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AFTERLIFE TRAP PART 3 – FROM THE PULPIT TO THE PAYCHECK
by
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Father Matthias Gray adjusted the thick collar of his cassock and took a long, steadying breath before opening the door to the bishop's private office. A winter sun streamed through the high windows, illuminating the dark mahogany shelves lined with old theological tomes. At the center of the room sat Bishop Alcott, reading from a tablet whose slick surface looked out of place among the dusty relics.

"Father Gray," Bishop Alcott greeted, tapping the screen to pause whatever document he was reviewing. "I trust you're well."

Father Gray managed a small smile. "As well as can be expected, Your Excellency."

The bishop set his tablet down and folded his hands. "We have much to discuss—Eternity, Inc. has new data showing an increase in 'virtual church' attendance. Many faithful have decided to continue worshipping from inside the digital afterlife, and that, Father, is a tremendous affirmation of God's presence."

Matthias blinked. He had often heard the bishop proclaim that the *Forever Program* was proof of the soul's existence. "Proof" that copying consciousness didn't negate the reality of an eternal spirit. Rather, the bishop insisted, the fact that humans could persist in a digital realm was a sign of divine design. Rejecting the technology, the bishop argued, was akin to denying God's power.

Matthias couldn't help but recall how uneasy he felt endorsing this technology. "Your Excellency," he ventured carefully, "I'm concerned we're conflating technological feats with divine miracles."

Bishop Alcott's eyebrows rose in gentle admonition. "Father Gray, I realize you're hesitant, but this is a rare opportunity for the Church to remain relevant in modern life. If souls are indeed separate, then consciousness upload is a testament to God's creation—an echo of the soul, so to speak. How can we reject such a tangible sign of His existence?"

Matthias fiddled with the hem of his sleeve. "I worry that we're...overstating what it means theologically."

"Then let our faithful decide," Alcott said. "Our official position is that this digital afterlife does not hinder the soul's journey. The Church's endorsement provides comfort—and with the revenue from Eternity, Inc., we've been able to fund charitable works we never dreamed possible." He leaned forward, voice hushed. "God's work, Father."

Matthias could find no easy rebuttal. He nodded, rising to excuse himself. The bishop's final words trailed him as he left: "A disavowal of Eternity's technology is a disavowal of God's latest revelation."

Back in his parish, Father Gray tried to focus on day-to-day matters. But his mind kept drifting to the swirl of questions—Was the bishop right? Was refusing to endorse this corporate-run afterlife tantamount to rejecting a sign from God? Or was it all a profit-driven illusion, a technology that preys on grief?

That afternoon, a parishioner named Theresa slipped into the confessional, her voice trembling behind the lattice screen. “Father, I’m not sure if you remember me,” she began. “My husband, Martin, died six months ago... but he wasn’t really *gone*. He chose to be uploaded. ” Her voice cracked.

Father Gray recalled performing Martin’s funeral rites three months ago. “Yes, my child?”

“I keep going to the visitation center,” Theresa continued, “slipping on the VR headset so I can see him in that digital world. I still love my husband, but I can’t afford all these subscription fees. Am I failing him as a wife because I can’t provide for him now? What is my duty to him? My credit cards are maxed.” Her voice wavered. “It’s the same kind of guilt I felt when choosing his casket—like if I don’t get the best one, I’m failing him. But now it’s so much money, and it never ends... and ... I’m drowning, Father.”

Matthias inhaled slowly. He remembered officiating Martin and Theresa’s wedding. They had been so full of promise. “Church doctrine says marriage vows last ‘till death do us part,’” he said gently. “If Martin’s body has died, you’re no longer bound—though I realize that feels hollow if his consciousness remains in this digital realm.”

A shaky breath echoed through the screen. “But what if he’s *alive* in that place? Doesn’t that mean I’m...still his wife? Or do I have to accept that he’s truly gone?” She hesitated, then

added, “I liked being a wife, Father. It gave me...purpose. And I feel I’ve lost that, along with him. I feel like I’m letting him down.”

Matthias closed his eyes, imagining Theresa’s anguish. “Theresa, you must do what brings you peace. The Church, per the bishop’s guidance, acknowledges that digital existence doesn’t negate Martin’s *spiritual* death. He has passed on, even if his consciousness data continues elsewhere.” He heard a soft sob. “Yet I understand how that might add to your grief.”

A pause. “I...thank you, Father,” she whispered. “I just wish I knew if God still recognizes our marriage.”

Matthias’s heart twisted. “God recognizes your love,” he said gently. “He knows the bonds we cherish. But that vow is no longer binding. You’re free.” He hated the words as they left his mouth, imagining how they might sound to Theresa: a dismissal of a central part of her identity.

Her tearful silence spoke volumes. She left the confessional soon after, and Matthias stayed behind, head bowed, a profound sadness tugging at his spirit.

Late that evening, Father Gray roamed the aisles of the church, each footstep echoing in the stillness. Moonlight filtered through the stained-glass windows. He paused before a statue of the Virgin Mary, tracing the contours of her serene gaze.

Would Mary have endorsed a technology that preserved consciousness? Or would she have insisted on the mystery of true death and resurrection? The bishop had insisted that digital

afterlife was a *visible proof of God*, but what proof was it, truly? If Theresa's grief was any indication, the lines between life and death were more muddled than ever.

He remembered the bishop's voice: *A disavowal of Eternity's technology is a disavowal of God's latest revelation*. Matthias glanced at the statue's gentle features, searching for a hint of affirmation. But only silence surrounded him.

The following morning, Ava Moreno herself arrived to discuss a new donation. She swept into Father Gray's modest office with polished grace, handing him a folder of documents. "Eternity, Inc. is grateful for the church's ongoing support," she said cheerily. "We've seen a spike in membership from your parish alone. Many families find comfort in knowing they can keep loved ones 'alive' in some way."

He nodded stiffly. "It's...a complex matter."

Ava's eyes glimmered with professional confidence. "I've heard the bishop's stance that this technology is proof of God's design. Truly remarkable. If a single endorsement from the Church can reassure thousands, think of how many more souls will choose our path. And with each new account, we're able to provide further donations to support your social programs."

Father Gray forced a weary smile. "Yes, our soup kitchen has expanded significantly thanks to your funds." He set the folder aside. "But do you ever worry about the moral ramifications of these families living in uncertainty? Or how easily we equate consciousness data with a living person?"

Ava's practiced smile faltered just a fraction. "We provide peace of mind, Father. If you have theological questions, well... that's above my pay grade," she quipped lightly. "But I do know our approach aligns well with your bishop's teachings. And your parishioners seem satisfied."

Matthias thought about Theresa, about how *unsatisfied* she was, torn between love and a vow that ended in death, yet continued to haunt her. "Not all of them," he murmured.

Ava shrugged. "Well, you can't please everyone. But we're doing good work here, right?" She tapped the folder. "This is a check for your parish. It can fund new pews, repairs... Think of the good you can do."

He nodded slowly, feeling that familiar press of guilt. After Ava left, he didn't bother opening the folder. He already knew the donation would be generous, the bishop would be pleased, and more parishioners would sign up for the digital afterlife, convinced that by doing so they were embracing a God-given gift.

That night, Father Gray prayed alone once again, pacing near the flickering votive candles. His mind returned to Theresa's confession, and to the bishop's unwavering endorsement. If he challenged the bishop publicly, would he be seen as refusing God's "latest revelation," or worse, defying his superior in the Church? Yet how many people grappled with deeper sorrows, entangled by the corporation's shining promises?

He knelt before the altar, pressing his palms together. "Lord, guide me," he whispered, voice quivering. "Am I endorsing a holy miracle or a corporate trap? Am I misleading my flock, or am I opening their eyes to proof of Your existence?"

The church remained still and silent. Light from a single candle illuminated the gold crucifix on the altar, casting a slender shadow across Father Gray's folded hands. In his heart, he felt neither clear affirmation nor outright condemnation—only the burden of responsibility.

He bowed his head, tears threatening. Each day he watched the ledger of donations grow and the lines of theological nuance blur. Each day, more parishioners—like Theresa—knocked at his confessional, confused about what “death” meant. And each day, he wondered if he was failing them.

At last, he stood, snuffing out the candle. The darkness closed in around him, underscoring the weight he carried. Tomorrow, he would counsel more parishioners, sign more corporate papers, and deliver more sermons that tiptoed around the bishop's decree. But for now, in the solitude of his parish hall, Father Gray was certain of only one thing: his faith had never felt more precarious. And he wasn't at all sure which side of the line—technology or tradition—truly served God's will.

End – Part 3