle responded, "Welcome to our library Father Rice. I know of your parish but I must confess that I am not familiar with St. Fastacrim." The priest replied, "Well, you needn't confess to me but in fact you have hit on the gist of the problem. No one seems to know of St. Fastacrim." He proceeded to say that he hoped that in some book or record someplace there might be some bit of information about this person Fastacrim. Our librarian asked as delicately as she could, how he, as pastor of the church could not know anything about its patron saint. At that point, Fr. Rice, asking if she had time to listen to his story, said that the story may explain the problem or at least part of the problem, the part that he was now faced. Belle replied that she was now very curious and to please continue. And so, Fr Rice told his tale.

With the untimely death of the former pastor, he had been given the assignment, his first as pastor, to this small parish in a decidedly Protestant college town. Shortly afterward, due to the untimely death (when is death ever timely) of the bishop, a new bishop was assigned to the diocese. After a few months, Fr. Rice was summoned to a private meeting with Bishop Penfield, who after the usual greetings and pleasantries asked, "Edward, what do you know of St. Fastacrim?" When the priest started to tell him of the parish and its operation, the bishop interrupted, "I am sure that is all well and good but I mean, what do you know of this "Saint", Fastacrim?" Rice was startled and confessed (Catholics do that) that the saint was there when he came and frankly, the question had never come up before. The fact is, he knew nothing of the saint and didn't even know to address the saint as he or she. All he knew was that there was a relic of the saint in a small alcove near the main altar and many parishioners, the older ones, often came and touched its case in reverence, usually with a brief silent prayer. He confessed (there we go again) that he knows the relic should be in the altar but he was new to the parish and did not wish to upset their traditions.

Bishop Penfield was surprised to hear that a relic existed and informed Fr. Rice that there was no record of a St. Fastacrim and therefore the name of the parish had been called into question. After all, a parish must have the name of a validly recognized saint. But, the existence of a relic put a new slant on the matter. The question now to be addressed is whether the relic was authentic which could determine if the saint was authentic.

And that, Fr. Rice informed Belle, was the crux of the problem he faced. At Belle's suggestion they went to the religious section of the library stacks and found several volumes on Saints, Searching them revealed no St. Fastacrim which did not surprise either of them as they were both sure that if he or she was unknown to the Bishop, he would have had his staff search lists available to him and probably made inquiry to the Vatican archives as well before bringing the problem to Fr. Rice. In reply to Belle's questions, Fr Rice related that he inquired about a parish history and found almost no information other than a date, 1826, the name of the founding pastor and the names of the 23 original families. How or why the particular Patron Saint was assigned was not in those records. Belle said she would speak with professor McNeill of the Religious Studies Department and see if he could offer an avenue of discovery. In the mean time she suggested that Fr. Rice check to see if any descendants of the original founding families still belonged to the parish or could be located as they may have heard stories from the past. A general request to the present parishioners for information would also be advisable.

With repeated and sincere thanks, the priest departed but not before giving Belle the telephone number of the rectory office. It was a few days later that the priest made a telephone call to Belle. He told her that he had found the name of a current parishioner that

was the same as one of the original parishioners. Alfred Giles, had not been to mass lately and was quite advanced in years and since he should have visited him just for those reasons anyway, he went to his home. Alfred was confined to his bed but otherwise alert and talkative. His daughter was staying with him. He did know stories of the founding of the parish and even more than that, he said that before there was a church the relic had been in their family. There was another relative living about twenty miles from there who had researched the family genealogy and had an old trunk containing memorabilia and some very old papers and journals which may be of some help. Alfred had seen all this many years ago and thought there may be something more about the relic. The daughter would contact her aunt and make inquiry. In the mean time, Fr. Rice told Belle that he wrote down all that Mr. Giles had told him and would post it to her that day. He said, "The story was interesting but of little solid help, if any at all."

Never the less, Belle was intrigued, especial by the news that the relic had been a possession of a private family. When the mail arrived a couple days later she anxiously opened the envelope to read the story. And ... this is what, in essence, the missive revealed:

Late in 1825, Rev. James Cleary, a Catholic priest, arrived in town on his way to Missouri. His horse had gone lame and he needed help. There were a number of Catholic families living there and the priest was offered room and board by one of them while another found a thorn deeply imbedded in the horse's hoof. Both the horse and the traveler needed at least a week's rest. During this time, the priest said mass for the faithful, heard confessions and baptized several children.

After Mass on the Sunday before the priest was to resume his journey he was beseeched by the people to remain and establish a parish. After all, he was there and they needed a priest. He said that he was needed in St Louis but the people were insistent that they needed him more, after all, there were already priests in St Louis and they had none. Sarah Giles, who was Alfred's mother, spoke up and said she even had a relic of a saint for a church. Fr. Cleary was astounded at this revelation and wanted to know more. He was invited to the Giles home to see this relic and further amazed that it seemed to be authentic. Sarah Giles told him that it had been in her husband's possession when she married him and had been in his family for generations even though they had been Congregationalists, when they attended church at all. In fact, her husband still didn't attend church or even the prayer meetings they often held at each other's homes.

The short of it was that Fr. Cleary stayed and the relic was given into his care. One of the families donated a plot of land and presently a small church was built. The priest studied the

inscription on the gold vessel containing the relic and after a meeting with his new parishioners decided the name of the church should be St. Fastacrim and the rest was history.

Belle had no sooner read the letter from Fr. Rice, for the third time, I think, when the telephone startled her into the present. It was the priest himself. He had just heard from Alfred Giles' daughter. She had gone to her aunt's home and they had searched through the old trunk in the attic. She would bring the papers found there that related to the parish and its relic to the rectory office the following Tuesday if that was convenient. Belle asked if she could bring Professor McNeill. He was the head of the Religious Studies Department and when she had told him of the dilemma he showed great interest. She was sure he would want to go.

McNeill, indeed, was fascinated from a scholastic point of view though as a Presbyterian elder, he didn't quite agree with the Catholic practices in regard to saints and particularly relics of saints. He thought it all quite morbid. He did, however have connections to people in European Universities who may be contacted for information but if a search had already been made, and it apparently had, he doubted if his friends could discover anything new. But, he was curious enough from a scholarly point of view to want to examine this relic. After all, he had never had that kind of opportunity before.

Belle rode with the professor in his "American" gas buggy on the appointed day. This was an adventure in its self. The ride was cold but short and they were both happy to be in the warm office of the priest. Miss Giles had already arrived just a few minutes before and was bubbling over with the aspect of bringing some light to the matter.

After introductions were completed, Miss Giles first produced a letter. It was from the Rev. James Cleary and addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Ephraim Giles. Fr. Rice read it aloud for the benefit of all.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Giles, ... On the behalf of the parish of Saint Fastacrim I would like to thank you for the generous gift of the relic of our patron Saint. It was a magnanimous gesture of shared love for you to surrender that valuable family heirloom for this Community. My prayers and the prayers of the parish will be with you always. The relic will be prominently displayed and a plaque will be displayed nearby recognizing your gift."

Miss Giles noted, "Of course the plaque mentioned in the letter never materialized but that is of little matter. The letter does give credence to dad's memory of the event." Indeed it did but it told nothing of the authenticity of the relic itself and left us with another mystery ... that of how this artifact came to be in the hands of a family of Congregationalists. Professor McNeill

noted that they would have had nothing at all to do with the veneration of saints. At that, Miss Giles, grinning broadly, produced a small book saying, But this will explain that part!"

The newly produced item was a tattered and obviously very old and water stained journal. The writing was smudged and in parts illegible. It was read with difficulty. Miss Giles had had the advantage of going through it with her aunt who had studied it on many occasions and so was able to provide a great deal of help in deciphering the more difficult parts. Belle acted as secretary and recorded the pertinent passages which are related next. What does not directly apply to our story has been omitted here for clarity, as have been the dates of the entries. Belle's transcription has, for the reader's sake, corrected numerous misspellings and much archaic terminology so we may better understand it.

The book was identified as the journal of one Ezra Giles, an Englishman who found himself on the Island of Jamaica in the year 1692. The pages prior to that date were missing but that is of no consequence to our story. That of course, was the time of the great earthquake and he was, in fact, in the town of Port Royal when it occurred, fortunately on the higher ground when a good part of the town slid into the sea. He somehow avoided serious injury. His journal records:

"The shaking of the ground was horrifying and buildings were falling all around me. I had never experienced anything like it and was thrown to the ground several times becoming quite disoriented. After the quaking subsided and I regained the awareness of my surroundings, I joined the mass of people fleeing off the peninsula toward the main part of the island and to the town of Kingston. As I made my way it seemed as if the lower part of the this town had simply disappeared. I came upon a woman who was trying to stop any man she could and as I approached she screamed, 'help him. he is in there', pointing into the still partly standing ruins of a church. Supposing the man in the church was her husband, I was moved to pity and told her I would try to find him and seeing an opening went in. I soon heard, then saw the man, obviously not her husband but a priest, pinned beneath a large beam. He was bleeding heavily and I was sure I could not free him, let alone save him, but he must have read my face for he said, 'I am going home ... save the relic.' At that, he handed me the object he was clutching and when I took it he said, 'Thank you my son ... go ... quickly.' I did just that and didn't look back until I was outside the building. There was then another quaking of the ground. The church collapsed completely and even more of the town slid into the sea."

"It has been five days since Port Royal was destroyed and I have found a ship which is bound for Boston. I signed on as ship's carpenter and will be happy to make leave of this accursed place. Many want to leave and I am fortunate to have been a carpenter as they badly needed one. I

could not have paid for passage even if they had room for me. As I made my way out of Port Royal, I scavenged a sack for this thing the priest gave me and some extra clothing. I have no money and nothing else. I tried to find another priest to give him this Papist thing but none was found so it will come with me. Perhaps I will find a priest in Boston."

"We have made our way past the Spaniards of Cuba and past the Spaniards and French of Hispaniola but due to our hasty departure from Jamaica the ship is in need of provisions and repairs. The Captain is heading to Bermuda."

"We have been eight days in Bermuda. Some of the passengers have left, preferring to either find passage to England or to go to Virginia. The repairs have been made and food, water and rum have been loaded. The captain will take the rum to Boston where he expects to trade it for beaver pelts to sell in England. We have also taken on some new passengers. There was no opportunity for me to get this object of mine to a priest here as there were none. The thing appears to be made of gold and could bring a large sum of money even if it has to be melted down. But the vessel does contain what appears to be a bone fragment and bears an inscription of some sort. I am sure it has value to the priests other than the worth of the gold itself."

"We will be making port in Boston tomorrow and my life, I think, has changed. One of the passengers who boarded in Bermuda is Hannah Crossman. She is seventeen and now alone. She and her parents were bound for Virginia when fever struck their ship after they were delayed by a series of storms on their voyage from England. Her father had died at sea and her mother as they entered the harbor at Bermuda where they too put in to replenish supplies and make repairs. She had no family in Virginia but did have cousins that were living in Boston. Hannah was befriended by a merchant who was going to Boston and she came aboard as his niece. He turned out to be a lecherous slave trader and she appealed to our captain to take her under his care for the voyage, which is what he did. We have become acquainted and I have agreed to help her find her cousins in Boston."

"Hannah and I found the house of her relatives in Boston but they were gone, having left some months ago for Connecticut. The new owner generously agreed to put Hannah up in their spare room and gave me use of the hay in their stable until I could take care of my business. That business was to be the finding of someone to take this papist object off my hands and possibly provide a reward. But in this separatist (from the Church of England) town, a Catholic priest was not to be found."

"Hannah was alone and so was I. She very much wanted to find her relatives. I have lost my attraction for a life at sea and believe I can make a good living with my skills with wood. We

found ourselves attracted to each other and since we could not travel as we were with any respect from others or from ourselves, we were yesterday joined in marriage in the town hall. We were very happy to have been thrown together as we had been. We have acquired a buggy and a suitable horse, paid for with my wages as ship's carpenter and will be on our way on the morrow. Hannah has a little money left from her parents and hopefully that will keep us for a while."

"It has been months since my last entry to this book and much has happened. We have failed to find Hannah's relatives but we joined a group of settlers at Colchester. My skills as a carpenter were much in demand and we have thrived here. During our movements since leaving Boston I shared the secrete of my gold vessel with my bride. Hannah said it was a "relic" and we agreed that it was a sacred thing for Catholics. We also agreed that as such we would not sell it or in any way disrespect it but keep it hidden until such time as we could transfer it to the proper people."

"Hannah is now gone, may she rest in peace, and I have become frail as well. My son Nathaniel has agreed to keep the trunk with the Papish relic until he can fulfill the agreement between his mother and I."

And that was the final entry in the journal. Professor McNeill summed it up when he said that the journal explained a lot in regard to how the relic came to be in the Giles family's possession but shed no light on the saint's identity. He did, however, say that it may be of interest to the school's history department and would tell Professor Reynolds about it and put him in touch with Miss Giles. Now he was most interested in seeing the object in question.

The group left the comfort of the rectory and made the short walk to the church which on a week day was not heated. The vessel containing the relic of St. Fastacrim was quite ornate and obviously very old. There was evidence of damage to it but it did have a name inscribed on the base. The inscription, however was worn down by many years of fervent touches and several parts of it were completely gone, or so it seemed. The Professor noted that the lower part of the first letter was gone as was almost all of the second. The "s t a c" were discernable but the "r" and "i" could not be certain. The last letter was certainly an "m". But it was in old script so he could not be certain of anything. The professor asked if it could be taken back to the University and put under magnification for a better view and after a promise was made to carefully treat it as a sacred object, the pastor agreed. It was placed in the purple hood used to cover it during Lent and Belle held it as steadily and reverently as she could on the trip back to the school where she turned it over the the care and further investigation of Professor McNeill.

In the mean time Fr. Rice made a small sign which he placed in the relic's shelf... "Relic Removed for Cleaning & Repair".

Several days passed and finally Professor McNeill met with our librarian. He had taken the artifact to the metallurgy laboratory where it was determined that the vessel itself was, in fact, made of gold. As for the name, "Fastacrim", under magnification, could be seen the faint depression that showed the first letter of the name was not an "F" but an "E" It was also seen that the second letter was probably a "u" rather than an "a". A scratch in surface at the top of the "u" was misleading. Also discernable was that what was taken to be "crim" at the end of the name was actually five letters but too badly worn to be readable. But that was all Bell needed and she went to her books of saints and, looking for "Eust" soon found St. Eustochium. She and Professor McNeill felt that there could be no doubt about the name of the person who's bone fragment was incased in the vessel.

The following day, Fr. Rice and Miss Giles met in Professor McNeill's office with Belle Fenton. They all went to the metallurgy laboratory and with the help of an assistant professor looked again at the inscription and determined now with even more certainty that it bore the name "Eustochium". Our saint was finally identified.

St. Eustochium

The third daughter of St. Paula. She was born circa 370 and stayed with her mother, taking her veil in 382 from St. Jerome, who wrote Concerning the Keeping of Virginitiy for her in 384. Eustochium and her mother went with St. Jerome to Bethlehem, Israel, and there she aided the sainted scholar in his translation of the Bible. St. Jerome founded convents in Bethlehem and Eustochium became abbess of all three in 404. A band of marauders destroyed one of the convents, and Eustochium never recovered from that experience. She died in Bethlehem September 28, 419.

All this was, of course, reported to the bishop and to the parishioners and it was agreed to change the name of the parish in accordance with this new discovery. The relic was returned to its alcove but now there was a brass plate inscribed with her name as well as recognition of the gift of the Giles Family. Furthermore, The Giles family has been offered a generous sum if they wish to sell the journal of Ezra Giles to the school. The bishop and all concerned agreed that the prayers these past years for the intercession of St Fastacrim were undoubtedly heard by St. Eustochium who equally undoubtedly gave appropriate response.

The Relic of St Fastacrim

Postscript:

When Bell later related this story to her best friend, Jennie, she added that she feared that if she were Catholic, she should adopt St. Eustochium as her patron saint due to their scholarly interests and "that other aspect of their common life".