

Attendance

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St. Paul said: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body, I do not know, God knows — was caught up to the third heaven...and heard unspeakable words...” (2 Cor. 12: 2-4). Apparently he was speaking about himself.

I know a man too, who, in the late 1970’s, was the centre leader in Paris and was caught up in a crusade. He had quite a fair contingent of international “fanatics for God” and they occupied a spacious mansion called Villa Aublet. Those were the heydays of the International One World Crusade, locked in a fight to the death with communism. “Stop your crusade or we will kill you” was the threat the centre leader received over the phone. Little did he know that they meant business. What was to be done? There were many lives at stake and a mission to be accomplished. The centre leader prayed and came to this conclusion: to continue to serve in this world or in the other. *Fiat voluntas tua.**

And so it came to pass at the end of a busy working day, the centre leader was seated in his office reviewing the achievement of the day with the lady secretary. “Can you smell something burning?” she asked. “Yes, I do. Please go check the rooms along the corridor whilst I go downstairs to check in the kitchen, lest the gas has been left open.” The kitchen crew had diligently finished their work and everything was ok there. So the centre leader proceeded upstairs to regain his office when a little voice gently whispered into his ear: “You’ve already checked the office.” So he paused. And the bomb went off.

What he and the lady had been smelling was the fuse burning, cut long enough to allow time for the bomber to make his escape. There was an ear-splitting blast. Everything went dark; the place was full of smoke, dust and debris. And out of the eerie, deadly silence came a feeble moan: “Please help me!” The centre leader looked into what used to be the corridor. A blanched figure of a woman. Why has one arm suddenly gone longer than the other? The poor lady had leaned forward to look into a room and only one arm had been caught in the full blast; an arm shattered in multiple places, hanging down limply, with shards and wood splinters stuck in her flesh... The centre leader claims he still carries in his heart the agonizing, horrified look of that bravest of ladies. He could only catch hold of her before she fainted.

Everyone was peremptorily told to leave the building, dressed or half-dressed. “But...” “There is no but. You do as I say. You get an ambulance... You call the police.” Too much at stake to think of collecting your things. Apart from our lady crusader, not a single person was wounded. The centre leader came off without a scratch but with much food for thought. Who, or what, was the little voice that whispered in his ear to coax him away from his office where a fuse was burning out and a deadly blast seconds away? To serve or not to serve? In this world or the other? This seems to be the law of attendance in a nutshell.