

The Trial

Our children graduated college and moved to the city, so it's just my wife Rose and me. We live in a village settled by our ancestors who fled the Great Potato Famine in the 1840s. They came to Rhode Island because it was a state that tolerated Catholics. Our faith and customs have remained the same over the years.

Each Sunday, Rose goes to mass, and I go to The Boar's Head. They are similar in three ways. First, they both offer fellowship with people of similar tastes. Then, you get a nip of the old brew in both places—more than a nip at a bar. And, if you believe God is everywhere, then He's at the bar just like He's at mass. The wife and I get home about the same time and spend the rest of the day together.

One Sunday, when I asked her as usual, "How was mass?" she said, "Mass is mass. It never changes. Everything we did last week, we did again today. Everything we did today, we'll do again next week. How about the pub?"

"Well, I'd say a little bit different."

"Oh?"

"A fight almost broke out."

"A fight? At the Boar's Head? For heaven's sake, what could you boys possibly fight about?"

"You're not gonna believe this. It was about God."

"God? A fight over God? In a bar?" She laughed out loud.

"Laugh if you want, but I'm not kidding."

"Did some Protestant sneak in and say something wrong?"

"No, it was Pat—Pat Robinson. He was hitting it pretty hard and started spouting off about the shape the world's in today, the homeless, the environment, and corruption. He kept saying God was doing a shitty job. The whole bar could hear him. He went on and on, not blaspheming, but sort of insulting God.

"When he mentioned abusive priests, that ticked off some of the guys. We don't go to mass often, but we're still Catholics."

“So, why didn’t you put him in a taxi and send him home?”

“We tried, but he refused to leave. He kept nursing his drink and saying, ‘We should do something.’ Then his eyes got so big you’d think he’d seen the Virgin.

“I got it!’ he said, still shouting. ‘I say we put God on trial—for mismanagement and gross negligence.’ Then he started blubbing. He wiped his eyes and nose and got very serious. He said, ‘Let’s put God on trial.’

“Finelli said, ‘Pat, you’re crazy. How could you put God on trial? First off, who’s got the nerve to judge God? And where would we find a jury of His peers?’

“Pat said, ‘We can have a trial without a jury. We only need a judge.’

“Finelli kept on. ‘And who’d do that? Not an atheist, and a religious person wouldn’t be impartial.’

“Pat was drunk, but he thought for a moment. ‘How about Marty?’

“He looked at Marty and back to us. ‘He’s the best barkeep in Rhode Island, and he never takes sides. He’ll be fair.’

“Marty jumped in. ‘Hey. If this is about God, leave me out. I don’t want to be in the middle of it. I’ve got enough troubles without that.’

“Pat was slurring a bit, but he said, ‘No, Marty. You’re the only one who can do it. You’re fair. You look at both sides. We all trust you.’

“Marty said, ‘You’re asking me to run a trial with God on the dock? Are you kidding?’

“Some of the guys shrugged like it was okay with them. A few brave souls said it might be fun.

“I told the boys we should agree to shut Pat up, but I warned them, ‘Keep it quiet. If word gets out, we’ll have Father Francis on our tails, and we’ll be the laughingstock of the whole town.’”

Rose interrupted, “Excuse me, but it sounds to me like you all had too much to drink, and Pat’s the worst of the lot. A bunch of silly old men.”

The following Sunday, when she left for mass, Rose grinned and said, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, like put God on trial.” Then she waved as she drove away with a big smile on her face.

The parking lot at the bar had more cars than usual. The lights inside were turned up, and a crowd was chattering away. Marty was doing a land-office business. Pat greeted me, “Glad you’re here. You know how to organize things.”

Pat was right. I’ve had experience organizing things, but not a trial, and not a trial for God. Pat yelled. “Listen up. Mickey here’s gonna help us get started.”

People looked at me, and I looked around. No one was laughing. I wasn’t sure where to start. Marty had finally agreed to be the judge, but that was all we had.

“All right,” I said. “We have a judge, and there’ll be no jury. So, we only need someone to ask questions and witnesses to testify. I’m thinking maybe two or three for the prosecution and the same for the defense. Pat should be the lead-off witness for the prosecution since this is all his idea.”

Finding witnesses to defend God should be no problem in a Catholic town but finding people who want to testify against Him—not so easy. And since Pat started all this ruckus, I told him to find another witness and left it with him. A week would give Pat time to find a witness or change his mind. We’d work out something about lawyers. The following Sunday, when I got home, I said to my wife, “Turn on Fox News. They interviewed Pat. He was sober and dead serious.”

...This is Bobby Burns for Fox News, coming to you live from the site of a most unusual event. To give some background, some men in a bar called the Boar’s Head got into a heated argument about God and ended up deciding to put God on trial for malfeasance. They have organized a trial, and bar owner Marty Matthews is to serve as judge. Unfortunately, there’s no room for our camera and equipment inside, but we’ve interviewed people leaving the bar.

Pat Robinson, the man who started the affair, gave us some details...

Mr. Robinson, let me ask you. Was it your idea to put God on trial?

It was. I have questions. The world’s going to pot, and not the marijuana kind. If God is so great, why all the mess?

What do you think might be the outcome of the trial?

I’ve no idea. We’ll have to wait and see. I doubt if it will be “Lock Him up.”

Rose continued cutting the lettuce for a salad. “I thought you would have forgotten about it before now. Turn that nonsense off. No wonder nobody watches news anymore.”

The following Sunday, I left for the pub right after breakfast. Half the town was there. The reporter was talking into the camera:

...Ambulances have taken away a couple of people who fainted due to the press of the crowd, but the people are orderly. There is no evidence of police presence or any other sort of crowd control.

Ye gods! I thought. This has turned into a circus.

I went around to the back and still had to get past security. Marty was behind the bar, busy as a hamster. He ordered more supplies for the curious who came to see the place where God was on trial. And he arranged two tables like an American court, for the prosecution and the defense. One of the chairs on the defense side looked more like a throne.

“Marty, what’s with the fancy chair?”

“Out of respect, you know. All this makes me nervous. I’m anxious to get this over and get back to normal. I’ll tell you one thing. If it turns out bad, I’ll personally package Pat and send him someplace where he doesn’t even speak the language. See if he can talk his way out of that.”

The onlookers were whispering like they were in a mortuary or at the bedside of a sick person.

Marty picked up a gavel, moved just to the left of the beer taps, and banged on the bar. “Okay, folks, settle down. We’ll begin with a reading of the charges and follow with testimony from the side bringing the charges. Then the defense will have a chance to—to defend. Then I’ll give you my decision.” Marty came up with a Bible, which he placed on the bar.

Pat walked to the bar and put his hand on the Bible. “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me.”

Marty said, “You mean, ‘So help me God,’ don’t you?”

Pat said, “No. I mean I’m going to tell the truth.”

Marty shrugged and said, “Okay. So, who’s gonna question Pat?”

A middle-aged man in an expensive suit came out of the crowd. “Your honor, I’m Justin Farrington of the law firm of Brown, Baker, Lithgow, and Farrington. When we heard about your situation in Providence, I called Mr. Patterson to see if we could assist. Since this is an informal court, I see no reason to produce my credentials, but I can if necessary.”

Pat looked smug like he had pulled off a coup. A murmur came from the spectators, and Marty said, "Okay. Get on with it."

Farrington began, "Mr. Robinson, please state your name and give your city of residence."

"I'm Pat Robinson. I was born and grew up in this here village. I spent two years in the military and two years in college. Other than that, this is my home and will be till I die."

"Mr. Robinson, you're charging God with malfeasance. Do you know what malfeasance means?"

"Yes. It means holding an office and not carrying out the duties properly."

"You say you have evidence God is not carrying out his duties. What do you believe those duties to be?"

"The Church teaches us God has all power, knows everything, past, present, and future, and He's just and good."

"So, you don't disagree with what you were taught? You're only alleging God is not doing His job, correct?"

"Correct."

Farrington said, "Then would you explain your allegations?"

Pat took a notebook from his jacket, opened it, and looked at his notes.

"First, what about Kerry's son over in Providence? When my son did some wheelies down by the off-ramp, the patrolmen brought him to my front door, said I should talk to him, got in their patrol car, and drove away. When Kerry's son was stopped, not by one but two patrolmen, for what they said was a broken taillight, they got him out of his car, gave him a sobriety test, took him to the station, and fingerprinted him. His dad had to go get him out, and they had to pay towing and storage to get his car out of impound. Black lives matter, you know. Where's the justice?"

Farrington said, "Pat, are you blaming all injustices on God? Do you think God should run everyone's life?"

Pat said, "He should stop injustice, yes. Unfortunately, it appears more like He's hiding in a corner."

Some of the crowd looked at each other and nodded as if Pat were speaking for them.

“Is there more evidence you want to give?”

Pat continued. “Well, we all know Bobby McEwan, James and Jenny’s only child. He was six and doing good in first grade. He got sick, then he was gone.

”Some of the McEwan’s neighbors nodded and whispered to each other.

“Quiet, please,” Marty said. “We’re not taking sides. We’re taking testimony.”

Pat continued, “Bobby will never grow up, marry, have a family, or grow old with his grandchildren around him. So, why didn’t God protect him? What’s the use of a child living only six years?”

Farrington said, “We’ll all die. So, why should it matter when we go, young or old?”

“When we get old, we’ve had a turn at-bat. We’ve had a life. But why is a kid born if he’s only going to live six years? Taking a six-year-old is not right.”

Farrington said to Pat, “So you think we should never even get sick?”

“Not necessarily but dying so young is wrong. God has the power to protect Bobby, and He didn’t.”

Farrington led Pat on. “You have one more case where you charge God with malfeasance. Please explain.”

“What are we reading about the Kurds? Our country took them on board. Now we’re making them walk the plank. Why has God allowed us to betray them and potentially wipe them out? Aren’t they the good guys? Yet, on newscasts, we see men in city streets firing automatic weapons. What must their wives and children be going through? What did they do to deserve being caught in the crossfire? I call it malfeasance.”

“Is this your personal experience?”

“No. How does it happen that I have an easy life while people in other parts of the world get abused and shot at? I bet they’re as good as I am. They have families, just like me.”

Farrington asked, “Do you have anything more to add?”

“One last thing,” said Pat. “I have petitions here sent to me by post and over the internet in the last weeks. There are a lot of people, thousands, who are asking the same questions. They think

God could do a better job policing the world.” He handed a stack of papers to Farrington, who passed them on to Marty, who laid them aside.

Farrington said, “Thank you, Mr. Robinson.” Then he turned to the other table and said, “Your witness.”

Barney McGill, a local lawyer, had just risen from his chair at the defense table when a strong jolt shook the building. Some ducked under tables. Others near the door ran outside. Most looked frightened, not knowing what to do. We waited. A second shock never came, and everybody took a deep breath.

“No harm done,” said Marty. “There might be an aftershock, but it won’t be as strong as this one. This is a good place to stop. We’ll take up here next Sunday.”

By the time I got there the following Sunday, everything seemed in place and ready to go. Marty said, “Pat’s still under oath. Let’s get on with the defense.”

Barney McGill rose and approached Pat. “Mr. Robinson,” he said, “Do you admit to being human?”

Pat smiled. “I’d have to say I do.”

“Then,” said McGill, “your knowledge is limited.”

“It is.”

“So, no matter what the big picture is, you are not capable of comprehending the entire operation of the world. Is that correct?”

“True.”

“Is it possible God is acting properly, and you simply do not understand what God is doing?”

“Possibly, but I’m not blind. I can see what’s going on here and around the world. People are starving, taken into slavery, treated like cattle.”

McGill said, “But do you admit there could be a higher purpose you are not aware of?”

“My father told me, ‘If you want to feed your family, don’t rob a bank; get a job. How you do something is just as important as what you aim to do.’ God should look to His methods. How could anyone say the death of masses of people contributes to a greater good?”

“Pat, do you believe in free will, where a person is free to make bad choices as well as good ones?”

Pat said, “I do, but I don’t think Bobby Hurt made a bad choice at age 6. I don’t think Kerry’s son Bobby chose to be black. I don’t think millions of Armenians, blacks, and Jews who were exterminated made bad choices.”

Pat sat down, and Farrington said. “Call Jason Jones.”

Jason came forward and took the oath correctly, “so help me, God,” and stood to Marty’s left.

“Mr. Jones,” said Farrington, “are you in agreement with the charge of malfeasance? Is it your testimony that God is not doing a good job managing the world?”

Jason said, “It is. It seems like God treats the world like a child playing with toy soldiers. He puts us in situations where someone always gets hurt, and He shows no signs of feeling for us. Why doesn’t He do something—anything? If we don’t get an explanation, what are we to think? Does He want us ignorant? Can’t He communicate with us, or is He incompetent?”

Farrington said, “Thank you, Mr. Jones.” Then he turned to Barney McGill and said, “Your witness.”

People began to talk among themselves, but Marty shut them down. “Order! Quiet!” McGill said. “Mr. Jones, we all know you. You’re in mass as much as any man among us. Are you a man of faith?”

“I’d say yes. I am a man of faith.”

“Then do you believe in life after death?”

“The way I see it, there has to be. Good people should get a reward, and bad people should be punished for the wrong they’ve done. So, yes. I believe in life after death.”

McGill said, “Then why are you here, testifying that God is guilty of malfeasance when you believe in the end, justice will be done?”

“The world suffers a lot of pain and evil while we wait in hope life will someday be fair. I hope it’s true, but what if we’re wrong?” The quiet chatter suggested Jason had voiced concerns held by several of those listening.

Marty said, "I think we've heard enough for today. We'll finish the defense next week. So, drink up and go home. Happy Sabbath."

When I got home, I turned on the TV news. The reporter was saying:

...Bobby, bring us up to date. What's going on?

Yes, the trial continues. Last Sunday, an earthquake shook the building, and people almost panicked. It only lasted seconds, but some people wondered if it might be a sign.

Right, Bobby. We felt the quake. Some people outside the bar also took it as a sign. However, we live near a fault. A quake now and then we take in stride. So, when will we get the next installment of our drama?

They expect to conclude testimony next Sunday.

The following Sunday, when Rose was putting breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, she said, "We'd better go early, or we might not get inside. Father Francis will understand."

Like before, I parked about a block away, and we walked down the alley to the back entrance. Marty had doubled the security. Only a small rectangle of the floor was visible in front of the bar. Marty was in high spirits. Whispering produced a steady hum. Marty greeted people and served behind the bar. When the time came, he gaveled the room to order.

"All right," he said, "let's get started. Today it's time for the defense." Emerging from the crowd came Father Francis in a black robe with a biretta covering his bald spot. When he gave Rose the eye, she looked like a kid caught taking money from the collection box. He walked past her to Marty's left and raised his hand.

"I swear to tell the God's awful truth and nothing but."

Marty said, "Father, aren't you forgetting?"

"I'm forgetting nothing."

"Sorry, Father. I thought—"

"We're not here to listen to what you think. Get on with it."

"What do you have in mind, Father?"

"I don't need McGill to question me. I know the questions."

Marty said, “Then please, Father, proceed.”

Father Francis began, “We all know and love Pat Robinson. He has not always attended mass, but he always pitches in when we try to raise money for the church. Pat’s troubled because things in the world seem chaotic—and rightfully so. Nobody’s disputing that. The question is: what responsibility does God have for the chaos? And the answer, of course, is none. God is a God of order, not chaos. We see it plainly with the movement of the stars and changing of the seasons. The entire universe is like a giant computer with its parts moving in perfect order.”

Pat, emboldened by his recent time in the spotlight, nudged Farrington, who said, “Begging your pardon, Father, but we’re not talking about the universe. We’re talking about the earth and the mess the world’s in.”

Father Francis was unaccustomed to being challenged and slightly flustered. “Right. Well, what appears like chaos on earth is chaos from a human perspective. The divine perspective is different.”

Farrington again, “How do we know that, Father?”

“We know it by faith,” Father Francis said. “There’s no other way.”

Farrington had a look of wonder on his face. “So, Father, there is no other way? It’s faith or nothing?”

Father Francis said, “That’s about the sum of it. You believe, or you don’t.”

“There’s no real evidence? Just faith?”

“Faith. That’s the final answer.”

“I rest my case,” said Farrington.

All eyes turned to Marty. He said, “We’ve heard the testimony. We can’t deny the facts. But we also don’t know what the end of the story will be. Will there be justice later? Is there “pie in the sky by and by?” Pat and Jason made good points. The world is full of injustice and chaos. Father Francis’ answer takes the long view held by many people. God has been silent. He neither defends Himself nor offers explanations. We can’t deny the reality of the world around us, but there’s always the unknown, an element of mystery. And we have no answers, except, like Father Francis says, faith. Lacking more evidence, I say we have a mistrial on our hands.”

Pat jumped out of his chair. "I object! Just because God doesn't come to His own defense doesn't let Him off the hook. The world needs serious fixing! Saying God is going to fix it someday is not enough!"

The people in the room got excited and began to argue.

To my surprise, Pat's face turned from anger to stone. Jaws clenched, he walked to the bar. "Two cases of whiskey," he said and dropped a wad of cash on the bar. Marty hesitated then hoisted them from under the bar. Pat said, "I'm going fishing." He marched out of the room, a case under each arm. As he passed, he spoke to his wife. "Don't worry. I'll be back when I get back."

Fox News reporters stopped Pat on his way out. As he stalked past, Pat said, "I've nothing to say to you. We can't even acknowledge the state our world is in or admit God's doing nothing about it."

He dropped the cases of whiskey in his pickup, pulled out of the parking lot, and drove the short distance to the dock. We watched as he loaded the cases of whiskey on his skiff and headed out to sea. His boat disappeared over the horizon while we watched in silence.

The following day, Pat's wife called me and said his boat had been sighted in the bay, and the only thing on the boat was a half a bottle of whiskey.

We formed a search party and organized so no part of the nearby sea would go unsearched. The weather was ideal, the sea was calm, but we found no debris and no sign of Pat's body. Police helicopters swept the area for hours. Finally, after searching and crisscrossing the area all day, near sunset, we came in for the night. Had we seen the last of Pat? His well-known propensity to drink too much, his state of mind, and his feelings about the trial didn't give much hope.

Wednesday evening, as we discussed a plan for a service for Pat, sorrow was as constant as drops from an IV in a hospital room.

"He was a good man despite his faults."

"He was a good father to his children."

"He was always a man with strong convictions."

"He shouldn't have got so upset. For what?"

"And I remember, even when he disagreed, he stated his opinions like a gentleman. We'll miss him."

“Now, Molly must manage on her own. We’ll have to look after her.”

Even Father Francis pointed out Pat had more doubt than faith, more questions than answers, but more courage than most of us, and after all, he said, “He was religious.”

Rose was waiting for a report when I arrived home. “What did you boys decide?” she asked.

“When we were about to finalize the details, a fight almost broke out.”

“A fight! You must be kidding. How can a fight break out during preparations for a wake?”

“We were nursing our drinks, recalling stories about Pat. We agreed to wait a respectable time. Marty was putting the money we collected in his safe at about 9:00 when the door swung open. In came an elderly man, followed by none other than Pat Robinson. His clothes were a little soiled, but he was carrying his purple life jacket we all recognized. We jumped up and surrounded him.

“Pat! Man!”

“We thought you were dead!”

“Where have you been? What happened?”

We listened while Pat told us, “First, I want you to meet my new friend and rescuer, Fred. This good man and his wife hauled me off the beach, put me to bed, and took care of me. Well, you know how upset I was after the trial. As usual, I tried to drown it in drink. When I was turning to come in, I fell overboard. My lifejacket kept me afloat, but I was too drunk to get back in the boat. The harder I tried, the sleepier I got. Before I knew it, the boat had drifted away, and there I was, floating like a cork.”

Marty put a beer in Pat’s hand, and Pat continued. “The tide took me north, but eventually, I washed up on the shore by Grover’s Cove. I was out of my head for a day or two. After that, they wouldn’t let me leave till I was fully recovered.”

“Why didn’t you let us know you were okay?”

“They have no telephone, and they’re not even on the highway. I suppose I could have got back a little sooner,” and he smiled his broad grin, “but knowing this crowd, I thought if I gave you an extra day, you’d have me canonized. Then I could come back a saint. Was I right?”

“Right?” said Marty as the men rose like they were ready to dogpile Pat.

“You no-good son of your father! You have no idea what you put us through. You’re not a saint, you—!” He gasped for breath. ‘You’re a rat!’”

Rose smiled sweetly and said, “Knowing the boys, I’m sure you forgave Pat.”

And in time, we did forgive Pat. I can’t speak for God.