

“The Seventeenth Coffin”

TWENTY MINUTE VERSION

A Play in One Act

By Kevin T. Baldwin

CAST

FATHER THOMAS WEEMS – An American priest and headmaster at an all boys’ high school. 40s to late 50s. Dealing with an unthinkable tragedy at his school.

MARIA GORETTI – A woman, flexible casting over 20. Although loosely based upon the actual Italian 12-year old patron saint of chastity, youth, poverty, purity and forgiveness, she is played in the form of an adult and should not be played with any Italian accent.

BENNY – A funeral parlor worker, flexible casting over 20.

LARS - A funeral parlor worker, flexible casting over 20.

FATHER MCMANUS – An older American priest, late 50s to mid 70s, somewhat cantankerous in demeanor but still a good man.

James 5:16 – *“Confess [your] faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*

Synopsis: A priest struggles with his own convictions, and mortality, after experiencing a multiple victim homicide event at an all boys' Catholic High School graduation.

Setting: A church altar located within the Saint Aloysius Boys High School, Millborough

(LIGHTS UP on a small but picturesque Catholic Church altar. It is adorned with many flowers for a funeral service. There are two sets of two rows of small pews on either side of the stage, set diagonally so the audience can see whoever is sitting in them. A priest, FATHER THOMAS WEEMS, is seen sitting asleep in the back row of the pews. He wears a typical priest's cleric suit. Two funeral parlor workers, BENNY and LARS, wearing jackets that read "Avellino Funeral Home", are speaking over a closed casket which they are wheeling in, moving to upstage center. There is a clipboard with some paperwork affixed to it rests on top of the coffin)

FATHER WEEMS – (Startled, groggy, mumbling) I'm up, I'm up. Go Red Sox. (Looks around) Hello? Is anybody there? (Yawns) Thought I heard something. (Gets up, stretches then sees the coffin, more awake now, realizing) Oh, no. They delivered another casket to the wrong spot again. (Tenderly) I see you finally arrived, Julian. But what are you doing here? You should be at the pavilion with the others. (Admiring the coffin woodwork) It is a beautiful final slumbering place your parents have chosen for you. I hope you...(can't quite think of the right words) I hope you sleep well, my son. Me? I need some coffee.

(FATHER WEEMS returns to the pew where he was sleeping and pulls out some papers, also looking for his glasses)

FATHER WEEMS – (Continuing) Have to work on my sermon for the funeral service. I've never presided over a funeral with this many...(can't finish the statement. Pulling himself together, instead speaking in a more upbeat tone) I hope you don't mind a little preview, Julian. The Vice President will be out there today. (Looks at the casket, then after a beat) I know. That's the general reaction I'd expect for him, too. becomes more solemn) I do miss you, boy. (Speaks as he walks over to the lectern far downstage right) I can't even read the words, here, and I wrote the blessed thing. (Puts the notes down) Let's see if I can wing it from memory. (Begins to speak but finds it difficult to truly pontificate) "Friends, we have gathered today in the wake of a great sadness which has overwhelmed the entire Saint Aloysius High School com-community..." (Saddened, frustrated) No-no-no! I said I wouldn't give in to crying. I...said...I...wouldn't... (He breaks down and starts to cry)

(An attractive woman, MARIA, enters onto the stage and sits in the same pew where FATHER WEEMS had been sleeping. She wears a simple bright pastel colored dress. She watches as FATHER WEEMS struggles with the sermon)

God. This is just terrible (Crumples up the paper). My words are inadequate. But, then again, what words would suffice? (Turns toward the casket) I'm sorry Julian. (Sees MARIA) Oh. Hello.

MARIA – (Rises) Father Weems?

FATHER WEEMS – Yes, I'm sorry. We're not really set up for visitors, today. Umm, Can I help you?

MARIA – I was told I could find you here. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was just wondering if you needed some help.

FATHER WEEMS – Not unless you're a speech writer. (Curious) How long have you been here?

MARIA – (Smiling, but humble) Oh, quite awhile, Father.

FATHER WEEMS – Are you with one of the families?

MARIA – I guess you could say that.

FATHER WEEMS – Which one?

MARIA – Well, all of them, I suppose.

FATHER WEEMS – (Not impressed) Look, it's too early for riddles, Miss...?

MARIA – Goretti. Maria Goretti.

FATHER WEEMS – Miss Goretti, as you can imagine, this is a very complex time for us, right now, and...(Steps down from the lectern, walks up to MARIA then stops, looking at her with some familiarity) Have we met before? You look...I mean, your name...it sounds familiar.

MARIA – (Flattering) Well, I certainly know you, Father. Your sermons are usually the highlight of my Sunday mornings.

FATHER WEEMS – They are? Wish I had more people with your enthusiasm at my services, then. I'd probably do better than David Letterman <or other popular comedian>. (MARIA laughs)

FATHER MCMANUS – (Offstage) No-no-no! You've got it all wrong, for crying out loud!

FATHER WEEMS – Father McManus? (Calling out to offstage right) I'm in here, Father.

FATHER MCMANUS – (Enters with BENNY and LARS from the funeral parlor. He is wearing a bathrobe, waving a document in his hand. He speaks in the direction of FATHER WEEMS but not directly to him) Would you look at this? I mean, just look at this.

FATHER WEEMS – Yes, Father. What is it? (Stands next to BENNY and LARS as MARIA stands near FATHER MCMANUS)

FATHER MCMANUS – (To BENNY and LARS) This is the third coffin you've delivered to the wrong part of the campus in two days. Sweet Mother Machree, why can't you people get it right? The students need to be kept all together. There's only one that is supposed to come here and this isn't the one.

FATHER WEEMS – I'm sure, Father, that it isn't their fault. A simple mix up, I'm sure.

LARS – (To FATHER MCMANUS) We was told to bring it to the school church.

FATHER WEEMS – Ah, but it was supposed to go into the garden pavilion area, right?

BENNY – (Slapping LARS) See? I told you it was supposed to be the pavilion.

FATHERS MCMANUS – (Responding to BENNY) Yes, in the pavilion. We can't fit sixteen coffins in a church this small.

FATHER WEEMS – (To MARIA) The service is being held in the garden pavilion.

MARIA – I know.

FATHER WEEMS – It's nice. Very spacious. Lots of flowers.

BENNY – (To MCMANUS) Sorry, Father.

MARIA – (To WEEMS) Oh, that sounds like it should be just beautiful.

FATHER MCMANUS – I have got a ton of preparations left to make. This is the last kind of problem I need right now. (Thinks, tries to regain his composure)

FATHER WEEMS – (To MCMANUS) Father, relax. I'm sure they'll have no trouble moving it over for us.

FATHER MCMANUS – (Still stressed, but apologizing to BENNY and LARS) Look, I'm sorry. We're all still a little shaken. The boy was the youngest of the victims.

LARS – Hey, it's no big deal.

BENNY – Yeah, we understand, Father.

FATHER MCMANUS – All right. Well, no time to be maudlin. I'll just have to show you the way to the pavilion. Come on. I'll get the door. I've got a sermon to write. I haven't got time for this. Sweet Mother Machree.

FATHER WEEMS – I can get that...(Calling after MCMANUS who exits hurriedly) Father? Do you need my...(He is gone) help? Father? (To BENNY and LARS who do not respond) Huh. Well, I'm sorry, boys. You'll have to forgive him. He's under a lot of pressure.

BENNY – (To LARS) Whatever. (Grabbing the stage right side of the coffin) You push. I'll steer. (Muttering to himself)

LARS - All right. Go. Easy now. Easy. (BENNY and LARS move the coffin off stage right, once again leaving MARIA and WEEMS alone on stage)

FATHER WEEMS – (Melancholy) Goodbye, Julian.

MARIA – It looks like a very nice casket.

FATHER WEEMS – (Agreeing) As coffins go, I suppose. (We hear the unseen church door close once again)

MARIA – You seem to be finding this all a bit overwhelming, eh, Father?

FATHER WEEMS - I must be getting senile in my old age.

MARIA – Don't be so hard on yourself, Father. Trust me you are as young as the world is new.

FATHER WEEMS – You're a poet, Miss Goretti?

MARIA – (Smiling) Merely an optimist, and please, Maria is fine.

FATHER WEEMS – (Smiles back) You're too kind. Well, Maria, the reason you saw me so perturbed up at the lectern is because I've been writing our funeral liturgy, which is supposed to be a final opportunity for these families and our church and school community to commend the departed to God's mercy. To be quite honest...I'm flummoxed, Maria.

MARIA – Flummoxed? Sorry, I don't get that word.

FATHER WEEMS – Maybe it's before your time. (During the following, FATHER WEEMS walks up to the lectern and speaks out to the audience as MARIA crosses to watch from center stage) It means stumped, stymied. I just can't seem to come up with words which are fit for dealing with a tragedy of this magnitude.

MARIA – Well, I suppose you could just read from the Gospels. There are plenty of good words there.

FATHER WEEMS – The sermon, *my* sermon, is supposed to be a source of comfort for all those families who have just seen their nearest and dearest brutally murdered by a lunatic with an assault rifle. And, in that sermon, Maria, there is supposed to be a part about showing compassion and forgiveness for that same man who transgressed against them, against us, because God would want us to care for him, too. (Sighs, shrugs his shoulders, comes back down off the lectern to speak with MARIA) I just can't do it. I can't find a good way to work that into the sermon while at the same time find words to comfort those still grieving over the loss of their loved ones.

MARIA – It sounded pretty good from where I was sitting, Father.

FATHER WEEMS – Trust me, it isn't. Why can't I come up with the right words, Maria? Why?

MARIA – Perhaps before you can move forward you need to address your own feelings, Father. For those that died, for yourself. (Compassionately) It's perfectly reasonable to be angry Father. It was a horrible tragedy.

FATHER WEEMS – What are you? A shrink?

MARIA – No, a Catholic.

FATHER WEEMS – (Angry) Very funny. Did Father McManus put you up to this?

MARIA – (Prodding) What's the rest of it, Father?

FATHER WEEMS – (Angry) Okay, I'm pissed...I'm pissed at Paul Serenelli. (Walks back up to the lectern) I'm pissed at the shooting. I'm pissed that those boys are dead. I'm pissed at the Vice President.

MARIA – The Vice President? Why? Oh, because he's not the President?

FATHER WEEMS – (Becoming more intense) That's right, because he's not the President, but I'm even pissed at the President, too. I'm *infuriated* at economic disparity. I'm *distressed* by a mental health system which allows guys like Serenelli to purchase semi-automatic assault rifles. I'm *incensed* at the football mentality of our two-party politicians who use phrases like "it's a complex issue" because they aren't smart enough or willing enough to work past eighteenth century values being applied to twenty-first century guns and gun laws!

MARIA – Father McManus owns a gun, doesn't he?

FATHER WEEMS – Yes he does! We fight about the whole "Right to Bear Arms" constantly. He's as stubborn as a mule. I'm pissed at the lack of common sense gun regulations. I'm pissed at everything and everybody. I'm pissed...at God. All right? I'm angry at Our Father, God Almighty.

MARIA - Tell God why you're angry.

FATHER WEEMS – I don't think...Here?

MARIA – (Prodding) Go ahead. I'm sure God is listening.

FATHER WEEMS – (Looks at MARIA) Sixteen boys dead! What's NOT to be angry at him for? (Enraged) Twenty-three killed at Sandy Hook, mostly children, just babies. Another school shooting, another mall killing spree. When does it end? (Screaming to the sky) What the Hell is the matter with you? I'm sick of it, you bastard! Do you hear me? Sick of it! How many souls...*young* souls...do you have to take? (Takes a deep emotional breath, calms down slightly, then turns to MARIA and says firmly) Sixteen...boys...dead.

MARIA – You hold God responsible?

FATHER WEEMS – God could have done something. (Loses balance slightly)

MARIA – Are you all right? Do you want to come down off the podium?

FATHER WEEMS – I'll be all right. (Looks at the lectern) You know, Maria, this lectern always felt safe to me, like a warm hug from an old friend. Now it feels like a prison because I can't think of the words, the *right* words, to make sense of things. All I keep thinking is that God could have done *something*. God could have prevented it.

MARIA – Intervened?

FATHER WEEMS – (More disturbed) Yes, intervened.

MARIA – How?

FATHER WEEMS – I...don't...know! (After a beat, more melancholy) Why, Maria. Why did our Father let this happen?

MARIA – (Thinks about the question, then, after a beat, sits next to him and calmly responds) I believe what God *causes* to happen and what God *allows* to happen are two different things. Father, (gently)

MARIA – You dispute the existence of God, don't you?

FATHER WEEMS – (Defensive, rising) No-no. I never said that!

MARIA – Didn't you? If you question why God doesn't intervene NOW...then, logically, Father Weems, wouldn't you also question if God has EVER intervened?

FATHER WEEMS – (Pacing) Not necessarily. (After a beat) Okay, perhaps. (Looks at MARIA, who is still seated, admitting) All right. All right, maybe I do "question", but that doesn't necessarily mean I don't believe in God.

MARIA – (Rising, speaking in a comforting, non-accusatory tone) Doesn't it? Father, today there are over seven billion people on this one small tightly enclosed place. If *you* don't believe that God has intervened on even one person's behalf...ever... how can you believe in God at all?

FATHER WEEMS – (Thinks about it) I...I'm not sure.

MARIA – Do you believe that God created the universe?

FATHER WEEMS – (Tired) This is probably worthy of a longer philosophical debate, Maria, but it is very early. I just woke up and haven't had any coffee yet. Just where are you going with this?

MARIA – (Chuckling) I'm sorry. (Gives him a hug around the shoulders) Please bear with me, Father. (Rises up, walks around) Think about the sun, or our moon, or any of the planets we know of. Did God create each one or did God just put the elements in place for their creation to happen?

FATHER WEEMS – He created the heavens. (Realizing) Yes, I think I see what you mean.

MARIA – Do you? Good, then let's assume God did the same thing for the planet earth. God created the elements and conditions necessary for the earth to happen, including all creatures...(smiling) great and small. (The image of the stars and planets disappears)

FATHER WEEMS – You *are* a poet, Miss Goretta.

MARIA – No, still a Catholic.

FATHER WEEMS – God created the building blocks and the rest is...what? Up to fate?

MARIA - Perhaps that is miracle enough.

FATHER WEEMS – Really?

MARIA – If that is where God's responsibility is supposed to end what comes out of that is still no less miraculous.

FATHER WEEMS – (Shakes his head, rising) What Serenelli did defies rational explanation.

MARIA – God could no more control the actions of Mr. Serenelli than God could control the 9-11 attackers, the Boston and Oklahoma City bombers, those boys from Columbine, Hitler, Saddam Houssein or...

FATHER WEEMS – (Interrupting) But it just seems so damned unfair, Maria, doesn't it? I mean, to extinguish lives...lives so full of potential. It's just not fair to allow *random chance* to choose who is worthy to live or be extinguished. God should -

MARIA – But God can't do that.

FATHER WEEMS – Why not?

MARIA – Then God wouldn't be God. (Offstage noise)

FATHER WEEMS – Wait a minute. (Listens) What's that sound?

MARIA – Someone's coming.

(BENNY and LARS re-enter stage right pushing another coffin in)

FATHER WEEMS – Isn't that those same guys from the funeral home?

MARIA – Yes.

FATHER WEEMS – What's going on, guys? You bringing this back? Wait. This one's different.

BENNY – (To LARS) I'm tellin' ya, the priest said this last coffin is the one that is actually *supposed* to go in here.

LARS – (To BENNY) Alright, already, but how come?

FATHER WEEMS – Yes, why bring the casket here?

BENNY – (To LARS) It's for a special service they're havin' for the Headmaster of the school tomorrow morning. (BENNY and LARS exit off right again)

FATHER WEEMS – (Confused) The Headmaster? But that's...

MARIA – Yes, Father.

FATHER WEEMS – I don't get it. I don't remember making arrangements with Father McManus to speak tomorrow.

MARIA – No, Father. He'll be speaking.

FATHER WEEMS – Then what...

MARIA – Father, remember when you first awoke? You went over to Julian's coffin. Was there a name on it, any pictures?

FATHER WEEMS – Well, there must have been. (Thinking) At least, I thought there was. (Remembering) No, not that I recall.

MARIA – Yet you knew it was Julian in there, didn't you? How?

FATHER WEEMS – (Looks at her, then considers) Well, I must have discussed the arrangements with Father McManus at some point. (MARIA shakes her head) I told you my memory's a little fuzzy. He must have told me Julian was in the sixteenth casket.

MARIA – Did he tell you who was in the *seventeenth* coffin?

FATHER WEEMS – No. At least...I...(Thinking) I don't recall. We really haven't spoken...too much since the shooting.

MARIA – (Indicating the casket) Go up and see, Father. Maybe it will come to you.

FATHER WEEMS – (Slowly walks up to the coffin, does not open it but knows who is inside) No. (Expressing his grief to MARIA) My God, Maria. It *is*. It *is* me.

MARIA – (Nodding, explaining) Paul Serenelli was deeply troubled for most of his life. He had come to kill Father McManus for kicking him out of school years before you arrived. When he began shooting you threw yourself in front of Father McManus and several others. You saved their lives.

FATHER WEEMS – But I was just speaking to Father McManus moments ago.

MARIA – No. You were talking but he was not hearing you.

FATHER WEEMS – (Thinks) Yes, well, we always did have that kind of relationship. He was always re-writing my sermons, correcting them. I hated that. (Reconsiders) I'll...miss that. That and the arguments, and...(Remembers) Oh, my Lord.

MARIA – What else, Father?

FATHER WEEMS – (The memories come flooding back to him) Oh, my Lord. I remember now. After the shots, I mean. (Feels the fabric of his suit expecting to find bullet holes) The bullets. Strange. I don't remember any pain.

MARIA - (Smiling) Good. I'm glad. I know God is glad, as well.

FATHER WEEMS – All the pieces just came together. (FATHER WEEMS has a realization about MARIA)Wait. I know who you are, now, too. (Horrified, recalling) Oh, my God. A long time ago, you were stabbed repeatedly. You...you died.

MARIA – (Nodding) Decades before you were born.

FATHER WEEMS – You were only twelve. How can you be here now as an adult?

MARIA – God wanted me to communicate with you in this way.

FATHER WEEMS – (Saddened) But...Oh, God...Maria.

MARIA – The boy's name was Alessandro. Alessandro...Serenelli.

FATHER WEEMS – (Surprised) Serenelli? The same as...?

MARIA – A distant relative, not that anyone would ever have made the connection.

FATHER WEEMS - Wait. I remember something about this. Alessandro, you...forgave him?

MARIA – Yes, on my deathbed.

FATHER WEEMS – (Trying to fathom) But how could you, after all he had done to you?

MARIA – How could I *not* when the cost would have been his soul?

FATHER WEEMS – *You* were concerned for *his* soul?

MARIA – As much as you were concerned for the souls of the people *you* saved that day.

FATHER WEEMS – Even if I could eventually find the strength within *me* to absolve Paul, I certainly can't persuade those grieving families and friends to do the same. Not now, not like this.

MARIA – Forgiveness begins with an inspiration, Father.

FATHER WEEMS – (Doubtful) I'm not even sure that I should.

MARIA – That's the wondrous thing about time, isn't it, Father? It has a great capacity for healing.

FATHER WEEMS – You truly are a poet, Maria...and a saint.

MARIA – And still a Catholic. (BOTH laugh) And you are a good man, Thomas. (FATHER MCMANUS returns from stage right, not seeing MARIA and FATHER WEEMS. He is dressed in a cleric suit more appropriate for church now, carrying a white pall and some notes in his hands. THEY watch as FATHER MCMANUS places the white pall over the coffin, leaving the top half open so the lid can be lifted. He then performs the sign of the cross over the casket and places his hand upon it. MARIA indicates off right) Shall we go?

FATHER WEEMS – (Curious, hesitates) Wait a moment. Please?

FATHER MCMANUS – (To the coffin) Tom, I hope you don't mind, but I've got to rehearse my sermon. We wanted to have a special ceremony just in memory of you and your ultimate sacrifice. (He lifts his hand from the coffin just as FATHER WEEMS crosses over to FATHER MCMANUS and places his gentle hand on the shoulder of FATHER MCMANUS) But...why'd you do it, man? The level of your courage is, I don't know. It's indescribable. (FATHER MCMANUS reaches into the breast pocket of his suit) I've got something for you. It's not much, but it is from the heart. (FATHER WEEMS gently removes his hand as FATHER MCMANUS pulls out what looks like a red, white and blue credit card with an American flag on it) I won't be needing this anymore. (He lifts the lid of the coffin and appears to place the card inside the body's suit. FATHER WEEMS giggles briefly. FATHER MCMANUS closes the lid back down and kneels, silently praying)

MARIA – What is it?

FATHER WEEMS – It tickles. (Pulls out a similar looking credit card with an American flag on it from his own coat's breast pocket. He looks at the card) It's his NRA card. (Has an epiphany) Wait. I've got it. (To MARIA) Let me do just this one thing more. (FATHER WEEMS crosses to the lectern, takes a pen and adds some wording to his sermon. He writes fervently for a few moments)

MARIA – What are you writing?

FATHER WEEMS – (As he continues to write) I'm hoping it's an inspiration, but it also could be an exercise in futility. It could mean nothing. Then again, it could mean...everything. (He puts the pen down and prays) Heavenly Father, please let my words be deemed an effectual fervent prayer, worthy enough to touch this paper...one last time. (FATHER WEEMS blesses himself) Amen.

FATHER MCMANUS – (Simultaneously blessing himself as he finishes his own prayer) Amen. (Rises, says to the coffin) Well, I just know that the Lord has great plans for you.

FATHER WEEMS – (Gently putting his hand down on the lectern) Good-bye, old friend. (He crosses to FATHER MCMANUS) Good-bye, old friend. (Crosses to MARIA, smiling) I'm ready.

FATHER MCMANUS – (Takes out a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his tearing eyes and sniffing nose) Oh no. Blast these allergies. (FATHER WEEMS looks at MARIA who nods. They watch FATHER MCMANUS go up to the lectern. As he puts his own notes down, he sees FATHER WEEM's notes) Here now. Where'd this come from? (Reading from FATHER WEEMS's notes) "Friends, we have gathered today in the wake of a great sadness which has overwhelmed the entire Saint Aloysius High School community." (Impressed) Say, that's a pretty darn good opening.

FATHER WEEMS – (Acknowledging the miracle) He sees it! (Looks up to the sky) Thank you. Oh, thank you, Lord.

FATHER MCMANUS - Wonder who wrote this? (Continues reading) "Sixteen..." (Noting the number) Wait. No, that should be seventeen. (Making the correction, FATHER WEEMS shrugs his shoulder, exasperated) "Seventeen lives were taken from us, diminishing us, reducing down from how magnificent the world could have been with them in it. How can we ever know...what might have been?"

FATHER WEEMS – (Again acknowledging) He sees it, Maria. But, do you think he'll keep it the way it is written now?

MARIA – (Reassuring) Have faith, Father.

FATHER WEEMS – Is that coming from the Catholic?

MARIA – (Smiling, joking, gently nudging him) The Italian. (He looks at her, smiling) Same thing.

FATHER MCMANUS – (Continuing) "But I also want to speak with you for a moment about a difficult subject. It's probably a concept which is so far from your minds now, but one which you should keep your hearts ready for when the time is right...forgiveness. (FATHER WEEMS is at ease as he exits off right with MARIA) You see, many years ago, there was a woman named Maria Goretti..." (LIGHTS DIM)

(Blackout)

The End