

Stump the Nuns!

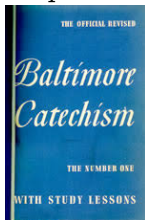
by Con Chapman

IRONDALE, Alabama. An edgy, innovative game show—"Stump the Nuns!"—has turned into a ratings sensation for the Eternal Word Television Network, the nation's leading provider of televised Catholic content.



"What is the Communion of Saints?"

"It's a combination of 'Survivor' and 'College Bowl' says Sister Mary Agnesita, the show's host. "We take four very strict nuns and match them up with boys who were cut-ups in their grade school classes. A lot of these kids became successful contrary to the predictions their teachers made when they sent them to the principal's office."



The authoritative source.

The show requires quick-draw responses to questions from the Baltimore Catechism, the official authority on Catholic liturgy and theology that is drilled into students from their first day in parochial school.

Today's taping features Kevin Mullaney, an options trader who was expelled from Chicago's Holy Name Elementary School in the sixth grade; Joseph Mooney, a graduate of Xaverian Catholic High School in Westwood, Massachusetts, who is now an investment banker; Bob Racunas, a devout boy who considered a career as a

priest before taking LSD in high school; and Con Chapman, a Boston lawyer who has a scar on his left hand from a blow inflicted by Sister Mary Joseph Arimathea, his sixth-grade teacher.



"Tommy Dickman was showing me how to 'flip the bird'," Chapman says, his face revealing the pain of the sole black mark on his otherwise sterling grade school transcript. "'Sister Joe' snuck up behind us and hit me with the metal edge of her ruler, right there," he notes, pointing to the middle finger of his left hand, which bears an ugly ridge of scar tissue. "I'm gunning for her," he says bitterly.

Along with Arimathea, the other members of the nuns' team are Sister Mary Clarus, the music teacher who caught Kevin Mullaney talking in line during a fire drill, the incident that led to his expulsion; Sister Gabriella Marie, a mentor to Bob Racunas whose decision to elope with the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish set off the boy's downward spiral into drugs; and Sister Mary Mark Piazza, an intimidating six-footer who schooled Mooney in the finer points of the low post position when she coached his sixth-grade CYO basketball team. "Joe could have been somebody if he'd applied himself," she says. "I can beat him at H-O-R-S-E to this day."

Sister Agnesita starts things off with a tough question that falls on the ears of the contestants like a helmet-to-helmet hit on the opening kickoff of a Boston College-Notre Dame game. “What is,” she begins, pausing for emphasis, “the Communion of Saints?”



Modeling clay depiction of Communion of Saints.

The nuns confer among themselves for a split-second, and the hesitation creates enough daylight for Mullaney, a former halfback for his high school football team, to burst through with the answer. “The communion of saints is the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head,” he spits out in the rapid-fire delivery he uses to make millions each year in the pits of the “Merc”, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

“That is correct!” says Sister Agnesita.

The audience applauds as the points for the team of former bad boys is posted on the scoreboard. The show uses a unique scoring system in which a correct answer is worth thirty-seven points, a combination of “3” and “7” which are considered mystical numbers by more credulous members of the Catholic faith.



"For God's sake woman, put some clothes on!"

"Next question," Sister Agnesita announces, keeping the show on the fast track that keeps audiences at home and in the studio on the edge of their seats. "Is it possible," she begins, "for a soul in limbo to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven?"

A buzzer sounds from the nuns' side of the stage, and Sister Mary Mark Piazza speaks. "No, because they aren't baptized. You can't go to heaven if you're not baptized."

Sister Agnesita is quiet for a moment, a signal to the other team that the answer is in some way deficient. Joe Mooney hits his buzzer.

"Yes?" Sister Agnesita responds.

"Limbo is the temporary place or state of the souls of the just who, although purified from sin, are excluded from the beatific vision until Christ's triumphant ascension into Heaven following the second coming," he says with a note of hesitation in his voice.



The crowd goes wild.

"That is-correct!" The crowd erupts in a cheer at Mooney's willingness to take a long-shot for his team.

"You never knew that in sixth grade," sniffs Sister Mary Mark.



"That's because there wasn't any money on the line," Mooney says with a sneer.

"That's seventy-four points for the boys who used to have to stay after school and bang the blackboard erasers together," Sister Agnesita says with a personable smile on her face. "All right—next question. What is the name of the sin that one commits by selling an indulgence?"

The nuns, each of whom is in her late 70's, don't hear the question at first, giving the bad boys an opening. "Simony!" shouts Bob Racunas. Sister Agnesita hesitates a moment for dramatic effect, and then cries "Correct!"

The crowd erupts in cheers, and the nuns' faces turn ashen.



"Three times 37 is 111 points, three digits in one number indicating the oneness of the trinity in a single God!" Sister Agnesita

exclaims, and the audience applauds in appreciation of her numerological mumbo jumbo. “You know what that means, right boys?”

“The Torture Chamber!” says Chapman, alluding to an isolation booth in which a single nun and her former student square off for a lightning round of hagiography, the lore of the Catholic saints.



“Pick your victim, boys.” The men confer among themselves and then Mooney, the team captain, announces that they have selected a *mano a hembra* match-up of Chapman vs. Arimathea.

Into the booth the two go, and a clock with a sweep second hand is set for 60 seconds of intense interrogation of the grade school principal by her former student.



St. Stephen getting stoned.

“Why is St. Stephen like John Belushi?” Chapman asks.

“Who’s John Belushi?” the nun asks.

“I get to ask the questions—they both died from getting stoned.”

“Correct,” says Sister Agnesita.



"What is the nickname of the teams from St. Sebastian's School in Needham, Massachusetts?" Chapman asks.

"I don't follow high school sports," the nun replies weakly.

"No excuse—they're the Arrows, 'cause that's how he died."

"Correct," Sister Agnesita interjects. "One more miss and you're out, Sister," she warns.

"All, right," Chapman begins, his face a mask of cold, repressed fury. "There are two offerings that a virgin may make to St. Agnes in order to receive a vision of her future husband in a dream," he says. "Name them both."



St. Agnes

The audience gasps. Has the lawyer made a tactical mistake? As a virgin herself, isn't Sister Arimathea likely to answer this question and escape from the head-lock he has her in?

The graying nun seems confident as she clears her throat. "If she fasts all day and eats only a salt-filled egg at night, her future husband will visit her in a dream," she says.

"That is—correct!" Sister Agnesita says.

"Lucky guess," Chapman says bitterly. "What's the other?"

"The virgin takes a sprig of rosemary and a sprig of thyme, sprinkles each two times with water, and puts one in each shoe. She places a shoe on each side of her bed, then says 'St. Agnes, who's to lovers kind, Come, ease the troubles of my mind.'"

Sister Agnesita waits for a moment, then speaks to Chapman. "True or false?"

He laughs a mirthless little laugh. "Are you kidding? What a bonehead mistake!"

"You think you're so smart!" the nun fires back at him. "I nailed it!"

"Sister, sister, sister," he says as he shakes his head back and forth. "Sprinkle with water *two* times? Please-she's got to do it three times or she'll end up married to a butt-ugly fast-food shift manager."

"Game over!" shouts Sister Agnesita. "But we have a consolation prize for our losers-the home version of 'Stump the Nuns', for hours of catechism fun in the comfort of your convent!"

