

Father Katzinsky

(Fictitious character based on real historical events)

I am the parish priest for a large congregation of Catholic Russians who recently immigrated here to New York City. I am new to the city myself and struggling to make a life for myself here in a new country. My main concern is the members of my parish. They are suffering and I am not always sure how to help them. Recently the government officials working for Attorney General Palmer have been questioning me about what my parishioners tell me in confession. They suspect my parishioners are trying to stage a communist revolution in America. I took an oath to never tell anyone what someone confesses to me or else my flock would never confide in me with their sins. I may be arrested and am not sure what I should do.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

1. Is this character real or fictitious? What is his current dilemma?

My congregation is very poor. They live in the most horrible tenement shacks I can imagine. They cram two or three families into apartments made for one family. Sometimes entire families are sharing one room. These tenements have no running water or ventilation. People throw their garbage and waste out onto the street or alley because there is no where else to take it. Sometimes there is one faucet for an entire building on the first floor so hauling water up and down makes it unlikely most people can bathe properly. The ventilation is horrible in these buildings. The people who live in the back apartments have no windows, if they have an opening it is a one foot square air shaft looking into the back or side of the neighboring building. Every time I got to visit the sick or administer last rites, I have to pray I won't get sick or pass out from the heat and smell.

Besides sanitation issues, fire is a constant threat. Three of my families were killed two weeks ago when their tenement apartment burned to the ground. The families were trapped on the top three floors because the only entrance was blocked by the fire. The fire departments are slow to respond in these ghettos. Often, the fire men are Irish and very prejudiced against the Poles, Russians, Greeks, Italians, etc. This causes me great despair as we are all of one faith, yet we let our prejudices impede our decisions.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

2. Describe the living conditions of Father Katzinsky's parishioners.

The reason my parishioners are so poor is because they arrive here with no money and must take any job they can get. The factories hire immigrants because they work long hours for little to no pay. The men in my congregation work 14-16 hour days, which means they are at work by 5:00 a.m. and do not get off work until 7:00 or 9:00 at night. They get no breaks during the day, but maybe a short time for lunch,

which they must provide for themselves. By the time they get home, they are exhausted and frustrated. They want to provide for their families. The American dream is that the husband should provide for his family and his wife should stay home and raise their children. My men feel inadequate as fathers and husbands when they work so hard but can not earn enough money to care for their loved ones. They feel like failures because their wives must work. When they get home, often the wives are begging for money for food, shoes, coats, coal, etc. but the men don't have it. They often turn to drinking to ease the frustration. Some take their frustration out on their wives and children by abusing them. I counsel them as best as I can, but really have no solutions to their misery, other than my prayers and forgiveness.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

3. Describe the frustrations from the point of view of the men.

The women are in desperate circumstances as well. Because their husbands can not make enough money to buy the basic necessities, they and their children often work in the factories as well. Or they often take in work into their cramped, tiny, sweltering or freezing apartments. They do laundry, sew, or weave and get paid by the piece. Either situation is hard on them. Besides the work to make money, they also take the full responsibilities of feeding the family, sewing their clothes, birthing children and doing the wash. I don't know how they survive. Many confess wanting to kill themselves but stop themselves when they think of leaving their children behind. They are so frustrated and exhausted; again I don't know how to help them.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

4. Describe the frustrations from the point of view of the women.

Many of the people in my congregation have begun discussing striking for better wages and joining the socialist or anarchist party. They talk about this openly, not in confession. They believe the economic and political system here in America is totally controlled by the wealthy who own the factories and make the laws. They feel the leaders of the country make laws to benefit themselves and profit from the misery of the working classes. I find myself agreeing with much of what they say. Jesus spoke of caring for the poor, giving your money to help those in need, having compassion for your neighbor, peace instead of war. Often I feel the American system violates the very tenets of Christ's teachings and the teachings of the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, Christ did not incite his followers to a revolution. He told people to "turn the other cheek" and suffer for the gospel. Are my people supposed to suffer in order to increase their faith? Should I encourage or discourage their political leanings? Should I encourage them to strike or to suffer in silence? I hear many of my wealthy parishioners say, "Unions are an affront to God. The laboring man would be protected not be labor agitators, but by the Christian men God put in charge of the factories and control the property interests of this country." Is this true? Are these

business owners following the teachings of Christ and protecting the workers? Does God want them in charge? Is this God's will?

I'm so young and new to this country. I want to be a good priest and earn the trust and respect of the people in my congregation. I also believe in law and order and do not want to be accused of being part of a revolution. I may have to go to jail for my silence. Is that what Christ wants me to do?

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:

5. List several reasons Father Katzinsky sympathizes with the members of his congregation. Why does he think they are right?
6. List several reasons Father Katzinsky sympathizes with the government. Why does he think they are right?
7. List reasons Father Katzinsky is under suspicion by the government. Describe why he does not want to tell the government officials what his parishioners tell him in confession?