

Secrets and Lies

I started collecting secrets when I was just six years old. There is a fine line between a secret and a lie. A secret is a lie waiting to be revealed. As a priest, I am trained to hold all of what I hear in the strictest confidence, but it is a tiresome burden. I am 65 years old and have spent my adult life listening to both from my parishioners as they look to God for absolution. But it is my own secret, learned at that tender age, which shames me.

The act of confession is therapeutic. The priest and confessee remain anonymous, but that only works in cities. I, Father France Campion and another man, are the only two priests at Blessed Madonna in the dusty outskirts of Mexico City. We see the same people each Sunday and during the daily masses held in our wooden, Spanish colonial style church, so we know the voice of each person. If I was inclined, I could write dozens of books based upon what I have heard these past four decades. I have heard the smallest of children, before their first Communion, shy to confess their 'sins' of making their siblings kiss a lizard or sneaking off with an extra concha late at night. I have collected dark secrets from teenagers swollen with shame after their first sexual encounter while hearing depths of despair from their parents confessing love for someone other than their spouse. Some try to justify their actions, craving that absolution yet I hear no repentance in their voices.

I may be giving the impression I am jaded but I have not always been this way. I grew up in Spain, the eldest son of a French farmer and Spanish mother, both strict Catholics who preferred Mass said in Latin to the modern Masses given in Spanish. My parents were loving, warm people who raised my three younger brothers and me to be modest and pious men.

Before I was even an altar boy, I loved the Church. I held a special reverence for Father Joaquin Alvarez and the local Bishop, Jorge Flores. Despite his small, stocky stature, Father Alvarez's booming voice echoed off the stone walls of the church that dated back to the Middle Ages. His voice made me feel as if the voice of God himself spoke. But his voice was not an angry voice, no, it was deep and emotional. I recall my mother, grandmother, and two aunts weeping. Their tears, not from misery but from the Holy Spirit entering them like water lapped up by a parched plant on a summer's day, mixed with sweat.

In stark contrast, Bishop Flores, was a tall, lanky man with a watery voice and eyes that shifted around until he put his glasses on. He came to our village once a year around the festival honoring the appointed saint of our village, St. Isidore the Laborer. Father Alvarez and the village went to great efforts to make the Bishop comfortable during his stay. The festival honoring St. Isidore lasted a week. It started on May 7th with a special Mass and ended each May 15th when the Bishop recited Mass instead of Father Alvarez. Our village would shut down. Children would not go to school, the men would not work except to construct a gazebo for the party the night before May 15th, and the women would do nothing but cook and bake.

I remember the first time I participated in the festivities. I was six, my first year in primary school, and looked forward to Bishop Flores' visit. We children in the primary school, perhaps 15 at the time, were put in charge of bringing in various materials to create a wreath and crucifix. This special gift would be presented to the Bishop on May 14th as part of the programming before the big dance. The wreath itself was made of citrus leaves from my family's orange and lemon trees, olive leaves, and barley. The primary school children would work on it while the older children, those in compulsory secondary education, created the crucifix from olive leaves, Jesus Christ from cornstalks, and cotton dyed from the juice of sugar beets for the stigmata.

Besides the wreath and crucifix, costumes had to be made, always by the older girls, and the set used for the play reenacting the Saint's life had to be repainted. That year, two of the older children, Juan Lopes and Maria Garcia, were chosen to play St. Isidore and his wife, Maria de la Cabeza.

But I wasn't interested in acting or sewing or painting, I was terrible at those things. No, the role I most coveted was the child chosen to present the wreath and crucifix to Bishop Flores. Father Alvarez would make the decision, so all week I was

extra helpful to show him what a responsible young man I was. I rushed around to make sure he and the Bishop had plenty of fresh water to drink, yelling at my classmates to be quiet during the rehearsals, and staying late to clean the church. Father Alvarez would not make the decision until the day before the grand pageant. I was on pins and needles during this time. I must have licked my lips a hundred times anticipating his announcement. I still remember his beaming face as he called my name.

I can't even begin to tell you how overjoyed my parents were! My grandmother swelled with pride at how blessed our family was. This was the year my grandmother won best paella, the Bishop's favorite dish. She refused to give away her secret, even to my mother and aunts, but I recall her sneaking off to feed a very fat rabbit. I never did see that rabbit after the festival.

The next day, we made our way to the light colored stone church. The brilliant sun heated it to a temperature I equated to what Hell felt like. I resolved to myself to be as good as possible so I could spend eternity in comfort in Heaven. I remember sweating so much, both from nerves and the sweltering heat, I was certain the fabric of my navy blue wool suit had turned black.

I broke away from my family and went to Father Alvarez. The children who weren't acting in the play as animals, lined up at the back of the church awaiting our turn to sing hymns. As I watched the older children go through St. Isidore's life, the heat started to melt the petroleum jelly my mother had slathered into my chestnut brown hair. I tried to put the slimy sensation, which oozed down my neck, far from my mind when it was our turn to sing. As Father Alvarez marched us down the cobblestone aisle, I tripped on a loose stone but caught myself before I fell. I steadied myself, mentally repeating the speech I had memorized for the presentation.

We took our places in front of the altar. Throughout the performance, I fought back the urge to wipe the salty jelly from my brow even as it stung my eyes. A couple of times I could not resist scratching my neck where it, sweat, and wool suit met. My grandmother's hawkish eyes disapproved so I withdrew my hand. I don't remember singing but I must have mouthed the words because I my mother beamed at me throughout the performance.

After the last song, Maria Garcia, still dressed as St. Maria de la Cabeza, handed me the handmade wreath and crucifix. During the week, I watched Maria transform ordinary cornstalks into Jesus. His face did not reflect pain or sadness like the crucifix in the church, but instead wore a serene mask. She had dyed small bits of cotton with the juice from the sugar beets and affixed those onto Christ's suffering body. Bishop Flores noticed, too, for he was always patting her back and looking over her shoulder at her artistic work.

Maria gave me a wink and a warm smile which revealed perfect teeth. She wore a plain linen dress which swept the floor while her shiny raven-colored hair was plaited in a French braid that hung down her back. With her hand upon shoulder, she escorted me to where Bishop Flores sat. Fear seized me as I stood before the thin Bishop Flores dressed in his embroidered red, gold, and white frock, eyes wandering all over the place. I could not help but stare at those eyes, waiting for them to focus. Instead they seemed more intent upon Maria's visage than mine. My mind went blank as I opened my mouth. Maria gave me a little push while my grandmother glared at me but nothing came out. Those eyes just frightened me too much.

Bishop Flores tried to spur me on. "What do you have in your hands, my child?" He smiled, exposing yellow teeth, the effect frightening me more. His hands stretched out to receive the wreath and crucifix.

Maria gave me another nudge and I almost dropped the wreath. "This is a gift for you," I began in a measured voice, concentrating on his nose, the only normal thing on his face. "This is a gift for you, Bishop Flores. It is made from the labor and love of God's children. We remember Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers. We celebrate his compassion towards the poor and animals and his piety." I finished and ham-fisted it at him.

"Thank you, my child." Bishop Flores, eyes stilled a moment as he looked at Maria before he got up, and faced the congregation. In his watery voice, so thin every person had to strain to hear it, he said, "Each year, this village's hospitality renews my spirit. The devotion of every single man, woman, and child shown here to God and Jesus Christ renews my faith. You truly embody the virtues of St. Isidore and St. Maria de la Cabeza.

"The gift of the crucifix is something I cherish. Each one is unique and special just as all God's children are. Thank you, and go in peace and be blessed." He made the sign of the cross, everyone imitating him.

Maria led me to my family as the Bishop led the congregation from the church. My parents, grandmother, and aunts all congratulated me as we headed back to our home. We changed our clothes into something much cooler and carried enough food to feed an entire army back to the church.

The fading sun illuminated the stone church in blood red light as a gentle late spring breeze came in to cool us off. The gazebo built by my father and the other men was decorated in vivid flowers and lanterns hung from the roof, bathing it in a soft yellow glow. Laughter, dancing, and the shouts of children running around filled the night air. The parents all danced waltzes accompanied by Father Alvarez's honking accordion.

I do not remember seeing Bishop Flores but I was too engrossed in the game of hide-and-seek with my classmates. After several rounds, it was my turn to find my friends. I knew none hid near the gazebo, too obvious. The best places to hide were the church and Senor Garcia's barn. Senor Garcia was the richest man in our village and Maria's father. I rushed first to the barn, following his horses' nervous neighing. I immediately found the Dominguez twins hiding behind hay bales. Before they left, they whispered to me where Pedro had been hiding. I shinnied up the ladder. Because of the dark, I ran right into a wall, loosening some tools. Unable to contain himself, Pedro giggled. I groped in the dark before finding his arm and yanking on it. He cried out, cussing at me. I threatened to tell his mother but in exchange for my silence, he told me where I could find Lucia, the last person left. I thanked him for the information and watched Pedro run back to the gazebo.

As the night darkened, we brought out more lanterns. Without anyone noticing, I snatched one and made my way to the church. As I got closer, I stopped, opened the lantern, and turned the flame down low, burning my fingers in the process. I circled the church once, quiet as possible, but didn't see Lucia. I heard a noise, like something had been knocked down but then I heard footsteps. Thinking Lucia must be inside the church, I slowly opened the wooden church door.

It creaked. I froze, listening. Muffled grunting and a woman's sobs. I pushed the door a little more, the faint lantern light casting a shadow on the cobblestone floor. The grunting continued as did the sobbing until a voice said, "Please, Bishop, please stop." I frowned. It sounded like Maria Garcia's voice but why would she be in a dark church with the Bishop? A hand clapped over her mouth.

"Shhhh, Maria, my child. Just a few moments longer." The grunting continued as the sobs came in intermittent intervals.

I dared go no further. Something told me what I had just heard was wrong but I was also confused. What exactly had I heard? Maybe Maria was helping the Bishop but why was she crying and saying "No"? I retreated in silence and dropped the lantern on the way back to the party. Finding Lucia no longer on my mind.

I was panting as I reached my grandmother. She asked what was wrong and I used the opportunity to catch my breath to decide if I should tell her what I had heard in the church. I was not sure and did not want to risk getting punished for telling a lie. Through my childish confusion over the scene, I decided to not say anything. So I just blurted out I had failed to find Lucia in our hide-and-seek game. My grandmother laughed, pointing to Lucia who was eating a piece of cake.

After that evening, each time I saw Maria, she looked tired and sad. She did not smile and withdrew from interacting with people until one Sunday, late in the summer, I ceased to see her at all. I heard from the women in my family, she had been sent away, possibly to university to study art. But my friends overheard their mothers say Senor Garcia sent Maria away to a convent.

The following February, it was unusually cold, Senor Garcia introduced to the congregation his newborn son. His and Senora Garcia's 'unexpected miracle' from God.

My passion for the church continued to grow as I matured into my teen years, although some nagging sensation, something I didn't fully grasp until I graduated from seminary school, bubbled inside each year at the St. Isidore festival. After my own turn as wreath bearer, I never paid much attention who was chosen. But there was one year, I believe I was 14 at the time, a thin eight-year-old boy, with distinctive wandering eyes, was chosen.

These past decades, almost 60 years since the incident in the church, have done little to assuage my silence. I grew to understand I was an unknowing accomplice. I spoke to my mentor, Father Guillermo Lopes, about the event. He assured me the shame and guilt I felt was unfounded. After all, how could a child comprehend? I argued I knew something was not quite right. I had even contemplated telling my grandmother but stopped myself. Again he used my age and urged me to not only ask God for forgiveness but to forgive myself. At six-years-old, I learned a secret and a lie were sometimes the same thing.