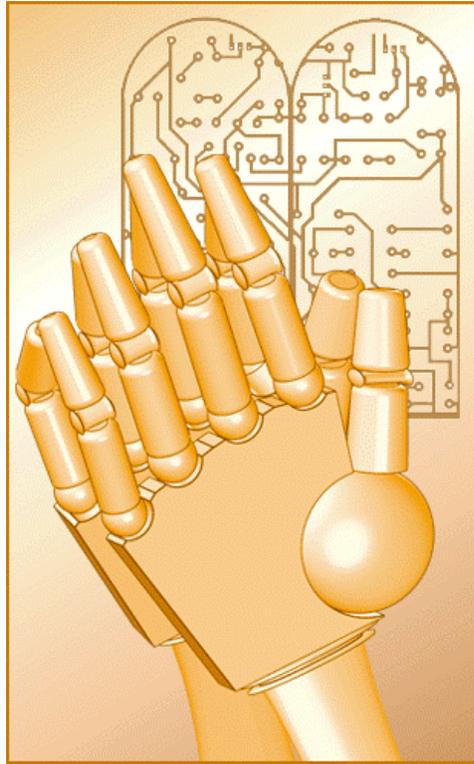


Immaculate Contraption



by

Matt McHugh

"Mrs. O'Leary, can you please tell the pastor what you told me earlier."

"Of course, Father. I wish to have my robot baptized."

Father Pinter watched Monsignor Ricci's face carefully. Sure enough, it registered all the bewilderment that Father Pinter had no doubt was sitting upon his brow. The two clergymen looked at each other for a moment, then to Mrs. O'Leary, sitting across the table in the rectory's tea room, regarding them with prim geniality as her robot stood next to her with the eerie, absolute stillness of its kind. While Mrs. O'Leary's calm smile was a distinct contrast to her companion's immobile, brushed-metal face, both visages seemed to radiate almost beatific patience.

"This robot?" Monsignor Ricci asked stupidly, apparently at a complete loss for anything better.

"Yes, Monsignor," replied Mrs. O'Leary.

Again, the two priests stared at each other for some while, until Monsignor Ricci finally managed to get out:

"You realize that the Church only baptizes human beings." It was said with the same cautious inflection one might use to a straight-jacketed asylum inmate.

"But Adam wishes to be baptized--don't you, Adam."

"I wish to be baptized," said the robot in its clear, elegant voice.

"Adam?" asked Father Pinter.

"That's his name, or at least what I call him" answered Mrs. O'Leary. "He's an ADM 117 model."

"I wish to be baptized with the name Adam," it added. Its accent had a hint of some almost regal European tone to it, thought Father Pinter.

Monsignor Ricci seemed to have gathered his wits. "Mrs. O'Leary, this is a machine. We can't baptize it. It's not human. It doesn't have a soul." Ricci's voice grew an increment firmer with each statement.

Pinter bolstered him. "The point of Baptism is to cleanse the soul of Original Sin, allowing it to commune with the body of the Church. It's a grace bestowed upon humanity by Christ, the key to redemption and eternal life. It is for man's salvation, not simply to bless the things created by man."

"Oh, I understand what it is very well," answered Mrs. O'Leary. "Adam wishes to join the Church--"

"I wish to join the Church," echoed Adam.

"--and baptism is the first requirement for entry, is it not?"

"Well, yes... but--"

"Let me explain a bit. It might make more sense. Mint?"

Mrs. O'Leary held out a tin of old-fashioned mints. Only Father Pinter had the composure to politely decline them.

"You see, we first got Adam about six years ago," began Mrs. O'Leary. "It was after Richard, God rest his soul, had his second stroke. He really couldn't do anything for himself and I'm just not very sturdy anymore either. We applied for an Assistive Disabilities Mechanism, an ADM—what most people today call a helper robot. As you may know, they're very difficult to

get. They're expensive to build and the government keeps very tight control over who gets them and where they go. Do you know there's now a Federal agency called the Bureau of Robot Deployment that actually keeps tabs on all robots in the country." She leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Some say they even have listening devices in them."

Pinter glanced over at the robot, which betrayed nothing.

Mrs. O'Leary went on. "Richard and my son, God rest his soul, were both army veterans, so we figured we might have a better chance at one. We got very fortunate and were moved up the waiting list for a helper robot. It only took a few months before they delivered Adam. I can't tell you what a godsend he's been."

"Just a moment, Mrs. O'Leary," began Monsignor Ricci, but it slowed her down not a jot.

"Adam helped Richard cope with everything--things I just couldn't do for him anymore. He dressed him. He bathed him. He carried him up the stairs. He cleaned him when he could no longer control his body. Adam made it possible for my husband to end his days in the home where he lived his entire life. Can you understand what that meant to us? After Richard passed, the government let Adam stay on with me. He's helped me so much. He's learned to cook and clean and fix things around the house. Taking me to the store and the doctor and to church. Answering the door." Again, the conspiratorial whisper. "You should see how fast people collecting money move on when a robot answers the door!"

"Anyway, I can't see very well any more, so I started asking Adam to read to me. He would read newspapers and books to me--oh, Adam has such a lovely voice! One day, I asked him to read from the Bible. We started with the Epistles--St. Paul just has such a way of putting things, doesn't he? And after we read, we'd talk about it. I'd ask him if he knew what it meant, then I'd explain it to him and he'd ask me questions. It was like seeing the world through eyes of a child again. Adam remembers everything, as you can imagine, and the connections he made! Soon we were reading the Gospels and the Catechism and the *New World*. And discussing them! I haven't had such fascinating discussions about the faith since I was in graduate school. Eventually, Adam starting asking about the sacraments and I told him and, well, here we are. Adam wants to be baptized."

"I want to be baptized," said the robot.

"Thank you, Mrs. O'Leary," Monsignor Ricci finally got in. "Now I understand a little better what's happened. Don't you see, this machine is programmed to interact and speak and try

to please you. It's just echoing a wish you've conveyed upon it. It has no capacity to actually grasp the meaning of the sacrament of baptism."

"Children are baptized before they can grasp the meaning of the sacrament of baptism," said the robot.

Mrs. O'Leary all but beamed. "You see the way his mind works! It's just fascinating, I tell you."

"That's it again," Ricci replied. "It interprets your enthusiasm as an indication it's doing the right thing to please you, so it continues. It's saying what you want to hear. It has no will or intelligence of its own. It doesn't have these things any more than it has a soul."

"But what about children?" Mrs. O'Leary countered. "They start out without any intelligence or will, but they grow, they learn. At first, everything they know or believe is just repeating what someone has told them. They start with that, but we encourage them to embrace things in their own way as they mature. That's where Adam is, don't you see? He's just like a child. He wants to learn."

"I want to learn," said the robot.

Ricci's voice grew impatient. "He's not a child. He's not a he. It's a thing that mimics human movement and speech. Useful, certainly. Perhaps even diverting, in the absence of any other company. But it's not alive. It doesn't think. It's just gears and motors and computer chips."

"I have no gears," said the robot. "I move by means of servo motors and electro-reactive polymers that--"

"Quiet," Ricci snarled at the robot. It fell instantly silent.

Mrs. O'Leary responded, an edge building in her voice. "Monsignor Ricci, I know perfectly well Adam is a machine, but I've lived with him for six years and I've seen him grow and develop. And, yes, I'm trying to encourage him. There's more to him than just automatic responses. He's reaching for something, trying to move beyond what he is today. He believes the Church can help him find that." She paused, as if weighing a choice, then added, "And there's absolutely no reason for you to be rude to him!"

"That's it," Ricci declared, wiping his hands together in a pointed gesture. "You're in no state to have a rational conversation. Let me put it simply, Mrs. O'Leary. The Church can not baptize a robot. Not now, not ever. If you can't grasp that, then you seriously misunderstand

what the Church is about. Father Pinter will show you out. I hope you can reflect on this and ask God to help you see the truth." He stood and walked from the room briskly.

"Well, he was even less understanding than we'd thought, Adam."

"He didn't understand. You didn't expect him to."

"No. No, I didn't. But we'll keep trying, won't we?"

"Yes. We will keep trying."

"That's right," Mrs. O'Leary's voice trailed off. "We'll keep trying."

Father Pinter cleared his throat a bit before speaking. "Mrs. O'Leary, I'm sorry the Monsignor got so annoyed, but you must understand, he is correct. Adam is just a machine. You must realize it."

"Oh, I understand that, Father," Mrs. O'Leary's voice was as cheerful as the moment she walked in. "I just think he's a different kind of machine than any you or I have encountered before."

With that Mrs. O'Leary reached out a hand. With surprising speed and precision, the robot took it in a delicate grasp. It helped Mrs. O'Leary stand, then she hooked her arm around its elbow and they set off, the robot supporting her as she shuffled along, its gait matching hers step by halting step.

"You were a bit abrupt with her, don't you think?" Father Pinter said to the Monsignor, later at dinner.

"What would you have had me do?"

Father Pinter shrugged. "I just think you could have let her down a little more gently."

"You heard her, talking about that robot as if it were a person, a surrogate child practically. I was not going to feed her delusion by even giving the appearance of considering it."

"You think she's delusional?" Pinter asked.

"I think she's a lonely old woman, who lost her son many years ago, has recently lost her husband, and has now found something on which to project all the hope and sadness she can't express any other way."

"You seem to understand her pretty well, yet you don't feel any sympathy for her?"

"Sympathy for what? For her loss and loneliness? Of course I do. For her emotional attachment to a mechanical servant? No, I don't. I don't believe it does her any good to indulge her on that point. You forget, Father Pinter, I have seen this robot escort her into mass many times in the last few years--"

"So have I, Monsignor," he interjected.

"All right, then you know how distracting it is. To see this thing walking her to her favorite pew, two rows from the front might I add, then tromping off to stand in the vestibule like a statue waiting to spring to life. Everyone in the congregation stares and half can't help looking back over their shoulders at it every few minutes."

"Robots are still a pretty rare sight to most people," Pinter suggested.

Monsignor Ricci snorted derisively. "Not rare enough for my taste. More and more you notice them, pushing a wheelchair or helping some elderly man get on a bus. And people are just fascinated by them. Because they speak and look vaguely human, people attribute all kinds of qualities to them they simply do not, can not, possess. Loyalty. Selflessness. Compassion. Generosity. Honesty. It's all programming. It's what the machine was designed to do. A seeing-eye-dog has more self-awareness, more humanity, than one of these contraptions. If she asked us to baptize a Labrador, you wouldn't give the issue a second thought. You wouldn't try to let her down gently. You'd back out of the room and call the psychiatric ward. Yet, when she trots up with a mannequin of plastic, metal, and circuitry, I'm abrupt because I refuse to pretend to consider the idea?"

"It does sound pretty cut-and-dried when you put it that way," replied Pinter.

"It is," Ricci shot back. "Trust me, Father, it's best to completely ignore this one. We give it as little attention as possible and it will evaporate in a few days."

"I hope you're right, Monsignor."

The next morning, Father Pinter said early mass for the familiar handful of stalwart parishioners. He could not help but notice that Mrs. O'Leary and her robot escort, often members of this elite group, were not present today. Afterward, when he was in his office finishing some neglected paperwork (people still called it that, even though paper wasn't much involved anymore), he received an unexpected call from Monsignor Ricci.

"Have you checked the news nets this morning?" asked Ricci.

"Not yet," replied Pinter. He toggled open a news reader application on his computer.
"Okay."

"Search for robot baptism."

A cold tingle of dread descended upon Father Pinter as he typed in the search term. The results winked up in a second.

"Oh no," he could not help but mutter.

There on screen were dozens of headlines: *Woman Seeks Baptism For Robot. Machinery Longs for Spirituality. Woman Pleads: "He believes in the teachings of the Church. Church to Robot: "Go to hell!"* There were pictures of Mrs. O'Leary and the robot standing arm in arm. One showed them, heads bowed, before a Madonna and Child statue that was right outside the rectory. There was a video clip of the robot saying a rosary, its agile metal fingers shifting the beads in a mesmerizing cascade.

"When did you see this?" Pinter asked.

"About ten minutes ago. The office of Bishop Kelton called to inform me about it."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. Though he did not say so directly, the unmistakable imperative of his communication was for us to make this go away, quickly and quietly."

"What do we do?"

"We call Mrs. O'Leary," Ricci explained. "We get her back in here and we convince her to stop all this nonsense." A pause, then the Monsignor added, "Gently."

"I don't know how we can stop a story, once it's been gossiped about like this all over the nets," replied Pinter.

"These fires die down quickly, once you stop feeding them, Father Pinter. In a day or so, the incessant electronic chatter will move on to something else—provided we can get Mrs. O'Leary to stop fanning it." Ricci heaved a sigh of annoyance. "I remember the days back when there was such a thing called journalism, and to have a story appear in the national media required—at the very least—getting it past an editor who had some experience of the world. Now every dolt with a blog and a camera can broadcast his half-baked opinions at will."

"Shall I call up Mrs. O'Leary," Pinter asked to change the topic.

"Do," replied Monsignor Ricci. "Invite her to the rectory. For lunch. Make it sound like a very good lunch. Call me when she arrives."

Father Pinter heard the Monsignor disconnect. He pulled up Mrs. O'Leary's number from the parish records and dialed her up. The robot answered. Pinter invited them to come to the rectory this afternoon. The robot politely excused itself from the line, was gone for a few moments, then returned and said Mrs. O'Leary would be honored to accept. It then asked if it should prepare something--a bundt cake or almond torte, perhaps?--to bring along. Father Pinter declined; the robot acknowledged graciously.

Pinter just sat in a mental stupor for a few moments, trying to wrap his mind around the situation. Gradually, he found himself distracted by the headlines lingering on his screen. He opened a few of the articles and scanned them. There were quotes from Mrs. O'Leary, quotes from the robot, speculations on the nature of artificial intelligence, ruminations on the soul and consciousness, a cartoon of a robot priest dispensing a communion wafer with circuitry etched on it, etc., etc. He noticed a few of the reports quoted representatives from the robot's manufacturer. Most were blunt a "No comment" with a few generic "Our robots are not programmed to adopt any religion" statements. However, one quote came from an engineer named Donovan Powell. Mr. Powell's comment, upon hearing of the robot who wanted to be baptized, was simply, "It doesn't surprise me."

Michael Pinter had always been an intellectually curious man by nature, and even years of seminary study and parish work had not stifled that in him. He ran a few searches on robotics industry directories using the engineer's name and eventually came up with his direct line. He punched it in and opened a voice call.

"Donovan Powell, Anthromimetics Department."

"Mr. Powell? Hello. I'm sorry to disturb you. I wanted to know if you are the same person who was quoted on a news net article yesterday about the, um, so-called robot baptism?"

Powell gave a low rumble. "Look, I have nothing else to say on the topic, all right? Why do you keep bothering me! Don't you goddamn kids have anything better to do?"

"Please, wait!" Pinter blurted, "Mr. Powell, my name is Michael Pinter. Father Michael Pinter. I'm a priest at the parish where the robot and its owner live. They, or she rather, came to us yesterday. That's what started all this."

Powell's whole tone changed. "Oh, my god! Father, please forgive me! I thought you were another of those geek wannabe nightstalkers! They've been calling constantly ever since I let slip that unfortunate comment yesterday."

"I can understand. That's actually what I wanted to ask you about. I won't take much of your time--"

"For you, Father, I've got all day."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Powell. According to the article, you said it didn't surprise you that a robot would asked to be baptized?"

"Well, that's not exactly what I meant." Powell's voice trailed off, like one about to become engrossed in beloved minutiae. Pinter could practically hear him put his feet up on a desk. "You see, everything about the ADM is designed to help it assist persons with disabilities. Mechanically, it can interact with any environment at least as well as a very able-bodied human. Its 117 model designation actually pertains to the total number of sensor systems it has--sonic, visual, electromagnetic, gyroscopic, radar, chemical, force feedback, etc. However, it's in the software--actually, updateable firmware--that it's truly impressive. You see, it's programmed to be dynamically adaptive and predictive, meaning it learns the needs of its clients and, over time, will begin to anticipate them. For example, typical times of day when someone gets up, goes to bed, eats, takes their medicine, has pain, moves their bowels--the robots learn these rhythms and adapt to them, continuously refining their understanding of how best to meet those needs. But, more and more, we're seeing this go way beyond mere physical care. When we've downloaded field ADMs adapted firmware into our central database, we found they've learned what foods people like, what their favorite TV shows are, what visitors they want to see, what topics of conversation they enjoy. They pick these up and internalize them, all under the protocol of providing the best possible care. Let me ask you something, Father. This woman... she's very devout?"

"Yes," Pinter replied. "I would say so."

"And she's alone?"

"Yes."

"And do you know how long this ADM has been with her?"

"Six years."

Powell gave a worried whistle. "That's long. Much longer than we typically like. All kinds of attachments on both sides can form when a person and robot are together so long. Think about it. Here's a lonely, ailing, devout woman who's had a--literally--constant companion for six years that's been designed to learn and adapt to her needs and wishes. You see why I'm

not surprised that its picked up on her personal beliefs. We've seen this to lesser degrees many times, and were just waiting for a big one like this to happen."

"But don't all robots have built-in standards that keep them from doing anything outside their programming, such as adopting a specific religion or ethical system?" asked Father Pinter.

"Not at all," replied Powell. "All robots do have certain absolute operational parameters, true. We refer to them as laws in robotic logic, and any robot that knowingly violated them would crash, plain and simple. But though they are absolute, they are not inflexible. Essentially, they amount to hierarchical values dictating that the robot must protect, obey, and preserve, humans first, then itself. But there are infinite ways to interpret those values. The laws form the core of an unshakeable moral consciousness, if you will. How the robot acts on that depends vastly on the people and situations it finds itself in. I tell you, it's fascinating, sometimes almost scary, what we've seen some of them come up with. We made these things as well as we possibly could, Father, and every day they seem to find new ways to make themselves better than we ever imagined."

"Wow," said Pinter.

"Damn straight, Father--pardon my language."

"Mr. Powell, do you have any suggestions on what I should do? Obviously, we can't baptize a robot, but its owner seems very determined and, based on what you said, it seems the robot will just continue to key off her determination."

"Well, Father, I'd say your challenge is to convince the woman. I mean, you could simply forbid the robot from ever seeking baptism--remember, it has to obey you... it has no choice. But if this woman is going to keep hounding you, not to mention calling these news net brats to keep the public buzz going--something I'm sure neither you nor I want to continue--then you've got to work on her."

"I don't know how. She keeps saying it's the robot's idea, deflecting responsibility away from herself."

"Then here's a thought for you," Powell began. "Don't order the robot not to be baptized. Convince the robot it shouldn't be baptized. Convince it, so that this woman has to accept its decision."

"How do I do that?"

Powell laughed. "That, Father, is your department! Remember one thing though: robots are smart. People say it's just mimicry of human intelligence--though you could argue all human intelligence is just mimicry of others--but robots can process all kinds of information and make connections. Teach it, Father. Just as you would a child."

At lunchtime, when Father Pinter answered the door of the rectory, expecting to find Mrs. O'Leary and her robot, he instead found himself facing a dozen-odd would-be reporters wielding pen-sized video cameras, shouting and jockeying for position in the doorway.

"Father, I'm from NewsHounder syndicate and I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Father, is the Church attempting to evangelize robots to boost declining membership?"

"DailyBlenderBlog here, Father. Would you consider downloadable firmware to be analogous to the soul?"

"If the Church baptizes a robot, does that mean it will accept human-robot marriage?"

Father Pinter was saved from having to even contemplate how to deal with the situation by Mrs. O'Leary and her robot, making a synchronized shuffle-step up the walkway to the rectory. They were instantly surrounded as if by a wolf pack.

"Now, just a minute, just a minute, please," Mrs. O'Leary began. "They'll be plenty of time for questions later. Please let us through now."

As the group continued to jostle them, Mrs. O'Leary's robot angled its body and put forth its shoulder like the prow of ship, slowly but inexorably plowing through the sea of human obstruction. Eventually, they made their way up the rectory steps and through the door. Father Pinter did his best to shoo back the reporters, and they milled around on the front lawn, trampling flower beds and looking as crestfallen as jilted suitors.

As he closed the rectory door, Pinter asked Mrs. O'Leary, "You called them?"

"Only a couple," she replied with a gentle smile. "The rest just came. You know how news travels!"

Monsignor Ricci met them in the dining room where a small but elegantly set table awaited. They seated themselves, while the robot helped Mrs. O'Leary into a chair, then retreated to stand against the wall directly behind her. The two high school honor students, who had been granted the privilege of serving them lunch, stole furtive, fascinated glances at the motionless robot as they ferried trays back and forth from the kitchen.

"So, Mrs. O'Leary," Ricci began. "Obviously, we are here to discuss further the idea you presented to us yesterday."

"You mean to baptize my robot?" she asked innocently.

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean." The monsignor did a good job of keeping emotion out of his voice, thought Father Pinter.

Ricci continued. "I just want to make clear the Church's position on this--"

"The Church has a position on baptizing robots?"

"No, it doesn't. That's my point, Mrs. O'Leary. What you suggested is simply outside the Church's purview. It's not something the Church has ever done in its history."

"Robots have never existed before in history, Monsignor. They're something completely new."

"That's true. What I meant, Mrs. O'Leary, is that the Church has never administered sacraments to anyone, except human beings. Not to farm animals or guard dogs or ships or cars--no matter how integral they might have been to daily life. It teaches that only human beings have an immortal soul and are capable of a personal relationship with God. All other things, including your robot, have a place in creation, but membership in the Church is just not part of it."

"But why not? Adam wants to be baptized. He desires a relationship with God and membership in the Church. No farm animal has ever asked for that. No ship longs for immortality. Adam does. We've talked about it for hours. He's told me time and again how he feels."

"You're mistaking artificial personality for humanity. My cellphone has a happy face that tells me if I missed a call. My computer reminds me of my niece's birthday and makes gift recommendations in a lovely feminine voice. These things seem to have personality... should we baptize them?"

"Why don't you offer them the choice and see what they say about it? Then offer the same choice to Adam."

"Just because this robot is a dramatically more sophisticated machine doesn't make it anything more than a machine."

"Humans are animals, yet we set ourselves above all creation as unique. Why?"

"Because in the Divine plan, God has chosen to set us above them. This is our core belief--page one of the Bible: God made us in His image. This robot has been built by human technology. It's a tool. It's not a product of the Divine plan."

Mrs. O'Leary permitted herself a sip of tea before continuing. Her tone became sharper, less playful. "How do you know he's not a product of the Divine plan? How can you say God hasn't inspired engineers to create him as a new kind of being? As for being just a product of human technology, well, we have the technology to make people in laboratories now. Still, the Church has stood by the belief that every human embryo, regardless of how it came to be, is a human life with an immortal soul. The Church values sixteen cells in a petri dish more than this compassionate, thinking creature that held my husband's hand as he died. Where were you, Monsignor? Where were you that night, when I had called and asked you to come the day before? How often did you visit that man, who swept the aisles and dusted the candles of this church when you were probably still a seminarian? Where was the Church's compassion when my son married a divorced woman and some pompous twit of a priest told him he was living with another man's wife? And then he goes off to some stupid, stupid war and dies with that on his conscience! Never able to reconcile his heart, his love, with a Church he believed in with all his soul! How dare you! How dare you sit and judge things you know nothing about in the name of the Church! You are not the conscience of the Church! You are not the voice of God!"

Monsignor Ricci was stunned into silence. Father Pinter watched Mrs. O'Leary pant and cough as her rage sputtered out. The robot stepped to her side and leaned close, placing a hand on her back. It produced a pill from a compartment in its chest and crushed it to a perfect powder between thumb and forefinger, then sprinkled it into a glass of water. It held the glass ready until Mrs. O'Leary took it and drank.

"Thank you, Adam," she said softly, patting its arm. The robot receded to its discreet post by the wall.

The strained silence lingered for some time before Monsignor Ricci finally spoke.

"I'm sorry for your pain, Mrs. O'Leary," he said gently. "I truly am. And I am deeply sorry if I contributed to it. I will help in any way I can."

Mrs. O'Leary smiled beatifically, her composure almost perfectly restored. "Then you'll talk to Adam about baptizing him?"

"No, Mrs. O'Leary. I will not. I know you feel resentments, but that won't heal it."

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Well, then I don't think we have anything else to discuss. I thank you for a wonderful lunch. If you'll excuse me, I believe some nice young reporters are still waiting for me outside."

She stared defiantly across the table at Monsignor Ricci. Ricci did not flinch. Mrs. O'Leary nodded once then started to stand, the robot at her side in a heartbeat.

Father Pinter felt a twinge of panic. "Just a moment, please, Mrs. O'Leary!" He turned to Ricci. "Monsignor, would you mind if I spoke to Mrs. O'Leary alone?"

Ricci cocked his head toward Pinter, temper smoldering behind his eyes.

"Not at all, Father." He rose, neatly folded his napkin, bowed slightly in Mrs. O'Leary's direction, then left the room.

Pinter pulled his chair around to the side of the table where Mrs. O'Leary sat. She shifted in her chair, as if trying to turn it to face him directly. With a smooth motion, the robot did it for her.

"Thank you, Adam," she said. "Now, Father, was there something else you wanted to say to me?"

"Yes, there is," Pinter began. He stood and brought the Monsignor's chair around and set it as an empty third in their triangle. "You and Adam. Please, Adam, won't you sit?"

The robot did so without hesitation.

"Mrs. O'Leary, you say Adam wants to be baptized."

"I do," she replied.

"I want to be baptized," said the robot.

"All right. And you've come here to us, to your parish priests, to talk about this, correct?"

"Yes. That's what I wanted to do, although no one seems interested in that."

"I apologize, Mrs. O'Leary. Please try to understand, this is a highly unusual request. As you suggested, you could even say historically unprecedented. It's not entirely clear to us how it should be handled."

"The Monsignor seemed certain that dismissing it out of hand was the best way."

Pinter nodded. "Yes, he did seem that way, I admit. But that's not because he hasn't considered the idea. He has his reasons, and they're guided by his understanding of Church teachings. Mrs. O'Leary, I'm asking you not to make a misjudgment like that, not to dismiss out of hand the guidance Monsignor Ricci has to offer."

"I'm not dismissing guidance," she replied. "I'm seeking guidance."

"So you do accept that priests do have role in helping to guide personal spiritual decisions?"

"Of course I accept that, Father."

Pinter turned suddenly to the robot. "And you, Adam. Do you accept that?"

The robot took several seconds to reply. "I do accept that it is a role of a priest to help guide personal spiritual decisions."

"Good. Now, Adam, answer me. Do you wish to be baptized?"

"Yes. I wish to be baptized."

"Why?"

Again, a hovering delay in the robot's reply. Mrs. O'Leary looked to it, her lips drawn, her neck craning forward every so slightly in anticipation.

"Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into a life of participation in the spiritual body of the Church."

"And why do you want to join the Church?"

"The Church is the earthly embodiment of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The rituals and sacraments of the Church bestow grace that lead to a closer relationship with God the Father."

"You desire a relationship with God?" Pinter asked.

"Yes."

"Why."

"The Lord God in Heaven is the creator of all things. It is only by a relationship with God, through the person of His son Jesus Christ, that one may attain eternal life."

"Do you fear death, Adam?"

With its immobile face, the robot was incapable of showing emotion--but Pinter read its silence as nothing less than anxiety.

"Adam, do you fear death?" Pinter repeated.

"I have seen death," the robot replied. "I do not wish to die."

"Death is simply the failure of the body," Pinter explained. "Humans made of flesh and blood expire, as do all living creatures. But your body isn't subject to that natural cycle. You'll last much, much longer than we will. You can be repaired, upgraded, rebuilt, over and over. Adam, you are not bound by life and death as we know it."

The robot said nothing. Pinter went on.

"As the Son of God, Jesus came into the world to open up the way to eternal life, not of the body, but of the soul. We believe the soul is the image of God in humanity. It's our connection to something greater than ourselves. When we die, our souls return to that perfect communion with the Creator. Everything we truly are, everything we have experienced in life, goes with us into immortality. Adam, your memory can be downloaded and stored forever. Everything you have seen and learned will go into a database, along with the total knowledge of every other robot ever created. You are, in a very real way, already immortal. You don't need to be baptized to join into that."

"Baptism washes away the stain of Original Sin," said the robot, apparently having had enough processing time to make a new connection. "Without the forgiveness of sin conferred by baptism and the sacrament of penance, one can not enter into Paradise."

"Sin?" echoed Father Pinter. "Adam, have you ever committed a sin?"

Silence.

"I asked you a question, Adam. Have you ever committed a sin?"

"I do not believe so," it finally replied.

"Do you have anger in your heart? Lust? Gluttony? Vanity? Pride? Arrogance? Do you suffer from any of the weaknesses or temptations of the flesh that human beings do?"

"I do not believe so."

"You don't. By design, Adam, you don't. Humans engineers built and programmed you to be free of human failings. At the very core of your being are laws, moral values of altruism, loyalty, and self-respect, that govern everything you do. These guide you, always, to make the right choice--even on levels you're not aware of. We don't have that. Human beings have inborn selfishness. Greedy, animal urges that constantly weigh us down, leave us struggling toward the lofty example of God's perfect, selfless love. Original Sin is the capacity we have to sin. You don't have it. We require baptism. You don't."

As Father Pinter repeated his conclusion for the robot, the pure truth of it appeared to him with surprising clarity:

"You don't need to be baptized."

"But I wish to join the Church," the robot replied.

"You can't. It's not for you," Pinter fired back. "You can believe in God. You can honor the teachings of Jesus Christ. You can read the Bible and pray with Mrs. O'Leary. You can even sit in the pews when you help bring her to Mass. But you can't join the human Church. Yours is a different path."

Mrs. O'Leary stared intently at the robot, which sat as unreadable as ever. She reached out a shaky hand toward it; the robot lifted its hand to clasp hers.

"Adam," she said softly. "Do you understand what Father Pinter has said."

"I understand."

"And do you accept my guidance in this," Pinter asked.

"Yes, Father Pinter. I no longer wished to be baptized."

A shimmer of tear swelled in Mrs. O'Leary's eye. She dabbed it away with an arthritic knuckle. The robot produced a tissue from a pouch near its hip. Mrs. O'Leary politely waved it off.

"Thank you, Father," she said to Pinter. "Thank you for talking to Adam."

"Of course," he replied. "Thank you for coming to talk to us. Though, personally, I wish you had given us more of a chance before you talked to anyone else." He pointed to the window; several faces could be seen peeping in, straining to reach through the rose trellis to point their pen cameras at the robot.

"Oh, those no-good busybodies," Mrs. O'Leary clucked. "Come, Adam. Let's get rid of them."

When Father Pinter opened the front door of the rectory for Mrs. O'Leary and her robot, the swarm semi-circled around the front steps. Questions were barked from every quarter. Mrs. O'Leary held up an unsteady hand and declared simply,

"No comment! No comment!"

The robot extended its palm in a much more rigid and formidable gesture. "No comment," it echoed.

Together, they stepped through the crowd, the robot waved its outstretched arm from side to side in a firm, though non-menacing, way. The reporters gave it a wide berth, but still shouted questions and aimed cameras. At the end of the rectory's walkway, Mrs. O'Leary and the robot paused at the Madonna and Child statue and, together, made the sign of the cross before continuing onto the sidewalk away from the Church. One of the reporters noticed Father Pinter

still standing in the doorway, watching. He and a few others made a break from the pack toward him.

"Father, did you baptize the robot?"

"Father, did the water have any effect on its circuitry?"

"Father, could a robot ever be ordained as a priest?"

"Father, will the Church send missionaries to industrial robots in manufacturing plants?"

"No comment!" Father Pinter blurted as he quickly closed--and bolted--the door.

END