

The Congregation Next Door

by Kristin Fouquet

When Carlton Hanks bought the house on the corner of Annunciation and General Pershing, right next to St. Anthony's Catholic Church, he believed that he'd live in peace. The five room shotgun single had been the previous rectory before the archdiocese had moved the priests to a more comfortable residence one street away. For three years, Carlton had gotten his peace until the archbishop declared the closing of many churches. St. Anthony's was on the list.

He had plucked quite a few "Save St. Anthony's" picket signs from his front yard. A group of die-hards had even broken into the church to pray and were arrested for trespassing. He figured the whole thing would blow over in a couple of weeks, but the people kept showing up.

One Sunday morning, Carlton was reading the newspaper on his front porch as usual. The church bells rang as the parishioners arrived. Twenty-five or so came marching up to the front of the church in their finest clothes. He sipped his coffee as they set up lawn chairs and stubbornly settled down on the sidewalk in the direct sunshine. He felt especially sorry for the kids, wearing their uncomfortable fancy outfits and bewildered expressions.

Folding his paper, he asked, "How come y'all still come here every week?"

"This is our church," said a proud man in a seersucker suit.

Carlton watched him fiddle with his bow tie. "The archbishop says

that your parish has been absorbed by St. Mark's. How come y'all just don't go over there? It's only three blocks that way."

A woman in a wide brimmed pink straw hat stopped fidgeting with her daughter's ponytail and looked up at Carlton with a pained expression. "My parents were married in this church, as was I. My children were baptized here. How can they do this to us?"

Carlton didn't know why the priests weren't siding with their flock. He assumed it was a desperate need for job security. The faith in such a machine was silly and unnecessary to him, but he felt the plight for the people who were spawned by it but abandoned. He shrugged. Pointing next door, he said, "The way I see it...the Catholic Church is a franchise and this location wasn't making business sense anymore."

A gasp came from a woman in a yellow pillbox hat. "A *franchise*?"

"I'm not trying to offend you or your religion. I kinda miss the pipe organ playing to be honest. What I'm trying to ask is why do you need them- these archbishops and priests? I mean if you know who your god is, why do you need them or this building?"

Jingling the coins in his pockets, a man in a poplin suit stepped up to Carlton's porch. "We parishioners pulled our hard earned money together to fix those stained glass windows after the storm. Now, we can't even see 'em."

The man's complaint appealed to Carlton's sense of fairness. This was a practical gripe that he could understand. "You want to look at those windows? Y'all come around the side. You can see them from my backyard."

There was some whispering and then the man asked, "Really?"

The entire stretch of fence was concealed by Confederate Jasmine. Carlton opened the wrought iron gate, letting them into his shady yard.

A few moans of delight were uttered as they peered up at the windows. The stained glass couldn't be appreciated quite as much from the outside as from within, but they didn't seem to mind. The ladies held onto their children's shoulders; the men stood behind them. Huddled into little groups, they began mumbling.

Realizing that they were praying, Carlton started to head back inside.

The man in the poplin suit caught his arm. "Thank you."

"Sure. What's it to me? Y'all can come every Sunday if you want to. I'll be on the front porch."

The man nodded and joined the rest of the congregation.

Carlton went in and fixed himself another cup of coffee.

