

The Father

The Father

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Saint Dominic's Media

Belleville, Illinois

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ISBN: 979-8-9857040-0-6 (Paperback)

Printed in the United States of America

19 29 21 22 23 24 25 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the Gracious and
Beautiful, Chosen, Blessed Mary
Queen of Heaven
Reigning in Glory
Radiant with the splendour
of her Son, Jesus Christ
the Lord of all Creation

abbot moses

The Abba came to Abbot Moses one day and said:
Abba, Father, I have spent thirty years in the desert; I
have punished my body and have only eaten bread with
a little salt and some greens. I have wearied my body with
fasts and vigils and much hard labour.

What more must I do to obtain my soul's desire?

The Abbot Moses held up his hands and from his
fingertips leapt up flames of fire. 'My son, stay with me; I
will make you into a living flame'.

~ sayings of the desert fathers”

prologue

The long procession filed out of the large Monastery chapel. Walking at the end, just before the Cardinal, was the new Abbess, Mother Mary Angela of the Crucified Christ, wearing her new Pectoral Cross and holding, now, her pastoral staff.

The Cardinal walked slowly; he was now 87 years old and beginning to fail; these long ceremonies tired him greatly.

A middle-aged, Bishop Lipgurd VG was MC for the Mass and Ceremony; he was a close friend of the cardinal and assisted the aged prelate, unobtrusively. Walking, before them and Mother Abbess, was a large number of altar servers and then other Religious from various Congregations.

The Chapel was filled to capacity. The lay people today were able to see the 45 strictly enclosed Benedictine Nuns of Transfiguration Abbey, as the grille was open for this special occasion when their monastery was being raised to the status of an Abbey.

Besides the parents and relatives of the nuns, there was a large group of villagers who had known the Abbess since she had been born on a local farm; the farm was

now managed by a William Harris, the brother of the Mother Abbess.

After the cardinal had unvested and a good number of people had dispersed to a local hall where refreshments were available, the cardinal and bishop attended the Abbess, for a short meeting.

The three people had known each other for over twenty years, so could speak freely without reserve when they were alone together.

The Abbess, Mother Angela, was a tall woman, young for her great office of Abbess. She was a woman of great beauty; a beauty enhanced by the brilliantly white guimpe surrounding her face, the time-honoured, floor-length Benedictine Habit and voluminous black cowl. She knelt for the cardinal's blessing; he then asked her for a nun's blessing, and she drew a small cross on his forehead with her thumb.

She then put her two hands into the very deep sleeves of her cowl and bowed her head to the cardinal. When she spoke; her voice was compelling: controlled, and cultured.

"Your Eminence, thank you for the Holy Mass and the glorious ceremony of Installation; thank you, also, Your Excellency, Bishop Lipgurd." She then smiled and spoke gently to the old cardinal.

"I realise Eminence, how extremely tiring it must have been for you...but I'm so happy that you were well enough to make the long journey and able to come to us today.

“Gentlemen, I won’t keep you long – I know they are waiting for you down at the hall – but I have something to show you.” She clapped her hands and Sister Sacristan opened the door leading to a small reception room.

“Is it ready, Sister?” The Abbess asked.

“It is, Mother Abbess, do come and see. I think you will be very, pleased.” The Abbess turned to the two men.

“Come with me. The community wanted to give me a present for the occasion, and I asked them to make something for me that would be a surprise. Let us see what they have come up with.” She smiled and led the way into the small room.

On the table was a gleaming ‘imitation’ brass-like structure lying on an ‘imitation’ coffin. All of them looked with wonder at the beauty of the effigy that the nuns had created, secretly, as a surprise for their new Abbess.

It was nearly four feet long and was an effigy of an old dying priest.

“But how was it made, Mother?” The cardinal cried aloud, astonished at the reproduction, and the likeness.

“It is beautiful!”

“I am frightened to touch it, Eminence, I don’t know how it was made, but I think it is absolutely wonderful and so real to life, I feel frightened, but honoured, just looking at it – he was such an important part of my life.”

The cardinal closed his eyes in anguish. He was in the first of his ‘two days’. Mother Abbess immediately understood, and taking the old man’s hands, put her own around them.

Bishop Lipgurd and the Abbess shared the cardinal's anguish and emotion, at the memories evoked by the effigy. After a moment, His Eminence, Terrence Cardinal McViver, lifted up his head and looked at the Mother Abbess. "Mother, will we ever forget all that we have seen; that we have lived through?" He sighed, "I shall die soon, Mother - he told me that - and ... through the mercy of God... please God... I shall see him again."

The Mother Abbess stood up straight, her hands back in her cowl, and spoke firmly. "Eminence, we *must never* forget. We three have been given a rare privilege that very few people have received: we have actually been part of this extraordinary priest's life..."

The Mother Abbess paused to think, her beautiful eyes closed. She then looked at the two men. "I've lost count of the years; how long ago did it all begin, Eminence? I *think* it began before I was born..." She looked at the cardinal and smiled, gently. "You should know, Eminence, you were my second father; you were, actually, at my birth, my mother told me."

The cardinal raised his head and looked at the great Lady Abbess with affection; he remembered that frightening and glorious day as though it were yesterday.

"I remember it from the beginning, Mother Abbess...I was only an Archbishop then; I had this extraordinary, brilliant, genuine, serious, holy priest, from a very wealthy background, at Bishop House with me. He was my canon lawyer... .."



The country people, for many miles around the little country town of Burnside, all knew of the priest. They did not, actually, *know* him, but they knew *of* him. They called him various names: some attributing to him great evil deeds, with possible sinister backgrounds, while others painted him in heroic colours, calling him a saint.

The majority, however, were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and just left him alone. They waited for the mystery of the priest who lived in the abandoned, ruins of a small country Church, to be made known, someday.

They had heard, from the builder, that the Father had the old Church ruin partitioned. In the back part was the place where he lived; his kitchen, laundry, bathroom, bedroom, all in one. He had a table for eating but with one chair only, and a smaller stool for his computer, one cabinet of three metal filing drawers, a few hooks on the wall for his clothes, a large plastic drum with a tap in it for holding water, some shelves for books, and a bundle of bed clothes, including a thin mattress which he rolled up each morning from the floor.

Along one window at the back wall he had them build a bench and it was there he prepared his vegetables, cooked his meals either in a Microwave or on an old Primus stove. Above the bench were a few cooking implements, two or three saucepans, three tin cups and plates, two large knives, a few pieces of cheap cutlery and a few other, very basic needs, used in a kitchen. There was also, surprisingly, an electric jug.

There were no floor coverings in either section of the old Church, just the original bare boards.

The people knew the electricity was connected as lights showed in the front area of the partition which, apparently, the man used as his Church – although no one had ever been invited there. The water was laid on as well but only accessible from a tap on one side of the old building. The man used this for all his needs; he had several buckets that he used, and he had a large tin tub he used as a bath.

Generally, it came to be the custom for a good number of people to leave food in the old bucket at the front gate in the high wooden fence which had been built to encircle the old ruin where the man and his dog lived. The townspeople were, in fact, more concerned for the dog, than the man; after all, the dog was a dog, and dogs ate a lot. Because of this, there were more cans of dog food than anything else.

The police knew of the man; they called him ‘Father’, together with something else which they found difficult to understand. The police called him a ‘hermit’. When people asked the police to tell them the hermit’s name,

they refused to do so, adding that he had particularly requested that no one would know his name. Strangely enough, the police respected that plea.

The people found this difficult to understand, but over time they became used to the man, and they happily called him 'Father', whenever they happened to see him – which was extremely rare. He was sometimes seen at the grocer shop buying seeds, and it was certainly known that he grew a lot of vegetables for he had been seen at the motor repair shop trying to get his old tools repaired, or belted back into shape, with a heavy hammer.

The town people also knew that 'Father' had a computer and that he paid all his bills by net banking – and paid them promptly which, of course, endeared him to the shopkeepers.

There was a little bell in the wooden gate which had a small trapdoor in it. Some people did go, in the early days, to the bell and did ring it, in order to introduce themselves, just to be friendly. Father always answered softly and courteously, but never invited them inside, or opened the gate to anyone. He would only speak briefly, give the visitor his blessing and close the hatch. which was locked on his side.

The ones who did see the 'Father' made sure they remembered what he was wearing so they could tell their neighbours. He was all in black; a long black robe to his sandals, with long, full sleeves, a sort of short cloak and a long, strange type of apron, again in black, which, later on, they found was called a 'scapular'. The robe had a hood attached and this was pulled down on the priest's

head, so it was difficult to see his face very clearly although they did note he was frighteningly thin and emaciated looking; his head was shaven closely and he had a short, full beard of black hair going grey. He apparently wore this one outfit, they noticed, all the time, even when he came out to go to the shops. Even going down to the shops, he kept his eyes down and never spoke, unless it was to answer a greeting, or a question.

There were, from time to time, parcels delivered, and usually at the beginning of each year, a heavy box of wine was left at his front gate. That used to cause a lot of whispering in the beginning: 'he was an alcoholic'; 'he was a hopeless drunk ostracized by his family', while others hinted at riotous drunken parties held at the old Church, which of course everybody knew, was complete nonsense.

There was another gate in the back fence, again locked. It led to the empty countryside behind the ruin, where sheep grazed, then up to the mountains where the forests began. The Father and his dog went for a long walk nearly every afternoon, over the fields and even right up to the forests. Sometimes they went further into the forests and those trips were the joy of his faithful companion – his dog.

The Father's dog was a small non-descript mongrel, which adored his master and accompanied him everywhere, obediently at his heel, even to the shops. He tried never to let the Father out of his sight for a moment. His name was Ruffy. He would not lie down to sleep until he heard the Father gently snoring in his bed on the floor

of the living area of the Church. This was easy for Ruffy to do, as he shared the lower part of the bed with his master.

Ruffy was a brown and white patched livewire, who loved racing madly after real, and imaginary, rabbits, or birds. He had a job as warden of the vegetable garden and guarded it vigilantly. Spotting a large bird descending on Father's crop, he would creep, lifting his paws high in the air to keep his presence unknown, then swoop with a resounding, wild bark, that drove the bird screaming into the air and flying for its life.

Ruffy was particularly busy when the tomato crop was in full fruit. The birds found them irresistible and the little dog was running most of the day guarding the crop. He liked the corn crop best; it became his special game to hide from Father among the tall stems with their broad leaves which provided excellent cover. Often Father, coming out to the garden would see the little tail wagging, frantically, through the corn stalks, but would pretend not to see it, but when Ruffy jumped out, with a 'special' bark, standing triumphantly before his master, Father would register great surprise and alarm.

Ruffy was always thrilled and wanted to play that game over and over. Father had to call a halt after two or, at the most, three times. He would then tell Ruffy, seriously, that they had work to do; they could play in the afternoon when they went for their walk.

When Father had been there nearly one full year, the people had become used to him and, in general, began to think there was something special about their town

now, they had a 'hermit' living in it! He caused no trouble, he made no noise, he was spotlessly clean and was courteous to everyone, so he became a kind of 'loved eccentric' that they had in their midst. He was generous too. When his crop of vegetable was more than he and Ruffy could eat, he would take bunches of celery, or lettuces or tomatoes, sometime even potatoes, and leave them at people's doors during the night.

Father, on his first anniversary, in 'residence', decided to take Ruffy for a good long walk up the hill into the forests which he loved, to mark the occasion. He was, afterwards, troubled as to where that suggestion had come from – when he surveyed the disaster that followed, in hindsight.

Father put a couple of apples in his ample pockets and a lump of his version of bread as well. Ruffy loved the doughy mixture made of flour, water, salt and practically nothing else, boiled in water, then hardened in the microwave. That would be their picnic.

Out in the paddocks, Father noticed with distress that the foxes had been ravaging again as he found two dead sheep with hideous wounds. He warned Ruffy to be extra careful as they passed into the forests and he made the little dog stay close to his side all the time.

He knew it was rare for foxes to attack humans, but a little dog would be no match for them. He was pondering whether to continue, or not, when he was violently attacked by a vixen who flew at his body ripping the front of his tunic open and some of his outer skin as well. He could not believe this was happening and stood

still in a state of shock. He then saw he had blundered near a fox's lair and there were four little infants that their mother was guarding.

Father responded instinctively with his arm, trying to knock the savage beast away and had his arm, almost ripped open by the razor-sharp teeth. Ruffy was going mad; frantically trying to attack the fox from behind - savaging the hind leg of the fox, to defend the Father. The enraged vixen turned her head, and with a swift movement of her teeth ripped the belly open of the little dog. Ruffy fell to the ground making gasping noises, in agony, as his blood turned the soft soil beneath him into a muddy pool.

It was then the Father remembered the staff he always carried and reversing it hurriedly he used it as a club to protect Ruffy. He slogged, desperately, at the wild animal with all his strength, managing to get its teeth from his own body from which blood was flowing freely. He tried to bend down to pick up Ruffy when the animal again went for his face tearing a hole in the side of his cheek. He fell, his face and open chest, became clotted with mud, while, through a visual blaze of blood, he blindly groped for the little dog with his fingers and could not feel him. He stood upright, then saw, to his horror, that Ruffy had crawled into a small tunnel that led into a bramble which had three-inch thorns. He pulled his hood tighter over his face and attempted to force his body through the small opening; his face and arms were shockingly lacerated and bled freely mixing with the mud of the tunnel.

It was an impossible task!

Ruffy was slowly dying. Father knew that well, and knew he had little time left. Ignoring his own suffering, and the intense pain he was experiencing, he tried to use his staff to force the brambles back, but it was useless. They were too strong, and he was too big to get into the tunnel.

He looked around, frantic; uncertain what to do. Where was the fox? Then he saw it. The vixen had re-joined her whelps deep within the same clump of brambles; it had previously, apparently, chewed its way deep into the bush and there was an entrance tunnel even smaller than that where Ruffy was.

Father stood up. He was close to panic. What could he do? Was there anything he *could* do? He could not just stand there and let his loyal, loving little friend, who had never left his side for thirteen months, just die without trying to get some kind of help.

He needed proper tools. Where could he get them quickly? He remembered from a previous ramble with Ruffy, that not much further into the woods, there was a sheep farm on the other side of the hill, not all that far from where he was now.

Once decided the farm was his only hope, he spoke to Ruffy who, hearing the voice, tried to lift his tail, but failed. "I'm going to get help, Ruffy. Please wait, for me; I'll run all the way and be back as soon as I can."

The Father quickly tucked up his tunic in the front, into his belt, and ran like a man possessed all the way to the top of the hill and through the last of the big trees

and finally stopped, panting badly, at a wire fence. He was totally unaware of the gruesome sight he made with his body a mess of blood and mud; his hands on the fence post holding him upright.

Not far from the fence was a farmer whom Father recognized; he had met him in the hardware store – a Mr Fred Harris. He was driving a tractor harrowing a recently, deeply dug, field. Next to the farmer was his little boy, Billy, who was safely strapped into the front seat and looking about; he missed nothing.

The six-year-old suddenly pulled on his father's arm. "Stop, Daddy! Stop!" Fred stopped, thinking the little chap was in some trouble. "What's the matter, son?"

"Dad. Look! There's the Father, He's been hurt; he's got blood all over him." Fred quickly pushed the button which lifted the metal harrow-rake up from the back of the tractor and drove rapidly over to the fence. Arriving there, he jumped down and rushed to the stricken man. Once he came close, he took one look and understood this man had been wounded most seriously. He was aghast at the extent of the blood loss.

"What the hell? ..." he began. The Father stopped him quickly.

"Mr Harris, I don't matter... it's my dog...it's Ruffy!"

"Ruffy?" shouted, Billy. "What's happened to Ruffy? I know Ruffy."

"The foxes...a vixen...I stumbled into her den...she tore Ruffy to pieces...we might... save him."

"Right! Just stay here with Billy. I'll run and get some tools. We'll fix the bloody foxes!"

Saying that, Fred ran faster than he had ever done before and grabbed, not only a couple of tough crowbars, but also his rifle. When he got back to the fence, he found his son had climbed through the fence and had persuaded the Father to sit down. The small boy was attempting to mop up some of the blood on the chest and face of the middle-aged man with his handkerchief.

“Good work, son. That’s the ticket.” Fred then turned to Father. “I’ll help you up and then you can come with us and show us the way.” He pulled up the tall man, amazed at how little he weighed. He held him a moment or two to get his balance; then asked him roughly: “OK”.

The Father immediately responded “Yes” and set off at a slow run back the way he had come.

The Father ran faster the closer he came to the dying Ruffy. Fred took in the situation in a glance. The damn tunnel was so narrow! He tried to do what the Father had tried; trying to force himself into the small circle but, retreated after a nasty cut on his arm. He stared at the tunnel...there had to be a way...

It was Billy who solved the problem. “Dad, you and the Father are too big to get into that tunnel. But I could fit easily.” He forestalled any objections by adding. “I’d be perfectly safe; the tunnel is quite big for me. I could let Ruffy know it’s me and slowly lift him a bit, from the ground, and crawling backwards could bring him out.”

The Father said, fearfully, “Oh, no, Billy! You might get hurt!” while the boy’s father kept silent working out a way to make that work.

Fred thought he might have the answer. "Father, what about if you on the left side, with your long staff, hold the thorns back, and I'll do the same with the crowbar on the right-hand side. That would make the hole much larger."

"If you think it will work, Mr Harris and Billy won't be hurt..."

"Righto, let's get moving. Down you plop, Bill, and Father and I will get our implements into the tunnel; then you are ready to go. Just remember, son, when you get to Ruffy, let him smell your fingers; he'll most probably remember you and then slip your hand under his body right up to his head, and when you have the whole body resting on your hands, slowly, ever so slowly, begin to crawl backwards.

"It's going to be difficult, son. Don't worry if you can't do it. But I think you actually will be able to do it...it's worth trying." He gave Billy's rump which was sticking up in the air at the beginning of the tunnel, a comic slap. "Off you go, lad, and show me what you can do."

Both the Father and Fred watched as Billy inched himself up the tunnel until he had reached the little dog. He let his fingers stay near the nose of Ruffy who suddenly gave a tiny flip of the tail.

"He remembers me, dad!"

"That's right son! Now get your hands in position. You might have to use your left hand to hold his tummy together; that's where that monster ripped it open. It's pretty messy, son... You...OK?"

“It’s Ok, Dad.” Billy did have to use his left hand, as his father had thought, and in the awkward position of having both hand underneath the body, the boy began the very difficult crawl backwards to the opening of the tunnel.

It seemed to take forever, but it, really, only took a few minutes, until Billy was able to be helped by the Father, who gently took the little body of his dog into his own hands then into his arms. The Father stood there with his little friend in his arms as the tears fell unheeded down his face, mixing with the blood already there.

The dog sniffed twice, his tongue came out to lick the fingers and he quietly died.

There was an uncontrollable moan of anguish from the Father, then silence and he stood perfectly still, not moving a muscle, until Fred came and said gruffly, “We’ll take him back and give him a hero’s funeral, Father. Just give me a minute first. Billy and I have another little job to do first.”

Fred looked at this son whose eyes were fixed on a huge fox that had suddenly appeared not twelve feet away from them.

“Dad, it’s the male!”

“Billy!” was all Fred said. The boy looked at his father, nodding his understanding. They were bush people. They understood life and death and the needs of Justice as well as mercy; without justice there is no mercy.

“Billy, the vixen’s not to blame. She was just trying to protect her babies as your mother would try to protect

you. But the father should have been here to protect her and his children. Understand?”

“Yes, Dad.” And he stood by his father, not flinching, as Fred took aim and shot the big male fox dead. The farmer then looked around and seeing the Father still standing as still as a pillar, he touched him gently on the arm.

“Bring your little friend with you and come back to my house. Billy will lead the way.” He handed the rifle to Billy. “I’ve emptied it of bullets son, so carry it as I’ve taught you. with the barrel pointing down towards the ground”.



An hour later, the Father was standing before Fred's wife, Molly, who had demanded that the Father remove his torn, and bloody, clothing. She then, without asking, took them to the washing machine and set the timer. Both wife and husband, were shocked to see the emaciated body revealed under the clothing. The Father stood perfectly still, his sunken eyes down, until Fred, took the Father into the outdoor laundry and using the hose, gently tried to remove the worst of the mud and encrusted blood. It was only he who saw the Father take off his undershirt of thick hessian which reached nearly to the calves of his legs. He left the Father then to deal with the washing of his body. When that was finished, Fred, helped him to dry off, then helped dress the Father with the drawers and the long hairshirt. Only then did Fred take the Father back to his wife. Mrs Harris then took over.

Firstly, she carefully studied the bites and tears in the skin, then using Iodine freely swabbed it on to the worst of the wounds. She was distressed to see that some of the wounds would need stitching. She consulted her husband; he closely examined the wounds and had a

whispered conversation with his wife. Fred then turned to the Father.

“Father, you would realise I have to sew up a lot of wounds here on the farm. I’ve learned a fair bit by doing that. We could take a risk and try to get you to town to see the doctor there, but he’s only there one day a week and today’s not his day. Would you take a risk with me? There will be no pain-killer, unfortunately, but I could give you a glass of whisky, if you like. What do you think? Would you trust me?”

The Father looked up. “Absolutely, Mr Harris. Please just go ahead. You are a kind, decent, man. Never mind the whisky; it’s OK.”

“OK, Father. Let the fun begin!” Fred laughed, his voice shaking slightly. He prepared his instruments, his wife boiled them quickly in a saucepan on the stove, then lay them on a clean white napkin. Fred put out the balls of absorbent cotton wool, the scissors and then threaded the very, fine needle, as his wife mopped up the blood for the first wound to be stitched.

The Father gave an involuntary flinch as the needle penetrated his skin then stood as still as a statue during the whole procedure, his eyes closed. After each wound was stitched, Molly swabbed more Iodine over the whole wound to aid the healing and protect it from bacteria.

The legs were the most serious and took the longest to prepare and then stitch. Fred had never, before, done such an exhaustive medical procedure in his life. He was dripping with sweat when he finally finished.

The farmer stood up, his legs suddenly groggy. He leaned over his wife and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks love. You're an excellent nurse; I think I'll marry you one day!" His wife laughed and made as if to give him a slap over the ear.

She went to speak, but Fred got in first. "Now, put the kettle on, love. I need a cuppa now, as never before in my life. And I won't be arguing if you put a nice big dollop of whisky in the cup before the tea, either."

Fred led the exhausted Father out onto the veranda and the two men sat on chairs there, near a table. Both were in need of rest and they sat there in silent companionship.

Molly retrieved the clothes from the dryer. She then took them to her sewing machine and while the two men were sitting on the veranda, she rapidly repaired what she could of the robes. She knew it was roughly done but, perhaps he had nothing else to wear. At least he could get home in a respectable state.

While this was going on, Billy, his eyes enormous, looked at the Father and marvelled; he looked just like his Dad only much thinner – he seemed all bones - and a little bit older, but he still looked just like any other man. Billy was a little disappointed at that; it was a bit of a let-down.

Billy's staring was sharply pulled back into line by his mother, who told him, brusquely, to take the Father's clothes to him and help him to dress while she prepared the tea.

Billy went out with the clothes and his father helped get the Father on his feet. Boy and man then helped the man to dress. With every piece of clothing, as it went on, the Father seemed, to Billy, to drift further away; to become less like everyone else, even his own father. The Father humbly thanked the good woman; his clothes had never felt so good. He had been acutely embarrassed at young Billy seeing him in the state he had been in.

Tea was a quiet affair. The Father spoke little and said nothing of himself whatsoever. He asked Fred for advice on various vegetables and ways of protecting his garden from the birds and then about Fred's own farm and finally Molly, about her children, which usually was a very shrewd move as Molly was sure to be ready to talk about her children, as any mother was. Father learned that this was not the case in this household.

"We only have the one, Father," Molly spoke softly. "God took away the other three before they were five years old. That's why Billy is so important in our lives."

"I understand perfectly, Mrs Harris." He leant backwards, his eyes become remote and almost opaque, his face slowly transformed and tilted upwards; it was as though he were listening attentively. There was dead silence in the room; Fred and his wife, staring at the Father, were suddenly afraid and gripped their hands together. They were terrified. What was the Father going to do? Was he ill? If he really is ill what should they do with him? The doctor is not here today...

Then the tension dissipated. The Father leant forward and gently told the woman. "Mrs Harris, there is

still a little angel of a girl who is waiting to come to you. She will be as beautiful, and as good as an angel, so please call her 'Angela'."

Both wife and husband looked at the Father with wide eyes. They were brimming with questions, but Fred deliberately forestalled Molly by standing up. He spoke gruffly to hide his emotion. He needed to change the conversation quickly. He spoke roughly as was his habit with emotional situations.

"Father let's do it now. All of us know how much you loved your little dog, your companion, for over a year now. You loved it and it loved you to the very end, as Billy and I saw. So, let's not make this a maudlin event. God gave you a full year of love and attention from one of His creatures; you treasured the gift and repaid it in full, even shedding your blood for it. Let us thank God for his great gift of love, which can be found in so much of his glorious creation." He turned to face his guest, clearly expected him to speak

The Father stood up.

"I want to speak only to Billy." He looked closely at the little boy. "Billy, I want you to promise me, today, that you will always love your father; we know boys always love their mothers, but fathers often get overlooked. Promise me you will always love him, honour him, respect him and never ever be ashamed of him. Your father is a farmer; they are the salt of the earth; the one decent thing you can trust among men. I think God made farmers to keep our feet on the ground; to keep reminding us of common sense.

“Just promise me, you won’t forget what I’ve said, Billy. For some reason, I know it is very important, for you, *today*, to make a solemn promise to me, to always do what I asked... ..Will you promise me that?”

Billy stood up his face serious. “Father, I do promise you that. I love and honour my Daddy and I always will do so.”

Father stood up. “Mr Harris, could we do the burial now? I must get back; I want to be back to say Vespers, if I can.”

“Certainly, Father, It’s all ready.”

Father bowed to Mrs Harris and followed the father and son out into the yard. Fred had dug a small hole, fairly deep, and found a small suitcase in the barn which did as a coffin. No words were said at the graveside and Fred placed the suitcase in the hole, and slowly filled it in with soil. Billy had taken a couple of flowers from the garden and he placed them solemnly on the completed grave, while Father said some mysterious prayers, briefly, in a foreign language.

Father thanked these good people; he then refused a lift back to town, and leaving quickly via the fence, he walked slowly back to his home – his eyes seeing nothing – he felt intensely, terribly, alone...ill and abandoned.

Back at the Harris household, the family had gathered together, but it was strangely quiet that evening. When Fred was alone with Molly in their bedroom, he asked her if anything was the matter. She put her arms around her husband. She was in tears. “Don’t ever leave me, Fred, will you? I couldn’t bear it!”

Fred was bewildered. “Molly, you know I exist for you. There’s never ever been anyone else and there never will be. I have the most wonderful wife and the most blessed boy that ever lived. I thank God every day of my life for both of you.”

“Fred, what do you think the Father meant...?”

“No, Molly, don’t... ..it’s all beyond me. I’m a simple man. That stuff’s not for the likes of me...”

“But, do you think...”

“Stop, right there, Molly! We’ve had a hectic day with lots of crying and stuff; I’m not good at all that. Let’s go to bed, love.”

The Harris household gradually grew silent and its three inhabitants slept, while down in the village, there was a light shining all through the night in the Church part of the Father’s house.



Ten days later, the Father answered the bell at the gate. He pushed up the trapdoor and saw the excited face of Billy, with Mr Harris standing behind him.

“Father,” cried Billy. “We’ve got a present for you. Please open the gate.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” came the deep voice of Mr Harris. “Billy is excited. Please only open the gate if you want to. We do have a little gift for you.”

The Father responded by quickly opening the gate, and the two visitors came through; they were the very first two of the whole area who had ever done so. Billy was struggling to hold a young Alsatian male pup, about fifteen weeks old. It transferred itself from Billy’s arms and jumped straight into the Father’s arms which went, instinctively, out to catch him. The lively little dog climbed up the priest’s front and began to lick his neck.

Billy was thrilled. “Dad, I told you! See he loves the Father already! He knows his new owner.”

And it was true, the infant pup, through some chemistry, or miracle or other, remained fixated on his new master – the others no longer existed. Fred Harris

quietly closed the gate, which had remained open, behind him, then asked, politely, if they could come in for a few minutes to fix up some details, regarding certificates, and shots, and so on. Father immediately, courteously, invited them into his home. They walked around to the side door near the back of the Church and entered the large living area.

Both Fred Harris and Billy were startled to see the abject poverty and sparseness of everything - the 'rolled-up' bed on the bare floorboards; the hooks holding clothes, the few pots and pans, the tools - everything. The Father drew out the one kitchen chair he had, but quickly took the stool he used at the computer, then an old box, scrubbed clean that he used to sit on outside when the heat was very severe. He gave that to Billy, while the only real chair was given to Mr Harris and the Father sat on the high computer stool himself.

With that inborn courtesy to poverty that good people have, Fred Harris pretended everything was perfectly normal, and began casually, to explain the 'shots' the little dog had already had and when he was due for his next round. The Father carefully noted these in a book he took from his computer table. He also wrote down the name of the Veterinarian, Fred himself used, also the details of the food that the dog would require as he was growing; this was essential, he was told, as he would not develop the right bone structure if he did not get the right vitamins.

"Please, Mr Harris," the Father asked. "Would you mind repeating those instructions about the feeding. I've

never had a baby dog before.” Fred sensibly repeated what he has said and gave other advice re the dog as the year progressed, and the little male dog grew to be a very, big, male dog. Fred delicately explained the need for an operation, in the not-too-distant, future, for the pup, to save the Father from a lot of trouble with the dog running away; it also would save him from trouble with his neighbours in the town.

The Father nodded his head; he understood exactly what would be needed. He begged Mr Harris, to let him know when this should be done; he was a complete ignoramus in regard to all this. Fred promised to do so and asked if he and Billy could come once a week, for a short visit, to see him, *and* the pup, on their ‘town’ day. The Father agreed happily. He told Fred his mind was now relieved; he would not do the wrong things, through his ignorance.

Fred started to cough a lot and clear his throat. Billy squirmed in his chair, knowing what his father was going to say.

After a fake ‘coughing’ bout, Fred said: “Father, perhaps I did the wrong thing in getting such a big dog. Alsatians grow into very, big, dogs and very strong dogs. I thought it would be the right kind of protection for you, but I forgot about the cost. This is going to cost you a fair bit of money in food. The wife and I would like....” that was as far as he got. The Father laid his hand gently on the man’s arm.

“No, Mr Harris... Fred... No!” he said softly. “Fred, I have the money; that’s not a problem. But one million

thanks for your kind and wonderful offer. If ever the day arrives when I need any money, if you would let me ask you for help first, then that would be a greater gift to me, than anything else.”

Fred was non-plussed. “But... here...?” he gestured to the sparseness of the room: the obvious poverty. “I don’t understand’.

The Father smiled one of his rare smiles. “Fred, it’s one of the vows I made to God. I’m not just an eccentric idiot – well, I am really that – but not, *officially*.” He laughed gently. “I am a hermit; a hermit is not permitted, by Church law, to spend a cent on anything that isn’t essential. That’s all. It’s pretty simple, really.”

“But what does a hermit do all day?” Fred was bewildered. The Father stood up and said, quietly, “We work, Fred. We work. But there are many different, kinds of work. Come with me, Fred, and you, too, Billy. I want to show you a secret that no one else, here at Burnside, has ever seen.”

Saying that, the Father, carrying the pup in his arms, led the way through a narrow opening in the corner of the partition that separated the two sections of the Church. He went first, followed by Fred, and then Billy. He led his visitors down to the closed front door and then they turned and looked at the Sanctuary of the Church.

Both father and son were stunned by the beauty of the sanctuary. That whole section of the church was spotless; the floor shining with oiled floorboards, the altar, large, brilliantly white with impeccable painting,

the real gold candle sticks with the long candles, the very, large gleaming brass crucifix, two feet high, that stood on top of the tabernacle, which, itself, had a magnificent door of shining brass with a beautiful pattern embossed in the metalwork.

To the side of the altar was a narrow table on which stood cruets of superlative quality in crystal and small bowls for washing the fingers. There was also the snow-white linen to be used at the Mass, while along the other wall, hung on pegs, were the various coloured vestments that would be used for the different seasons of the church year.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this beautiful space was a glorious, antique, glass lamp which hung with brass chains from the ceiling. This lamp was red in colour and contained an oil-filled bowl in which a wick always burned.

The whole effect was dazzling. The Father had done a startling job in restoring the whole of that area of the Church - alone.

Fred looked at the rest of the Church, and noticed for the first time, the extraordinary high stained-glass windows on either side of the room. How on earth had the Father got up there, to scrub and wash those windows clean? They were filled with glorious colours, which could now be seen again.

Fred noticed that only the sanctuary area had been finished in the painting; the rest of the space was still to be done. He spied a long ladder near the front door and realised that was, obviously, how the Father had got up

to those windows. It was a high ceiling, much higher than Fred had expected.

In all, this was a very, beautiful, and devotional Church. Young Billy still had his mouth open in surprise. His eyes were goggling. He went close to the Father who was kneeling on a wooden kneeler in the middle of the Sanctuary, still with the pup tightly held in his arms. The Father's eyes were closed; he and the dog were completely still.

Fred coughed to gain attention; he wanted to get away quickly. He felt as though he had burst his way roughly into another man's soul. As soon as he coughed, the Father stood up, genuflected and, without a word, led the way back to the living area. He turned to Fred and explained, simply.

"Fred, more than 1500 years ago a very great man called Saint Benedict wrote a rule for monks; how to live, how to work, how to pray. We do any kind of physical work; no work is beneath us, Saint Benedict said. Scrubbing out the latrine can be just as pleasing, in the sight of God, as praying in here on my kneeler, if it is done, as well as you can do it, and it be done for the glory of God – with the intentions of pleasing Him, of honouring Him, of loving Him.

"I try to balance my work between work out in the garden, work in the chapel and in the laundry, or kitchen work, and whatever other work happens to turn up, each day.

"And, I always try to have recreation each day. Usually, that took the form of a good long walk in the

fields behind me here and up the hill to the forest near where you live. It was always Ruffy's and my little break, from hard work. Now, I'll be able to resume that walk with a new companion, when he and I have first sorted out which one of us is the boss." He smiled, as he lifted the little dog to his face, and kissed him lightly.

Fred laughed. "And, saying that, Father, it's time young Billy and I were off on our way; we have a lot of work to do ourselves today." He came forward and patted the dog. "You behave, now, young fellow, or you'll hear from me, do you hear?" The dog reached out and licked his nose which made them all laugh.

The Father led them to the gate and unlocked it. Billy quickly got in a word. "Father, what about a name for the pup? We left that for you to decide. Have you any special name you'd like to give him?"

"I have, indeed. Today is the Feast of Saint Thomas, so I'm going to call the little chap, 'Saint Tom'. What do you think?"

Billy clapped his hands. "'Saint Tom' it is then, Father."

After shaking hands with the father and son, the hermit looked at his new charge. "I think they're wonderful people, Saint Tom, but do they realise how big you're *really* going to be?" He shrugged and let the animal down to roam all over the area around the church, so he would know it well. This would be his home now.

IV

During the next two months, the Father had his hands full, training, and teaching his new responsibility. To his delight, Saint Tom was a quick learner and was very anxious to please his master, so within a short space of time, they came to know each other very well.

Saint Tom learned his place in the chapel; he knew he could not move even once after he had gone to his place, until the Father rose and clicked his fingers, and they both proceeded out. In the living area Saint Tom had his own blanket near the doorway but, if the weather was very cold, he was permitted to sleep at the bottom of his master's bed.

Saint Tom had a voracious appetite and wanted to eat everything, including the Father's sandals. For this, he was punished severely; he was made stay in one place for two full hours without moving – Saint Tom hated that!

The Father had to request the grocer to send the messenger boy to the gate with seven big cans of dog meat each week, as well as dog biscuits to chew on, for Saint Tom's teeth were growing strong and healthy, giving him

the same problems, that made human babies chew on everything they could find – as their teeth came slowly through.

The Father was astonished at the speed of the growth of his dog, and the length of his hair. He had a good, strong brush, given to him by Fred, and brushed and combed Saint Tom every day. The dog's coat was shining with the attention. His feet were resuming normal size as his body grew – they had seemed too big for the little body. Now, it was rapidly becoming a 'big body' and the feet looked perfectly normal.

The Father had insisted from the start that Saint Tom learn where he was to ease his bowels. He had taken Saint Tom to the small area near the back fence which Ruffy had used. He let the dog sniff all over that area, then waited while Saint Tom did as was expected.

Fred and Billy kept their promise and called in briefly once every week on their 'town' day. Fred checked the dog over and praised the Father for his care of the dog. Billy was amazed at Saint Tom's size; also, by the fact that, although he acknowledged Billy's presence by a casual flick of his tail, he took no other notice of him whatsoever. He was a one-man dog, and that man was the Father.

When Saint Tom had been with the Father for three months, he had become such a very obedient, loving and sensible dog, the Father had taken him out the gate and down to the little town. Many people had come out of the shop doors to see the new dog. They marvelled at the little-big dog walking obediently close to the Father's

heel, never leaving his side. A group of rough dogs had rushed out to deal with the 'newcomer' and Saint Tom had stood still, looking up at the Father, who shook his head and, strangely enough, the other dogs slunk away. Saint Tom then sat at the door of the shops the Father entered, totally ignoring everyone else, but the moment he noticed the master's return, he had been on his feet, tail wagging and ready to go.

After that success, the Father, on his next free day, took Saint Tom out the back gate for a walk through the paddock and up into the forest. The dog, seeing a sheep for the first time, immediately took off at great speed and chased the poor sheep until it was baled up by a fallen tree. It whimpered with fright while the Father rushed to help the poor animal. He came to the sheep and, holding it firmly by the wool near its neck, he sat down and spoke soothingly to the frightened animal, ignoring Saint Tom altogether.

The dog was bewildered, but he clearly understood he had done something wrong; something that his master did not want him to do. He sat down twelve feet away and watched as the Father broke off pieces of long grass and fed the sheep which appeared very, surprised and relieved, as it happily ate the offering. Gradually, the Father released his hold on the wool and left the sheep free. It sat down beside him, and the Father gently massaged its head and its ears. When he got up to go, the sheep followed him, while Saint Tom followed, slowly and sorrowfully, behind the sheep. He was in disgrace and knew it.

When they had reached the back gate again, the Father let the sheep follow him inside the enclosed yard. She looked at her new home and aware of the luxurious green grass there, she began to eat with many happy sounds of pleasure. Saint Tom watched the whole proceedings intently. As soon as the Father went inside the living area, Saint Tom went to the sheep and began sniffing it all over. He sneezed a couple of times; this was a very unusual smell, so he began all over again until the smell was familiar.

The sheep, her belly full, then settled itself on the grass and Saint Tom tentatively stretched out beside it. The Father looking through the open door smiled; the feud appeared to be over. He would speak to Fred when he came on Wednesday and explain why he had kidnapped someone's sheep. As he went to prepare for Vespers, he wondered, wryly, what kind of animal he would next find himself with; I now have two dependents, he thought – that is quite enough.

On the next Wednesday, explaining about the sheep-stealing episode, Fred started to laugh when he saw the sheep. "It's becoming a zoo, or an animal shelter," he cried. Billy went straight up to the sheep and said, proudly, "It's a female, Dad"

Fred laughed again. "Well, what kind of name are you going to give this one, Father?" The Father paused, thinking seriously.

"First of all, Fred, before the naming. What am I to do with a sheep; it belongs to someone ...?"

“No worry there, it belongs to me. She is old and no use anymore, so nobody wants her. You can have her if you want her.” And, to avoid any embarrassment, he hurried on: “Now, the important question is twofold: do you want her? - it would be a help with the grass wouldn’t it? And secondly, now the name – very important, the name.” Fred laughed happily.

“Thank you once again, Fred. I would like to call her, ‘Anne’ after the mother of Our Blessed Lady. So, we now have Saint Tom and Saint Anne. What do you think of that?”

“Excellent! Now, Billy, I want you to take Saint Anne down to the water trough near the back door for a moment, I want to speak privately to the Father.”

Billy trotted off with the sheep with Saint Tom following him. Fred, a little red in the face, said, roughly: “Listen, Father, the wife made me promise to tell you... she’s ...she’s pregnant! After all this time, *she’s pregnant!* We never thought it would happen again.” Fred rubbed his hand over his face, roughly, and cleared his throat loudly, while the Father stood stock still: his eyes closed.

Slowly, the Father opened his eyes and spoke slowly to Fred, his voice different. “Fred... son... this one is precious; precious to God and to Molly and you. She *MUST* be named ‘Angela’ as I told you. She will do great things, but they might seem strange to you, but she will lead you and your family, and many, many more, to Heaven...this is a special child...a very, special child of God. You are a privileged man!”

He went quickly to his computer table and from a small tin there, he took a key. He then came back quickly to the farmer. "Fred, I must go to the chapel. Take this key, I had one cut for you. Please, let yourself out and take Billy home to your good and precious wife. I will see you in one month's time. I think the weekly visits should stop - I am becoming dependant on them. Thank you for everything." So, saying, the Father hurriedly stood up and walked quickly into the chapel.

Fred, slightly bewildered at the speed of all this happening, looked at the key in his hand, called Billy and they hurried away, locking the gate carefully behind them.

V

When Fred thought the dog was ready for the operation, the Father made the arrangements with the Veterinary Surgeon and Saint Tom was booked in for his operation.

It was a very anxious Father who led Saint Tom to the surgery on the appointed day. He was fearful of the operation and worried about the effect it might have on his loving companion.

Saint Tom had enjoyed the walk down to the surgery until they had entered the building when he became aware of the strange chemical smells. The Father was asked by the surgeon to lift the dog onto the operating table, then, when the dog had been anaesthetized, was asked, politely, to leave and to come back in the morning; he could take the patient home then.

The Veterinary surgeon also informed him he was going to put in extra stitches to protect Saint Tom. It would be a precautionary measure, just in case he accidentally pulled out some of them, through over-strenuous activity. The surgeon cut short the conversation by adding, over his shoulder, as he turned to the patient on the table:

“Just come and collect him tomorrow morning and, don’t worry. He’s such a wonderfully healthy animal, I’m sure there will be no problems whatsoever.”

VI

It was a very relieved and delighted Father who led Saint Tom back to their home the next morning.

The dog was happy and continued licking the Father's hand.

Reaching the church, the Father found a letter stuck in the slot near the trapdoor. It had a crest on the front of the envelope that frightened him. His hand shook as he took the letter from the slot. He released Saint Tom in the garden and rushed to the Chapel. He would not open the letter until he was kneeling before the tabernacle.

He knew from the official crest that it was from the archbishop of the archdiocese. The Father had once lived, and worked, with the archbishop in 'Bishop House'. It was a cold, formal letter, couched in stiff, very stilted language, but the point of the despatch was clear. The archbishop had decided that a 'canonical Visitation' was long overdue. He intended rectifying that by coming on the 17th and he would stay overnight at the Hermitage.

The Father emitted a very, rare, moan of anguish, at the news. And, 'overnight as well'! Dear God. What was he going to do with him? Where would he sleep? What

will he eat? What will he say to the outdoor privy? The absence of a shower? Or... even a bathroom?

He had visions of being dragged off, first to a psychiatrist, then back to the deadening grind of legal work, as a Canon Lawyer, in Bishop House. He clasped his hands together and closed his eyes tightly.

Stop it! He ordered himself. Stop it, immediately! You have trusted in God, fully, all the time you have been here, every step of the way. Why stop now? God will show you what to do; just trust Him *now*!

The Father knew his first concern should be to make the place as clean and as pleasant as he could – everything should be sparkling with cleanliness – that should be, and *must* be, his first concern – the rest is up to God.

He went into the living area and really looked at the place, as if he were a stranger, and gasped. It was awful! Simply awful! When the Archbishop sees this dreadful mess and tries to have a bath in that small tin tub the Father had bought, there will be no going back to ‘secretarial’ duties. It will be straight into an Asylum!

Well, so be it! He decided. He made a list of all he needed to buy that day from the shops. The first one on the list was: Bleach. The whole place needed a thorough cleaning. He then realised that he did not know, or had forgotten, when the archbishop was arriving. He dived for the letter and read it again quickly. Merciful God, it was in two days’ time! Oh well! Into the cleaning now! It will give him a start. Thank Heavens the chapel is fine; that should satisfy the prelate.

Rapidly, the Father put on his rough, 'work habit', over his normal habit and set to work. He boiled the jug and with the hot water and a bar of cheap soap he began to scrub the floor, the chairs, the tables, everything he could get his hands on. He would use the bleach on all the kitchen things and the bathing utensils as soon as he came back from shopping.

For the first time, he was really, suddenly aware, of the cold. He had forgotten they were now in winter. Please God, he prayed, do not let there be snow, as we have no fire...or any ice... or even sleet, he added – as an afterthought – just to make sure.

That night when he had unrolled his bed and had removed his sandals and scapular, he climbed into bed, aware that when the visitor arrived, he would have to give his bed to the archbishop; he would use Saint Tom's bed. For the first time he wondered what would His Grace think of Saint Tom? Please God, let Saint Tom behave himself, he prayed as he fell asleep.

VII

The Father was relieved to see that Saint Tom looked well and not suffering badly from any ‘after-effects’ from the operation. He then decided to do his shopping. He had a load of work to do that day.

He went into the shops and bought all the detergent he could find and stocked up on some food essentials in preparation for the visit from his Superior. Saint Tom was well behaved and waited patiently at the doorways as the Father finished his purchases.

VIII

When Saint Tom had first entered the yard on his return from the surgery, Saint Anne had rushed to meet him, ‘bar-ring’ loudly. Saint Tom greeted her happily and licked her face, again and again. The old sheep, from then on, tried not to let him out of her sight, following him everywhere.

Now that the nights were severe with the cold, Saint Tom – on his first night back home – had waited until he thought the Father was asleep, then gently nosed the door open and brought the old sheep inside where she settled happily at the foot of Saint Tom’s bed. The dog was shrewd enough to have her out of the building when he heard the Father wake the next morning. That became the usual practice for all the nights following.

During the day Saint Anne sheltered out of the icy wind near the outhouse as the days were usually very cold, but sunny, and it was a sheltered spot.

When the day had warmed up, the old sheep would venture out to the enticing green lawn.

During Saint Anne’s time at the Hermitage, she had done a marvellous job in turning the waste land of grass into a very neat, green, lawn.

When the Father had finished his morning duties in the Chapel, he hastened to begin his cleaning with the bleach.

Saint Tom, now after his experience, in the terrible place, with the frightening smells, was more than ever anxious to please his master in every way he could. He watched him like a hawk; he even copied his movements that he could clearly see. As the Father scrubbed and scrubbed with his new disinfectant – the bleach – Saint Tom sneezed a lot but seemed to accept even that dreadful smell.

The Father took a walk around his little world and thought he had done all he could to make the place as respectable as he could. Please God, he prayed, the archbishop has become more resigned, by now, to his troublesome Canon Lawyer's desire to pursue, in these troublesome days in the Church, the unusual kind of vocation, he had chosen.

He remembered, with a shudder, the tirade of reproach he had received when he had first applied for permission to live this life. The archbishop had been, literally, furious. The Father knew the archbishop relied heavily on him; he had used him for every difficult case he had to solve. The archbishop had made it clear to the Father, he regarded him as a genius, in so many different fields, including law.

As the archbishop had constantly reminded him, he *needed* him; he had a very, difficult, very, large, Diocese, to run and he had admitted, truthfully, to his trusted

lieutenant, that the Church was in a terrible state, with problems everywhere.

These arguments had disturbed the Father greatly. He wondered whether it could be Satan who was urging him to go away, or not. He was so worried he had said he would leave it totally in the hands of God. He had told the archbishop he would not ask again, but he would not take back his request to be given a chance to try the vocation he believed he was being called to, either. He would just wait for the archbishop's decision.

The Father had waited three months for permission to be granted, and a place had been found for him.

The archbishop had made it his business to go and check out the place at Burnside that had been suggested to him by some of his priests. The Father learned, later, from the priest who drove the archbishop, that he had laughed when he saw it. It was such a gigantic mess, a tumble-down ruin that the archbishop thought, with grim satisfaction, it would finish any romantic ideas the Father had in living like a mediaeval character you read about in a child's story book!

Finally, the archbishop had given the priest one year to see if he could persevere. He thought, the driver had told the Father privately, after seeing the property, that the Father would be back at Bishop House within a fortnight. But, to his chagrin, it was now nearly two years - not one - and the stubborn fellow was still there!

As the Archbishop was being driven the long way to fulfil this 'Canonical Visitation', he was determined he would 'fix' it this time. He would make the priest see the

error of his ways; he would bring him back where he belonged – at Bishop House!

IX

At two o'clock on the day appointed, the large car came to a stop outside the back gate of the Hermitage. The chauffeur, a young, very well-dressed priest, hopped out and opened the big gate.

The archbishop waited until his chauffeur had driven inside the enclosure, then for the back door of the episcopal car – to be opened. The chauffeur extended his hand to assist the archbishop out.

The portly, grey-haired man was dressed in his finest robes and looked resplendent. As he advanced, in a dignified manner, towards the building, Saint Tom rushed forward and welcomed him, in a somewhat over-zealous way, by leaping with his great paws on his shoulders and licking his face exuberantly. This knocked the Archbishop's Zucchetto off his head and, poor Saint Tom, then added insult to injury, by picking up the little purple skull cap and running off with it.

The Father looked on aghast. What a beginning! He rushed to his Archbishop. "I'm so sorry, Your Grace. Saint Tom didn't intend to hurt you; he's a very friendly dog." He looked back through the gate and demanded in an angry voice. "Saint Tom take that Zucchetto from

Saint Anne and bring it back here.” The dog did as he was told and carried the little skull cap in his teeth and laid it at the feet of his master. It was sopping wet with saliva and had two holes in it from the dog’s teeth. The Father closed his eyes, as he handed the damaged article to the archbishop.

The only thing that penetrated the archbishop’s ears were the names. “Who in the world are Saint Tom and Saint Anne? Have you gone mad out here in the wilderness?” He shook himself down. “There is only a badly trained, huge dog, that looks like a camel, and a sheep that looks on her last legs.”

“Would you come inside, Your Grace, and you, too, Father, I want to get this gate closed quickly. Your splendid car is being talked about in the village I can assure you, at this very moment. The sooner we are out of sight the better.” At this news, the archbishop hastened inside the gate, and the chauffeur – who was trying not to laugh – as well.

The Father looked enquiringly at the young priest who told him his name was Father Bert Joyce. They shook hands and followed their archbishop into the compound.

The archbishop looked all around the very neatly, kept yard: at the fencing, the vegetable garden and the overall, general security; it was surprisingly good. He then approached the living quarters; the Father, began to wilt inside his habit. He kept his head and eyes down, waiting for the blast that he knew, would be coming any minute now.

There was a deadly silence. The archbishop looked around in unfeigned astonishment. At last, he managed to speak. In an outraged voice, he bellowed: “*You LIVE here?*” He moved a little further into the room. “I don’t believe it. The Bishop House dog has better quarters than you have here.” He walked around the large space. “Where is the bedroom?” he asked after a few minutes. The Father pointed to the rolled-up bed against the wall. His canonical inspector raised his hands in unbelief.

“You sleep on the floor?”

“Yes, Your Grace, I do.”

“And... pray tell, Father, where am I to sleep tonight?” The Father pointed to the same place. “You mean in your bed? On the floor?” He then shouted loudly. “Are you *INSANE?*” The archbishop paused, so the Father jumped into the breach.

“I thought, Your Grace, you could sleep in my bed – I washed the sheets and the pillow slip – I will sleep on Saint Tom’s bed, over here.”

“I suppose, with the dog?” The archbishop asked with a sneer.

“Well, yes, I suppose that could be right. It’s too cold for Saint Tom to be outside. It gets down to minus 5 degrees Celsius here. No dog could cope with that. It would be cruel not to let him in.”

“Huummmmp! I suppose Saint Anne is brought inside, as well?”

“I’m afraid that is now true also, Your Grace. She is old and is a faithful friend; Saint Tom looks after her. He

lets her on his bed; he thinks I don't know that, but I do."

"Good God! It like living in Noah's ark." He looked around and saw his chauffeur grinning. "And, as for you, Father Joyce. Just watch yourself or you'll find yourself living here instead of the hermit – so whip that grin from your face instantly." The young priest immediately stopped grinning and tried to make his face utterly bland and non-committal.

"Yes, Your Grace." He sneezed violently. "Excuse me... it's the smell."

"Yes," broke in the archbishop. "What in the name of heaven is that frightful smell? It's similar to bleach." He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose several times.

The Father looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, it is bleach. I wanted to have the place shining for your visit; I think I overdid the bleach." He smiled. "At least, Your Grace, it would have killed any bugs hanging about."

"Bugs! What on earth have I let myself in for! I did not think I would be visiting savages!" He stumped, angrily, on the floorboards. "Enough of this nonsense. Let me see the chapel. I can just imagine what a mess you've made of that, as well. I knew all this would happen!"

"I suppose I'll have to issue a formal notice of closure for this whole debacle."

With the threat of that blast hanging in the air, the archbishop took off for the narrow doorway which he

guessed would have to lead to the chapel. He was in a vile mood; the thought of the night before him filled him with the horrors. He remembered vividly what the chapel had looked like – the total ruin it had been when he had come, two years ago, to check it out; the whole building was a complete wreck.

He strode into the chapel with a set face. After three paces he stopped dead with surprise. The exquisite beauty of the whole sanctuary area, and the finished part of the chapel, stunned him completely. He put out his hand and leant against the wall for a moment to get over his surprise. He simply could not believe it! He blinked several times to check if he were seeing correctly. Then he moved on down the chapel to the front door then turned and looked at the whole area.

It was such a shock, and the beauty of the whole of the Lord's house, was so breathtaking, the archbishop fell to his knees and bowed his head to the floor. He then, humbly, put out his hand to the Father, for help in rising again.

The unfortunate young Father Bert Joyce came in and stood in the middle of the room, letting out a piercing whistle in his surprise. The archbishop turned on him quickly. "Keep quiet, you moron. Look and learn what a chapel should look like. Look at the beauty, see the love of God that prompted it. We are, you pathetic clown, in the presence of God Himself." He went to go to the official kneeler when he turned on the young priest again. "I've changed my mind. Bring in my cases and then take yourself off to the motel; I do not want you

near this place; you are not worthy of it. Go! Get out now!”

The young priest fled. The archbishop turned to the Father and asked humbly. “Father, I have been very wrong. I didn’t trust you and I should have. I’ve known you for years and you’ve never betrayed me.” He knelt on the floor. “Father, would you hear my confession...?”

The Father was confused and trembled. This was an unprecedented thing to happen. He asked the archbishop to wait a moment and hurried out to the living room where the youngster was depositing the cases. He whispered to the priest. “Father, please don’t go! Just wait a little outside with Saint Tom. I want to speak to the archbishop; he’s had a shock that’s all, son. Please wait, I’ll be back soon”.

He returned to the chapel and carried the kitchen chair with him. He instructed the archbishop to kneel on the good kneeler as he sat in the chair beside him. The penitent hardly waited for the ritual blessing but began immediately: “Bless me Father for I have sinned... ..”

After the Father had given counsel and absolution, but before he dismissed his penitent, he suggested, again very humbly, that the archbishop might have been a little hard on the young priest, and he would take it as a special favour if he were permitted to stay for the evening meal, after they had chanted Vespers together.

The archbishop was ready to do anything this extraordinary priest asked of him; he agreed instantly. He then asked to be permitted to pray alone in the chapel for a little while – if that was convenient.

The Father marvelled! It was, as if their roles, had been completely reversed!

When the Father returned to the living quarters, he informed Father Joyce of the new arrangements, and then asked the young priest if he had ever fried rissoles before. The priest said he had not, but there was always a first time, wasn't there? They both laughed quietly. The Father went on. "I thought of having them covered in breadcrumbs which I can remember my mother doing. If I get that going, would you take care of the actual cooking?"

"Sure thing, Father. God help us both! I've no idea what the end-result will turn out to be," laughed the youngster. He, then, on the Father's orders, went out to the garden to gather some greens to go with the meat. There wasn't much, as it was dead winter, but there was cabbage, so Father Joyce sliced that very thinly, then lightly fried that, as well as the circular rings of meat, that were carefully covered with breadcrumbs that the Father had prepared for him. There were eight rissoles in all: two for each of the men and two for Saint Tom. Father Joyce kept some thinly sliced, uncooked cabbage, for Saint Anne as well.

When the cooking was complete, they put the rissoles in the microwave at a low heat to keep them warm and went in to say the Office of Vespers. They stood within the Sanctuary altar rails and the Father kept the young priest near him to guide him, while the archbishop stood alone opposite; he certainly did not need any help; he

had been saying the Divine Office for more than forty years.

It seemed strange, to the Father, to hear other voices joining him in prayer, but he found it a happy sound, and they were at peace with each other. When they had finished their evening section of the Divine Office, they went from the chapel, for their dinner.

The Father, as he led the way, was wondering what the reactions to his food offering would be. He had the chair ready for the archbishop then led Father Joyce to the stool and he, himself, sat on the 'box seat', as the called it, slightly below the other two diners.

It was fearfully cold, and the three men ate hungrily. Saint Tom demolished his dinner in seconds and looked for more. The Father had some tough dog biscuits and gave a plentiful plateful to the big dog. Saint Anne was allowed in and enjoyed both the greens that Father Joyce handed her, and the company as well.

After dinner, the Father had tea ready and it was boiling on the primus stove. It was very, poor quality, but the men drank it happily as it was steaming hot, and they were so cold.

It was a short while after the meal that the Archbishop emitted a genteel belch. He apologized and said, he rarely had wind, so something had obviously disagreed with him, but it did not matter; he had enjoyed every bit of the meal.

Father Joyce suddenly excused himself and the Father heard him running to the outhouse. He wondered why

both his guests had had problems with the food – he did not have any.

When the young priest returned, he was white-faced and looked sickly. He insisted he was fine, but a dreadful suspicion had taken hold of him. He offered to clean up and to do the washing up and soon was busy at the large tin bowl that the Father used. Next to the bowl was a rubbish bin – again made of a large, one-time, biscuit tin – and stooping to it, Father Joyce searched through the debris to see if there were any clues as to what kind of meat was used in the rissoles. The only things he found suspicious, were two empty tins of dogs' meat! His stomach reacted, he rushed outside again, and was not seen for a long period.

When he returned, Father Joyce spoke directly to the archbishop. "Your Grace, by your leave, I'd like to drive to that Motel we saw on the way in – it's only about five miles from here, as you said. I feel a little off colour. I'd like to go to bed if I may."

The archbishop looked up. "Of course, dear boy. Off you go and get a good night's sleep. I'm sure you'll be right in the morning. Come back in the morning, would you? Good night now."

Father Joyce said good night to the Father. "Good night Father. It's been a wonderful experience being here with you. I'll see you again tomorrow." He then leaned over close to the older priest and whispered: "Father, don't give any more of the dogs' meat to the archbishop, you could kill him." Then in a loud voice. "Good night

everyone, and that includes Saint Tom and Saint Anne, as well.”

X

Later that night, the archbishop was very cold; perhaps colder than he had ever been in his life. He had been glad of the advice of the Father to keep his socks on his feet.

As he lay shivering, trying so hard to find a comfortable way to sleep on the hard boards, he suddenly felt a large weight pushed up against his leg. It was Saint Tom. The archbishop looked around quickly, listening intently, and heard the Father gently snoring; he then lifted the top blanket and the dog slipped under and the temperature rose rapidly. Soon, the archbishop forgot the hard boards and fell into a deep sleep and slept until morning.

XI

Awaking the next morning, the archbishop was immediately, aware of the bitter cold. He hurried to get out of the tangle of blankets and taking the tin tub left out for him, filled it with a small amount of water and quickly, using a sponge, sponged down his face and neck. He had no intention of washing further; he would die of cold. He cleaned his teeth rapidly, then grabbed his day clothing, pulling his underclothes on, then his outer clothing, at the speed of light.

His feet were freezing. He quickly found his shoes and pulled them on, grateful that his socks had been on all night. When he had pulled on his shirt with his clerical collar, then his heavy winter cassock with its trimming in purple; combed his hair, and put on the half-damaged Zucchetto, he felt ready for the day. However, he needed to visit the outhouse and, for the first time, wondered where the Father was.

It was then he heard the quiet chanting coming from the chapel. He recognized the words; the Father was already chanting the Divine Office. Dear God! What on earth time does he get up, he wondered? It is still pitch-

black, dark, outside where, to his consternation, he found he had need to go as soon as possible. He hurried to the door and realised the two animals were no longer inside. They must have been released earlier, he surmised.

As he stumbled outside into the darkness, he had difficulty in finding the small building, but eventually did so. He had never, before, had to do the complicated task of using the toilet, in complete darkness. However, man adapts very quickly, and he managed, taking time to realise that the Father had obviously bought a special roll of toilet paper for him alone, as he could feel a stack of carefully torn up newspapers already in place. What a kind and compassionate gesture he thought.

As he sat in the outhouse, he thought of his experience in the Father's living quarters. He smiled as he thought what his powerful and snooty friends, the bishops, the archbishops, even the cardinals, with whom he had to associate, would think of all this? How horrified they would be, if they knew, the Father Hermit lived exactly as did the archbishop's paternal grandparents, all those years ago. He remembered one weekend he had spent with his father's parents and had been astonished to find they lived, ate, slept, bathed and played all in the one room. They were very poor farmers, and he was the son of a poor farmer, himself.

He pondered the distance he had travelled since he was a struggling farmer's third son. Who knows what would have happened, he thought, had not the Principal of the Elementary school noticed the possibilities that

could be opened to the intelligent rustic boy? She had encouraged his parents to enter him for the Bursary examination which would give him, all expenses paid, a secondary education.

His good parents had seized the great opportunity. He had entered the competition, won it, and went off, from home, to study at a very prestigious school where, for the first time in his life, he became aware he was a 'poor' child.

He did not have any extra money, as the other kids did; he had to wear the same clothes again, and again, to every kind of Sport. However, there were a couple of kind teachers there, who understood his situation, and used their influence to get him some decent clothes and, for the first time in his existence, he had more than one suit to wear – one actually on his back and one in the wardrobe. He had felt like an emperor!

How awkward it had been when he came home and realised how poor his family was; how roughly his father spoke; how hard and worn-out his mother looked; how the other kids called him fancy names; treating him as though he no longer belonged, laughing at his 'posh' accent – treating him as if he were a stranger. He had no idea he now spoke differently or that he used words that his brothers did not know.

But never, he thought furiously, never did his father or his mother do that; they loved him, and he loved them, regardless of whether they had fancy clothes, or talked with correct grammar, or not.

It seemed foolish, then, not to apply for University after Secondary school, and so he went to University, again on a scholarship. He had spent some years there and then came home only to tell his sad, but delighted parents, he was entering the Seminary: he wanted to become a priest. To his parents' dismay he was to be sent to Rome to study, and in doing so, as he had said goodbye, it was not only to his beloved parents, but, he realised, he was saying goodbye to all he had known, and loved of simple, ordinary people, and a simple way of life.

That is, he realised... ..Until NOW!

The Father, whom he had come to reprimand, had shown him, in a startling manner, how precious his early life had been; how all the fancy outer trappings meant nothing.

Goodness and decency, love and forgiveness, mercy and love of neighbour, were more commonly found in the ordinary, simple person, than could be found in the empty, sterile, intellectual discussions of vain men sprouting their clever arguments – priests or lay.

The concepts of the great gifts from God are timeless, priceless things: unalterable, regardless of the outer trappings. Once possessed, God is all that matters; the others are mere 'things' which could be dispensed with, and not be missed. Possessions made life easier, more comfortable, but they were not the essential centre of our being, or, at least, they *should not be*... let that happen in the church, the archbishop realised, and we are lost!

The sky was gradually growing lighter and through the half-opened door, he caught a glimpse of Saint Tom

and Saint Anne standing waiting for him to emerge. He chuckled to himself and came out to greet both animals quietly, then scrubbed his hands under the outside tap and hurried inside the building.

The Father came to meet him. "Good morning, Your Grace, thank God it's not too cold this morning. I don't think there's any ice about which is a good sign. We should have a fine, sunny day, I think."

"Father," asked the archbishop, drying his hands. "Could I begin Mass in about fifteen minutes?"

"Certainly, Your Grace, I have it all ready, for you, the vestments and everything is ready and, if you will permit me, I'd count it an honour, to serve your Mass."

The archbishop was overcome. He coughed softly. "It is I who would be honoured, dear Father."

The Father looked confused and embarrassed. "Well, when you are ready, go into the chapel and I'll prepare a little breakfast for us when we are finished. I'll offer the Holy Mass after your Mass."

"And, if you permit me, Father, I should be delighted to serve your Mass." The Father stumbled away to the kitchen area and, almost blindly, began to get the meal ready, his gait unsteady: he was aware of the great condescension of this great personage, in asking *him to serve his Mass*: a dirty, scarecrow of a priest, who lived in what appeared to be utter squalor.

The Father knew he was regarded as an eccentric and he truly did not know whether the life he was leading was pleasing to God, or not. And now to be asked whether

he would, *permit* an *archbishop*, to serve his Mass? It was bewildering – and frightening!

He concentrated on slicing the bread and had it ready to heat in the microwave. It could not be toasted, as he did not have a toaster; but he had bought some cheese and some dates. Peculiar, he knew, but it would do for breakfast.

There was a tinkle of a bell from the Chapel. The Father went immediately to the chapel. The archbishop was standing at the foot of the three steps, ready to start. The Father knelt near a large and beautiful, highly polished brass gong. The celebrant glanced at the Father, who nodded, and they began.

After that Mass, the archbishop took off his vestments and when he was stripped back to his ordinary day cassock, the Father began to put on the same vestments; he only had one set of each.

He felt nervous as he, in turn, stood waiting for the nod from the archbishop but, once he had started, he never thought of his server again.

The Prelate watched in growing astonishment at the total absorption of the Father in the Mass and began to feel a little afraid. The Father was moving into a realm that the archbishop did not really understand. He had certainly studied Mystical Theology but, he honestly admitted to himself, he really did not understand it, at all. He tried to steer clear of any hint of ‘mystical’ allusions, or any suggestions of vague ‘emotional things happening’ in administering the Sacraments. He secretly thought a lot of it was highly questionable and seemed to

only occur with ‘hysterical, highly suggestible priests or...nuns!’

In reading the lives of the Saints, in truth, he had a tendency, to ‘skip over’ any ‘weird’ happenings in their lives. Just getting through a priestly life and stamping out sin in the self, was quite enough without fancy words, making it sound so ‘pretty’!

With this mindset, when the priest had reached the consecration, the archbishop was simply bewildered to see what looked like a golden mist envelope the sanctuary.

His first thought was there must be some logical explanation for this mist. Possibly, it could be a reflection of sunlight, or a reflection of something. However, as the Father lifted up the consecrated wine and held the chalice aloft, the archbishop’s eyes stretched wide open, his mouth quivered in fright and he nearly cried out aloud in his terror—

No.no.no.no.NO! This is not possible! His mind was screaming; while his eyes noted every possible reason for it to be, completely, *possible*!

~the Father’s feet had left the floor...they were slowly, still rising, above the sanctuary floor~ the archbishop half rose from his knees. He was staring; his body was rigid: every muscle was clenched tightly.

He fought against the truth of what he was seeing, but...He began to understand, against his will, the underlying reason and *therefore the Truth*, of all of this...

~the priest was completely unaware of anything but...
Christ – Christ was all consuming...the priest was one
with Christ.

~it was as if the Father, himself, were illumined; he
was shining like a glowing candle in the centre of the
golden mist.

The archbishop trembled with crippling fear.

In spite of his fear, he was also filled with an
awareness of the Glory... *The Glory that is God!* He bowed
down low with his head to the floor; he felt himself sink
deeply into the *silence of prayer* as he had never ever
experienced it before! ...

One part of his mind was registering that this was
what Saint Paulinus of Nola, had written of...prayer
beyond, and without... words...He now understood what
Saint Paulinus had meant.

The Prelate struggled to pull himself together as the
Mass drew to its conclusion. The Father came down the
steps, went to the vesting table and removed all his
vestments, carefully hanging each one on his special hook
and clothes hanger. He then went to make his
thanksgiving to the centre of the sanctuary, standing
completely still, his eyes closed.

The archbishop was afraid to make a noise; to even
move. He did not know what he should do. He had come
expecting to find a charlatan and had found - to his
dismay – possibly...

...just *possibly*...

...*a saint!*

He thoughts were in the anguish of confusion. He knew he was just an ordinary bishop; he only knew bad priests, ones that drove him mad with their stupidity, their quarrelling, their feuds, their insults, their gambling... even their immorality. He knew what to do with them. This... however...*whatever this was!* – was totally outside his experience...he felt...lost, bewildered, frightened of everything he knew, or *thought* he knew.

The Father, genuflected, looked around and smiled. He said very softly. “Shall we eat now, Your Grace?”

They moved to the living area to eat their simple meal, silently at the table; the archbishop shooting secret glances at the Father from under his bent head; astonished that the priest looked perfectly normal – as if nothing unusual had happened. The Father carefully began to sweep up the remainder of the crumbs and crusts for the animals. He looked calm and relaxed; the archbishop, was aware he was still taut with the tension of the sight he had experienced.

As they went out together, Saint Tom and Saint Anne rushed to the Father and Saint Tom covered him with kisses while Saint Anne made happy bleating noises as she rubbed her head against his knee, again and again. The animals, as though they had been carefully instructed, went then to the archbishop, accepted his offering and showed their appreciation, but in a very subdued way. As he patted the animals, the archbishop came back to normal and began to speak naturally. He felt as if a huge load had been removed suddenly from his back.

The archbishop was amused at the animals; they certainly knew their master. His mind flew back to the last dog he had as a child, a little wild thing called, 'Pinky' for some reason. How he had loved that dog! No one in the world came between him and Pinky. When he was killed, the young boy, that he was then, nearly broke his heart, carrying the small dead dog back home to his parents; his mother had let him cry his heart out on her ample breast; warning the other kids to go away; not to taunt him, or she would give them a taste of the 'Feather Duster'. She had then ordered Kenneth, the eldest boy, to help bury the little animal, he remembered. She had been a wise, and loving, woman, his poor, hard-working mother.

Both men returned to the living quarters. The archbishop motioned the Father to sit down at the table with him. He took up a note pad, cleared his throat noisily and spoke seriously and authoritatively.

"Father, do you realise you have been here nearly two years now? I really can't believe it. I know I only gave you leave for twelve months, but I'm now very glad I forgot I hadn't checked up on you.

"Now I'll tell you the truth. I told the VG, Mons. Lipgurd, that, in all probability I would have to take you back to Bishop House, a woeful wreck of a priest. I did not confide in Father Joyce, but I threatened him that I was going to leave him here and take you back. However, I secretly thought - to tell the absolute truth, that you *would* do well.

“We had been together so many years, I couldn’t believe you would fail in whatever you attempted. That is not easy for me to admit now, but it is the truth.

“I am very satisfied with you; you can be assured I find both your way of life and your continual fidelity admirable but, I’m sorry, some things have to be changed.” The Father was seen to flinch briefly.

The Prelate went on. “First thing is the chapel. I want the chapel to be finished: the painting first of all. Then, you’ll need a couple of adequate chests, or cupboards, to hold the vestments and altar vessels – both to be lockable – that is the rule, you know that. This, I want done by a local firm.

“I have to go on to Father Pattison’s parish this evening. He is a very old man and wants to retire; the parish, as such, has ceased to exist. The town has moved away – the farmland has been sold, unfortunately – and Father will return to Ireland and I’ll suppress the parish officially. No one will suffer through this, but the beautiful little church has some things that you could use here. I shall see them tomorrow and direct them to you here. The first thing will be pews. I think I could fit in two lots of four-seaters pews for your chapel leaving a good centre aisle. I might be able to get the presses and vesting table if they are movable. I shall grab everything I’ve noticed you need here, and do not have.

“That’s the easy part. Now, I want you to agree to take the yearly Archdiocesan retreat for priests at the end of the year.”

The Father stood up, his lips trembling. "Your Grace," he muttered in real distress. "I have never ever given a retreat; I have no fancy words, or phrases, or any great learning – I want to obey you in everything, as I have always done, but I simply do not believe I can do what you are asking."

"Nevertheless, you will do it. I shall modify it. I'll take the biggest load of the lectures and, if you could give just one talk per day, would you think that reasonable?"

"But what could I talk about? I know the law, being a lawyer, and a canon lawyer, but you would not want that. I have no real in-depth knowledge of the Fathers of the Church, or..."

"Nor would I permit you to lecture on them, if you did have that knowledge." The archbishop leaned his elbow on the table and cupped his chin in his hands. He looked steadily at the gaunt man. "Tell me, Father. What is the priesthood all about?"

The Father breathed out; he had been holding his breath. He was relieved; he had feared a difficult question. He smiled, happily.

"It's essentially about being taken into a personal, intimate relationship with God Himself, with, and *through*, the loving worship of our Saviour Jesus Christ, His Divine Son. It is *through* that worship that we are given the opportunity to enter into a more intimate relationship with the holy Trinity.

"Everybody, through their unique genetic package – their DNA – instinctively *wants to believe*. People also *want to worship*. That comes with being born; it is what

we usually mean when we talk about the Natural Law – although that is usually referred to when talking of moral issues.

“So, all of us want to believe, therefore, it is the work of priests is bringing all men to worship and know, and love, and believe in the *True God*: to know TRUTH in all its beauty, which is Jesus Christ. That is the priest’s special work. And he accomplishes this, *first and always* by prayer.

“Of course, everyone needs to *know* about the One they are worshipping and *how* they are to worship; that’s where preaching comes in, but if preaching is all there is, *it will accomplish nothing* – an empty bladder... hollow... sounding brass. Preaching, however, must be the result of *knowledge built on prayer*; if it is not, it is useless.

The greater the depth of prayer, the simpler will be the Truths that the preacher expounds which are already magnificently laid out *in all their simplicity and their splendour in the simple catechisms of our Holy Mother, the Church*.

The archbishop clapped his hands and gave a loud shout of agreement. “That’s what I have been trying to tell my priests. Give me the old simple Catechism any day in preference to the junk I am forced to spend hours wading through – that is sent to me by so-called ‘Scholars’!”

The Father smiled, gently at the vehemence of the prelate. He then continued.

“A priest does not have to be a gigantic scholar to teach the catechism. Saint John Vianney, the Cure of Ars

– the only Diocesan Parish Priest in the history of the Church to be canonised – failed every exam he ever attempted. A priest must fly from those who twist and tie the Truth, into incomprehensible knots, which simply baffle most of the people, and only pander to the vanity of the preacher.

“Or, worse still, he must not be diverted into the transient ‘follies’ of man – which are all the rage one year and forgotten the next; the Church has seen every folly of man, over and over during its long existence – there is truly nothing new under the sun – the Church has experienced it all.

The archbishop nodded in agreement.

The Father continued. “When you read the history of the Church you find every idiocy and sin we face now in our 21st century, as it was in the twelfth century – apart from some IT extras.”

“The Truth rides the waves, no matter how violently they break upon it. It then emerges in simple statements such as are given in the Catechism, which, of course, come from Holy Scripture – the words of God Himself.”

“But,” interrupted the archbishop. “Priests say that the Scriptures are too difficult; people do not understand them.”

“That is not so. And this applies to the New Testament as well as the Old. A very great Biblical Scholar taught me once a valuable truth on this matter.

“He said: ‘The Gospels were written by simple men for simple men; you don’t have to tie yourself in knots to comprehend them; they mean just what they say.’

“The thing I find the most alarming and hold in abhorrence, Your Grace, is the prevalence of priests who are afraid to preach the Truth – for fear of man’s displeasure. That is a denial of Christ Himself, who *declared He WAS the Truth.*”

The archbishop raised his hand.

“Father, to me, also, that is the greatest sin of my bishops and priests today,” he declared. “They are afraid of witnessing to the Truth and that is tragic. Witnessing to Truth is, as you have said, witnessing to Christ Himself.”

The Father nodded sadly.

“That then becomes a *second*, betrayal of Christ. A priest becomes, in a way, another Judas Iscariot when he fails to witness to Truth. As I said at the beginning of my answer, Your Grace, a priest is brought into an intimate relationship with Christ; Thereby lies his greatness, *but also the terrific battle he must face!*

“God has given him a tremendous gift; ignore it, mock it, not acknowledge the gift and woe to that priest. He is worse than a bawdy, lecherous, drunken sinner who wallows in his sin like a bloated pig! Such a priest is a despicable creature; his end is discovering he has lost all meaning that made sense of life; he finds himself alone in a terrifying universe that is meaningless.”

The Father closed his eyes in what appeared to be anguish, as he thought of the words he had uttered.

“Priests come in all shapes and sizes. Some have great gifts, others few. It does not matter. Christ only asks of

us to recognise and use the gifts we have been given to the best of our ability.

“All of us know, instinctively, all that I’ve just said. I have not said a single thing that is new. However, once we really *know* Christ, *we WANT to love Him*. Think of that old Irish hymn that was sung decades ago – it was sung by princes and labourers, royal ladies and street sweepers:

‘O make us love you *more and more...*’ and that very telling line:

‘Jesus my Lord, my God, MY ALL...’

“It is a living miracle that we can all sing – regardless of our background, our social standing, our education – those two extraordinary, mysterious, words: ‘MY ALL’ and understand what they mean, even though nearly every ordinary person in the pulpits, or the pews, would find difficulty in articulating *what* they mean.”

“I agree wholeheartedly, Father. Those thrilling words sum all of it up, don’t they?”

“They do indeed, Your Grace. We are, mysteriously, aware of the degrees of loving; the movement from just saying words, to actual contemplation, even though we may never have heard of that word.”

“Why are we aware, Father?”

“Why are we aware Your Grace? Because our hearts are demanding a fulfilment that will only ever become complete, when we stand in the Beatific Vision of our Maker, our Saviour, the One who loves us beyond our pathetic comprehension: Jesus Christ. Even a little glimpse of that glory is a hint of what is available to us if

we surrender our being to Christ. Some of the greatest saints that have lived, and live unknown today, practise contemplation and are not even aware that they are doing anything special at all.

“The Cure of Ars speaks of this, and in saying that, I challenge any priest to say that holy saint – who had little, or practically, no scholarship, at all - was lacking in any way in his pastoral work. He turned a complete village into a holy and saintly people – people came from all over France for spiritual help from him. He had ‘living Faith’.”

The archbishop nodded his agreement and made some notes on his pad.

The Father’s voice began to increase in speed; his eyes were partially closed while his two hands were now clasped tightly together on the table.

“The priest, as well as every individual, is drawn to the beautiful, the intense, unsatisfied, longing, of our hearts. His job is to learn to *live in prayer*, so that his prayer becomes so beautiful, *and so simple*, it reaches up to become one with the great Prayer of Christ, in the Sacrifice of the Eucharist...The priesthood is about love...love, pure and simple...and it cannot be separated from the Eucharist – the Sacrifice and fount of love. The tabernacle should be the source from which the priest draws all his strength, his love, his words, and the motivation for all his living. It is the living fount of life-giving blood that cries aloud the love that is waiting, within it, to be poured out on us. Neglect the Eucharist and we are empty, and useless, vessels.”

The Father closed his eyes completely and remained for a long time without speaking at all. He then sighed and went on.

“I am troubled, Your Grace, by all the words that we are supposed to read about ‘New Plans’ for Evangelisation; ‘New Methods’ to adopt to make our message more suitable to ‘modern people’. It is all, no doubt well meaning, but so stupid.

“If Christ is our goal and seen as the prize to be striven for – the whole purpose of our being alive – no matter the hardships and the unending difficulties – it will automatically draw others to Christ...it will draw people like a magnet. *That* is the Evangelisation that will solve all the problems in the Church: humble trusting prayer by the pastor of his flock – not endless meetings and devising new plans that are dead in the water before they have finished writing them.

“However, the priest has to be the shepherd who *believes with all his being*; loves without counting the cost and is willing to give his life for the one he loves: Christ.

The Father smiled. “And no matter how difficult the road, Christ is never outdone in generosity; he will lavish gifts on us as he pours out His love for us. Everyone knows this. Every child knows this.”

The Father added gently to his superior. “As a very great and a very sound writer once wrote:

‘There’s nothing difficult, or mysterious, about prayer – *even the simplest child knows how to pray*’.” *

The Father suddenly stopped, worried. The archbishop was laughing.

“I’m sorry Your Grace, have I said something wrong, or stupid?”

The archbishop leaned back in his chair, smiling broadly.

“Well, Father, *AFTER ALL THAT!* ... you are the one who said he couldn’t possible give a talk to priests, are you?” The archbishop laughed happily.

“Now, you said Father, that every child knows how to pray! *That’s exactly! what I want you to teach my priests and the bishops under me.* The Church will fall like a pack of cards, if its priests do not start to relearn the basic message they are trying to teach.”

The archbishop turned another page.

“Now, that’s finished; I’ll let you know by email when the retreat in on and then I’ll send someone to collect you.

XII

“Next thing. I have decided *now*, I am leaving Father Joyce here to live with you.” The Father looked horrified.

“Yes, I know. I would feel the same. Seems like an idiot, and he isn’t, but he *will* be one, if I can’t get him away from a clique he is involved in, at Bishop House.

“Let me speak bluntly, Father. I think he is worth saving; I want to help him, but he has resisted me at every turn. I can only hope you can do the trick with God’s grace.”

The archbishop smiled again truly amused. “If you are horrified at him coming here, believe me, when I threatened him by revealing my plans for him to be left here, he nearly went through the roof; he told me it’s like being condemned to hell. I can only hope then, Father, you can give him such a taste of hell, in his time here, he might be of some use to the Church – he’s of no use at all, at the moment.”

“But,” stuttered the Father. “What do I do with him? I mean what work can he do here?”

“He can say Mass daily for the people; prepare his sermons thoroughly; he can visit the sick, comfort the

dying, work in the garden under your direction – in fact all the myriad activities of the ordinary curate in a parish. He is not to visit the pub, watch the Television, or attend any shows of any kind and he most definitely is not to spend his time with his wretched phone. I am not sure just what he is watching – for all I know it could well be pornography; I have a suspicion it is.

“Now we’ll have to have some changes done out here. Get the plumber to put on the water for the sink and install a simple shower with a simple plastic curtain so that each of you can bathe in some privacy. Get two simple beds, preferably with a wooden base and a big table with *four* chairs. I’ll see what Father Pattison’s place has to offer and have the furniture sent to you. I’ll do all that tomorrow. The furniture will all arrive before the week is out.

“I forgot, Father, the fence. It will have to be changed in the front. I want the fence to continue right the door of the chapel, for the people. Get them to put in a sensibly sized mailbox, also a large, box-shaped, section of the fence, which can be used for people to leave their gifts of food. These could be locked and unlocked from your side of the fence. Have two keys cut, one for you and one for your Brother priest.” The Father nodded, then asked.

“Your Grace, would you grant me permission to leave for a period of ten days while all this work is being done. I want to make a special, isolated retreat. I will take Saint Tom and Saint Anne with me and stay away. If you would come with me down to the little town now, we could get

it all started today. I could leave early tomorrow morning after the Masses.”

“But where would you go?” queried the archbishop. “You have nowhere else to go...”

“Oh, yes, I have, Your Grace. Up there in the hills, hidden by the huge trees is a shepherd’s hut. It is secluded and dry; it will be the perfect place for me to make a special retreat.

“If there anything *in* the hut?” The archbishop asked.

“Not much, except a fireplace,” he admitted; then smiled. “But it’s waterproof, that’s a real bonus.” They both laughed. The father continued.

“I shall also visit the farm at the back of those hills behind the Chapel; Molly Harris is close to her time and she will bring forth a glorious girl that will do great things for God and for the Church.”

“How....? No, it doesn’t matter. Yes, I agree to your request. I would like to meet these people before I go. But, before we set off down the town, Father, a question please.”

The Father’s face blanched again and his eyes almost closed.

“Yes,” he muttered, wondering what would come next.

“I have this very strange feeling I shall die soon; do you think it is so?”

The Father’s eyes opened wide, and he looked into space. He spoke in a remote voice – his voice seemed to have echoes; his head was lifted, as if he were listening. There was a period of total silence; then the Father spoke. “No, it’s completely wrong. You are fifty-seven years old.

You will live until you are eighty-seven; you will receive two days' notice that you are dying. As soon as you are in your 87th year, go to Confession every single day, so that you will be spotless and ready for Christ, whenever He calls you."

"I promise you, Father, I will do so, God willing. So, I'll see this 'miracle girl' grow up then?"

"Of course! You will be the cardinal who officially consecrates her as Abbess of the new enclosed Benedictine Abbey of the Transfiguration..."

"I've never heard of such an Abbey!"

"Of course not. The abbess is not yet born, but she will be very soon."

The archbishop started to get out of this chair when he halted, his face a picture of misery. "Did you say, 'Cardinal'?"

"Of course. You will be named in the next consistory..."

"Oh, merciful God! God Forbid! No, no, NO!" He stood up his face ashen. "Let's go down the town, Father. I cannot stand much more of all this! It's all too much for me; I am a very, simple man."

XIII

The procession down the town was an event in that little country village. Word had spread like wildfire of the magnificent Episcopal car when it had first appeared, so all the shop owners, and their staffs, were waiting in their doorways and the archbishop was thrilled, and a little frightened, at the greetings the Father received. The people not only called out their welcomes, but invited the group in, wherever they went; they even greeted Saint Tom and Saint Anne as well.

The Father spoke softly and gently to all the people and raised his hand in blessing. They went into the grocer's 'emporium' – called such, as it sold everything – and Father bought, to the archbishop's surprise, twelve loaves of bread. When the shop owner, embarrassed, admitted he only had that amount left over from yesterday, the Father said that was exactly what he wanted. He then bought a good amount of hard cheese, dates, and packets of pasta. He also bought some boxes of matches and another ten tins of dogs' meat, just in case he ran out. Saint Tom was always hungry.

The archbishop had never been in a shop such as this, before, and wandered around buying a few things that he thought the Father might need.

They then moved on to the 'All Purpose, Building, Services' shop. The staff knew the Father well there and welcomed him, and his visitor, whom they called 'Sir.' Father introduced his visitor to each person with his full title: 'His Grace, Archbishop, Terrence McViver'. The people were awed by the title; they had no idea what it meant.

The two men were invited to sit down at the counter and began to outline their needs. The owner was delighted; they were experiencing a down-turn in work and he had four tradesmen he had to pay, and no work for them to do. Therefore, he assured both customers that the work would all be done, and perfectly done, within ten days.

The Father sensibly invited the owner, to accompany them back to the Chapel, so he could see, at 'first-hand', all that was involved. The man grabbed a notebook and immediately set off with his customers. The Father, with some extra reminders from the archbishop, kept the man writing all the way back. He was muttering, 'Fencing, Carpenter, Painting, cleaning two very large, high stain glass windows, two wooden beds to be made, a Plumber to put the water into the living quarters, a sink would be required, a shower as well, also a small surface of the floor to be tiled, with a drainage hole in the floor, for the shower water. The pipes to be dug outside in the yard and an Electrician to add more lights to the living area'.

Wow! The owner exulted; this was like winning the lottery.

XIV

When they arrived back at the Chapel, they found that Father Bert Joyce had returned, looking a little pale, but otherwise all right. The Father introduced the Builder, Toby Malone, to the young priest, and told Father Joyce he would be left in charge to supervise all the work being done and to offer suggestions if he were asked.

The young priest looked surprised and a little daunted at the responsibility. He forced himself to listen very carefully to all that was being said of what was to be done. The archbishop said he would be calling in to see the completed job – which was, of course, clear to all of them, merely a means of letting the youngster know he would be checked out on the job he had done.

It was Father Joyce who suggested, a small confessional, to be built at the back of the chapel against the back wall. He suggested it could be something like the one he quickly sketched – a very, basic confessional. The builder looked at the sketch and smiled. He said it would be a ‘piece of cake’; he had an excellent carpenter who could knock that up in no time at all.

While they were in the Chapel, which the builder had never seen before. He noticed a very, small organ gallery.

“What about up there? What’s there?”

The Father answered: “I’d almost forgotten it. No, Toby, it’s too big a job. Perhaps Father Joyce, later on, might see about restoring it. There is, believe it or not, a very old organ up there which is still playable, but has to be pumped by your feet. In my early days here, I used to try to remember how to play some of my favourite hymns.

Father Joyce was immediately interested. “I play the piano. I have never tried the organ. I would love to try. May I, Father?”

“My dear boy, of course, but only hymns – this is a holy place - and only when all the work is done. Not before. All right?”

“All right! I’ll look forward to it.”

The builder interrupted the conversation of the clerics.

“I think I’ve seen all I need. I’ll go now and order the supplies. I see, Father, you have used white for the walls. Well, we happen to have a very pale slightly cream colour already in our store – in fact, we have stacks of it; the job it was bought for, fell through. Would you consider having the paint we have on our hands at the wholesale price? We could use it for the whole chapel, including the part you have already painted so well.”

“I accept your very generous offer with thanks, Toby. One problem I see is how to protect the altar. The altar is precious to us: that is where Christ is.”

“Not to worry about that, Father. I was brought up a Catholic, I know what you mean. I will have everything covered in canvas so that not one drop will fall on the beautiful altar, nor on the wonderful job you’ve done on the floorboards - and the altar rails. You’ve restored them to their original pristine state. They’re first class; a great job!”

He snapped his fingers. “Call it a deal?” and held out his hand. First the Father, then the archbishop shook hands vigorously with this honest man. As they moved towards the front door, the Father whispered to Toby that he would remove the Blessed Sacrament so that the men could work and talk freely, as they worked. Tony nodded his comprehension.

Father was still carrying all the food he had bought. Father Joyce came and whispered to him; the Father apologized, and let the young man take the large, heavy bag, reminding him to leave ten loaves of bread in the bag. Bert Joyce was puzzled but did as he was told.

As they saw the builder out the front door, the archbishop said: “Now, Father, we’ve missed the Midday Office, but we can catch up on that later. Let’s just say the Angelus together and have some lunch. I want to go with you to meet the farmer this afternoon, then I must head away to my next appointment. I am not used to driving now; I don’t want to drive in the dark. Do you agree?”

“Certainly, Your Grace. A very sensible suggestion.” He replied.

At the table after the Angelus had been recited by the three priests standing around the table, they sat down to a very simple meal of bread, cheese and dates. Father Joyce looked relieved. He had been secretly dreading that he would be given another helping of dog food.

Before they rose from the table, the Father took out a bunch of keys from his habit pockets. He selected keys to the front gate, the chapel front door, the outer door to the living quarters – also the key to the back gates. He also had a lanyard to keep the keys safe.

“Brother Father - that is what I think I’ll call you – you will need your own keys and, especially now, with all the men coming in, to do all the alterations. I suggest you put the keys on the lanyard and wear it around your neck. That is what I have to do; it saves all the frustration of not having the keys with you when you need them in a hurry.” He smiled. “It also is one way of not losing them; they are expensive to have cut.

“Tomorrow morning, I shall offer the first Mass and I would like you to serve my Mass, unless you have personal objections to that, and then I will serve your Mass; you could follow me. I want us to be finished by 7.00am. I think the workmen will be here then.

“As you will be offering the last Mass until the next Sunday when the men won’t be working, you must remove the Blessed Sacrament, consume the few hosts that are left, as I want the Tabernacle door to be left wide open so it will be obvious to Toby, the main workman.

“I will wait until you have done all that, then I shall go with Saint Tom and Saint Anne, and we’ll be away for

ten days. When I return after exactly ten days, I know I shall find everything, even better done, than had I done it myself. Thank you, Father; you will have a busy ten days, I do understand that.”

“But where...?” He received a fierce nudge in his side by the archbishop; he received the message quickly.

Father continued, as though he had noticed nothing. “This afternoon, I am taking the bishop and the saints to visit Molly and Fred Harris and their son, young Billy. You will meet them later.” He looked at the archbishop. “Are you ready, Your Grace?”

As they stood at the door, the archbishop noticed that the Father had lifted the front skirts of his tunic, also the scapular, and tucked them into his wide leather belt. The archbishop did the same with his very heavy cassock, and took, humbly, the suggestion as to how he could tuck up his robes into his sash. The Father’s skinny legs and his open sandals were revealed but, of course, the archbishop had those awkward things, trousers, to cope with, so he bent down and rolled up his good trousers to his knees. He then copied the Father who took a long staff from near the door and took one for himself.

As soon as the ‘saints’ saw the Father with his staff, they bounded to the back gate and, as soon as Father had opened the gate, they rushed out to the wide, beautiful fields, with the forest in the distance up on the top of the hill.

The archbishop looked a bit uncertain. Just how far were they going to walk? He asked, tentatively, “Is it very far, Father?”

The Father smiled. "What is that comic expression they once used to say? 'It's going to be a walk in the park!' ~ which you always knew meant it was going to be absolutely, dreadful! Yes, it's a fair way, but we won't rush it and we'll definitely take the hill slowly. I'm not young anymore either, you know." The archbishop laughed.

"Young! I've been so long a priest that I can't really remember ever being young, but I must have been once! Well, lead on Mc Duff." He looked around where he was, his eyes taking in Saint Tom galloping across the field, Saint Anne trying to follow him, but giving up and sitting down, deciding to sit in the long grass and wait for her protector and friend.

The archbishop smiled; he felt 'at home' here in the bush climbing a steep hill, his feet sinking into the grass under his tread; there was something healthy and good about walking on the grass, not cement.

He pondered, as he walked, his relationship with the Father. They were so different, yet so alike. They were both highly educated, but in different fields, were from different backgrounds, but in more important ways, very, very, similar.

The two men were similar in their sensitivity to beauty – in their appreciation of nature, their love of the earth and in an awareness of the exquisite beauty of God's creation. This had led, them, both, individually, to an appreciation of Gerald Manly Hopkins' Nature poetry. The archbishop tended to keep it to himself; he had no intention of being mocked by rude and rough

priests, even prelates: he knew that to evince a love of such a so-called 'feminine' thing as poetry could easily be a source of amusement and could be regarded as a weakness, to those he had to control and discipline.

Yet now, on this walk up to, and into, the forest he felt free to let the poetry flow out of him. He, without really intending to say it out aloud, began the poem he loved the best: 'God's Grandeur'. The Father, a little way ahead, heard the words and followed them, in his mind, with real joy.

With the beauty of God's creation all around him the archbishop came to a stop: 'men 'had trod and trod and trod and all is seared with...' well... with *something* or other. He thought it was, 'toil'? ...No, he remembered, it was, 'trade'! ... yes, 'seared with trade'...and the next line... 'nor can man feel...being shod!' How true that was! 'Being shod'. Back home in his childhood home, the kids had been rarely shod - except when going to Mass on Sundays. Having shoes always on your feet was unknown to the archbishop until he had been sent to boarding school. He remembered, with a vivid memory flashback of his early childhood, his toes twisting in the newly dug cool earth after his father had ploughed a field.

Yes, it all was, indeed, *glorious* and Hopkins had been right!

His gazed at his companion, striding ahead, his eyes seeing everything.

The Father's mind was alive to the beauty, as was McViver's. The archbishop smiled as he heard his hermit priest muttering: 'The world is charged with the glory of

God...the glory of God...the glory of God', and he was smiling happily his eyes soaking up the richness of God's gift to man.

Thanks be to the glorious God, thought the archbishop, that I have been given the chance to find this precious pearl; this glimpse of the Glory, shining in the wilderness – *literally* the wilderness.

His thoughts were interrupted by a call from the Father. "Your Grace, look at the saints!" The archbishop did so and was speechless. Saint Tom and Saint Anne were both fixed like statues in front of a patch of thick thorny brambles.

"What are they doing? Why are they standing like that? That's weird!"

"It's where my first little dog, called Ruffy, died. His blood is in the soil; he had been attacked violently by a vixen who tore him, and then me, almost to pieces. For some reason, Saint Tom recognizes something here. He has always done so – I've never known why."

"Is the dog buried here?"

"No, that's the strangest part; it's where he died. This wonderful farmer that we are going to meet, buried Ruffy for me in his own garden. That's how I came to know this good family." He spoke to the saints. "Thank you, Saint Tom and thank you, Saint Anne." The animals immediately relaxed their stance and ran ahead; they knew where they were going now.

The men both paused to admire the beauty of the age-old forest. It was a hidden world of secret loveliness. Both men were vividly aware of the source – the inner

spring - of the innocent Divine loveliness. The archbishop - a little embarrassed - coughed a lot to disguise his feelings.

This was proving to be the most extraordinary 'canonical visitation' he had ever done!

In a little while they had reached the wire fence and Saint Tom barked loudly. The Father instructed his superior to quickly pull his clothes down; they would meet both parents and the young boy, Billy, very soon.

Saint Tom's barking brought Fred quickly to the fence. However, there was no jovial greetings as there usually was. Fred gasped as soon as he saw them: "Thank God, thank God, thank God, you've come. Molly's gone into labour."

The archbishop wanted to turn and run for his life. Such things as women's issues always embarrassed him; he was so aware of his complete ignorance. He looked in astonishment, yet again, at the Father. He was shooting questions at the farmer as though he were an obstetric surgeon.

"Is there great pain?"

"Yes, more than there should be, I think."

"Is the baby in the right position?"

"No, I think that's the problem."

"Can you get a doctor?"

"No, I've tried. He won't be here until tomorrow. By then, it will be too late," and the good man burst out crying. The Father held him in his arms for a moment or two, then said softly.

“You must stop that, Fred. Leave it all to the archbishop and me; you know this is a special girl child – do you think God will let her go before she even begins her work.”

He turned to the archbishop. “Come on, Your Grace, and pray as you’ve never prayed before. We’re going to deliver the child.” He turned back to Fred.

“Fred, take us in to Molly now. You must stay with us at every moment and do what I tell you.” He turned to the saints: “Stay here and be utterly silent, not one peep out of either of you...come on, Terrence.”

As they hurried to the house, they could hear the screams of the poor woman. The archbishop shuddered. He knew he would disgrace himself and probably faint. He heard the Father asking: “Fred do you have any large aprons we could put on? Give us a couple of towels and we can wrap them around us...Now, Terrence, let’s scrub our hands under this tap with this coarse soap until they are spotless without even a drop of sweat” They did so and putting on the outside coverings they went into the bedroom.

Molly recognized the Father instantly and held out her hand which he clutched and held to his breast.

“Molly, you know what I’ve told you. Angela will live; the birth will go well. We just have to sort out a couple of things. Put your hands on your belly. Can you feel the baby in any position...That’s right! ...You are doing fine. Just gently press downwards you will feel it... Can you feel anything now? ...You can? You can feel the *head up there?*

...Goodness! That means it's upside down. We have to turn it round.

"Fred, come here! I cannot do this; this is your job. Put your hands on your wife's belly, feel the head...*go on Fred...* you won't hurt the baby. Feel it?... That's right! You're doing great! ...Now, Fred, gently push it around to the left, very...very slowly, see if it will move with the pressure...It did? Good! ...No, you're doing fine...it's moving, Fred, keep going, move it... but, very, very, slowly down towards the exit canal."

"But what do I do when it gets down there?" Fred's voice was wobbling; he was sweating heavily.

"Stop that fear, immediately, Fred! ...You're doing wonderfully...Now, it looks as if it's nearly there...No! Stop! Stop! Don't push it any further around! ...It's perfect now." He turned his head towards Molly. "It's up to you, now, Molly. You have to push! Whenever Terrence and I say, 'Push'... All right?" The poor woman nodded, tearfully.

The Father next gave directions to the archbishop. "Terrence, take Molly's hand... I'll take the other one; whenever I say push, you hold the hand firmly against your chest and push *against* Molly's strength, as she pushes... OK?

"OK," muttered the red-faced prelate. Molly shrieked and the Father said loudly, 'Push' and the archbishop did as he had been told.

Fred shouted. "Father, I can see the head!"

"Right, Fred. Now, have your hand ready to help the baby out... Don't be afraid to put your hand under the

baby's head—cup your hand to catch it and use your fingers to safeguard the neck as it comes out. We'll soon see if either arm is in an awkward position.”

Molly screamed again. Both men immediately shouted, ‘Push’

They were interrupted by another shriek of pain from the woman, her face a lather of perspiration.

The archbishop, quickly, grabbed a washer with his other hand, and wiped the face of the agonized mother. As she screamed again, both the Father and archbishop said in unison, “Push” while the Father said, “*Now, Fred, Now!*”

There was a sudden gasp from Molly and Fred simultaneously. The little girl child slid easily out, but, as there was no sound, the Father quickly took her from Fred's hands, and holding her up by her feet, gently slapped her rump.

There was a sudden gasp from the infant and then she wailed with such volume that Fred and the archbishop moved backwards. Molly was looking at her daughter with unbelieving eyes. “Father, you've done it; you've done it; you've done it.” The Father tutted, embarrassed, and gave the baby to the mother. She held it to her heart as if she would never let it go.

The Father, wiping sweat from his own face, spoke to the father of the child: “Fred, quickly, get me a pair of scissors.” When the man came back, the Father said: “I'm not going to tell you what to do now; you know. Go ahead and do it, now, for your daughter, as you do all the time when your sheep are lambing... so, get to it!” Fred

snipped the umbilical cord and tied the end still in his daughter, in a little knot. Molly's section of the cord would come out naturally, with the after birth.

It was only then that the Father noticed that the boy Billy had been watching the whole procedure. When he saw the Father looking at him, Billy rushed forward, buried his head in the Father's body and cried and cried; he had been certain his mother was going to die with the screaming, and with his dad so bewildered, crying and upset. The Father held him close and whispered to him to be strong now; his Mum and Dad needed him. He was now the big brother of a little sister. The Father then spoke to the mother.

"Now, Molly, we have to give the infant a bathe. I'll try to do it as gently as I can". He turned to the boy. "Billy, boil some water in the jug and then put it in the biggest bowl you can find. I only want the water warm not too hot and not too cold. You can do that; you're a big boy now."

"Now, Terrence, we forgot some basic hygiene, so let's remedy it now. We Should have put down some other sheets beneath Molly so we could remove the one the poor woman is lying on which is now a mess. We will fix that up, won't we? ...Fred, get me a couple of sheets, old ones if you have any...Now, Terrence, you're going to learn how to do the complicated task of changing a sheet with the person lying on it."

With the archbishop holding Molly first one side with one hand holding her firmly in the middle of her back and one on the shoulder, then repeating the

movement with the other side, they were able to gently remove the soiled sheets from under the woman and put down a clean, fresh sheet while they put a double folded sheet under the woman's lower body to catch all the mess that would now, or soon, flow.

Billy then brought in the warm water in a good bowl. He walked carefully, as it obviously was a very, special, bowl to the family. The Father thanked him and then invited Fred to be the one to sponge down the waiting baby as he held the body steady. He joked, "She'll be a great singer with that powerful voice, I can tell you. Now all she is waiting for is a good meal so, when we dry her off, Molly, she'll be in your arms." A few minutes later, he cried: "Here she comes Molly, your own very special, glorious daughter, Angela."

He motioned to the archbishop to come with him now out of the bedroom. "They need to be together now, Your Grace, for a little while...Billy come with us and show us where the laundry is, and," he leaned down to whisper to the child, "to tell us how to use the washing machine; I'm sure you know how, he straightened up "and now, Your Grace, you and I will do the washing of the sheets, the towels and then the aprons we were wearing.

"Molly will have her hands full for a while and Fred has a farm to run. Then, Billy, we'll go and see the saints; they're waiting for you to speak to them."

As they followed the young boy out of the house, the archbishop said with mock severity, "And just who was it who gave you permission to call me by my first name? My

word, just because you have nearly given a heart attack, with that episode ...” he started to laugh.

The Father was unrepentant. “You must remind me, Your Grace, to call you by your correct title at our next split-second emergency, like the last one.” He smiled, teasingly. “I take it you are totally familiar with the washing machine, and all things done in a laundry, You Grace?”

The archbishop aimed a mock punch at the Father’s cheekiness. “When that dreaded day comes, which you assure me I can’t avoid, of becoming a cardinal, I’ll remember that crack, and make you pay for it, my lad.” He again laughed. “However, I’m in no doubt you know everything about everything. After being an obstetrician, a mere washing machine, would be child’s play to you! – Me? I don’t think I’ve ever seen one work.”

“Well, this will be a first-time event for you, won’t it. I’ll show you how it works, after Billy, who’s coming up to seven years old, teaches me!” This time the Father, actually, *did* laugh!

Under Billy’s direction, the machine was in use within minutes and the Father set the timer as they sorted out the sheets and took the worst ones outside, shaking them clear of most of the mess, then ran them under the cold garden-hose tap before taking them back and placing them in the machine. They added a fair amount of detergent and some disinfectant which they found on a shelf.

While the sheets were being done, they went out to see Billy with the saints. The young boy was in his

element and while the Father sat on the ground near his own animals, Billy took the archbishop to see his pet rabbits and his precious birds in an aviary which his dad had built for him. Billy went into the cage with the birds who flocked to sit on his shoulder and settled on his arms and hands – even his head; the boy called each bird by its own name. They obviously trusted him completely. The little boy was so proud of his birds that he insisted on introducing them, one by one, to the great Father with a difficult, ‘funny name’. However, being a very well brought up child, he tried to remember to call this important man: ‘Your Grace’ whenever he spoke to him.

It was Billy who first heard the ‘clunk’ from the laundry and called out to the Father. “The washing is finished, Father. It needs to go into the dryer now; it only takes a few minutes – it’s a good dryer.”

“Thanks Boss,” called the Father which made the boy laugh. The Father hurried to the laundry, took the linen from the machine; transferred it to the dryer, set the time and returned outside. He called to the archbishop. “Please come here, Your Grace, we’ll fold the washing.” And soon, both men were folding the sheets, the aprons and any other things that were in the wash. Billy had come in with them, after running in to see if his Mum was still all right; he happily told the two men that she was sitting up and smiling, and Dad’s arm was around her.

“Billy, now pay attention.,” demanded the Father. “What other tasks has your poor father to do today that we could do for him?”

The boy thought quickly. "Well, nearly all the main jobs could wait till tomorrow, but there's the three dairy cattle to be milked; they were milked this morning, but Dad didn't have time this afternoon."

"Go and round them up, son. The archbishop and I will do them now; then we must hurry off; we're running late."

The archbishop started to laugh again. "This time, 'smarty pants', you think you will now put it over me again. Let me tell you, I grew up on a farm and I do know how to milk. In fact, I was once a pretty fast milker."

"Good! That will halve the time. Come on, get those skirts up again or you'll have some explaining to do." They hurried down the paddock and into a small milking shed. Billy had the first two in, one on each side of the bail. The milk buckets were there as well, also the bucket for cleaning down the teats. Both the archbishop and the Father let the cows smell their fingers, and gently rub down the sides of the necks, before they sat down on their stools, as Billy put some good hay down in the feed trough in front of each cow.

Both men had their skirts up as high as they could get them. The Father's tied into his belt, the archbishop's lifted front and back with the front tucked under his purple sash, while the back was lifted, up over his shoulders exposing the back of his trousers, his braces and his white shirt which was dripping with perspiration.

It was similar to a competition: both men milking as if there was a great prize to be won. It was, of course, the archbishop who finished first and who was ready for the

third cow as Billy brought her in. She, too, was a placid old animal and was no trouble to a man, who revealed he certainly did know, what he was doing. The Father had to ask Billy for advice, a couple of times, as it was the first time he had ever milked in his life!

When the task was finished, they tried to make themselves respectable again while Billy took the milk back to the house.

“Your Grace, we are running desperately late. We will just pop in to see mother and daughter, say goodbye to Fred and then dash home. Father Joyce could be worried, and I am concerned: it will be dark soon, and you have over fifty miles to drive tonight.”

“Let’s be quick then, Father.” The archbishop and the Father went as fast as they could back to the house. They knocked, softly at Molly’s door and Fred himself opened it.

“Thank God, you men were both here; I was nearly off my head before you came....”

“Thank God, Fred, He sent us, and that we were of some use. Now, we are in a tearing hurry as the archbishop has to be fifty miles away in a couple of hours, so we have to get home. Can we just say, goodbye to Molly, then we will be off?

Fred opened the door wide, and they saw the new baby, Angela, at Molly’s breast. The mother looked up, her face radiant and beautiful. “Father, you were right; she is the most beautiful baby I have ever seen. God bless you, Father, and you too, Father – I don’t even know your name.”

The Father smiled. "Molly, thank God all is going to be well. Let me tell you something. Very few women could say that their doctors who delivered their child were a hermit priest, and none other than 'His Grace, the Archbishop Terrence McViver, the head of this entire Archdiocese.'" Molly's mouth fell open. Before she could say anything. Father continued: "Fred and I will now kneel while His Grace gives us his Apostolic blessing."

The archbishop, his hand trembling, raised it high and said the sacred words. Father, gently, pulled his Superior out of the room; then shook hands with Fred and hurried away down to the fence where they said a hurried goodbye to Billy, and almost ran back to the Hermitage.

Arriving there, breathless, the found Father Joyce had been watching for them for the past hour. To prevent even more time being lost, the Father instructed the young man. "Brother Father, we haven't time now for dinner. Please slap some cheese between some slices of that stale bread we have left, add an apple and a few dates; put them in some container that is lying about and check to see that the archbishop does not leave anything behind him. We must rush him away."

"But what have you been doing....?" The Father cut in quickly. "Oh, nothing much, you know, talking...you get carried away..."

The archbishop looked around quickly to see that he, certainly, did not leave anything. He was then ready to go.

He astonished Father Joyce by kneeling on the floor before the hermit priest and asking, humbly. "Father, please bless me. I have learned more about pastoral work and theory in one afternoon, than I learned in a whole year at the Gregorian in Rome."

The Father withdrew into himself. His eyes became remote. His voice was different. "You will not find the next part of your journey easy. You will confront evil unmasked. Your Grace, the situation is not as innocent as it seems. Don't be afraid for a moment! It can all be traced to an idol that is in the house. Search for it, burn it, and then you will be safe.

The Father continued: "Now....Benedictio Dei omnipotentis, Patris et Filius et Spiritus Sancti, descendat super te et maneat semper.....Amen" He raised the prelate to his feet, hugged him briefly to his chest and stepped backward, "Father Joyce will see you off, Your Grace." The young priest was astonished to see tears in the archbishop's eyes.

XV

Early the next morning, Father Joyce heard the Father moving about, and remembered that he was leaving, straight after Mass that morning and would not be back for ten days.

In one way, the young priest was pleased; he would have no one looking over his shoulder for the next ten days, seeing all his faults and telling him what to do. But Bert Joyce had a streak of decency in his character, and he admitted that, to be fair, this 'odd-bod' had not been overly 'bossy' in the couple of days the archbishop was here.

Boy, was he glad, *that* other one was gone! He noticed everything and did not mince his words either, but he'd had to put up with him. If he wanted to be promoted, then he knew he had to pretend and flatter those who would get him into power. Bert wanted the big jobs. The ones that brought in the money. He wanted a big, fancy car, a great house to live in, great robes to wear, servants to boss about, little actual work to do, and all of this, preferably in Rome, that gorgeous city, where you could get away with anything, and no one ever found out. It was his kind of city!

Being naturally curious, Bert Joyce wondered where the old chap was off to. He could have a friend, one of the farmers, who would take him in, the poor, weird, bloke. Yet, he is taking the animals – the ‘saints’ – as he called them, with him. Not many people would take the whole three of them, and who would let the animals sleep inside their house? Also, the food he was taking! The stale bread, the lump of cheese left over and the dates – besides about ten tins of dog meat! He actually shuddered at the memory of what he went through by eating, what he had thought, were normal ‘rissoles! Ugh! The man must be a bit off his trolley. Yet, he seemed fairly, bright in many ways. He is a strange one... this one.

Oh, give it up, he told himself. He must get out of this bed, such as it was, and have to be bright and perky and smiling. Get up, the pretence must go on. He thought he would just have a few more minutes...

XVI

Bert Joyce felt his shoulder being shaken and he came back to life again. Dear God, it was pitch black. What time was it, for God's sake? He looked at his wristwatch, with its luminous dial; it was 3.30am. God in Heaven! How can anyone begin the day at 3.30am?

He climbed out of the bed clothes and let the animals out of the living quarters. With the light on, he saw that the Father was fully dressed, with his travelling bags all lined up, ready to go. For a moment he was worried about the man, then as the cold penetrated his being, he shuddered and ran like a hare out into the darkness to the outhouse. Thank God, he thought, his mates could not see him now; they would laugh their heads off.

He was shaking badly with the cold as he washed under the outside tap and when he got to the door again, he found both animals waiting for him to let them both back in. He did so, then rapidly got into his day clothes. He longed for his cup of coffee which usually started his day.

No coffee today. He had to answer the old boy's Mass first. He then snorted in contempt. It would have to be

in Latin and according to the Extraordinary Form, wouldn't it?

What a bore, a bloody, long bore! However, needs must. Thank Heavens he had done that deadly boring course in Latin, first at school, then at the Seminary. What a joke that had been!

A gentle voice spoke behind him. "Are you ready, Bother Father?" He nodded and followed the Father through the small door into the Sanctuary which was ablaze with light and ready for Mass. Joyce quickly picked up the little 'Guide' which was where the server usually knelt and glanced at the front page. Thank Heaven, it was all there.

The Father waited for his server to be ready, then genuflected and the Mass began. "In nomine Patris, et Filii and Spiritus Sancti....

Joyce was ready with the first response and the Mass proceeded along normal lines. At the Sanctus, Joyce remembered to ring the gong and, perhaps he hit the gong too hard, he thought, as it went echoing around and around, the room. The warning bell came next; he hit that better, not so loud, then he was ready for the three at the Consecration. He hit the first as the Father genuflected, then as he lifted the host high in the air, there should have been another bell, but there was silence.....

Father Bert Joyce was staring, his eyes enormous, his mouth was wide open, dribbling saliva. His muscles clenched in fear. He seemed incapable to moving. He looked as though he were in a fit or had suffered a stroke!

When he could move again, he dropped the beater for the gong and rubbed his eyes. He obviously was seeing things, perhaps he was not well... ..then his eyes became fixed on the Father's feet which were suspended in the air a full foot off the floor... and were still rising! *God in Heaven!* He started to rise to his feet in tandem with the feet; he felt encompassed by the feet...

His eyes moved up to the Father's head as a golden mist spread over the sanctuary and over *him*. He noticed the Father's head was tilted upwards; the eyes absolutely fixed on the Host he had just consecrated.....Dear God! He was now near the ceiling! Bert Joyce started trembling and could not stop. He now began to gasp with shock; his fingers scrabbling with the front of his cassock; despite the terrible cold, he was sweating dreadfully. He wondered if he were going mad; if he could run away; what he was seeing was not possible; he was seeing something that *wasn't there...or...he*

actually, shuddered... horrified...or could it... be possible?

... WAS THERE?

He wanted to flee; he wanted none of this...or... perhaps the archbishop left him here for this? He took another swift, terrified look up at the Father, totally absorbed IN GOD – *he understood that was exactly what was happening*. Then that MEANS... No, No, No, it cannot be...

...CAN IT?

Father Joyce, trembling, his teeth clenched to prevent them grinding together, looked at his life as it flashed in

a nanosecond through his mind. He had never really believed in anything to any extent. Yes, he had gone through the motions and went through the Seminary courses, which were a breeze for anyone with his background... through the dreary retreats and even gave quite clever talks on the Fathers of the Church and Doctrinal subjects. His thoughts stopped dead with fear. He had actually given clever talks on the *Eucharist*... **ON THE EUCHARIST ITSELF!**

God have mercy on me, he cried to himself ...*Even on that!* A mocker and an unbeliever! ... I am condemned! Cast out!

Now he was shattered! He thought for a terrible moment that he was about to die – to die in his sins, his fearful, dreadful, hateful, deadly sins, in despair. There was one, over-riding terrible Truth, that kept drumming into his brain. He kept his eyes closed tightly, but then, took a quick look again. He thought - he hoped - he might have imagined it. NO, NO, NO! There were the Father's feet, he could just see them, up near the ceiling...

It was all REAL; *it truly was, REAL!* Then that meant that Truth was a REALITY, a *Real Person!* - he had lived an enormous lie! He had... he had...he ...his mind went into a spiral of sheer, shivering, hysterical panic...his body twirled around into a twisted coil...and

... he fainted across the altar steps into the golden mist...

The Father found him there at the end of Mass.

The Father knelt beside the young priest and helped him, gently, to his feet. He took him to the living area

and sat him on a chair, then quickly un-vesting, hurried back with the clothes and hung his vestments where they should be. He then returned to the table and poured a glass of water; standing behind the white-faced priest, he held his head until the youngster seemed to be himself again.

“I think my dear Brother Father, you should not attempt to offer the holy Mass this morning. I take it on myself to dispense you. By Sunday, you should be well again. Sit still now and I’ll get you something to eat. While you are eating, I’ll slip in and consume the hosts left in the tabernacle; the men will be here in about twenty minutes.

Father Joyce clutched his arm. “No, Father. I must go to Confession NOW. Please say you will hear me. I need to go desperately. I am in grave danger – I could go to Hell... I’m losing my soul.”

He thought the Father would be shocked. He was not.

“Of course, I will, son. Just give me a moment to clear the tabernacle.” The Father hurried off and consumed the last of the hosts, then returned to the young priest, and changed his white stole for a purple one.

“You could kneel here near me. Right? Take your time, lad. Remember son, you and I are called to something that is wonderful and terrifying, with great and glorious promises and with equally terrifying punishments. We are simple men, with all the temptations of ordinary men: not one of us is perfect or, has not done something in his life of which he is bitterly

ashamed, and prays constantly, in repentance, for his folly.

“We live such a short time, yet eternity is forever: that is so hard to remember, when the passions are upon us; we usually remember them, though, when we have broken God’s commandments, and the vows we have made at our Ordination.”

The Father smiled and his voice was kind. “I grow more and more boring in my old age. Let’s begin my boy.” He made the sign of the cross over the young priest, then stopped again. “Remember, God will forgive everything if we are *totally honest*; *you cannot... simply cannot... fool God*. Make a truly honest confession and you can start again, as a new-born babe. Now, tell me, roughly, son, how long is it since you made your last Confession?”

The aging Father was shocked in spite of all the years he had spent in the Confessional, by the reply. He closed his eyes in anguish, as he listened intently.

“Father, I have never, ever made a *real* Confession since I was about twelve years old. I’ve pretended ever since, as it was compulsory. I made up the sins and never ever told the real sins I actually did commit. I’ve been a complete sham for the whole of my time as a Seminarian, then as a priest. Every Mass I’ve offered has been a mockery – I have never believed in anything; every sacrament I’ve administered, likewise. I’ve only read the Divine Office when I couldn’t get out of it, and I never pray, ever!

“I have believed in nothing, nothing at all since I left childhood. I only entered the Seminary as a path to an easy and wealthy life.”

The Father went to speak but Father Joyce, forestalled him. “And I haven’t even told you about my moral state. I have broken my vow of chastity innumerable times: I have committed ever kind of sexual sin, not just the normal fornication with women, but with men also. Nothing was out of bounds with me as I believed in nothing.

“I’ve broken all the commandments; I’ve even stolen from the Church itself if I saw a way to do it without being caught; I’ve used filthy language and laughed at the piety and reverence of ordinary, simple people. I’ve never loved anyone, good or bad, in my entire life. I’ve done all I could to defraud and rob my neighbour, and I dumped my parents as soon as they became a burden to me – I considered them too ignorant, too backward, too stupid with their silly devotions.

“I have been filled with vanity; I thought I was the greatest scholar in the whole stupid Church; the others in the priesthood, I despised as weaklings, morons...peasants.

“I have lived for myself only and my god has been luxury, good food, ease, moral laxity, amusement to pass the time; I use pornography on the web daily.”

Father Bert Joyce began to cry. Not false tears, but scalding, heart-breaking tears which came from the depths of his being. It was as though a dam had burst within him; his whole body was shaking. Without being

aware of it, he had slumped his head against the elderly man's knee. He straightened and looked up at the Father.

"Father, I think God has let me see you as my last and only hope. Will you take me on, Father? I can't really promise you anything, as I've never really tried to change my life before, but I want to try. Is it too late, my Father? ...I think God is using you to help me!

"Be my day-to-day, director, I beg you. I think you are, truly, my only hope, my *last hope* to change my whole life. If you say no, then I know I'm damned."

There was dead silence in the room. After minutes of serious reflection, the Father's hand came down and lay on the head of the young man.

"Well, well, there's no need for me to ask you to make an act of Contrition; you have already done that, and this is one time when the traditional: 'Three Hail Marys' will be insufficient." He smiled. "Look at me, son. There, I'll call you no longer, Brother Father, I'm going to change your name to 'Father Joyce-son'. In that way no one will know what it means – except the two of us.

"Of course, if you're serious, I'll regard you as a precious gift from God; to do my best to make you into a shining gift of royal silver to offer to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. If you have, as you have confessed, broken all the Commandments, that makes it easier for me, for we know where to start.

"However, there's always a 'however'; you have to promise me total obedience. *Total*, nothing less! If it is less, then I drop you instantly. It will be a tough road, son, but no harder than Saint Augustine faced when he

had to be dragged away from his mistress. When you experience the love of Christ, even the tiniest ray of it, you will do anything to gain more and more of this precious gift, but there is a lot of work to do before that can happen.”

“Now to be practical, you will have ten days of endless work to do with the workmen and accepting all the furniture the archbishop is sending us. I leave that to you to arrange, as you think fit. This will be your parish when it is all finished – if it all works out – so you arrange things the way you want them.

“I shall not be far away if you really need me. There is no need to call me – I do not have a phone – but, believe me, I shall know if you need me. Just call for me in your mind and I shall return immediately.

“First things first. You can make no beginning without asceticism. Until I get back here, I want you to do these simple things. 1. Wear your cassock at all times, day and night; not the collar, except if you go out into the street. 2. Wear a hairshirt – there is an old one of mine hanging over there on a hook. Tell no one you are wearing one. 3. Take a belt from my cupboard and gird yourself tightly. 4. Get rid of your shoes and socks, and if you have no sandals buy a pair down the street. 5. I forgot... your underwear. Get rid of those terrible undergarments – no priest should ever wear such things. Use a pair of my ‘drawers’, take one from the cupboard; they are horrible – they are made of hessian, but that is the whole idea.

“Now, you would be thinking they are all *exterior* things, and they are. If you are going into battle, the first thing to do is to equip yourself with the right armour – they are all external things, too. Now, during this time you will have great difficulties with all the men here. They will think you are peculiar; that does not matter, it is – what is that expression? – it is, ‘par for the course!’

“While they are working, I want you to work every day in the garden. Make it the most beautiful, most cared-for garden, in the district. It will be, for you, the garden of Christ. As you work, think only of Christ. Christ the man – a man like you: strong, manly, not a weakly, wimpy creature, but a man with muscles through hard work, not sitting like a lady in a manor house which most holy cards make Him look like.

“Think of Christ, the *man, just like you, working with you*, sweating with you, resting with you, eating your poor food with you – your stale bread and the hard old cheese, and plain water: drink nothing but water – resist all invitations by the workmen to join them in a drink.

“That will suffice, for your penance today. I want you to keep to that little rule for the next ten days. Is that clear, my son? Please do not fail me.” He moved a little way, apart from the young priest.

Father Joyceson sat back on his heels, his eyes streaming. “I promise I’ll try, my Father; I’ll try.”

“And now, son, I’ll give you absolution. You will start all over again as a shining new soul who is preparing to go into battle to be worthy of his Divine Master. ‘Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat.....’

The Father stood up. He took up the two large bags he had to carry – one over each shoulder. In his left hand, he carried a long flat case that the young priest had never seen before. The Father opened it briefly: it was a travelling Mass Kit.

“A good, holy priest let me have this, as he was dying, Father. He was a missionary in an awful place, and he had just been speared; he died as I held him. He had spent 37 years in that mission field among the people who murdered him... God bless you, my son! *We are involved in mystery... my son...great... very great and deep... MYSTERY.*”

The Father took his staff in his right hand and called his saints. They then left the premises.

Father Joyceson stood at the back gate, watching them go.

He had never felt so forlorn, lonely and terrified, before, in his entire life.

XVII

The Father did not dawdle in his walk this time. He strode out strongly and Saint Anne had difficulty in keeping up. They made for the forest but not by the usual way; they went into the part that did not head towards Fred's farm, but away from it. The saints were bewildered; they kept their eyes on the Father to work out where he was going.

When he plunged into the thickest part of the forest, Saint Tom's nose was twitching with all the new smells while Saint Anne was frightened and stayed close to the Father's knee. As the Father came to a circle of open space under the canopy of leaves where the hut had been built, he spoke softly to the saints.

"This is the right place; we can go in – the door is not locked." The Father entered with his saints following and stood still. It was very dusty and a little cobwebby, but he thought it was an enchanting, hidden little place, so secret and beautiful that one could feel the presence of God very strongly. He was very happy he had remembered it. There was nowhere to put down all his baggage so left them outside and went to make a bush-broom.

The saints watched him as he chose hardy ferns and suitable bushes to use as a broom and he wandered a little in his search, while the animals started to sniff around the area taking in the new smells.

Although the area was free of humans, there were however, plenty of sounds. Birds lived in large quantities in the branches of the trees, while butterflies seemed to be everywhere. From time to time, it seemed as if the very air was full of butterflies. Saint Tom could not resist and snapped a few, only to splutter and sneeze as he tried to get rid of the slightly sticky wings from his mouth. Saint Anne found some fresh green grass, still slightly wet with dew, popping up between the trees and she tried some and seemed to find them delicious, her little tail wagging rapidly.

However, there were ominous warning signs underfoot. Saint Tom leapt back when he disturbed a long and evil looking black snake which came at him, before it turned away and disappeared into the bushes. Saint Tom looked at it, astonished. The Father stamped his foot and ordered the snake to leave the area - as they had left the garden of Eden.

XVIII

When he had fashioned a broom, the Father began the task of sweeping the hut out. There were clouds of dust which made Saint Tom, sitting outside near the door, sneeze frequently. It took quite a while to clean the hut-floor, but he was pleased to see it was only dust, nothing more. When the hut was clean of dust and webs, he noticed a shelf over the fireplace; it was unusually wide, and he wondered what it could have been used for. The only suggestion that came to his mind was that of a drying rack for the shepherd's clothes as the shelf overhung the fire.

He was interested in the shelf as he thought it could do as his altar for the Masses. Yes, it was a little high, but it certainly was better than trying to cope with sitting on the floor or finding a flat rock outside in the undergrowth. He decided he would certainly try the shelf the next morning.

He brought all his parcels and bags inside and then went out and called the saints into their new temporary home. They wandered around the small wooden building sniffing the whole area.

XVIX

After the tour of inspection, the Father led the animals outside; he had prepared an activity for them.

He took a ball from his bag. He then let Saint Tom smell it thoroughly, then threw it as far as he could into the dense forest.

“Go”, he shouted and off went the big dog. They could hear the dog snorting and giving short barks as he searched and searched for the ball. He went further, and further away, his big voice only very faintly heard, before he found it. Not only found it, but found a very, strange animal, with vicious claws, sitting on top of it.

He had to get the ball and take it back to the Father. He tried a rush attack and withdrew hurriedly with blood dripping from a scratch on his nose. He sat down in front of the animal, whatever it was, and puzzled what he was to do to get possession of the ball.

He tried friendliness, but the animal was not having any of that. It spat at him showing long and dangerous teeth. He turned backwards and used his powerful back legs to try to kick the animal from its perch on the ball.

He actually sent up a piercing yell, as he felt those dreadful claws in his leg muscles.

Well, there was nothing left for him to do. He put back his head and barked as loudly as he could. And kept barking. The Father, of course, heard him very faintly and came to him, eventually, but it took nearly two hours to find a way to get to his dog.

The Father had been forced to fight his way through some rough, wild bush to get there. He had left Saint Anne back near the hut; he knew she would stay there.

When he reached Saint Tom, he saw at once what the problem was and, advancing on the animal, spoke softly and calmly. "You've frightened Saint Tom, you know, my beautiful big wild-cat, yet you're only a very, beautiful pussy cat. He could eat you alive you know, and he is always hungry, so you had better let me pick you up and I'll take you back to our camp site."

He let the big cat smell his fingers which he held steadily before the cat's nose. She sniffed a long time, as if remembering. He then proceeded to gently rub his hand down her back which was covered with very, long and lustrous hair. She liked that, and after a few minutes, began to purr. He then gently picked her up and she was very stiff for a moment, then relaxed and settled into his arms and he led the very disgruntled Saint Tom back to the circle of trees where he had left Saint Anne.

When he reached the hut after a long walk, he sat the wild cat gently on the hearth stone before the fireplace and let the other two see that she was really a very beautiful creature, just grown big and wild in the bush.

She was not young, so she probably had lived in the bush for years. The wild cat had black hair which was in need of a good brushing. She had long legs after her years in living rough, and when she stood next to Saint Tom she was half as high as he was. She was a big animal.

The Father said the Office of Vespers there, with his saints quietly listening to his voice.

The wild cat sat on the hearth stone, watching, as the Father began to prepare for their evening meal. There was a little creek nearby, which a little further on, became a small waterfall – a tributary of the big waterfall. He filled his can with water, from the creek, drank his fill, then came back to the hut, took from his bag a plastic bowl and put it on the floor for the saints. Saint Tom drank deeply, Saint Anne who had fed well that day, as she had found, near their hut, a large area of fresh good grass, only drank a little, while the cat, intrigued, jumped down and sniffed it disdainfully, returning to her position.

The Father then opened a can of dog's meat and, immediately, the cat was *very*, interested. It stood its ground next to the towering height of Saint Tom and even let him smell her but made it quite clear that was as close as it was safe to get. She hissed very loudly, if he came any closer, and this strange noise frightened the dog greatly. He kept his distance.

When the Father put the meat in the plate, the cat let Saint Tom eat first, then just moved in and took what she wanted. Saint Tom looked at her in wonder, the Father with real amusement. They finished with the

bread and Father ate two whole slices very slowly. There would be no more until after Mass the next morning.

After the evening meal, the Father, took from his bag a comb with large teeth, and combed Saint Tom's tough hair, removing carefully, any burs that he could find; also checking to see if the dog had been bitten by ticks. He then took the cat onto his lap, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, and slowly and gently began the same treatment with her. She looked startled and frightened; the claws began to extend, but when she realized he was not intending to harm her, she then let herself be brushed, then combed and inspected, by this strange being. It felt so wonderful, she gently sniffed his arm, giving it a tentative lick.

The Father then sang the Night Office of Compline and his voice was the only sound in the wilderness as the birds settled down to sleep.

As they prepared for the night, the Father put down two large cloths, one like a cape which he spread on the floor and lay down on it. Saint Anne was the first to understand that sleep time had arrived and nestled in close to him. Saint Tom was next, his huge body their electric blanket. The Father looked at the cat, patted the area above his right shoulder and, after a tense moment, she leapt down and settled close to her new master purring loudly. He, there and then, decided to call her Saint Catherine of Sienna. When they were all in their places, he sat up and spread a woolly blanket over them all. They settled down very quickly and soon, all were asleep, including the Father.

The Father woke as usual, long before daybreak. All three animals were sleepy and grumpy, Saint Tom growled slightly, Saint Anne did a bit of 'hymmping' noises, before she returned to sleep and Saint Catherine opened her mouth wide, then hissed quietly, before she fell back down again, sound asleep.

The Hermit lit one of the two big candles he took from his bag and from its light, said a shortened form of Matins, Lauds and Prime, while his 'congregation' slept in behind him. After Prime was finished, the saints were awake and were paying close attention to the Father.

XX

The Father quietly stood as before, utterly still in the light of the candle, alone with Christ. It was his practice, before holy Mass – as it was the sacrifice of Calvary – to put himself in one time-period of the Sacred Passion of Christ. This morning, for no particular reason, he chose the agony of Christ in the garden.

As soon as he began, he was suddenly, and violently, one with Christ; the betrayal was about to happen. He was soon weeping tears, while his brow was drenched with perspiration. He was trying to prevent it happening: ‘Judas,’ he kept murmuring urgently – his arm stretched out... ‘no Judas, please don’t! That way leads to damnation!’

The horrific betrayal had taken place, in his mind, as he prepared for Mass – his mind working on two levels. He noticed the light was enough now for him to see the book even without the candle. He quietly prepared the make-shift altar on the shelf over the fireplace and took from the missionary Mass Kit a six-inch crucifix, then a small corporal and on the corporal, he placed a tiny wafer, then poured a little more than a teaspoon of wine

into a small chalice the size of an eggcup but made of real silver. There was a similar vessel for the plain water.

When he had all the bits and pieces together, with the missal open at the right page, he pulled on the all-purpose one-piece, white, missionary vestment which had within it, a stole and a detachable amice. He had no alb, so the old habit had to do instead.

There was a little bell on the altar shelf-table; the Father placed it where he could get at it, for he would have to ring it himself. And he was determined he would do so.

Just as the first beams of the glorious sun's rays filtered through the tree trunks, the birds began their song of praise. The door of the hut was open and never, before, had the Father heard such a huge variety in the symphony of sound; the frogs joined in and other unrecognizable sounds, which the Father offered to God as His morning tribute, from His breathtakingly beautiful creation. This was undiluted 'laudate' indeed!

The Father then began the Mass.

Of course, Saint Tom and Saint Anne, were familiar with this; they rose and stood silently watching their master. Saint Catherine was intrigued, so she did the same. She was slightly worried with the first three bells - rung by the Father - then settled down and was not worried about the second single bell, but when the Father held up in the air the little chalice, after the consecration, Saint Catherine's back arched in terror and her eyes were glued to the terrifying sight of the big man rising high up, off the floor of the hut, until he was near the roof. She

was frightened and hastened to huddle close to the big dog with the strange name.

It was not only the three saints who were still. The whole birdsong stopped abruptly. The forest seemed to be holding its breath; every aspect of the forest animals' home seemed different. On the ground level, every kind of snake imaginable, slid out of the woods, and slithered in terror, with all the speed they could muster, to get away from all that was beautiful and good, and holy, and from Him who commanded them to live on their bellies, all the days of their lives, and to eat the dust of the earth.

Strange to tell, snakes never appeared in that section of the forest near the hut, ever again.

It seemed as if all the animals only breathed again when the Father's feet were back down on the floor again. Then, it seemed, the Father shook himself slightly and the Mass continued to the end.

XXI

When holy Mass and the Father's prayers had finished, he turned to his saints. "I think it's time for breakfast and you can all run off now and do what you have to do. After we have had something to eat – not much, I'm afraid – we're going for a very, long walk; there's some other saints waiting to join us."

The animals certainly ran off and Saint Tom was especially glad; he had a lot of urine to dispose of, and quickly got rid of it, as did Saint Anne, even Saint Catherine. They then came back to share the stale bread with Father. It was a meagre breakfast, but they all followed it up with some cold water from the creek. The Father used the creek to wash his face and arms and the faces of all three of the saints. Saint Tom and Saint Anne were used to the daily ablutions, but Saint Catherine wanted very badly to object; to tell this busybody that she could look after herself, thank you, but, prudently, let her face be washed gently as well.

As soon as that was over, Saint Catherine moved slightly apart and washed her own face as she had always done. The Father smiled. She was an independent lady

and wanted him to know it – yes, definitely, a Saint Catherine of Sienna!

They roamed widely that day, and Saint Anne and Saint Catherine found, to the Father's surprise, quite good and unusual food – Saint Anne with pockets of new, fresh, grass in hidden patches between the trees, while Saint Catherine showed how she had managed to live and remain healthy all the years she had spent in the wild; she seemed, to the Father's surprise, to eat all kinds of mosses and special coloured fungi she found near the roots of the trees.

XXII

With the Father, calling a halt when he wanted to say the Office, they eventually reached the waterfall which was, indeed, as beautiful as the farmers had told him. The undergrowth was thicker here and some of the way, hard going. Saint Tom's great strength was needed now; he took over the lead, pushing down with his big feet the smaller obstacles and finding the best way forward. The Father relied heavily on his big saint. He knew he would always find a way and it would be a good way.

They were ready to turn back when the Father suddenly called a halt. "What is that sound?" he asked. The animals listened intently. Saint Catherine licked her lips. That worried Father. He shook his finger at Saint Catherine and said, simply, "No!" and she fell back in line. "I know what the sound is; I can't imagine why it would be here. Follow me now." He set off at a good pace and found about a hundred yards on, caught in a tangle of roots, a very large rooster, while his mate, a chubby, flustered hen, was pulling, ineffectively, at a number of roots bigger than herself, trying to rescue the rooster.

The Father reached down to the hen. "Don't be worried, Mother. I'll get him out of there." He then, to Saint Tom's consternation, placed the hen on the dog's back. "You look after her, Saint Tom; I'm trusting you." The big dog looked at the Father silently protesting. He then, tried to ignore the irritating pain of the claws which the hen used to hold onto his moving back.

With a huge heave, the Father levered up the root that was penning the bird to the ground. He lifted the rooster up to his face. "Now, Mr Rooster, if you promise to behave and to obey Saint Tom – he is the boss of the saints – then you and your wife can come with us." The very, large rooster, with his huge red comb, leapt from the Father's hands to his shoulder and sat there. He immediately gave a very loud triumphant crow. The hen, to Saint Tom's relief, jumped down and ran to the Father and stood by his side.

The Father smiled. Nature was simply glorious, and wonderful and beautiful, and it all came from the hand of God. This was unspoiled nature – as it was in the beginning.

There followed several hours as they investigated the whole new area near the falls. They were starting to get very hungry and were looking forward to the evening meal – except for the Rooster and the Hen; they had found a plentiful number of worms and grubs in the hidden, secret world of the forest floor. They were full of food and wanted now, just to sleep.

"That is enough for one day, saints. We need to say Vespers. We will go back to our hut now. Saint Anne, we

will wait for you to eat good grass if you find any, as we go. Everyone be on the look-out for grass; it has been a little scarce, in some places today. Soft, young plants, or ferns might do, Saint Anne could try them. I want her to have plenty to eat; I don't think she has had enough today."

The animals seemed to understand as the Father noticed Saint Tom pulling up some ferns and giving them to Saint Anne to try; also, to his delight he saw Saint Catherine scramble up, quite high, in the trees to pluck certain moss she spied growing there. These Saint Anne ate with relish. The Father found some wild berries, which he knew were safe, and filled his hood with berries; that would help fill empty bellies – mainly Saint Tom's.

Very soon they were home again at their hut and they took a little rest before they began the evening dinner. The Father still had several tins of dog's meat and five loaves of bread, quite stale, and a little mouldy by now, but still edible. When they all were ready, Father said grace and they all began to eat, then the Father began to sing to them the hymns he knew best.

Whether it was the singing, or the weariness of being on the move all day, they were all ready for bed and as soon as the Father lay down on the ground cover, they plopped down in the places they had been the night before.

XXIII

And so, the ten days followed the same pattern, with much walking, little food, especially for the Father and Saint Tom, and intense joy experienced by the Father, alone with God, in communion with the beauty of God's creation.

At the end of that time, the Father turned his mind back to the Hermitage. He began to wonder what was happening back there and just how his new 'disciple', Father Joyceson, was getting on.

He had a few surprises in store.

As they started back to their real home, the senior animals led the way with a slightly anxious Saint Catherine following them, keeping close to the Father. The newly canonised saints, Saint Peter, the rooster and Saint Martha, the hen, carefully did the same. When Saint Martha was tiring, the Father put her on Saint Anne's back, and they got on fine. Saint Anne's long woolly fleece did not even feel the long toes of the hen as she clung to the fleece.

After they had finally descended the mountain and left the forest, they could see the hermitage before them. Saint Tom gave a loud bark of recognition and Saint

Anne hastened her steps almost upsetting Saint Martha on her back.

To the Father's delight and joy, he saw, waiting outside the back gate, the figure of Father Joyceson who, seeing the procession, waved and waved his arms and began to run towards them.

The reunion was complete. The animals circled Father Joyceson each wanting to be patted and cuddled while the young priest himself had his arms around the Father and kept saying: "You're back; you're back!" The Father held the young man away from him and looked at him. He had changed a lot; he was certainly much thinner, the feet were bare of socks and he was wearing new sandals, very similar to his own. To Father's delight, he noticed that Father Joyceson had found the electric clippers and had cut off all his exuberant hair; his head was shorn now as was the Father's.

In his excitement, the young priest was babbling about all the changes. The Father let him talk until he had run down, then quietly introduced him to their new charges: Saint Catherine, who smelled the fingers carefully, before she let his hand stroke her back. She liked him immediately and attached herself to him, then and there: wherever he went, she followed.

With Saint Peter, he was not so enthusiastic and stayed close to the Father - one he had become used to; but Saint Martha made it quite clear, this new one was the one she wanted to be with and, with true feminine wiles, persuaded Saint Peter, the Rooster, to do the same. Father Joyceson was entranced. He had never kept pets

and knew nothing of the devotion and love they evinced towards those they liked and trusted.

Saint Tom was a pushover of course; he knew the young priest and jumped up on him nearly knocking him to the ground with his great strength.

As Father Joyceson broke away from the animals, he asked the Father seriously. "Father, how on earth are we going to feed these orphans? It's becoming like a zoo, or perhaps an Ark."

"Don't worry, my son. God will show us a way..." his eyes swept the view before him. "What on earth is that new building behind the church?"

"I wanted to ask your permission to have that built, but as you were not here, I had to make a decision. With all the tools I had to buy, and while I was trying to work out where we could store the animals' feed, I agreed to Toby's suggestion that he build a small tin-roofed room-cum-shed where we could do both: all the animals' food could be kept dry and out of the way, and the tools would have a home. Was that the right decision, Father? I was worried you would be angry with me taking that decision without you being here."

"No, son, definitely not angry. It was a very sensible decision to make and now with even more animals, to care for, we certainly do need that building and, as you said, the tools definitely need a home, otherwise they will rust. They are expensive, so we must protect them...No, a very good idea. I'm glad Toby suggested it..."

He looked up, puzzled, as the young priest ran away inside the old church building and then he heard the

tolling of a bell from their own chapel. He hurried to the front of the yard, noting the new gardens, in passing, and the new fence leading to the Church door. Above the door in a small wooden canopy that had been added, hung a bell which gave forth a very, sweet sound. Father Joyceson was ringing it from *inside* the building.

A bell! How wonderful! He realised it must have come from the archbishop with the other glorious treasures – he was waiting to see – from the old priest’s church which was being closed.

The Father came back to the door of the living quarters and waited for Father Joyceson, who arrived panting and laughing at the same time.

“Did you like it? Our own bell! I can’t believe it myself.”

“I think it’s great, son, simply great! We can ring it for Mass from now on.” He looked at the youngster, and smiled: “Now, lead the way, Father, my son: we are really starving, all of us, or at least some of us! What have you left?”

The young priest laughed. “You won’t believe what I have for you, all of you. It’s a positive banquet.” He put on a very, serious face. “However, Father, you have to come and see all the things that have been done first. Let’s start with the garden.”

Entering the garden, again; this time, not listening to the bell, but studying the garden itself, the Father stood still. He could not believe the change from what it had been. The vegetable garden was now twice its length, there was a line of pines planted against the front part of

the fence and the fence itself was magnificent. It now went to the very doors of the Church; there was the box for the mail and one for the food; the height was good, so they still had their privacy.

There was a hedge planted before the square area against the back fence, which was the animals' privy, while in front of the outhouse, there was now a fine lattice with a flowering vine planted on it in front of the small building. The grass had been mown and looked great. Saint Anne rushed to fill her belly with grass before they even went inside.

They all went inside, Saint Catherine, Saint Peter, Saint Martha following the two experienced saints, Saint Tom and Saint Anne, to see what was happening to their home. The Father saw the two wooden beds with the wooden platforms, but with a curtain around each bed extending one foot from the bed itself, so the two priests had a little privacy from each other. The Father went quickly to the new sink, and rejoiced, as Father Joyceson explained the changes.

"I made the decision Father to get the biggest sink I could get; I thought we could do our washing there as well. Was that the right decision?"

"Perfect, my son."

"And look at the shower! Now we can actually have a shower! And I don't know if you'll be angry or not, but I put on the hot water, so that we could have hot, or warm showers... perhaps, in wintertime?"

"Sensible, lad".

“And look at the wonderful drains, from the showers and the sink. I helped the men dig the drains. The earth is tough here, isn’t it? I see you are looking at the furniture. Isn’t it marvellous? We now have four chairs, actually four chairs! I feel like a millionaire. And look at the wonderful table where we can eat, and your computer desk, with its proper drawers and so on. I think it’s wonderful!”

“Truly, my son, so do I.”

“But wait, I want to take your hand and lead you into the chapel. Close your eyes. You simply won’t believe what I have to show you.”

He grabbed the hand of the Father and led him to the new door to the chapel. Then, with eyes still closed obediently, the Father was taken-half- way down the centre aisle, then told to open them.

The Father did so and cried out in wonder. He had to hold on to the younger man to prevent himself falling. Struggling, he regained his feet and began to sing the ‘Gloria’ in a loud, triumphant voice which reached the ceiling. He then realised – with real joy – that Father Joyceson was singing with him.

When they had finished, he struggled to speak. “Only one word for it: *Magnificent! Simply magnificent! A fitting place now for Christ our Lord!*” He added quickly. “Father I have to sit down, please.” The young priest saw the deathly colour of the older man’s face and lowered him gently to the seat of one of the new pews. Father Joycceson then led the procession of saints out of the

chapel and told them to be very, quiet as their Father was not well.

As he prepared the banquet for the Father and for the animals, he kept taking a peep into the chapel to see if the Father was all right. When he thought he would try to get him to come out, he went in and found the man, examining the new confessional, the new vestment cupboards, the vesting table with all the drawers which held all the things necessary for holy Mass. They had inherited a veritable gold mine in ecclesiastical treasures. There were even some splendid large religious paintings in gold frames that hung on the walls. The Father could not believe his eyes.

This little chapel was now a magnificent, shining, jewel in the crown of their blessed Lord.

The young priest had done wonders. How true and how right the archbishop had been when he said those words: 'this one was worth saving.' How right he was! The archbishop was a holy and wise man!

He was startled by the ringing of a small hand bell and, looking up, he saw Father Joyceson in an apron with a large ladle, waving to him. He obeyed the summons and his empty belly rumbled at the thought of food.

Over a very simple meal of soup, pasta with some grated cheese, with stale bread afterwards, then a cup of coffee, the travellers thought it was a truly wonderful welcome-home dinner.

With the Father's imprimatur on everything, Father Joyceson was a very relieved young priest.

There was the same food for Saint Tom and Saint Catherine, while the young priest tried out the dish on the rooster, Saint Peter and then the hen, Saint Martha; they all seemed rather surprised, but after nibbling at first, they, with all the animals, ploughed into the meal as if they were half starved – which of course some of them actually were.

Saint Anne was a problem. She did not know what this dish could be and bleated pathetically. Father Joyceson was perplexed as to what to give the old sheep. The Father suggested stale bread, she had seemed to like that up in the forest. The young man was doubtful but, believing the Father, he attempted to feed Saint Anne and she rapidly demolished two whole slices of bread. He promised her he would find more fresh grass for her the next day.

Father Joyceson talked, without ceasing, during the meal; he had been alone for ten days and he had so much to tell. He informed the Father about the widow lady, Edna, two doors away, who had the most beautiful garden in the village. He explained how she had helped him select the ornamental and fruit trees, the climbing roses for the fences, the lattice before the outhouse, and the hedge to plant in front of the animal's outhouse/compost heap, combined.

She had also told the young man to put in, immediately, young plants of beetroot: very nutritional and easy to grow; also, to put in more carrot seed; they were equally easy to grow. He was looking forward to digging up the potatoes in a week's time; she had told

him it was time to harvest the crop. He was really looking forward to that. All the animals would like potatoes, he thought.

The Father listened intently, missing nothing, and noting the enthusiasm, the excited voice, the whole interest in the place which he had previously despised; he pondered on the beauty of the miracle that had taken place.

After their special 'festive' cup of coffee, the Father sighed, saying mildly, "Well son, no more coffee now until the eve of the Feast of the Holy Cross when we begin our fast for Christmas.

"Tomorrow we must go down the town for supplies, but more importantly, to pay all those good men. The work is magnificent, I am thrilled with what you have done; it looks first class to me, so I need to thank them personally. On the way you could introduce me to Edna. Do you know her other name?"

"Yes Father, it's Roberts. Mrs Edna Roberts - she made me repeat it, so I would not forget it. She said she has been waiting all this time for the chance to meet you; she wondered what you were like."

"And you replied?"

"Oh, that's easy! I said she would be disappointed. You were a horrible, very old man with a bad squint, no teeth, had a wooden leg, a terrible temper, and slashed with your cane all the flowers off the plants."

"Well," said the Father, "it's close enough to the truth, so it will do!" which made them both laugh happily.

Father Joyceson made the Father sit down as he let the animals out, then he washed up the dishes, in the wonderful hot water now available. Then he resumed his place by the side of Father who now spoke seriously.

“Son, we’ve had our recreation, now to work. I want a full account of your spiritual life for the past ten days.”

Father Joyceson knelt down; his eyes closed. He waited for the first question:

“How did you find the hair shirt?”

“Absolutely terrible for the first four days; the nights were the worst, but then I started to get used to it and it certainly restricts certain temptations, indeed.”

“Did you keep to the diet I suggested?”

“With one outstanding failure, Father, I did.”

“What made it ‘outstanding’?”

“I was so hungry, each day, when I was aware of the wonderful aroma coming from the men’s area when they were eating meat pies for lunch. I came in here one day and ate everything that was in here; including a tin of that frightful dog meat?”

“With dire results?”

“Yes, absolutely right. I was so sick the next day I was dashing off to the outhouse every five minutes. I felt so ill I thought I was dying!” The Father smiled.

“With all the work, I know you would have been very busy. Did you have any spare time for reading what I suggested you read?”

“Yes, I did. You gave me a copy of the 12 letters that Saint Antony of Egypt left. I have read three of them and I think they are wonderful. He was a real, human being,

a real man and his determination to win the battle with self, shone like a star in the sky...”

“You’ve read three of them?”

“Yes, I’ve actually started the fourth...”

“Stop instantly! That is the devil’s way: it only leads to pride in learning. You are not to seek that; it will take you away from your path. I want you to go back to the first letter and read a few lines each day and spend the entire day thinking of just those few lines. Understand?”

“Yes. Father. I’m sorry; I thought you would be pleased.”

“Why? Are you setting out on this journey to please me? If you are, stop immediately! I want you to set out on this journey – which is perilous, dangerous, and simply fraught with hidden traps – with only one intention: to please Christ our Lord, no one else.”

The Father noticed the slumped shoulders, the disappointment, the anxiety, the fear of his penitent that he would be reprimanded further. He laid his hand, briefly, on the young man’s head. “I think you have made a splendid start in a week; the archbishop would not recognize you – he was very worried about you – but, lad, he believed in you, and so do I. Just remember, there is a very long way to go yet. Pray for patience and be prepared for starting afresh each... and every, day.

“Each day, as you roll off your bed onto your knees, you must know for certain, you are beginning yet again. The priesthood vows are so easy to say so glibly – *we must live them out in their completeness each, and every day* – otherwise, we are simply frauds. So, each day, it is as

though we were just starting, for the very first time, to put our foot on the first step of the ladder – the very first step that little Saint Therese speaks of.

“Do you follow me, lad?”

“Yes, Father, I do.” Was the very subdued answer.

“Take heart, son I’m nearly finished... Now for prayer. How is it going? Do you pray during the day, as you work?”

“Well, I certainly try to, Father. I always start off, OK, but, then I get involved in what I am doing and forget the praying altogether and have to start again.” The old Father smiled.

“When you are doing something complicated, it’s just as well you concentrate on that, otherwise you would probably blow up the house, flood the chapel, or do something equally drastic...No, my boy. When you are working, do not try to keep saying the *words of prayers*, just put yourself in the presence of Christ, who is there beside you, and offer the task to him. That is all. Stay with Christ but concentrate on doing a perfect job with whatever it is, even such things as cleaning the outhouse, or the animals’ compost heap. All of them can become precious prayers to God, if you do them for the love and glory of Him, whom we love.

“Think of the man who loves his wife with all his heart. He thinks she is the most beautiful of all the things God has made. Does he spend all his work time singing her praises and talking to her in his mind? No, he works so hard to do his work so well that she will be proud of him. How many times I have heard an ordinary, good,

wife tell me, when I was doing a pastoral visit: 'Father, you know that Jim is an Accountant and has never done manual work in his life. I want you to see the back shed which he built with his own hands; he had never laid bricks before, but he learned how to do this and then did it to please me, as I needed the space. I'm so proud of him – it was a work of love.'

"That was just one of hundreds of examples of what I mean, that I happen to remember, but they were all, essentially, the same.

"When we think of the truly magnificent towering Cathedrals of Europe built centuries ago by monks, do you think those geniuses of builders, making precise calculations, as they stood on rickety platforms high up in the sky, were concentrating on repeating Psalm 135? Of course not! But they would have done that astonishing work simply for the glory of God, knowing that they would never ever see the end of their work. Most of the great cathedrals took over 100 years to build, remember.

"If we are preparing the food, looking after the animals, washing the floors, or any other menial tasks, they can be shining acts of love to God, the same as those we offer in the Divine Office in the Chapel.

"We are so fortunate in our monastic type of life as we can offer both kinds of activity to God – the manual and the official 'Opus Dei', the work of God, which is, of course, the Divine Office – the psalms that have been offered to God for three thousand years, by his people..." The Father laughed softly, "And speaking of that, we'll

stop talking now and go into the Chapel for Compline: it's been a long day!"

Father Joyceson smiled, happily, as he followed the Father into the chapel.

XXIV

As the Hermitage priests slept, Archbishop McViver, at Bishop House, was sitting at his desk trying to decide what to do with the situation he was now facing. A complaint had just come in about one of the junior priests under his care. This was the second time a complaint had been made about this particular priest. He had handed it over to the Administrator and he had, simply, forgotten it.

He knew he had been remiss. He should have kept a more vigilant eye on the young priest since he was first recruited for the staff of Bishop House. He really did not know the priest at all and that was wrong. In fact, his complete forgetfulness of the young man was such that he could not even remember which room he has been assigned to, when he first arrived.

Bishop House was a huge, sprawling, building; there were sections that the archbishop had, even now, not explored. It was a very, old building, beautiful, yes, but a nightmare to keep clean, the staff told him; it had rooms going in all directions and seemed to consist of endless corridors. He certainly knew where his Vicar General's room was, as he had to call on him so frequently, also the

room of the Administrator of the Cathedral, Father Stanley Wright.

Stan Wright was a jovial, chubby priest who handled a multitude of duties without, seemingly, any problem. The archbishop had left the arduous job of keeping an eye on the young curates to Stanley. He knew, or thought he did, that the Administrator was keeping a close watch on the *behaviour* of juniors who worked at Bishop House, as well as their clerical duties, in the Cathedral. He now realised, he had, perhaps, been mistaken. In most cases it was not their clerical duties that needed to be watched, but rather what they did when they were 'on the loose'.

When he had first been informed of the case concerning Father Hilary Baldwin, he had sent for Father Wright who admitted that, yes, he had discovered that the priest in question, had 'flown under the radar'. The Administrator admitted he really knew nothing of the 'young chap'; he seemed to turn up for all the Masses he was scheduled for, as well as other duties in the Cathedral. When questioned as what he did in his spare time, he admitted he 'didn't have a clue.'

The archbishop felt his patience dwindling and he gave the Administrator a warning: he had better shape up or he would be shipped out, 'quick smart'. It would be interesting, he said, to see how Father Wright managed, after the lush, Cathedral job, in a slum parish with the bare necessities of living, where he could be left to rot until he retired.

Father Wright straightened up, truly alarmed. The archbishop had never, before, bawled him out like this.

He had been lax, he humbly admitted as much, to his superior; he had not kept any sort of real watch on the young priests, and he knew he should have done.

“Father Wright, if you were not such a good Administrator, I would fire you from the job this very day. Let me give you a warning and do not dare forget it. I want to know what the hobbies are of each, and every, curate we have, and some idea of where they spend their days off.

“I do not want a bunch of scared, mealy mouthed, ‘pious shams’, but equally, I also do not want my curates attending dubious shows, hooked on watching pornography on their damn phones, or, really, doing anything that has obvious dangers for a man in Holy Orders. I want you to know about their families: do they see their families, or keep in touch with them? Are they interested in Sport, either watching it, or playing it? I would encourage the latter very much.

“I think men, young men in particular, need a physical outlet; let it be sport, if possible, with them playing it. You could perhaps arrange groups of the young ones to watch important Sporting events. Get an idea of where they spend their day off each week. Do they attend the theatre? - the Movies? - are they interested in special areas of study you could encourage? -what television shows do they talk about? The list is endless.

“Father Wright, I simply do not have the time, with the enormous load I carry, to fiddle around with damn young pups who need a babysitter to keep an eye on them. They are men and would resent too obvious a

prying into their private lives, and I do not want to do that either. Yet, you and I, must have some idea of them – not just the outside appearances they present.

“To be practical, I want you to consider, if you could have an interview with each of them, perhaps once a week, or fortnight? Just a chat to learn more about each one; what they do, what they like, what they hate, their hobbies, their interests, you know the drill – it is much the same as we all experienced during our training in the Seminary.

“But, definitely, *not*, inquisitorial, or prying – rather, man to man. You are called: ‘father’ well *act like a father* who is not there to whip them, but to show them his friendship and understanding. Check whether they have a spiritual Director. They seem to think they are finished with all that when they have reached ordination. They could not be more wrong – they need one more then, than ever before.

“I think you would be more acceptable to them than I would. The curates are all so damn respectful to me, I suspect they make rude signs to each other when I leave the dining room.

“Now, before you go, Father Wright, tell me where this young blighter, Father Hilary Baldwin, lives – which room, I mean. I really have no idea. Is it on a higher floor?”

“Yes, Your Grace, it’s room 52, one floor up from here.’

“And one last thing. What do you think of Father Hilary Baldwin, from the little you do know about him?”

“Well, he is very polite; he seems very expensively educated and can talk on nearly any subject you mention. He has a very fine speaking voice, comes from a very wealthy family, I would think. He is courteous, has beautiful manners and I would have thought he would have been an ornament to Bishop House. I am astonished to hear there’s a cloud over him.”

“Thank you, Father. You can now go, thank you.”

The archbishop turned to his VG. “Edward, what the hell has this bloke done – apart from completely pulling the wool over Father Wright’s eyes. Tell me again. No wait a minute, let me try to remember what you said before.”

His Vicar General, Monsignor Edward Lipgurd, had explained the whole worrying case to him. The Mons was not one to exaggerate, therefore the archbishop realised it was every bit as serious as it appeared.

Unfortunately, it was also utterly laughable which, once the papers heard of the details, it could heap ridicule and contempt on the Church. He reviewed the whole episode again in his mind as he visualised the young man as he remembered him.

Father Hilary Clem Baldwin, the youngest cleric living in the Bishop’s House, was a tall, slim, man with abundant, fiery red hair, a strong face and excellent teeth, but with a quick temper, which his friends were very aware of; they kept clear of him when they saw the tell-tale signs of his face paling while he spoke even more smugly knowledgeable than usual - using words which he knew the others did not even know or understand.

He was generally called 'Baldy' – possibly because of his name and by the irony of the tag when he had such a huge crop of hair - by his friends, and opponents, in the clergy, the latter group being far larger than the former. The archbishop learned many priests, in the archdiocese, thought Hillary Clem Baldwin was nothing more than an irritating pain in the neck; he heard they often expressed their wonder as to why the archbishop – a man who was one with both feet firmly on the ground, if ever there was – kept this annoying character in such an obviously favoured position which suggested certain promotions in store in the future.

The answer seemed simple to the archbishop. Hillary Clem Baldwin was a highly gifted man. He was very intelligent, sailed through his studies, was able to read in Latin and Greek with ease, and, even more important to the archbishop, was able to talk in erudite terms of Art and English Literature with distinguished visitors. The archbishop realised what a treasure these attributes were and kept him at Bishop's House for that very purpose. He was extremely useful when visiting V.I.P.s were staying – especially those from Rome.

The archbishop was no dummy, either, but his conversation tended to be on ecclesiastic matters, not on the opera and other cultural subjects. For this reason, he relied heavily on the young priest, Baldwin. Father Baldwin seemed to have no inhibitions at all in dealing with even the most elevated echelons who visited from the Vatican. The archbishop could safely leave him after

dinner with the visitor while he rushed to his office and tried to keep up with his correspondence.

As far as the archbishop could see, the young priest's gifts should have stopped there: *just talking about them*, but he was soon told that Father Balwin did more than talk about Art; he loved, actually, *doing it*. Well, the archbishop thought complacently, he was happy that the young chap had a decent hobby. He had smiled as Father Hilary Clem Baldwin showed him some paintings in water colours and a couple in oils; the archbishop told the artist, happily, that he thought they were very 'pretty'.

After that remark, Father Baldwin never showed him any more paintings!

The young curate had been in bed with a bad touch of the 'flu for a few days now, so the archbishop decided he would go to Father Baldwin's room to see if he were any better and, perhaps, might be able to just have a talk; he had to get to know this young fellow better.

First, of course, he had to find the room. He discovered it was at the very end of a long corridor where most of the rooms looked empty. He stomped down the long corridor and came at last to No. 52.

Arriving at the door of the bedroom, the archbishop paused, drew a big breath, put one foot over the threshold... and stopped dead!

His eyes were positively goggling! The priest had painted on all the four walls – *and the ceiling* as well! There was not a spare space anywhere that was not covered with paint. It was similar to walking, unexpectedly, into an over-decorated room in the Vatican Museum!

The archbishop was very rarely uncertain what to do. He looked around the entire room, his mouth open, in shock. He thought there would not be another priest's bedroom in the whole of the world like this one! Well, he admitted, reluctantly to himself, it certainly was magnificent Artwork, but hardly what you would expect to find in an ordinary priest's bedroom – the subject matter totally unsuitable.

The priest lying back in his bed, in a dramatic tangle of arms and legs, seemed oblivious to the effect the large bucolic scene of ebullient renaissance nudity – with several over-weight girls frolicking across the walls; even the ceiling, while Pan played his pipes, as he danced among the girls – was having on the archbishop.

Father Baldwin greeted his superior happily and thanked him for coming to see him in his sickness. He was surprised that the archbishop did not respond. He was still looking again at the painting, his mouth still gaping. Then he turned on the artist.

“You will now rise from your bed; you look perfectly well to me. Then, the first job I order you to do, is to get out your paint box – you, immature, idiotic imitation of a priest in Holy Orders!

“You can keep your paint box, but you will now dress all the naked women in sober clothing, neck to ground stuff; you will get rid of Pan immediately and put in his place, David, singing and dancing as he led the Procession of the Ark back to Jerusalem. You will put in the oxen pulling the ark.

“When that is done, you will vacate your room; you will take no 43 - it’s empty. If you once again ever try to decorate Bishop House, I shall transfer you to a slum parish where you might like to share your love of Art with the ‘bruisers’: not many of them are into Art.

“Finally, do not come down for lunch; there will be no food for you until the job is done; that includes the moving to Room 43. Good morning.”

When the door closed, Father Baldwin jumped out of bed. “Well, it didn’t go as badly as I thought it would!” He was utterly unrepentant.

As he dressed in his painting clothes, his mind was working out magnificent gowns for the women to wear. Oh! They will look absolutely stunning! I can’t wait to start... I won’t tell his ‘nibs’ that I sleep in Room 43 already - I couldn’t sleep here -

- the smell of the oil paint is *dreadful*!”

XXV

The archbishop had only been back in his office fifteen minutes when, his VG told him the police were wanting to see him: Sergeant Tracey and a Constable Little.

“Good Grief!” He muttered as he walked into his office, he wondered what new hideous problem he had to face now?

He had met Sergeant Tracey many times before, so shook the middle-aged man’s hand strongly. The Sergeant introduced his companion, the unfortunately named, Constable *Little*, who was an immensely tall, strong, muscular young man who towered over both the other men, and they were not short. The Constable was seven feet tall!

The archbishop tried not to react to the shock of the Constable’s height and size and invited the men to sit down. “Well, what disaster are you bringing me this time, Sergeant Tracey. Which of my villains have I to deal with now?”

“Your Grace, it’s a Father Hilary Clem Baldwin...”

“Really, that is a surprise! I have just been to see him. What on earth has he done?”

“Well, I suppose you could say, Your Grace, that there’s a bit of a mitigating element in this; he’s an artist, you see...”

“I really didn’t know that until today, myself, Sergeant. Yes, he does paint extraordinarily well; I was very surprised. He’s super intelligent and very well educated – will bore you for hours if you let him – but I didn’t know his knowledge actually encompassed *doing* what he loves talking about.” The archbishop was really puzzled. “But Sergeant, that’s hardly a crime, is it?”

“It depends, Your Grace, where the ‘offence’ took place.”

“What offence? Painting is not listed in the Crimes Act.”

“No, but forgery is!” the archbishop half rose in his seat, in his surprise.

“Forgery? What forgery?” He barked.

The Sergeant stretched his legs out, then remembered where he was, and sat primly upright again. “Look! Let me tell you the whole ridiculous story.

“Father Baldwin, apparently, was hard up; he had lost a great deal on the horses,” there was a snort of indignation and fury, from the archbishop. The policeman went on. “So, to solve his problem he did some canvases of some famous paintings, and a ‘clever dick’ there, in the pub, told him he could sell them for a huge amount of money by claiming they were genuine ‘old masters’ – whatever that means...”

The Sergeant was interrupted by the Constable, “It means, Sergeant, paintings by famous artists in previous

times, such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Degar, Velasquez, Tintoretto, or perhaps, a Van Gogh – artists like that.”

Both the archbishop and the police sergeant turned to stare at the giant.

“How do you know all that rubbish, Little?” the sergeant thundered as though he had been personally betrayed.

The Constable was unperturbed. “I did an Art Course before I decided on the Force, Sir.” The Sergeant wiped his forehead.

“Blimey! Well, as I was saying, Your Grace, Father Baldwin let this crook have three paintings which were sold for a great amount, somewhere – so, I admit, your priest must be pretty good! – He then gave a portion of the money to the man you have living in your house. He is an expert Art Forger.”

The archbishop had closed his eyes as the litany of crimes was read out.

“Sergeant, ‘Blimey’, is the right word to describe it. I’ve had to deal with just about every sort of disaster since I was unfortunate enough to be promoted to Archbishop, but I have to admit, this is the first time I’ve ever been involved in a ‘cultural’ crime.”

He paused to try to take it all in. “So, he’s a drinker – or perhaps not – but he frequents the pubs; he was engaged in a fraudulent arrangement with a crook; he benefited by a crime; he seems utterly unrepentant, so he is totally untrustworthy... and to make it even worse, I am to blame. I never checked why he was always missing when I wanted him here in Bishop House.

"I didn't even know he could paint like he does; I thought it was just a little hobby he had. I thought he was a very cultured chap with a very good education...Ah well! So, what do we do?"

The Sergeant stood up. "I have to take him in, I'm sorry, Your Grace. Would you take us to him?" The archbishop stood up, his mind in a whirl. An Art Forger! What the hell do I do now, he wondered.

The policeman grew impatient. "Don't you know where he is sir?"

The archbishop groaned. "Unfortunately, yes I do know where he is; he is up in his room putting clothes back on the women."

There was a sudden gasp from both policemen. "He's doing WHAT? What the hell is going on here?" The older policeman was horrified, but the young Constable was totally scandalised; he was outraged.

He shouted: "Then all they say about the Church is true? It's totally immoral."

"What in the name of all that's holy are you hollering about? What is immoral? ... Oh, never mind, just follow me, you can see for yourself what I mean."

The archbishop walked quickly up the stairs and again stomped down the long corridor to Father Balwin's room. He threw the door open and shouted:

"Look at the dreadful criminal. There, look, I told you; he is putting clothes on the naked virgins that have been prancing around his room, and I didn't have a clue about this until today... Get off that ladder, Baldwin -

your painting here is finished, and so are you, you disgraceful chap."

He then turned to the police. "Just take him away; I'll see to his defence and all that – he deserves all that the law can throw at him. But just take the sneaky, spoiled, brat away – he should never have been ordained; I don't want him here in my house."

Father Baldwin smiled, ruefully. "So, it's all come to an end, has it? Well, it was fun while it lasted. Sergeant... yes, I see you are a sergeant, would you just let me put this very, difficult veil, on that rather fat lady who's in the procession. The clothing is right, don't you think? But I did want to put a very beautiful veil of gossamer silk over her beautiful hair – I'm proud of the hair – it would help the poor woman – she's not much to look at, I'm afraid."

The artist forgot the veil completely when he looked at the Constable. "Wait a minute, what have we here? Where did this magnificent specimen of manhood come from? Would you mind removing your shirt, Constable and let me see if you have good pectoral muscles."

The poor, young giant, forgetting *who* he was, and *what* he was, began to fumble with his shirt buttons, as Baldwin went on: "Excuse me asking, Constable, but have you ever modelled for David or, perhaps, Attila or one of the great Renaissance heroes – those chaps with muscles the size of a cart-wheel?"

The Constable blushed bright red. "As a matter of fact, I have, sir." Then catching the fury on his superior's face, he quickly added: "But that's neither here, nor

there; it has nothing to do with the charge against you. It is you who are charged with Art Forgery, not me.”

The Constable tried strenuously to stop his eyes wandering around the room, taking in the really, exquisite, ‘Art-Work’, as he frantically did up his shirt buttons. He had to force himself to listen to the Sergeant’s words as he cautioned the prisoner of his rights; then advised him to quickly pack a small suitcase and to come with them.

The Archbishop stood in the corridor. What a ridiculous and crazy end to the career of this young priest! How could he have been so blind to what was going on. He would speak to his VG; he had too much to do, to watch like a governess over every Tom Dick or Harry, they sent him.

He wondered how long Baldwin would get in his sentence, and what, in Heaven’s name, he would do with him when he came out! An idea came into his head: I wonder if the Father at the Hermitage could work a miracle with this chap too. I shall keep that in mind. He became aware of the policeman waiting for him.

“Yes, Sergeant, I’ll sign that statement, and I’ll come with you to the door. Thank you both. I’ll send our solicitor to the station as soon as he’s free. Thank you, yes.” Then, in a sudden burst of compassion for this silly, young fellow, he reached out and patted Father Baldwin’s arm. “You’re a stupid clown, Baldwin, but I’ll stand by you. Now get the hell out of here!”

XXVI

The trial of Father Hilary Baldwin had been attended by the Archdiocesan solicitor who kept the archbishop informed of its progress at all stages. Father Baldwin had received a sentence of three years imprisonment for Fraud.

One month from the commencement of the prison sentence, the archbishop sent his VG to see Father Baldwin in the prison which was not too far from the centre of the city.

When the VG came back, he could hardly wait to tell the archbishop all the news.

Monsignor Edward Lipgurd was a serious, thirty-six-year, old, priest, very tall and thin, but who exerted great influence by his ultra-strict manner and his face which never seemed to change its expression which earned him the name of 'poker face' - by the other clergy in the Archdiocese. He had brilliant degrees from Rome, but although very learned, he was not possessed of much imagination. As this was the case, he was excellent in his role as the archbishop's Canon Lawyer, and, as Mc Viver called him, his 'hit man', when it came to coping with serious cases of clerical misbehaviour.

Never were his decisions influenced by foolish sentiment, which he regarded as a weakness – a betrayal of Christ.

Therefore, the Monsignor's visit to a jail, was a first, for this man, and he was left bewildered.

On his return to Bishop House, he went first to the archbishop's office, and began talking, before he even sat down.

"You won't believe what I saw, Your Grace! There were black and white sketches of the top warden, and most of the guards pinned up in the front office – where the visitors first come as they arrive. The Warden proudly showed me each sketch and named the guard; telling me it was the 'spitting image' of each person. He also told me they were very, proud of their model prisoner.

"They never stopped talking about how wonderful the 'prisoner- priest' was. They had given him a class to run with all the equipment provided; the jail library had bought in several volumes of great masters for the prisoners to study; then I was permitted to stay to watch our priest begin to teach a class to them. I have to say, Your Grace, that even I, was able to follow a class he was giving" he smiled one of his rare smiles, "and that's admitting something!"

He wiped his forehead, "Truly, Your Grace, I am totally out of my depth dealing with this character; I've always associated artists with total debauchery, cocaine and sleeping in the gutters. This 'fellow'... this *priest*...has upset me greatly. I don't know where I am with him."

“Did you manage to speak to the villain, alone, at all? That is, away from his adoring guards and fans?”

“Oh, yes, Your Grace. I saw him alone in his cell; they have given him an *entire cell just to himself*; the justification being he has so much equipment no one else can fit in with him.” Mgr. Lipgurd shook his head. “Your Grace, he is being treated as a celebrity. I couldn’t understand it.”

“Did you ask him was he repentant of his crimes at all?”

“Yes, I did. He didn’t seem to understand what I meant. He said he was happier there than he had ever been before. He actually asked me if he could stay there forever. I think he really is *amoral*; I have read about that, but I’ve never believed it. How could someone not know if something is right, or wrong?”

The archbishop sat silently, thinking over what his VG had reported. He kept his eyes closed. Then he looked up and asked: “What do the other prisoners call him? I mean, do they yell dreadful things, like ‘Nancy boy’; or ‘Pansy’; or the equivalent of those names?”

“Definitely not. He is called, very reverently, ‘Father’. I found that strange myself, Your Grace.”

“I find that exceedingly strange, too, VG, but perhaps, there’s a glimpse of hope there, what do you think?”

“I think the same as you, Your Grace. He hasn’t forgotten he is a priest obviously.” The VG rubbed his eyes. “I’ve forgotten, how long is he in for?” He shook his head, eyes closed, then remembered. “Your Grace, I

remember. Father Balwin was sentenced to three years, if I have remembered it rightly. But the question is what are we to do with him when he gets out?"

"God alone knows, VG. He's so weird in his response to his illegality, that I'm afraid I simply don't know." He suddenly made a decision and sat up straight again.

"My dear, faithful Edward, thank you for going to the jail. Let's wait until we see if there is going to be an appeal, or not; I'll go and see the Father at the Hermitage. I need advice, and need it, badly." He stood up. "Come and have a cup of coffee with me; you've had an awful shock I can easily see that."

The two men went into the small sitting room and rang for coffee.

XXVII

Back at the Hermitage, the Father was marshalling his troop to go down to the shops to pay his debts and to buy provisions.

With the news that the Father was back and the work at the old ruins finished, everyone was out to welcome the Father back again. It was quite a procession now, with Saint Tom leading, Saint Anne always close by his side, then the new three saints: Saint Catherine, Saint Peter and Saint Martha.

The village dogs were in a quandary; they were immediately put in their place by Saint Tom who merely looked at them and growled. That was enough. He was a mountainous size now and intimidated the mainly little dogs kept by the shopkeepers. When the Father went into the shops, all the animals, sensibly clustered around Saint Tom. The village people were enthralled.

The Father took Father Joyceson in with him to the builder, who had organized all the work done at the Hermitage. Toby Malone welcomed the Father back sincerely; he was grateful that there was nothing that the Father did not like in what they had done. He also was aware that the Father made sure he mentioned, every

single little thing, that had been done; nothing was missed. Father assured Toby he would have the full cost of the invoice within the hour. They shook hands and Toby gave Father Joyceson a separate hug, and a whispered; ‘Thank you!’

They stocked up at the grocer’s then the bread shop and bought all the food they needed for a fortnight. They were ready to return home when the estate agent came running out and spoke quietly to the Father.

The land behind the Hermitage leading up to the forest, virtually to the perimeter of the Harris farm had come on the market again. The Father was interested and asked the young priest to go on home and get the lunch ready while he spoke to the Agent. Saint Tom was agitated to find they were leaving the Father behind and caused some disquiet in the group of animals. Father came quickly out of the doorway he was about to enter; he spoke seriously, and calmly, to Saint Tom, who obediently went with Father Joyceson, while his master returned to the shop.

The estate agent, who combined being a solicitor, with his almost non-existent land sales, spoke honestly to the Father.

“Father, to be honest with you, this land has been on the market for about fifteen years now. No one wanted it and farmers have just used it as extra grazing land, as no one seemed to really own it. There’s about 150 acres, perhaps a bit more, and they are asking a prohibitive price. I thought of you when the owner, a city chap, who has never even seen it – he had recently inherited it from

an uncle – notified me. He just wants to get rid of it. I told the man the price was ridiculous, in an out-of-the-way place such as Burnside. I asked: if he would he be willing to accept a much lower price?

“He said he would accept anything, just to get rid of it.” The Estate Agent, Mr Price, paused and looked a little embarrassed. “Father, you seem to be growing up there, at the Hermitage, and I hear the Church is finished which means that you might be thinking of building a proper house, to live in for you and your assistant. I know it’s a bit cheeky of me making these suggestions.”

“No, Mr Price, it isn’t. It is very kind and thoughtful of you. I actually was thinking that we needed more land for a proper garden where we could be nearly self-supporting. I wanted to give my young priests – that is, anymore that the archbishop decides to send me – some real work to do. It is too dangerous for young men to be sitting around, doing nothing.

“Please just give me an idea what to offer for the land. I would have no idea of how to estimate that.”

The Estate Agent named a price that even to the Father seemed ridiculously low and he decided to accept this as a gift from God. He requested Mr Price to make the offer in his name, not the Archdiocese. That way, he avoided all problems of what he did with it. He asked Mr Price to bring up the survey of the plans of the area to be sold, and to walk with him around it. He would then arrange for the fencing of the area, with gates, where they thought they should be erected.

Mt Price was elated and said he would make the offer immediately to the seller; and asking the Father to wait, he rapidly typed out his email to the owner and, within a few minutes, the answer came back. It was accepted without a quibble.

Mr Price then announced he would be up at the Church in the afternoon, to take the Father all over his new property.

Mr Price and the Father shook hands; the deed was done!

XXVIII

Over lunch, at the Church, the Father told Father Joyceson, the news of the property. The young priest was overjoyed. At last, there would be enough room for them to expand their garden, and to grow all the things they needed to grow.

As both priests wanted to see the extent of their new property, they decided to make that their afternoon walk – they would both go with the Estate Agent. The Father told his assistant, he was to contact Toby Malone to oversee a good fencer who would fence and gate their property once the boundary markers were in. Toby Malone had proved totally reliable before, so they were sure of a good job being done by leaving it to him.

As they were finishing their meal, the Father, speaking softly as usual asked: “Father Joyceson, the church must have a name. I’m sure you have one that you would like to use. What would your choice be?”

“That’s easy. Considering the number of ‘Saints’ we have here, I think we should call it: ‘All Saints’. What do you think?”

The Father smiled. “Well, the name is very orthodox, as well as great. We needn’t explain your reasoning for

choosing that particular title in honour of the menagerie, out there – or rather, *in here!*” They both laughed.

“Well, as you’ve agreed to the name, Father. Could I dare show you a sign I’ve had printed while you were away?”

The Father was apprehensive. “This time, son, I truly have no idea what you are going to show me...Please don’t hold me in suspense, show me now.”

Father Joyceson ran to his bed, knelt down, and drew out a large sign, framed and covered in glass which showed the name of the Church, the times of Masses, Confessions, Hours of Exposition; the hours of opening and closing of the Church and the names of the priests. ‘Father Joyceson’ was clearly printed, but the Father was simply called: ‘The Father’.

The Father studied it closely. “I see you have put yourself on the 6.00am Mass each day – including Sunday – and me on the 7.00am, son. That’s not right; the archbishop made it clear to me that he had you in mind as the Parish Priest, and that’s what you will be. The most popular time will be the later Mass – if anyone comes at all. I want you to change the times: put me on the early one and you on the 7.00am. Can that be done, now it’s printed?”

“No problem at all, Father. I told the young chap who runs the little printing shop that you might want to change something, and he said it would be no problem at all. He was just delighted with the business.”

The Father looked closely at the sign again. “It’s beautifully done, Father. He is an artist this chap... By the

way, we've fixed up all the details of the Mass, except the very important ones of Servers. What do you think we should do? I'll be happy to serve your Mass anytime, but I think we should try to have some reliable other young men, or adults, to serve. I think adult men would be best, but who would know how to answer in Latin? Have you thought of this at all?"

"Yes, I have Father. I've persuaded Toby Malone, who is a lapsed Catholic, but he once was an altar boy, when the Latin Mass was in use; he still remembers the responses. When I asked him, he was greatly disturbed, but he did say, if we're stuck, he'd try to do it for us."

He then consulted a little notebook he carried. "Then, there's Mrs Robert's son, Luke. He manages the motel five miles away. It seems he, when he was a young man was once in the Seminary, for a while, and can read Latin. He called to see me and said he would be happy to serve one Mass, if we could not get anyone better than he was. He doesn't practise, either."

The Father smiled again. "All right, it appears we're ready to go. When do you want to start Father?"

"I think we should start this weekend, Father. Let's not put it off. I know it's only three days' notice but if it's any longer I shall be so nervous I shall fall to pieces."

"All right, my boy, so our whole lives will change from next Sunday morning." He stood up and said he would be in the chapel if he was wanted.

Left alone at the table, Father Joyceson put his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. Boy! Will it ever change! Wait until the people, these good, very ordinary

people, see the Father levitating! Then the 'fun' could start!

He started to sweat. Dear God help us *and help me to cope with that!* And the inevitable questions that will follow! Give me the grace to remain calm and help me to get through this coming weekend.

XXIX

Meanwhile, back at Bishop House, the archbishop stared at the sheet of writing with the terrifying crest and moaned slightly in horror. Perhaps he had read it wrongly? He read the Latin text again, and again. No, it's painfully correct. He rang the buzzer on his desk which would summons his VG.

Monsignor Edward Lippurd came instantly in response to the call; he took one look at the archbishop's face and quickly asked: "Your Grace, do you want me to ring for the doctor?" Edward rushed forward and took the hand which was trembling.

"No, Edward...It's...." He held out the letter from Rome. "Read it, good friend and weep with me!"

"I don't understand... ..Oh, my goodness! Congratulations, my very dear Archbishop... Congratulations, Congratulations...."

The archbishop was close to tears. "Stop it! Stop it immediately! Edward, do you know what this means? It means that the Father was correct. Never in a thousand years would I have ever thought I would be, one day, a

Cardinal... me a cardinal! A poor boy from the outback! I still can't believe it."

He put the letter back on his desk and held his head in his hands. "Edward, I never ever wanted this. I was hoping that the archbishop status was the last of any promotions; it only means endless worries, endless responsibilities, endless separation from all the people I love, and the duties I know how to perform. I'll be like a novice again, trying to fumble my way through a load of new ceremonies I don't know how to do; I'll have to mix with a crowd of people who, frankly, give me the horrors." He looked up at his VG his eyes pleading. "Edward, could I run away, do you think? Hide up there with the Father, Saint Tom and Saint Anne?"

The monsignor had to keep his feet on the ground to cope with this situation. He spoke firmly. "Listen to me, Your Grace, when do you have to go? We need to organize everything for the time you will be away. They couldn't... they wouldn't...Oh... please tell me, Your Grace. They won't keep you over there, will they?"

There was a yell of anguish from the archbishop. "Edward, bite your tongue. I never even thought of that dreadful possibility!" The archbishop took a deep breath, then shook himself.

He closed his eyes, tightly, forcing himself to be calm. He was prepared to face the situation now -

... it has happened; that is the end of the matter, he realised his face grim; the Church is an obedience. He looked up at his VG standing beside him. His colour had returned to normal as he spoke slowly.

“You’re the sensible one, Monsignor. Let me see.” He quickly scanned the text again. “I will leave in, let me see, five, six... no seven days from now. Good God! So soon. I was hoping to be able to get up to see the Father before I left, but there is no time. Get me your diary of all the ceremonies, duties – civil and religious – that I am scheduled to do this coming week.

“I’m very, sorry, Monsignor, here I am carrying on like a hysterical movie star, but you are the dogsbody who has to step into these shoes now and do everything in my place! Let’s put our heads together and see which ones we can cancel until I come back.

“Edward, I WILL COME BACK, I promise you; I’ll do everything in my power to get back here as quickly as I can! Go, get the book and let us get started.”

The Monsignor stumbled out of the office, suddenly nervously aware that *he* would now be doing all those terrifying ceremonies, that the archbishop seemed to take in his stride. God help me! He pleaded, closing his eyes.

He decided, there and then, he would write a quick email to the Father to let him know of the great honour that their beloved archbishop has received from the Holy Father.

Mr Price arrived at one o'clock sharp. He was a tall, big country man, with rapidly receding, ginger hair, a freckled face, and a wide smile. He greeted the two priests happily and had all the plans and surveys with him.

He wore sensible shoes to cope with the fields and noted with satisfaction the Fathers tucking their skirts up so that only their thin legs were showing. He did not seem unduly fazed when the Father called the saints to follow them. All the animals gladly did so with Saint Tom, of course, in the lead. They had a long way to walk so the Father kept an eye on Saint Martha and whenever she seemed to be getting tired, he shifted her onto the back of Saint Anne who seemed delighted to have a passenger.

Mr Price pointed out the fact, which the Fathers had known, but had not considered: the creek, a tributary from the small waterfall, actually crossed, their new property. The Agent took the opportunity to point out how important this was if they were considering farming, especially, vegetable farming: there would be a constant and unfailing source of fresh water always available, even in times of drought – even though they seldom occurred in that area.

The Fathers were surprised and thrilled with the unexpected size of their purchase. It was actually more than had been mentioned by the Agent. They also realised that to fence that enormous area would be a very costly affair; they raised this with Mr Price. He suggested they consider fencing properly only a part of it, and then

running a single electric fence i.e. one line on metal posts, throughout the rest of the property. That seemed a very sensible suggestion.

It seemed that their new property included the open fields now used by sheep, several acres of forest and mountainous land; while to their utter surprise, they now owned half of the actual waterfall itself. Apparently, the survey line went straight through the very centre of the waterfall. That ensured, forcibly, that they would, certainly, *never* be short of water.

They arrived back at the Hermitage, very tired, but elated as well. They shook hands with Mr Price who assured them he would have the pegs in the boundary line, within three days. He was then let out the front gate by Father Joyceson.

The Father went straight to his computer; he knew there was an important email waiting for him. He opened it, read it swiftly and closed his eyes tightly. He then told the young priest the news and begged him to pray for their archbishop; he would need prayers now as never before. He then excused himself from dinner and went to the chapel where he remained for some hours kneeling, not moving a muscle.

Father Joyceson came in before he went to bed; they chanted Compline together and the young priest bowed to his superior and went out to bed. The Father stayed where he was for another 90 minutes.

After one hour, Father Joyceson was worried. He went into the chapel and silently, moved up to the kneeling figure; He was, suddenly, frightened.

The Father was breathing, his eyes were open, but he was seeing nothing. He was like a dead man who was breathing. The young priest was terrified. He wanted to touch the priest, but his hand was trembling so much he was too frightened to do so.

He withdrew a few feet from the kneeling figure. He was then startled to hear him speak, but not to him.....*to the archbishop!*

“Do not be frightened, Your Grace...it’s only me.....”



The archbishop was aware that someone was calling his name. “Your Grace! Your Grace! Wake up.”

The archbishop snorted, then opened his eyes and cried loudly, in his fright. He trembled with fear as his eyes became huge.

The Father was standing beside him.

When his mind was able to click into what was being said, he heard the words: “Do not be frightened, do not be frightened Your Grace. When I see you again, I shall address you as Your Eminence; you will be a prince of the Church...”

The archbishop scrambled out of bed and knelt on the floor; he was, actually, shaking, now, in his terror; he reached out a trembling hand to the spectral figure before him, convinced he was dreaming.

To his astonishment, the hand that reached out to meet his was strong, rough with hard work, yet gentle at the same time. Again, came the comforting voice:

“You will not be frightened; you will cope brilliantly with the promotion, you will live until you reach the age, I told you; you will consecrate the Abbess Angela at the

Enclosed Benedictine Monastery of the Transfiguration, you will see the good Monsignor Edward Lipgurd consecrated Bishop; he will be your Auxiliary – he is a simple holy man. The man you set out to save, Father Joyce, will end his long life still at the Hermitage; he will be a great saint; Father Hilary Clem Baldwin has great gifts that God has given him. If he acknowledges the author of those gifts, then he is on the road that leads to Heaven; if he does not, he is doomed. I believe you should send him to me when his sentence is finished, but *do not*, I repeat, *do not*, renew his Faculties after his release.

“God bless you, my dear Archbishop, pray for me, and for all your poor priests. God bless you and now go back to sleep; you need it for the days ahead.”

Monsignor Lipgurd, wakened by the cries of the archbishop, had rushed to the bedroom only to fall to his knees, in terror, at the sight of the spectral figure, and to hear the words spoken.

The VG was shivering; nothing like this was possible, his mind kept repeating – this is the stuff of pious drivel...or... was it? ... Is it really happening? Am I seeing what I’m seeing? ...Oh, my God, what did the Father say? He had mentioned *me*...NO! No, not a bishop! ... Please God, not a bishop! No! Not that!

The good man could cope with no more; he crashed to the floor in a dead faint knocking over a small table; books tumbled noisily, everywhere, which alerted the archbishop to VG’s plight; he leapt up from his knees, rushed to get water for his long-time secretary and true,

The Father

solid, friend... and ... he suddenly remembered, his eyes opening wide ... God help us!

- his auxiliary bishop to be!

XXXI

Father Joyceson was apprehensive of the first masses that would be held in two days' time, not only as the people would then see, with their own eyes, the extraordinary hermit's mystic gifts of their Father, who was living in their midst.

He knew what the Father did not know: he knew that Toby Malone and his workmen, all from the area, had spread the word far and wide of the sort of life they lived up at the Hermitage – the primitive, make-do furniture, the no water, no heat, practically no food eaten; the sleeping on the floor, the dreadful outhouse; they had also raved about the beauty of the chapel: all the work of the Father, himself, without any help from anyone.

Bert Joyceson knew the people were intrigued. They did not know what to make of the stories they heard. This was how people had lived in the Middle Ages, they said; modern men in the 21st century did not live like this.

The people were curious and, religious or not, they all intended to be there to see at first hand these unusual men. They secretly thought it would be a frightful experience but, their curiosity would never be satisfied, until they had seen it for themselves.

Among those who were determined to be there were Fred and Molly Harris, Billy and his ‘miracle’ sister, Angela.

Molly was not a Catholic, but Fred was. It was the extraordinary events of Angela’s birth that convinced her that any priests who did what those two priests did, that day, had to be of God. The outcome was, that she was going to ask the Fathers for instructions, and she told Fred, she was determined that they would all go, as a family, on Sunday, and that was that!

Fred and Molly had taken the baby, Angela, to be baptized a couple of days after the workmen had finished their work on the old church. Father Joyceson had done the baptism and Fred’s mate, Toby Malone, was proud to be the godfather while Mrs Edna Roberts had been the godmother. Angela had been baptized with the names, ‘Angela, Mary, Frederica, Harris.’ The parents had promised Father Joyceson, that Billy was next, but he had asked, especially, if the Father would perform his baptism; he had known the Father, before Angela was born, he boasted proudly: he had helped the Father in burying his little dog – the one before Saint Tom. The young boy thought he had a special priority with the Father – more than anyone else.

His parents were amused, and a little alarmed that it would cause embarrassment to Father Joyceson, but the young priest had only laughed and said he would arrange it with the Father.

Molly was secretly worried whether her sewing of the Father’s habit would be seen by the other women on

Sunday; it had been a 'rush job' and she knew it was not good work – she was not proud of it. Having no idea of the rest of the clothes, the Father would be wearing, when he came into the chapel to offer the Mass, she just hoped they covered her stitching!

Molly Harris had never been to a Catholic Mass before in her life.

On the Saturday before the 'big day', many cars stopped to read the new sign that was erected near the road which began: 'Catholic Church of All Saints'. They saw the times of Masses and the news spread throughout the little village. As Confessions were listed for Saturday afternoon, Father Joyceson sat in his new confessional with both little doors open – just in case anyone did turn up at 4.30pm

He was astonished to find that they certainly did turn up. Besides the real penitents, there were also the curious visitors to see the Church; they came in large numbers, for such, an out of the way, little village.

They were awe struck. This Church was simply beautiful, peaceful, silent, people kneeling on real kneelers, even – to Father Joyceson's intense surprise – some of the women had their heads covered.

The young priest was kept busy until 6.00 pm. When he returned to the living area, he found that the Father had prepared the food and they had their simple meal together. As the younger one ate, the old Father read the gospel for tomorrow's Mass out loud in a strong, secure voice. As it was moving on in the Church's Year, the readings were from Ascension time; they were all

redolent of consolation, as Christ reassured His faithful followers, that as He went back to the Father, so He would prepare a place for his faithful followers when their time came to join him.

The reading never failed to move the Father, while the parish priest was learning to read the Scriptures all over again and listened intently as the Father gave a little meditation on the text.

They sat in silence until the Father quietly said, he would do the cleaning up. He told his assistant to prepare the vestments and all the little things that would be necessary for the Masses – the wine, the water, the cruets, the special mat for the Saints to be on, and once again, he urged the parish priest to remember they must be at the Gospel side of the sanctuary – in their usual place – and they must all fit together on the mat.

They discussed the times they would ring the new, church bell. The Father suggested, if he could find anyone who understood the Mass, to ring the big bell three times at the consecration of the bread and the wine when the priest held up the Sacred Species. He also thought, the big bell should only be rung for five minutes before each of the two Masses. He did not want to drive the good people of the village mad with the bell tolling for long periods.

Luke Roberts had been contacted to serve the early Mass at 6.00am and the Father advised his young assistant, to kneel next to Luke to help him if he needed it – and to make sure he told Luke that. The parish priest was only there if Luke happened to forget something he

had to do, or something he had to say. By not 'taking over', it would show Luke he was trusted.

They discussed a few other details, and the Father advised Father Joyceson to get an early night. He needed to be in his best form for tomorrow; they did not know what they would face. He told his somewhat nervous young parish priest, that it did not matter if no one came, they would offer their Masses for the people who had been so wonderfully good to them; it would be a way of showing their appreciation of their kindness to them - whether they knew about it, or not.

Father Joyceson only spent a short time in the Chapel for his night prayers and then did as he had been told and went to bed. He woke around midnight and noticed a light still burning in the chapel. He crept to the door and peeped in; he saw the Father kneeling with arms outstretched and his gaze fixed on the tabernacle.

He watched the Father in awe, for a little while, then crept back to bed, trembling slightly; he was in the midst of mystery here and, even after all this time... he found it absolutely terrifying.

XXXII

All the church lights were shining in the winter morning, as people started arriving at 5.30am. Father Joyceson was running the soft, felt, floor mop over the floor between the seats; he did not want a speck of dust to be seen by the village people.

When the people arrived, he lit the candles on the side altar – Luke could light the main altar candles when he arrived – then went into the Confessional where he put his purple stole over his white surplice, closed the door and sat down. He then opened the little door on his left side and spoke to the person whom he could not see through the grill – as the little curtain hid the penitent who then had complete anonymity. He heard a tremulous voice mutter: “Bless me Father for I have sinned.....”

The big bell – under the control of Fred Harris, the farmer, began its sweet tolling at 5.50am and the parish priest made sure that the confession he was hearing was the last confession he would hear until the masses were over.

As he hurried from the confessional, he was astonished to see that there was standing room only. He

had thought a good number of people would come – but this was incredible. People were standing along the very narrow side aisles as well. He hurried to Luke who was standing awkwardly near the altar rails and told him to light the altar candles then wait for him.

While Luke was busy at the altar, Father Joyceson hurried out into the living quarters to the back door and let in the saints. The animals were a little disconcerted at the sight of the huge crowd but went to their allotted space, on the left-hand side of the sanctuary. They immediately fell into their usual grouping with Saint Tom standing with Saint Anne beside him with Saint Martha on her back. Saint Peter stood on the other side of Saint Anne and Saint Catherine pressed closer than usual against Saint Tom as she stood on his left.

The parish priest went back to Luke. “Come with me, Luke, and learn how to dress the Father for Mass.” The two men went to the Epistle side of the altar, they genuflected before the tabernacle and went to the Father, who stood perfectly still at the vesting table, as the younger priest handed him each article of the vestments he would be wearing. The Father then said the special prayers assigned to each vestment, as he received it.

Finally, when all was ready, the bell having stopped, the Father went down the centre aisle with Joyceson and Luke following. When they reached the door, they turned around and then began the ceremonial procession back to the altar with Luke and the parish priest leading. As they walked very slowly up the aisle, the younger priest thought the altar had never looked so

beautiful as it did in the early morning light with all the flowers and the candles, bravely burning. He felt a glow of pride in their church – it was beautiful.

Luke and the parish priest knelt on the left side on the lowest step as Mass began. The parish priest had done, as the Father had suggested. He had made it clear to Luke he was only there as an emergency backstop. If all went well, he would do nothing at all, simply attend the Mass. After a slightly nervous start, Luke did so remarkably well, the parish priest began to relax. Things were going splendidly. And the crowd! The crowd were surprisingly, totally, silent just watching every, single, thing that was being done in front of them. They missed nothing.

When they reach the Sanctus, Luke struck the gong three times and the echo bounced from the walls. Those in the congregation who had never seen a Catholic Mass before, realised, this was obviously the important part. The big bell rang three times as well. Then, at the elevation of the sacred Host, again the three bells, from both gong and big bell, but - Father Joyceson felt his stomach muscles clench with fear; he had forgotten what usually happened when the Father reached this point – as the Father elevated the sacred chalice with the Precious Blood, there was the usual gentle cloud of colour, a golden mist, which covered the centre of the altar and the Father. The people watched in something akin to terror as they saw their strange priest start to rise from the floor.

One woman screamed, while another fainted. Many people stood up not knowing what to do. Some men swore horribly in their fright. Would the Father return? Was it all a circus trick? What, in the name of God was happening?

Luke was so afraid, he cried aloud, and half-rose from his kneeling position his hands to his mouth.

People held onto each other; the need for personal earthly contact seemed universal: women held onto their husband and even to the unknown men standing beside them; men did likewise. All eyes were glued to the spectacle taking place before them. What in the name of God was THIS?

Some people pushed past others and ran from the church altogether. One man vomited immediately he reached the road outside. He was gasping; his wife thought he would have a heart attack. Two women came out to help her.

Father Joyceson forced himself to jump up and stand in the middle of the sanctuary facing the people. He spoke clearly but softly.

“Please, *I beg of you*, don’t be alarmed and just try to understand what you are seeing. When I first came here and served Father’s Mass, I nearly died of fright. Please, just believe me, you have in your midst here, a very, very, holy priest, who had been given extraordinary powers and graces from God Himself.

“Truly, I tell you, there is nothing to fear here. Try to believe me. There is nothing to fear! We have been so blessed; it is almost beyond belief, but it is all TRUE!

“I know you’ll find it hard to believe, but Father has no idea he is off the ground. The normal rules of gravity and physics simply do not apply to him.

“It is a gift from God, please, please believe me. There is nothing to fear; rather something to thank God for on our knees: we have been blessed to be in the presence of the greatness and glory of a soul that loves God to the point that he is absorbed entirely by God alone. The Father belongs only to God, but in a minute or two, he will resume Mass and won’t know anything has happened at all.” As the priest was speaking, the Father was slowly returning to earth again and continued placidly with the Mass. Gradually the people quietened but were tense and very disturbed by the whole episode.

At Communion there were only about ten communicants, and after Communion, the Father had told the parish priest he wished to speak briefly to the people, today, instead of a proper sermon; he would do everything in its proper place, next Sunday.

After Luke, white faced and shaking badly – and shooting quick glances at the Father to see if he remained ‘normal’ - had helped with the ‘cleaning up’ that had to be done as the Mass drew to its end, the Father gave the final blessing and read the Last Gospel. Then instead of going down the steps to say the final prayers, he went to the lectern.

He spoke simply. The people were reassured by the normality of his voice and relaxed their stiff postures. This was the Father they had known – they realised *NOW~ they had never known him at all* – but they listened

intently to the ‘normal’ voice of a *human being*, not someone they could not comprehend at all.

“My very dear friends and neighbours. I hope and pray you like the way your Church has been restored. Father Joyceson and I think it is beautiful. This morning, I only want to thank you for all the kindness you have shown me since I first came here, years ago now. I want to thank Mr Malone and every single one of his workers for the glorious work they have done; they are the ones who have made it magnificent. I have offered all their work to God for them and for their families in this holy Mass.

“Lastly, two little points. There will be no collections taken up here in this church, unless we get totally stuck and really need your help. Secondly, I want to emphasize that Father Joyceson is the Parish Priest, not me. He is the one you will need to see about Baptisms, Marriages, Sick Calls and all the rest of the duties that a parish priest has to do. Pray for Father Joyceson, he is a very good and faithful priest. God asks nothing more of us, than we be faithful. God bless you all, and now we’ll finish the Mass as it should be finished.”

The Father came down the three steps and knelt on the lowest step, Luke and the parish priest knelt on the floor as the final prayers were said in English, with a very loud response – from those who remembered them – in the congregation. He then disrobed at the side altar and Father Joyceson began to vest in the clothing taken from the old priest.

The Father came out to the living quarters, with Luke, and thanked the young man sincerely. "You did brilliantly, son."

"Thank you, Father," Luke replied his voice still 'wobbly'. "Could I beg a favour? That you might hear my Confession?" the Father smiled. "Just sit over there, Luke, and I'll let the saints out into the garden."

When the saints had been released, to their relief, and a little later when Luke, shriven, had gone back into the Church to make his thanksgiving, Toby Malone began, nervously, to serve Father Joyceson's Mass, while the Father went down the chapel and into the Confessional. He was really surprised to see nearly thirty people waiting for him; he was also delighted, to see how many had remained for Father Joyceson's Mass.

XXXIII



Outside the Church of All Saints, groups of people, gathered to speak of the experience they had all witnessed – the astonishment, the wonder, the really terrifying behaviour of the Father. Some of the women were in tears. They had been severely shocked. They had never heard of such a thing in their lives! There was wonderment, never loudly expressed, but genuinely felt as to whether all this was, ‘all right’, or not. Some expressed the view softly, that perhaps all this was not quite *legal*!

These were country people who did not accept strange and bewildering things lightly, or quickly. They were insular in their thinking and slow to accept new or difficult, challenging, ways of thinking or behaving. They were full of the prejudices and modes of thinking of country people everywhere.

However, the general attitude was that the locals, who loved the Father, believed that if he were doing something odd, it just *couldn't* be a ‘bad’ thing; it had to be something they just did not understand.

One young woman, who irritated the townspeople considerably by never letting the people forget that she

was soon going to university, informed the women this was called, 'Levitation'. The women rolled their eyes – they had never heard of any priest doing that! A load of nonsense; just what Lorraine Wickens would think up – she with her airs and graces and her great pretence of knowledge! Poor Lorraine tried to tell them about Saint Joseph of Cupertino the great saint. They had never heard of him. Oh, he was an Italian, was he? Well, you know what they're like, don't you!

The more practical women, from the town area, not the farming area, were more interested in forming a group to help clean and do all the work that is associated with running a Church and keeping it spotless. They decided they would talk to Father Joyceson about it.

Mrs Edna Roberts, feeling she had a definite 'foot in the door' with her boy Luke, actually serving the senior Father, said she would offer her services to the parish priest to do the flowers for them. The women all thought that a good idea. Edna had the best garden in the district and always had masses of flowers which she gave to all her neighbours.

When the second Mass was finished, Tony Malone joined the men on the other side of the entry path, but nearer the road, and the men were more concerned with more immediate problems. They had all been up for hours now and needed to empty their bladders. They said that it all was very fine and very moving, but the Father had forgotten the one thing necessary for large numbers and he should have remembered – he was a man himself. The Father had forgotten the need for the provision of

Toilets. Fred Harris asked his friend, Toby Malone, what would be the best price he could give for two sets of toilets, one for men and one for women.

“Well, we’re well off for water here with the mains supply from the local dam, as well as the waterfall, but I was wondering about using the rainwater; it’s just going to waste here.” Toby commented.

“I think it’s a sensible idea and would save on the water rates,” Fred Harris agreed. “We could use the rainwater from the guttering; it’s a big building. It’s going to waste now, but if we had a couple of galvanised iron tanks, we could divert most of the rainwater into two big tanks, which we could erect, one behind each of the two toilets. With the last lot of work here, Toby, as you all know now, extended the mains water pipe from the one tap outside the back door, around the back of the church, to where the new shower and sink are now placed. It would be a simple job to take that a bit further and use it as a back-up source if the water from the guttering, runs out. In that way, there’d be plenty of water collected for the toilets – they’d never run dry.”

“You’re suggesting Toby,” queried Bob Hendry who worked as plumber for Toby. “That, we make it a septic tank, job? I thought it would be pan collection only.”

“Well, what do you think mates?” Toby questioned the men. “There’s bound to be outsiders coming here now, to gape and gawk, at our strange priests; do we really want them to laugh at us, county bumpkins, who only had a smelly pan system in our toilets?”

There followed the usual patronizing remarks made about 'city folks' by these country men. The end result was to work out costs – which they would leave to Toby – he was the expert – and then see how they could afford to get it done. They decided to meet up next Sunday with a plan, or at least more definite information about the feasibility of the whole idea. They would discuss the project and the cost with Father Joyceson.

The men's group broke up, and they went to collect their wives. Fred found that Molly with baby Angela, had not only remained for the second Mass, but they were still there when it was over.

Fred whistled to his mates and they crowded around him near the road, away from the other groups of people and some people heard a cascade of water, as some of the men relieved their bladders, while the rest of them told jokes and laughed very loudly to cover the noise.

Fred gave them a 'thumbs-up' sign and went back into the Church to encourage Molly to come out and for them to get home. He had work to do; he had not milked yet. She knew that and apologized so, Fred, taking Angela in his arms, came outside, with Molly doing a fairly, complicated, genuflection on leaving her pew. She thought she must practise that; people did it so easily; it is a bit like a curtsy, she realised – just as you would do if you were introduced to the Queen. This time, she smiled, it is to the King, Himself.

XXXIV

Within two months, the toilets were built, with big rainwater tanks installed, and were placed on the righthand side of the Church, facing the road. This left the garden enclosure as it had always been. The saints were disturbed by all the workmen coming and going, but they knew the workmen by now, so were always well behaved and unafraid. The cost had been paid without a murmur by the Father which mystified the men.

When Saint Martha produced chickens in the fullness of time, Saint Peter led the triumphant procession around the garden area with all the other animals following. Saint Catharine became all maternal and, instead of eating the beautiful little chickens, took care of them; apparently firmly believing that they should not be out of their mother's care, so kept 'nosing' them back to the mother hen, if they tended to stray away.

This increase in the number of dependents meant that the 'tool, cum animal food, shed' had to be extended to provide a safe and dry place for the saints when the Spring rains would arrive. As the Masses were public every day now in the mornings, the saints were only

permitted to enter the chapel on Sundays. They took refuge in their new shelter when the days were extremely cold or wet.

The village of Burnside was becoming unrecognizable. The crowds were increasing each week. The visitors often travelled long distances and were in need of food and drink after the Masses were over. As the handful of shopkeepers realized what an opportunity this could be; there followed a virtual blizzard of building, alterations extensions and renovations in the little village.

The shopkeepers had called a meeting to decide on a plan. They were all neighbours and had no desire to destroy another person's livelihood. The widow, Mrs Edna Roberts, wanted to start a tearoom by extending her very large veranda on one side of her house, but she would need a larger kitchen which would give work to perhaps a couple of young women, or, perhaps young men, as casuals. She intended doing a short – one week – course in the city – she saw it online– in learning how to do coffees, and how to use that huge coffee machine which she intended to buy.

In order to fulfil her plans she would need cakes; the small village cake shop agreed to supply these, if the owner could get a man, or woman, to help her with the cooking; they would need to enlarge the cooking facilities at the shop as well. The publican, who already had a large side room which he used for big celebrations, said he had been asked many times for 'bed and breakfast', so wanted to put on another storey and to extend the downstairs

large reception room. He would then need extra women and men as barmaids, housemaids, laundry men or women, cleaners and kitchen hands. They could start on a casual basis and see what happened; if the phenomenon continued, they could become permanent.

The Council members, who also were present, suggested that they upgrade the track to the waterfall. It was a natural scenic marvel. They could make it a local attraction with, perhaps, a small car park, some concrete tables and benches and well painted signs. They suggested they could use the local sign writer for this work which would help him out and would keep all the work in local hands.

This idea was novel and was received with more enthusiasm than the council men had expected. They suggested they put it on the agenda for the next Council Meeting.

This was good news to all the good people in the area; it had been a bad season, and many were out of work and were desperately in need of an income.

Fred Harris mentioned that the young Father, was concerned; they needed a second Confessional with all the new people coming. Could they 'fix-up' a second Confessional just like the first one on the other side of the back wall? Toby Malone, who understood the situation well, said they would make that their first project.

That decent, good man, Toby Malone, as the chief builder in the area, organized a draftsman to see each of the shopkeepers, at their dwelling, and get their plans

done as quickly as he could; he would then sub-contract with another builder from Arrowfield – a much larger town than Burnside, 20 miles away – to cope with the number of men, and the multiplicity of trades he would need, to get the jobs done, and done quickly.

They had invited the local member of Parliament, to the meeting, and he was mainly worried about car parking. Already, the village street was blocked each Sunday with cars double parked as there was nowhere else to park them. His agent suggested, tentatively, to the member, that there was a twenty-acre area of land opposite the Church. It was Crown Land and, perhaps, if they could get permission, they could use that?

The member said it would be perfect. He would get the permission, but in the meantime, go ahead, clear it, see that there are no dangerous sections in it – with boulders and hidden stumps of trees – and it should be fenced off, with a gate, that could be locked, as a matter of urgency. It could be used the very next Sunday if they got themselves organized. He asked Toby whether he could manage that; the builder nodded.

Toby was sweating heavily; he was aware he was being given the means to make a fortune.

All this was being done without the knowledge of either of the two Fathers. But, within the old Church, Father Joyceson was finding it much easier to cope with the myriad duties that he was now engaged in; the help of the Altar Society had completely taken over the cleaning, polishing and decorating the Chapel. This was an enormous relief.

The young parish priest was gradually learning all the names of the parishioners and their children. He found a diversity of talents among his people and, when he tried out a couple of old hymns, he found he had about six or seven really fine voices, both female and male.

With this encouraging sign, he steeled himself, and climbed up into the Gallery to try the organ. He took with him cleaning cloths, including polishing cloths for the woodwork; also, a can of 'bug killer'. He did not know what he would find up there. He felt a little guilty that he had never before explored the gallery, but decided, sensibly, he had not been idle; he'd had a great deal of work to do. To his delight, he found that only one step needed bracing; the others were good and strong. He would have a go at fixing that himself; if he could not fix it, he would see Toby.

He spent an hour cleaning, before he opened the lid, with nervous fingers. To his surprise and delight, he found the keys had been covered with a felt runner which had protected them. When he removed, very carefully, the felt, he found the keys underneath looked brand new and untouched by time.

He carefully sat down on the seat and put his feet tentatively on the peddles; a huge cloud of dust poured out. He sneezed a couple of times as he gently pumped the peddles and there were wheezes galore, but soon, the wheezing stopped, and so did the peddles. He wondered what was wrong. Then he realised it had obviously indicated there was enough air to work the bellows, that filled the pipes, that made the keys play!

With fumbling fingers, he remembered the ‘*Lourdes Hymn*’ and played the notes with his right hand. The sound was very good. Encouraged, he tried it with two hands; there was a broken note down there about three octaves below middle C, but it seemed that was the only casualty of age. He played again with two hands, remembering to pump his feet on the peddles non-stop, then, pulling out some stops, was suddenly brave enough to play at full blast.

He knew he was being heard outside as Saint Tom suddenly lifted up his big voice and howled throughout the entire performance. Now, that was a problem he had not thought of! He would have to find a solution; he would ask the Father.

The Father came in from the garden and sat quietly as the younger priest played then, all the hymns, he could remember learning, to please his mother, all those years ago, when he had been very young. He had a wonderful memory, and was astonished, at what he could remember after such a long time.

He looked at this watch and saw the time. Gracious! It was time for the Angelus and Sext. He quickly closed the organ, gathered all his cleaning materials and hurried down to the Father.

The Father smiled as Father Joyceson, sensibly, left his clutter just outside the altar rails. He took his place on the Epistle side of the Altar; the Father waited until the parish priest was ready, then began the Angelus.

XXXV



ver their lunch – they usually did not speak during meals – the Father said he had some news to tell the parish priest – which was his usual name for Father Joyceson.

“Yes, Father?”

“His Eminence Terrence Cardinal McViver has returned to Australia. He has sent me an email telling me he will be visiting us here next weekend.”

Father Joyceson was dismayed. “Oh, dear Lord, Father! What terrible news! ... Oh, I didn’t mean terrible! I mean... I would be truly thrilled to see our new Cardinal, but coming here? Where will he stay? We cannot put a cardinal to sleep on the floor, or on our luxury wooden board beds...and, merciful God, the food! And...”

“Ssh! Father, quieten yourself. The cardinal will not be sleeping here. He will be staying and eating at the Motel with his very faithful VG, Mgr. Edward Lipgurd. The Monsignor has been the archbishop’s secretary for a long time now, and he will soon be made bishop. Their chauffeur this time is a fairly young priest named Father Hilary Clem Baldwin – I don’t know him, do you?”

“That’s a relief, Father! ... What did you ask? Oh, I remember. No... I don’t think I’ve ever met Father Baldwin... But wait a minute! ...Wasn’t he the one in jail for Art Forgery? Or was that another one, I’m thinking of?”

“No, he’s the one, son. What do you know of him? Anything good, I mean?”

“Well, he’s an extraordinary artist; can paint like a Da Vinci; is very well educated, speaks in a very cultured voice, sings and plays the piano very well; is accomplished in just about everything. He lived at Bishop House where he was used by the archbishop to entertain the important visitors from Rome.

“We – that is – the rest of the priests didn’t like him. I think that was because we were envious of his gifts and his very superior education. I think that was our fault, not his.”

“Was he devout? Careful about his priestly duties? Did he spend any time in prayer?”

“The answer, Father, is No, No, and lastly No!” Father Joyceson was embarrassed; he flushed and started to smile sheepishly. “Father, I blush to say it, but he was even worse than I was!”

“Oh, I see. Then he’s obviously in a bad way!” The Father laughed softly. He then spoke seriously.

“Son, I have to tell you something. His Eminence said, he is going to leave Father Baldwin here with us – I believe he lodged an appeal and had his sentence largely reduced, but he has been inside for at least two years. From what I gathered, he has been placed into the

custody, of the cardinal. That will now be, officially, transferred to you, and to me.

“Now, there is an aspect of all this, that will affect you, directly, Father. Hilary Clem Baldwin does not have any Faculties, so he will not be able to help you with any of the Masses, Confessions, and general pastoral work. I am a little exercised in my mind wondering what we could do with him. Let me know if you have any ideas.” The Father stood up. “Let’s say grace and pray for guidance, my boy.”

The meal was over. Father Joyceson, his brow furrowed, began the washing up then, while cleaning the kitchen, he was thinking of the new non-priest, Hilary Baldwin who was coming to live with them. What on earth would they do with him? Without Faculties, he could not help in the parish...

The only thing he could think of was that he could play the organ and train the choir. What else he could do he could not imagine. There was, of course, the outdoor work, but he seriously doubted if Hilary had ever seen a shovel; he would be, he thought, most probably, totally useless in any work done outside the building.

Well, he would leave it to the Father; he was sure to have wonderful suggestions to make when he had thought about it.

XXXVI

The details of the visit from the new cardinal had been emailed to the Father which was an act of great courtesy which both the Father and the parish priest appreciated. They knew then what was to happen.

The Cardinal was due to arrive with Father Baldwin on Saturday, to speak to the Father. He would leave Monsignor Lipgurd at the motel, then the Cardinal could speak, privately, to Father on the Saturday - regarding his new responsibility. Later he would return to the motel for the night and bring his VG back with him Sunday morning, when he returned to the Hermitage for the Masses. He would make sure he had a talk with Father Joyceson then - he was anxious that the Father made that clear to his parish priest.

The Father explained to his parish priest that the cardinal would offer a private Mass, late on Sunday afternoon - with the front doors closed - as it would then be easier for them; they could just serve and not have to do all the 'fancy bits' that would be needed if he were to say a public Mass. The cardinal was a sensible, down to earth man; he fully understood there was no choir, no

music, only a couple of nervous servers at the Hermitage. He said it would be better if no one knew he would be there in the afternoon. The cardinal said Monsignor Lipgurd would also need to offer his own Mass. The Monsignor, himself, had suggested he could offer his own Mass after the cardinals in the afternoon, before they left the Hermitage. The cardinal voiced his gratitude for the thoughtfulness of his good Vicar General.

Both Hermitage priests thought this was completely sensible and very thoughtful of their cardinal. They were secretly relieved. They learned that the cardinal would preside at the Father's Mass with the Monsignor next to him, Sunday morning. As he was simply presiding, nothing special had to be done for him. Before that Mass, and before and after the Masses, he, or his VG, would use the second confessional, if there were a crowd.

Thank God, Father Joyceson thought, we have a truly pastoral cardinal – one who was not afraid of work; one who understood a tiny parish in the outback of this vast farming territory.

XXXVII

The parish priest immediately told his working committee of cleaners and polishers and decorators about their famous visitor, and they went to work with a vengeance. By Saturday, the whole place was spotless, and shining, simply filled with glorious flowers. Even the women thought it looked better than it had ever been. They had grown very fond of the old, beautiful church. The young parish priest took on the outside and made sure, it too, was fit to be seen.

Father Joyceson was disappointed that it was not Spring; all the roses which, by now, covered nearly all the fences, would have been spectacular in their beauty, and the lattices would have been covered with flowers as well. Anyhow, all the beds of vegetables were looking fine; the carrots were up as were the beetroot, while the onions were about to be dug, as well. The pumpkins needed another week or two before they were picked and placed on the roof of the shed for the frost to harden them; they would then last longer. The men were already eating the potatoes, but there were still plenty more in the ground. There would be something to put into the pot, at any rate, for the meals.

The parish priest realised that with another priest to feed, they would need more food; he would have to see about that.

XXXVIII

The large black car swept into the lane beside the Garden side of the church. Father Baldwin, hopped out, opened the back gate, then drove the car inside. The cardinal warned the youngster ‘non-priest’ of the animals, but he need not have worried. He no sooner had appeared, than Saint Tom rushed forward wagging his tail. The cardinal fondled his ears.

“Saint Tom, you remember me! I cannot believe it. Oh yes, I can. I can believe anything at all about this extraordinary place.” He turned to the young priest. “Look Father Baldwin, this is Saint Tom, and ... heavens above, the old ewe remembers me as well... Saint Anne!” He fondled the old sheep, which rubbed her head against his hand. Saint Catherine stood apart, looking at this stranger, but such now was her affection for Saint Tom, that she came forward and permitted this stranger to pat her head. Then the wild cat hurried back to the safety of the big dog.

“And... there are new saints as well. Well, Mr Rooster, Mother Hen and Mistress Wild Cat, I dare say you’ve been canonized as well.” He turned to the young priest. “Aren’t they glorious?”

“Simply overwhelming!” replied Father Baldwin, in a bored voice. “I’ve always thought an obsession with animals is a defect in human beings; it amounts to a fetish! It is obviously, a throw-back to our primitive state when we were dependent on animals for just about everything. I, personally, would like to shoot them. I’m fond of shooting.”

The cardinal said a word, that they both thought it prudent to pretend they did not hear. He then added: “Come! And I am warning you, Mr Non-priest, be on your best behaviour. This, really, is your very last chance.” Saying that, the cardinal led the way into the living quarters, and the reception by the Father and the parish priest.

The Father genuflected and kissed the episcopal ring with great devotion. Father Joyceson, likewise. The cardinal then took the older man into his arms and hugged him, as he would his father. He was actually afraid he’d breakdown and cry, so deliberately spoke brusquely: “Well, no standing about. I want to see all the chapel and, after that nightmare drive all this way here, I’m longing for a cup of tea: that is, of course, if you have four cups with handles in the place.”

He linked his arm in that of the Father’s and they went off together to the chapel. He spoke over his shoulder. “Father Joyceson, you could teach Father Baldwin how to make a cup of tea. It will be a novel experience for him”.

The cardinal had missed nothing; he had noticed all the wonderful changes to the living quarters: the beds,

the shower, the sink, the hot water, the table and chairs, and the other furniture. He then went into the chapel and, unable to help himself, he gasped aloud, his hands raised in wonder.

“Father... my dear Father... this is magnificent! I cannot believe it; this is the most beautiful church in the whole archdiocese. Let’s sing the Magnificat together in thanksgiving.”

XXXVIX

From the living quarters the two young priests heard the singing; Father Joyceson was thrilled. He stood fixed to the spot with a cup in one hand and a saucer in the other, until the singing stopped. His eyes, shining with innocent joy, looked at his new companion. “Wasn’t that wonderful?”

Father Baldwin was looking around the unbelievable living quarters. He raised his eyes and looked at the young parish priest with a supercilious smile on his lips. “What? ...Oh that! ... I’m not interested in the distorted, inaccurate, singing of two senile, old, men.” Father Joyceson gasped; he very nearly dropped the cup he was holding - he couldn’t believe such rudeness.

Baldwin swept on, his eyes roving over the entire room. “Do you mean to say I’m to sleep in this pigsty?” He curled his lips. “It is not even good enough for those savages outside the door - those canonised primitive beasts.” He stomped around the room. “Where shall I sleep? It cannot be here there are only two - I cannot call them ‘beds’ - two ‘articles of torture’, that I can see.” He drew himself up to his full height. “Where shall I place

my weary head; do condescend to tell me? O Keeper of the Swamp!"

Father Joyceson clenched, and unclenched, his fists. He was trying so desperately hard to keep his temper – he was tempted to forget all that the Father had taught him and to really punch the face of this insulting, smirking creep. He felt his arm muscles clenching and his neck muscles hardening as he prepared to let fly.

With an immense struggle, he managed to say, coldly. "Father, you will be sleeping on the floor with the dog." He ignored the spluttering, almost incoherent astonishment of the young 'ex-con' as he called him in his mind.

He then rubbed in the insult further, by adding: "You'll find it quite comfortable when you get used to it. I washed the sheets and the pillowcase, myself, to make sure the dog's hair was quite removed from it. If you still find some hairs, don't worry, Saint Tom is a very hygienic animal. The worse they can do is to make you sneeze.

"However, as it gets very cold here at night, you might welcome the animals; they could share with you; they become quite warm. It's really quite remarkable."

Father Baldwin was just about to erupt, when the two older men came out into the living area.

"Well Father Baldwin," the cardinal commented, "you've seen all this part and it's simply wonderful, as I'm sure you can see. What it was, before this luxury, was truly astonishing; now this is '5- star', living, at its best. Now, while we start our tea, Father Baldwin, you could slip into the chapel and see the masterpiece that it is now,

and you could say a little prayer to Christ our Lord while you are there. When you finish, come back here. I want you to sample the Father's famous bread; he makes his own, you know – he has made some especially for you."

The young priest rolled his eyes. "How exceedingly kind! I am overwhelmed," he gritted, through clenched teeth, as he left the room.

Father Joyceson excused himself politely, took his cup of tea and a handful of dog biscuits out into the garden. He would have his tea there and crumble the biscuits into crumbs, with small pieces for the saints; the cardinal would then be free to speak to the Father!

XL

The cardinal, starting to drink his tea, spoke quietly and seriously – all levity gone. “Father, you see my problem; I don’t really know how to deal with this character. I can tell you – no one else – I really want to belt him into a pulp, which his father should have done with him, years ago. He is the product of a doting mother, not renowned for her intelligence, who has spoilt him shockingly and a decent father, who lost the battle early in their marriage for any control of the young boy.

“Everything the father tried to do she undid behind his back. When he went to the Seminary, the father came to me and warned me – actually warned me, *not to take him*. And, not for the usual reasons, but that he could easily *ruin the Church with his outrageous behaviour*.

“It was difficult to find a reason for refusing him. I dithered for as long as I dared. He was very well educated, was talented and gifted with a high intelligence, but I instinctively felt he could not be trusted for a moment! I could not present that, *presumption*, as a reason for postponing his ordination, so I reasoned when he was ordained, the safest thing was to keep him near me, so

that my eye was always on him. However, you know well, the heavy burden I had; often I forgot all about the young priest, living somewhere in that great rabbit-warren of Bishop House.

“We really only met at meals, but my administrator of the Cathedral told me he preached well, with lots of impressive quotes from the Fathers, and so on. I deliberately went across to the Cathedral to hear some of his sermons and I was not impressed. Yes, they were learned, or appeared so, yet there was something missing. I think it was the basic, ‘touch-stone’ of all the rest, FAITH, *simple belief*. I do not really know if he believes *in anything*. I’ve never been sure he’s not just taking us for a ride.” He ate a very small piece of the Father’s bread and swallowed it quickly. He drank tea to get rid of the taste. He kept his eyes on the Father as he continued.

“After hearing him one day, I asked him to come to my office, and we had a talk – or, at least, I tried to do that. I asked him if he had any regrets about being ordained to the priesthood, and did he ever feel he had made the wrong choice. He laughed merrily at that. He said definitely, ‘No regrets whatsoever’; he was, in his own words, ‘having a ball’.

“I asked him about some moral questions, and he gave me the textbook answers every time. I asked him bluntly whether there were any sexual problems troubling him. He laughed heartily. ‘Not a one!’ was the answer.

“I talked with Mgr. Lipgurd, a good friend, as well as a wonderful VG. The Monsignor couldn’t stand him, but

was always polite with the young man, as he was with everybody. He said that Baldwin's problem was that he had never grown up; he was still an adolescent.

"Frankly, Father, I simply do not know what to do with him.

"I remember pleading with you, for Father Joyce - or, as you have re-named him - 'Joyce-son' - which speaks volumes for me, as to how you have changed him. He was a different case. I could see the wonderful possibilities there, and it was, in desperation, that I brought him to you. I remember saying: he was *worthy of saving*. I believed that, at the time and I see what you have done: it's a living miracle...I want you to see if you can repeat the miracle with Baldwin.

"Incidentally, I think it would be well to call him, not Father, but Mister Baldwin. It is too confusing to the people, otherwise. If he is called, 'Father', then people will automatically think he can hear their confessions and so on. It could cause scandal. Yes, I think 'Mr Baldwin', sounds much safer."

"Tell me honestly, Father, do you think there's hope with this young brat?"

The Father briefly closed his eyes. "I honestly don't know, Eminence. There is always hope, but sometimes, it seems to me, if Satan gets hold of someone, *especially a priest*, then, to pull him loose is a mighty job which often seems to fail.

"I shall certainly try my best to help the young priest if I can - I have no real idea what to do. I tell you honestly - I *do not know* what to do; I'm not a magician. God will

have to tell me. But I know this: he would be a great prize if Satan won him over, completely... ..”

The elderly priest suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes became remote and fixed on a point on the opposite wall; his chin was raised up and he appeared to be listening.

The cardinal felt suddenly afraid. As the Father began to speak, obviously repeating the words he was hearing. The cardinal heard little other than scattered, distorted words; it was similar to listening to static on the radio.

The Father was listening intently. It became obvious the words he heard frightened him greatly: *“As he has been placed now in your care, it depends largely on you now whether you are prepared to do more to help him than the others...”* The next words were like arrows being thrust into the very being of the Father. *“Are you willing to enter further into My Passion?”*

The Father stopped speaking and rose in his chair, his face blanched with terror. His hands, clasped together, shook with fear. He then began whispering, but... ended up screaming: “No, no. no... NO!”

Father Jpyceson hurried from outside at the cry and stood in the doorway, trembling, his hand to his mouth staring at the Father.

The cardinal started to his feet with the Father’s cry of terror! He moved as if to help him, then stopped – not sure what to do... He kept his eyes on the Father. There was a short period of total silence; the Father sitting again, every muscle taut, his eyes tightly shut. The cardinal then watched as the Father, slowly began to relax

and... then, with utter calm... with complete resignation... his eyes remaining closed.

He finally sighed, and the cardinal, leaning forward tensely, heard him say clearly: *"Forgive me, please forgive me, my Lord... for hesitating...let it be done... ...as You have said."*

With a tremendous effort the Father sat back in his chair, opened his eyes and looked at the cardinal.

"Yes, Eminence, there is great hope for him, *now*." He reached out and clutched the prelate's arm. "Eminence, I beg of you to pray for me; pray harder now than you have ever done before.

"Did you hear any of that, Eminence, or did only I?" he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Father, I heard nothing, *clearly*, except the last sentence," the cardinal whispered back in an awed, trembling voice.

The Father stood up and spoke quickly. "Eminence, please forgive me, I cannot stand any more. Please go out to the garden and speak to Father Joyceson now; he is longing to speak with you. He is a wonderful, glorious, holy man, who had gone through his own particular hell, and has come out triumphant. He is so grateful to you and wants to thank you."

He noticed the cardinal hesitating. *"Please, Eminence, I beg of you to do this.* I must go to the chapel; I need strength; I have none of my own."

The cardinal stood up and grabbed the Father's arm. "I certainly shall, my very dear Father. Then I'll shoot off to catch up with Mgr. Lipgurd at the Motel. He has his

lap-top with him and is doing all the work of the Archdiocese, while I am here talking to you.”

With an effort, the Father focused on the prelate.

“Eminence, just before you go, I must ask you... do you have the youngster’s lap-top and his phone in your possession, or are they still with him? I want him removed from them.”

“Yes, Father, I do have Mr Baldwin’s lap-top and phone in the car. I confiscated them on the drive. He was sending me crazy with his endless chatter. I’ll ‘accidentally on purpose’, take them with me when I leave.”

The Father bowed to the cardinal and almost ran back inside to the chapel. The cardinal went to Father Joyceson in the doorway, and the parish priest helped the older man down the steps to the chairs outside.

XLI

Both the cardinal and the Monsignor were astonished as they drove through the darkness early Sunday morning to find hundreds of people, already gathered in front of the church, while the carpark opposite was filled to the gates with cars. The sun had not yet risen on this winter morning, and the cold was severe. Only the lights of the cars provided illumination.

The two men were relieved to be able to drive around the back of the building to the back gate and avoid the crowd. This time the cardinal hopped out and opened the gates for the Monsignor. The car was parked inside, and the gates were firmly closed.

The Monsignor, Edward Lipgurd, was bewildered. The crowd of people! He could not believe it! Why so many? Where had they come from?

Even the cardinal was shaking his head in amazement at the number. And the church bell tolling! It was so different from what he had known of this place before, in his first episcopal visitation.

The cardinal spoke quietly to the VG. "Edward don't be afraid. It nearly frightened me to death the first time I

witnessed it. Now, we are already dressed for choir, so you just stay close to me and kneel with me. In a way, we are both just presiding at this special Mass, with the, now, ageing, priest. If, at any time, you feel frightened, grab hold of my arm, and you'll be fine."

"Eminence, I believe you, but I'm honestly scared to death, to tell the truth." The cardinal quickly tried to reassure him.

"Everything will appear different inside; just take it for granted, even the animals..."

The door opened for them and Father Joyceson welcomed them, quietly genuflecting to the cardinal and kissing his ring hand, then shaking the hand of the VG. He then spoke briefly about the procedure, then led them in, past the animals and pointed out to them their place on the Gospel side of the sanctuary where two chairs had been placed just for them.

The cardinal smiled as he noticed that Edward took a step backward when he saw the animals at Mass, then he, himself, looked closely at the chairs. These beautiful throne-like chairs certainly did not belong to the Father; the parish priest must have borrowed them from somewhere, just for the occasion.

The Monsignor noticed the Father, wearing his biretta, just waiting, fully vested at the other side of the sanctuary, where a young man, wearing a tie and a dark suit was standing next to Father Joyceson, waiting for the signal from the Father.

The Father sighed, removed his biretta, then said: 'Procedamus in pace'; Father Joyceson responded, the

Father replaced the biretta on his head, and the procession began to the door.

The Father went first, then the cardinal in his scarlet robes, lace surplice, biretta and Zucchetto, with his floor-length scarlet cloak, followed by the Monsignor and finally the servers.

Reaching the end of the aisle at the door of the Church, they turned, thus reversing the order, and with the big bell still ringing, they retraced their steps to the altar with the servers leading, followed by the Monsignor, then the Cardinal in all his splendour, with the celebrant – the Father – coming last.

Arriving back at the sanctuary, the two special guests went to their chairs on the highest step. The monsignor, realising he was on the same level as the cardinal, moved his chair immediately backward leaving the cardinal in the prominent position.

The Father remained standing on the floor facing the steps to begin the preliminary sections of the holy Mass – the moment the big bell stopped tolling he removed his biretta, and gave it to Luke, took a deep breath and began: “In nomine Patris, et Filii et Spiritus Sancti...”

The Mass was underway.

Father Joyceson’s mind was racing. Part of his attention was listening carefully to Luke, who was nervous today with important people listening to him; then his mind flittered to a dozen different things; he, even for fleeting moments, wondered where on earth was the new Baldwin man? He had heard him complaining late, last night, as he had tried to get comfortable on the

floor and refusing to let the animals go to their accustomed positions. Even Saint Tom, who was the gentlest of animals, actually growled at this usurper of his place.

The parish priest did not think the newcomer had much sleep during the night. This morning, early, he had heard him using filthy language when he had to go to the outhouse and discovered there was no light, not even a torch! Then he remembered hearing him, washing himself under the tap, outside the door. He thought it must have been freezing out there for the poor silly, young man. He resolved he would see him after they had eaten breakfast, but that would not be until all the Masses and Confessions were over.

He forced himself to concentrate on the Mass. This could turn out to be a problem for the Father. Heaven knows what this enormous crowd of strangers would make of it all. However, he would find out, as he had been instructed to take the cardinal to meet the people after the two Masses. Give me grace to say, and do, the right thing, he prayed.

The crowd was utterly silent. There was an air of expectancy, also of fear, pervading the chapel. The people seemed to be holding their breath waiting for the Sanctus bells. As the Father read the Preface, the people were aware this was the prelude to the 'event' and they began to sit up rigidly, staring, eyes wide open, at the sanctuary. Even the cardinal felt his muscles constricting.

With the elevation of the Sacred Host, with the big bell tolling and the gong from Luke, in unison, the

cardinal discovered he was holding his breath. He heard the Monsignor next to him taking deep breaths.

When the next three bells went for the elevation of the Precious Blood, the sanctuary was again filled with the extraordinary, beautiful golden mist and as the Father extended his hands, holding up the beautiful silver chalice above his head, he began, again, to rise, slowly from the floor.

There was a collective indrawing of breath as people watched in awe and in trembling fear. The cardinal heard a low soft moan of anguish from his VG who was staring - almost out of his mind, at the spectacle before his eyes.

To behold the 'Glory' is terrifying to mortal beings. To see a human being defy the natural order, and break through to another dimension of existence, was incapable of comprehension - or explanation. All those present were aware they were involved in mystery: the mystery of God Himself.

XLII

There was not a sound, not even a cough or a movement – all time and action ceased.

Monsignor. Lipgurd had fallen forward on his knees so that his forehead rested on the wooden step; his hands clasped in wonder, as he felt his heart expand with intense love for God, such as he had never before experienced, in his life. He marvelled at the experience; he wanted to stay in this place forever: to stay safe in the close embrace of Christ Himself.

Such was the feeling and attitude of nearly all the people crammed into the Church, while outside, the people tried to catch a glimpse of the events within. All was quiet... still...

until.....

Father Baldwin descended from the gallery and walked noisily up the aisle to the gates of the sanctuary. He turned his back on the altar and faced the crowd speaking in a loud, supercilious, mocking voice.

“Now, my friends, you have all been duped; this is nothing more than the Indian Rope Trick. Clever, yes, but it fools not one of us, does it?”He suddenly stopped, then screamed.

“WHAT? ... The young man looked upward, fearful.

“*What the hell is happening? ...*” he shouted alarmed.

Then a terrified shriek seared to the ceiling from young Baldwin with his head staring upwards! - The crowd outside were able to hear him as he screamed:

“*WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME?*”

Father Baldwin spun his body around, still staring upwards. There was a vivid flash; the cardinal and monsignor rose to their feet, horrified, as they heard a loud, piercing cry of anguish from up where the Father was, and then their eyes were fixated on a thin stream of blood falling onto the altar cloth.

The young priest who had been taunting the Father began to scream in agony:

“Help me...someone help me... I CAN’T SEE; I CAN’T SEE!”

Baldwin staggered from side to side, groping, trying to find his way out of the chapel, but fell over and lay sprawled on the aisle floor. His eyes were wide open, but they were completely opaque! He appeared to be unconscious.

The cardinal pulled the monsignor to his side quickly. “Edward, something had happened to Father. I think it is...No! I’ll not say it...we’ll try to get him down.” He turned to Father Joyceson, who stood there, his mouth open, looking upwards, bewildered and terrified, not knowing what to do.

“Father Joyceson, get me a white stole if you have another one; I’ll finish the Mass from where Father left it.” He whispered to the young priest. “Is there a medical

doctor or nurse in the congregation that you can see, Father?" The parish priest nervously, but quickly, scanned the large crowd. "There is, Eminence. There's a doctor and two nurses I have met. Do you want them?"

"Yes, hurry to them and say I need them urgently. Bring them right up onto the sanctuary: this is an emergency." As Father Joyceson hurried off, the Cardinal faced the crowd and asked, loudly: "Is Mr Fred Harris present? If so, would you please come here to me immediately."

The doctor, one nurse and Fred Harris all arrived together. The cardinal met them at the altar rails. "Do you know the doctor and nurse well, Father," he whispered to the parish priest, who nodded. "Right, Fred, how glad I am that you are here. I want you to be the marshal as we sort out this situation which could turn out to be a disaster for everyone here."

Fred was shaking slightly, not understanding what had happened, but realised that the Father was obviously ill with the doctor and nurse there.

The cardinal turned to the doctor. "Doctor, please just check out that young villain of a priest briefly; just see if he is faking, or not. Ok?" The doctor nodded, and the cardinal spoke to the young nurse. "Don't be afraid, my child. I want you, after the doctor had had a quick look at our dear Father, to bandage his hands. Perhaps, Father Joyceson has a tablecloth or, even a cloth used for the altar that we could cut up?"

He turned to the parish priest, who nodded, and then the cardinal whispered to Fred, the doctor and

nurse: *"I think Father had received the stigmata and we need to bandage his hands to stop the blood."*

The young woman staggered, taking a backward step, her hand to her mouth. "My God! ...I can't believe all this is happening! Yes, Eminence, I'll do whatever you advise me to do. I'd feel... happier... if the doctor could look at our Father... before I attempt to do anything."

"Of course, dear child," the cardinal comforted the shaken woman.

Father Joyceson had rushed off to the kitchen where he found a cloth that could be used. He brought it back with a pair of scissors and handed them to the nurse. The doctor was talking to the cardinal who led him up to the Father who, now, had come down, standing near the altar, the chalice carefully replaced on the altar. He did not seem to notice the doctor taking each of his hands and gently touching them although the doctor's own hands were shaking, as he saw the blood flowing from the jagged wounds. He really was at a loss to know what he was supposed to do.

Naturally enough, he had never, in his life before, had to deal with someone with the stigmata. He was a young man not long qualified, and he looked to the nurse for assistance. He asked permission, then called her up to the altar.

The nurse immediately joined the doctor and cardinal at the altar, the woman carefully genuflecting to the Sacred Chalice. She softly suggested to the doctor that they could bind the hands tightly; it would, at least,

slow the flow of blood. The Father stood without moving until all the bandaging had been done.

The Cardinal whispered to both the nurse and the parish priest. "We'll have to remove the altar cloth; it's covered with blood. Roll it carefully, please; it is a precious relic of this great, great priest. Father Joyceson, quickly get me another altar cloth." This was done swiftly and for the most part no one really saw what was happening except the group around the altar.

The cardinal then suggested softly to the Father he would continue the Mass, but the Father begged him to be permitted to finish this Mass; he told the cardinal, it was important for the poor young man. If it pleased God, He might let the foolish boy regain his sight. He assured the cardinal, he felt strong enough to continue and asked again, to be permitted to do so.

The cardinal agreed at once to the request; he was secretly hoping this would be the case, but he asked the doctor and the nurse to wait after Mass, if they could, and to come into the living quarters behind the altar where they could examine Father more closely. The cardinal told Father Joyceson to take the stirring Father Baldwin next to him; to help him to kneel down on the step, to keep hold of him, and to tell him he was not to move one inch from where he was placed until the Mass was over.

He also told the parish priest not to worry about the Communion, he and the Monsignor would distribute the Communion.

The cardinal thought it vital that the parish priest stay there with Baldwin, guarding him for every minute, until they were in their own quarters again; the fellow could easily give more scandal; that was the last thing they needed just now!

The doctor and nurse stood to one side of the church near the wall, close to the animals for the rest of the Mass.

The Father went on with the Mass as though there had been no interruption, and at Communion time, Father Joyceson had managed to find one more stole and the cardinal and monsignor distributed Holy Communion to the vast number of communicants waiting at the altar rails. They nearly ran out of altar hosts and carefully kept a small number, so that there would be a few remaining, in the tabernacle. As a consequence of this, many people who had prepared themselves to receive Holy Communion were unable to do so.

XLIII

Fred had patrolled the Church and kept a watch on the doings of the crowd outside; he was helped in this by a young policeman, Jerry Adams, who had come home for the weekend to see his family. He was in the first year after graduation and was delighted to be chosen by Fred, whom he knew well, to help in this extraordinary situation. For the first time he felt as though he were a *real* policeman.

Fred was able to see some people scribbling in their notebooks and guessed that the Press had finally caught up with the 'outlandish' doings in the little, out-back, town of Burnside. He made sure he would inform the cardinal about this; he would need to be prepared for what was likely to happen when these reporters got back home, or onto their phones.

There was no sermon given at this Mass on this day, but just before the others began the recessional to the living quarters, the cardinal waved the procession on while he remained behind.

When they had gone, he went to the lectern.

He used his big ‘official’ voice so that he could be heard, not only inside the Church but outside a fair way as well.

The cardinal had always spoken simply; he did so now. “My good people of Burnside. I know how much you have come to love and respect your great priest, your Father, who has lived with you here for a great number of years now.

“I met some of you years ago when I first came here as Father’s Archbishop. Then I was whipped off to Rome and only now have had the glorious opportunity of returning to the one place, in all the world, that I love most, and would be so happy to be able to stay with you, here in this part of the archdiocese, for the rest of my days. And, to stay with your Father.

“You, my very dear friend and Vicar General, Monsignor Edward Lipgurd, and I, have witnessed marvels in this little country restored Church. You have now two beloved pastors, with your parish priest a man after your Father’s heart.

“Now, I have to warn you, not as a great important cardinal, but as a very ordinary man and friend, we could be in for a very rough time now as the events that we have participated in this morning become known. I beg of you to take great care of the two Fathers; they will need protection. I shall speak to Fred and his group of friends for advice about security; Father will have to have security after today.

“What has happened to Father is *very rare* in the history of the Church, and very, very, dangerous to

Father. He is now elderly and quite frail already, but now with this, his very life is in the balance. I am not exaggerating, dear friends. That is the solemn truth.

“When the Press descend upon you, I beg of you – simply beg of you – to say as little as possible; everything will be twisted and something beautiful, magnificent and gloriously thrilling, could well be turned into something trivial, sensational and tawdry. The Press can often turn pure goodness into evil.

“You have shown your love for your priests here over the years and you have even cherished the animals which he loves so much, he has canonised them all.” He smiled, briefly. “I would like to speak more with you; but we have so much more work to do today, I must stop.

“If you would kneel for me – if you can, with the crowd – I would like to give you the Apostolic Blessing: to you and to every single member of your families..... *Benedictio Dei omnipotentis....*”

The cardinal then left the sanctuary. Father Joyceson let the animals out, then sat Father Baldwin down on his own bed and told him to remain there and not to move, while he rushed back inside the chapel to take his place in the confessional. It seemed the whole congregation wanted to go to confession. Mgr. Lipguard soon followed the parish priest and went into the second confessional.

The doctor and nurse had followed the procession out to the living quarters. The doctor sat the Father down at his own table, then he, with the aid of Fred who had come out with the others, helped remove the vestments. Fred handed them to Luke to put away and then helped

the doctor to place Father's hands on the table. Fred then stepped back as the doctor and nurse gently removed the bandages. The cardinal now was standing close by the Father.

In spite of himself, Cardinal Terrence McViver, standing next to Fred, gasped, when he saw the jagged holes in both hands. Fred moved forward and, briefly, put his arm around the shoulders of the good cardinal. The Father did not look at his hands, he kept his eyes down. It was only when the cardinal put out his arm and let the Father's head rest against his breast, did he and Fred, hear the whispered words: "Eminence...the pain ...Oh, merciful Saviour...the painnnnnnnnnn!"

Fred had to move slightly away; he was afraid he might disgrace everyone and just faint. He would never forget this moment of sheer horror and panic, in his whole life. He was looking at the torn and jagged, bleeding hands of a Stigmatic priest! This was really what Christ's own hands had looked like on the cross! His stomach muscles clenched in anguish and Fred wanted to run away and hide like a little child.

The doctor and nurse, examined the hands closely, then, asking permission, the doctor used his phone to take several close photos, promising that they would only be used when he needed advice on what, medically, it would be best to do. This was uncharted territory.

The nurse who was weeping quietly, suggested sponging the wounds carefully; then re-bandaging them with clean bandages with, perhaps a little pad of cotton wool against the skin under the bandages.

Both doctor and nurse agreed that they should not attempt to put any 'healing' liquid such as iodine near them; just to leave them as they were. The nurse held the emaciated hands with great tenderness; they were, to her, a precious living relic of their precious Faith.

The doctor did suggest he would bring up, later, a mild sedative to Father, and, in the meantime, to let the Father lie on his bed resting; he did not know what else they could do; he had never faced anything like this before.

When the medical couple had finished their work, they thought the Father was asleep at the table, but the eyes suddenly opened and his voice, much weaker, than it usually was, spoke: "Thank you both; you are very gentle and kind people, thank you." The two people then left, with the nurse wiping tears from her eyes, and the doctor clearing his throat repeatedly. They immediately faced a flashing firestorm of phone cameras; they forced their way through the crowd refusing to say one single word.

The cardinal then, with Fred's help, placed the exhausted man down on his bed. Fred, thoughtfully, went outside and found a tin utensil which he brought in and placed under the bed, near where the father's hand could easily reach it. This action made the Father smile; he began whispering. Fred leant over to hear him: "Once a farmer, always a farmer, Fred...thank you."

Fred spoke softly to the cardinal, his voice uncertain. "Eminence, I know this request is peculiar, but would you let little Angela come in for just one minute to see

the Father. She loves him more than anyone else on earth.”

The cardinal smiled. “Little Angela. I’ll never forget that afternoon, Fred in all my life...Yes, bring her in, for just a moment though, and caution her not to disturb him.”

The cardinal looked at the figure of the young blind priest sitting forlornly on the parish priest’s bed, his head in his hands. He went across to the priest who hearing him looked up and reached out a trembling hand to feel who was there. He felt the soft satin of the sash and he whispered, “Eminence?”

McViver was moved to pity at the sight of the young priest’s wide-opened, blind eyes. He said softly: “Yes, son.” He sat down carefully on the bed alongside Hilary Baldwin – not certain whether the bed would hold them both. However, it seemed to be strong enough.

He kept the young man’s hand in his. “Well, here’s a how de do, and no mistake...What are we to do with you, Father!”

The young man struggled to speak “Am I truly blind, Eminence? I don’t seem able to see anything, whatsoever. There is just total darkness.”

“Yes, son, that is the total darkness of a soul without God – there is nothing but the darkness where Satan rules.” He sighed heavily. “You had been given such gifts, Father, such enormous gifts that others were so envious of, and yet, you have thrown them back into the face of God; you have mocked God! Mocked Him at the most

sacred moment of the holy Mass! Is it any wonder you were struck blind?"

The young man began to weep. "Eminence, is there any hope for me? Will I ever see again? Could there be...another chance?"

"Father, I have this great position and I have it within my power now to cast the decisive vote, in the election of a pope, yet, in a simple question like that, I have no power at all. I do not know – I simply do not know."

He sat up straight, his mind made up. "However, I've decided what I'm going to do with you. I shall not renew your Faculties; I shall leave you with the Father. As he is a fragile, elderly man, with terrible wounds now, he will need someone to look after him every moment of every day.

"I'm appointing you, as his Carer for as long as I decide. He has no say in this matter; it is totally up to me."

"But... how can I do that? I can't see."

"That is true, so you'll have to learn to do without sight. I want you to get up and go around the whole room, *now*, touching everything, until you get an idea where everything is. Go very slowly so you don't keep falling over, then give yourself little tasks, such as: walk from this bed to the sink; go from the sink to Father's bed; walk from Father's bed to the back door; go out the back door and count the number of steps there are to the ground outside. Walk with your arms extended, until you find the outhouse, then measure the distance it is back

to the door. Do that several times until it becomes clear to you.

“Father Joyceson will teach you how to differentiate between the saints, that is, the animals, which you will also help the parish priest to look after. When I see the little girl coming in here in a moment, I shall be free to introduce you to Saint Tom, the big dog. He needs to know, that you will be constantly at Father’s side. He could rip you to pieces if he doesn’t understand that; he’ll think you are hurting that precious, holy man.”

He was about to get up when he remembered something else: “You will not speak to any stranger at all; you will keep utterly dumb; you will speak only to the Father, to me, and to Father Joyceson...Oh, excuse me, Angela is here. Stay here until I come back for you.”

The cardinal came forward and took the beautiful little girl in his arms. “My dearest child. God bless your own wonderful father; he has been my helper today believe me.” He bent down and said quietly. “Angela there is nothing to be afraid of, my child, your dearest old Father is longing to see you and loves you dearly. He has very sore hands, so he cannot hold you, but you can hold him. Ask him for a blessing; he will be longing to do that. I know he thinks, you, Billy, your Mummy and your Daddy, are the best people in this whole country. Come along now.”

He, with one hand, and Fred with the other, took the little child to the Father who, with his eyes closed, said immediately, “Angela, the little angel! The future abbess of the enclosed monastery of the

Transfiguration!" and held out his arms. The little child ran at once into his embrace. She began to cry; the old man held her close. "Now, no tears, my precious child. You were not sent from Heaven to your mother and father for tears, but for joy." The Father went to pat the child and cried aloud, with the pain. She, instinctively, drew back whispering: "Father, forgive me, I forgot your hands. They are God's special gift to you, and to us." She drew apart.

"Please Father, bless us before we go. Billy is waiting outside, may I bring him in. I don't want him to miss out." Without even waiting for permission, the child rushed out to the chapel and brought back her big brother who immediately knelt before the Father with his forehead to the floor. The chosen child imitated her brother, instantly. In the background, the Cardinal and the blind man knelt as well.

The children were ushered out and the cardinal came again to the Father: "Father I have not said my own Mass yet; I'll do it now. I'll bring Brother Baldwin over to you; remember this... '*Brother*' – that's what I decided we'll call him – Brother Baldwin cannot see. I have appointed him as your Carer; he will look after you day and night. Now, I must hurry. Monsignor is still in the confessional, the poor fellow; he has had a very exhausting morning, and no mistake."

The cardinal took Brother to the Father taking the hand of Brother and letting him feel the bandaged hand gently. The Father carefully picked up Brother's other hand and held them both together lightly. He let his

'Carer' feel his wounds, wincing with each touch. The Brother was surprisingly gentle and was crying softly.

"Father..." he attempted to speak. "I have caused...all... this...I..." he broke down and wept uncontrollably. The Father cradled the young man's head against his chest then gently raised him up and spoke very softly to Brother. In a little while, the Brother was more composed and sat beside the Father's bed, just content to be there and gratefully aware that he had been given another chance to really live.

In the meantime, the cardinal had hurried to the chapel, closed the front door and prepared for Mass. He brought the Monsignor out of the confessional to serve the simple Mass of the cardinal, then the cardinal served his VG's Mass. The cardinal then sent Billy Harris to get Luke from his mother's house, next door; to ask Mrs Roberts if her son would serve yet another Mass for Father Joyceson.

When Luke arrived, Father Joyceson began his Mass and by the time he had finished, it was lunch time, and the parish priest was utterly exhausted.

XLIV

The cardinal found that Molly Harris had driven the four-wheel drive vehicle home, with the children, leaving Fred behind – a mate would drive him back afterwards. She thought the cardinal might need him to help in all the arrangements that would obviously need to be made now for the protection of the Fathers.

The cardinal was greatly relieved to find Fred still there. He took hold of him and took him to the living area where Father Joyceson was now busy getting a ‘scratch’ lunch ready from what he could find.

The parish priest was feeling rather desperate at what he had to offer such distinguished guests when there was a tapping on the chapel door. He went to the door and found Mrs Edna Roberts with a huge tray of food: sandwiches, cakes, biscuits, and even some warm sausage rolls. She and the Cake Shop owner had put together what, to the Hermitage men, was an absolute feast.

The parish priest was so grateful he felt like hugging this sensible woman. He thanked her profusely and returned to the table where he spread out the feast for all of them, including Fred.

They helped Father up from the bed and he sat at the table with Brother Hilary beside him and the cardinal on the other side.

After the prayers were said, the men were very hungry, and they did justice to all the good things offered.

Fred sat beside the Brother and both he and the cardinal assisted their maimed men to eat at least something. The cardinal helped the Father to eat a small sausage roll and a quarter of a sandwich. That was all the Father could manage. On his part Fred fed Brother with a couple of sandwiches and two sausage rolls.

The parish priest had boiled a huge pot of tea and they all had two cups. It had been a very exhausting morning.

When they had satisfied their hunger and thirst, the cardinal raised the questions that had to be faced. They remained seated at the table; there was nowhere else they could go. The cardinal was anxious about many details that had to be faced.

“Fred, I said earlier, in my little talk, that security would have to be employed. Is there a local firm here at Burnside? We need 24-hour security and that will be pretty difficult out here, off the beaten track. Could the police help? I have always found them very cooperative and very helpful. What do you think?”

“Eminence, there’s a young Constable, Jerry Adams, here in the church community – he was at Father’s Mass this morning. He’s just out of his training. I wonder if we could get him established here, permanently? Could we

pull some strings? I know that is only one person, but he, being a local, would be a good way of ensuring the police are involved, right from the beginning, of what could well be, a rather frightening phenomenon.” The cardinal nodded his agreement.

“If you tell me whom to contact, Fred – I mean, the local senior officer – I’ll add my weight to your suggestion and contact the Commissioner. But apart from the young officer, any others you can recommend?”

“Well, there’s a big firm – big for a country place – at Arrowfield, that’s twenty miles away; they would be glad of the work, I know. And then we could form a local group of the village people and the farmers; they would be useful at night, or, when either of the Fathers has to go down to the shops, or to someone who needs them. I could see about arranging that.”

Fred leant his elbows on the table. “Eminence, it’s the Press I’m worried about; even an innocent walk down to the shop to buy necessities could be a traumatic event for anyone from the Hermitage.”

“Bless you Fred! It wasn’t only Angela who was sent by God to help us in this extraordinary situation – you played a big part in it as well.” Fred flushed slightly and kept his head down.

The cardinal went on. “I’ll have to send more priests here...even just for the confessionals... Edward,” turning to his VG, “who can we send? They would have to be very, good priests. Any ideas?”

“Eminence, the only ones I can think of, at the moment, are that young priest, Father Brad Tulliver who,

I think, is a very promising, earnest and fervent young priest, and that old priest, Father Bob Healy; he is a very holy old man.” He coughed a little. “I’d like to stay here myself, but I don’t suppose that would be allowed, would it?”

The cardinal actually laughed. “Nice try, Edward! Not a chance; I rely on you for everything. But those two names are very good ones. I’ll send them straight away. But Father Joyceson, what would we do for accommodation?”

Fred answered instead. “Excuse me for interrupting, Eminence, but I do know that the Father here has purchased a huge amount of land behind this church. Could we go ahead with a multi-purpose building, using all the local tradespeople; it would solve the accommodation problem and we could enlarge the church by doing away with this part – once the other section was completed.” Fred shook himself and spoke nervously.

“Eminence, I know I’m trespassing on your own ground here, but, regarding finance for the big new building. I know the Father has made it a rule here not to have collections at Mass, but with this crowd of gawkers and sensation seekers, I don’t really see the sense of not asking them to contribute. We will need a lot of money to build a decent, and big enough, addition, on the land that Father has bought.” Fred began to mutter; he was now flushed, and embarrassed. “Forgive me if I have spoken out of turn.”

“No, you haven’t Fred. A very sensible suggestion, and one we’ll act on!” responded the cardinal. “Could you gather a small group of mature men and women, Fred, to take control of the collection, and the counting of the money?”

“In the meantime, waiting for the building to be built, the two new priests could, perhaps, be billeted at the pub for nights and spend the days up here. Would that be a possibility?”

The cardinal then took the Father’s arm and held it firmly. “Father, could you bear all this? Would it be easier for you to take you back with me to the anonymity of Bishop House? No one would know of you there.”

The Father spoke slowly, but audibly. “Thank you, Eminence, you are the kindest superior a man could ever have. No, I think I must stay here. I came here to be totally unknown, and God has made it clear that it was to be for some purpose. Perhaps it was for Angela – only you and I, know the story behind that – so, now I have Brother *Paul* – that’s what I’m going to call him, not Hilary – Brother will stay with me and will be another angel who will bring glory to God and to the whole Church.

“However, if you order it otherwise, then that is God’s Will, and I will certainly obey that.”

“No, I certainly won’t be ordering you to return against your will. I think the people have made it clear they want you to remain with them, as long as you can. I am simply worried about you; that is all.

“I agree, completely, that God has made it abundantly clear to me, as well, you are needed here for some purpose He has. You are blessed in the splendid men and women who are willing to help you and Father Joyceson; we must not let them down.

“Leave the administration to us and don’t worry yourself about any of it; we’ll work it out with Fred, here, and all his faithful friends.”

The cardinal ended the meeting; he let the Brother help the Father back to his bed; the priests left the room and went out to sit with the animals.

Before he left the Hermitage, the cardinal had a long and serious talk with Fred Harris. He left, with his VG, when evening had fallen; it would be a long and dark drive home; back to Bishop House.

XLV

Three years passed before the cardinal was able to visit Burnside again.

The cardinal was driven back with the new Bishop, Edward Lipgurd, and his new VG, Father Mark Coggins. Arriving mid-morning on the Saturday, he asked Father Mark to drive down to the village slowly and then back again. He could not believe the changes that had taken place since he was here last.

The first thing he and the new bishop had noted were the extra streetlights erected and the large parking area, now widened, opposite the church. The street itself was paved right to the gutters on each side of the road and parking spaces were clearly drawn in yellow paint.

Nearly every shop and dwelling had doubled in size; the shops now looked like city shops with the abundance and variety of the goods they now carried visible through the new, huge plate glass windows. The cardinal noted the new buildings: one housing the new Commonwealth Bank – the first bank that had ever been in that village – another new building was now the Doctor's residence and office – it was the doctor who had been at the unique Mass of the Stigmata three year ago. The Hardware shop

was hardly recognizable, it was so large now, while the Estate Agency had grown to be a full-size shop-frontage; the pub now had a large upper storey while on the ground floor, the dining room, had been extended to encompass both sides of the main building. It could now easily cope with more than 100 guests for teas and luncheons with a large local staff now working there.

Right at the end of the village street, there was a large hall: a multi-purpose building which was used as a Market Day venue on Sundays, opening after Mass times. It was hired out to the various groups that needed it during the week. The last building in the shopping area was the new Police Station, with Sergeant Jerry Adams, the incumbent. He now had, the cardinal learned later, a young constable to help him as well.

The two senior clerics marvelled at what had happened to the little town of Burnside. The cardinal was saddened and glad: saddened, at the loss of the simplicity and rural charm of the village, as it had been when he first saw it, years ago, yet realistic enough to know that people with no local work available for their children, as they grew up, would be so grateful that at least there was employment available in the area; the young ones would not need to be racing off to the big cities where, so often, they were simply, tragically, lost.

Father Mark drove slowly back again, and Bishop Lipgurd guided him where to drive to get to their destination. The entrance road was the same, but it did not stop now near the enclosed garden but went on to a

new parking area in the front of a two-storey structure where workmen and clerics were still working.

Father Joyceson rushed over to greet them, opening the doors of the car and helping both bishops out. He went to kneel to the cardinal who forestalled him by taking him into his arms and hugging him. While doing so, he whispered: "How is the Father, my boy?"

"He's fairly well, Eminence, and looking forward to your visit, and for His Excellency, Bishop Lipgurd; he is anxious to see both of you again." The parish priest shook hands with the new bishop and welcomed him back to the Hermitage.

The cardinal introduced his new VG, Mark Coggins, and the two younger men shook hands. The two bishops stood and looked about them. What a difference! What an incredible difference!

The new building was nearly complete: it was a very plain, two-storey building with bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs, and offices, kitchen, common room-cum dining room, and a very, small chapel downstairs, with laundry and other necessary rooms close by. The parish office was a room closest to the entrance. It was opposite a reception room where visitors were received.

At one end, the end closest to the old Church, were three rooms facing a short corridor with a door at the very end. These were for the parish priest - Father Joyceson - Brother Paul and the one closest to the old church, was the Father's room. The door was his means of getting to the Church, privately, without going through the main entrance. His room was the barest of

the lot with his own hard bed, no floor covering, a line of hooks to hold his few clothes, one chair, a kneeler and a very large wall crucifix which was the central focus of the room.

Father Joyceson explained the lay-out to the guests and then took them to the renovation at the Church itself. They were startled to see a nearly full-size church now, with a beautiful, old, stained-glass window behind the altar revealed in all its glory; the altar had been shifted back against the rear wall. This gave nearly thirty feet more space for pews. New small rooms had been added to each side of the old church, one a Sacristy for the vestments and precious chalices and altar vessels, while the other was a 'work sacristy,' with many cupboards, where all the general work tools – brooms, dust mops, buckets, and such were kept, and where all the flowers were prepared for the church. Each of these two rooms had doors leading to the outside area.

All three visitors went in and knelt before the altar. The two bishops could not believe what they were seeing. It was truly a precious gem – the loveliest church in the Archdiocese. They could not help being overwhelmed by the displays of flowers, on the shelves of the altar itself, and in front of the many statues of saints around the Church.

The youngest priest there, Father Mark Coggins, had never seen anything like it and realised there was something different about this church. He had never, before felt so... 'overwhelmed', he decided was the word he needed – he felt he had been taken from an earthly

sphere to another realm. He wanted to just stay there, with these two great men, yet he was disturbed at the same time.

He was both relieved, and, disappointed, when the cardinal, whispered to both his companions. "We must not keep the Father waiting; come on now." They very quietly left the church.

Once outside, His Eminence remembered the saints. "But wait a minute, where are the saints? For goodness's sake, don't tell me Saint Tom has died!"

He called out in his loudest voice, "Saint Tom! Where are you hiding, you villain?" There was the muffled bark of a very, old dog coming from the front area of what used to be the enclosed garden. The cardinal then noticed a gate in the fence near where the back door had once been. He hurried there and going through the gate was face to face with Saint Tom – old, whiskery, with a parody of his once powerful voice trying to bark loudly. When he saw the cardinal, he leapt up and his paws reached the shoulders of his friend; he licked the visitor's face with his tail wagging back and forth at a tremendous rate.

"But where are the others? Where's Saint Anne, Saint Catherine, Saint Peter and Saint Martha?"

As he said the names, Saint Tom began to whine softly, and taking hold of the cardinal's cassock pulled him gently to a series of small graves along the fence. Saint Tom went from one to the other; then went back to the cardinal his tail drooping and licked his hand.

The cardinal stooped down and cuddled him close. "You are one of the most loving dogs I have ever encountered in my life, Saint Tom." The cardinal turned to his VG. "Look and learn, Father. Even the dumb beasts of the earth know about love. This animal is worth a dozen of the best sermons on earth."

"Come with me, to see the Father, Saint Tom." He ordered. The dog was immediately at his side, his tail wagging again. "Come Edward, and you too Mark, we've kept the Father waiting – that's not right."

The small group with Saint Tom, went to the main entrance of the new building where Father Brad Tulliver and Father Bob Healy, were waiting with Father Joyceson.

They exchanged greetings, then the cardinal and the bishop asked to see the Father. Father Joyceson came forward, patted Saint Tom, and the two moved aside.

"Eminence, Brother Paul is with him in his room. Perhaps we could go in one at a time?" He added, smiling, "of course with Saint Tom. He always wants to see Saint Tom."

"Certainly, Father, you know best in this situation." He lowered his voice. "How is Brother Paul?"

"I think you will be really surprised, Eminence. He is Father's shadow now; he really looks after him."

"Did any sight return, Father?"

"None at all. He is totally blind, yet he has come to know his way down to the shops in the village. He usually takes the Father for a walk down there on a day and when there are few people about. Saint Tom guides him, and

he guides the Father.” Father Joyceson put his hand gently on the cardinal’s arm. “Eminence, you might get a shock to see the Father; he is very, very frail now. Yet he still offers Holy Mass daily, which exhausts him dreadfully.”

The cardinal lowered his voice. “And the bleeding?” he whispered.

“I think I wrote to you about that, Eminence. It is only on Fridays now during Mass – the crowds now, on Fridays, are *horrendous* – but the amount of blood lost fills me with fear.” He shuddered slightly and closed his eyes. “During the rest of the week, his hands have to be bandaged, of course, but they are dry, and – miracle of miracles – they remain uninfected...thank God.”

“And you, my son? How are you coping with all this: the enormous crowds, the building programme, the constant calls, the amount of correspondence you now have. I think you were God’s special gift, to the Father, when he needed you so desperately. But I am worried about you, Father. You are never off duty. How are you in health, yourself?”

“I think I’m fine. Now that you’ve sent us that fervent young priest, Father Brad Tulliver, and that very dear old priest, Father Bob Healy, I’m greatly relieved of work; they do nearly all the practical pastoral duties and the sick calls now – they both have cars – and they are wonderful in the confessionals. They stay there for hours when the really, big, crowds come. They are wonderful, inspiring priests and, what is especially important to me, they love the old Father as much as I do.”

“All right, son, let’s go in.” he knocked gently on the door and as he turned the door knob, an old voice called out, “Come in Your Eminence. I have been longing for your visit...Ah! My second faithful follower is here as well...Eminence, if you ever can persuade the powers that be to canonize animals, make sure you get Saint Tom’s name on the list.” The old man struggled up on his feet; immediately Brother Paul bowed in the direction of the cardinal and moved swiftly to lift Father and then held him to keep his balance, his arm protectively around his waist. The Father whispered to Brother, and the young, blind man helped him to kneel for the cardinal’s blessing.

The cardinal blessed both the Father and his assistant, then lifted the old man up and hugged him tightly, his eyes moist. As so often he had to do when emotion overwhelmed him, the cardinal took refuge in comedy. “I, see, when I come visiting you, Father, I have to bring my own chair. Goodness me!” They laughed as Father Joyceson slipped into the room carrying a chair. The cardinal then spoke to Brother Paul. He found the young man appeared to be a different person from what he had been when he had first brought him to the Father.

To test him, the cardinal asked whether he would like a change; he must be tired of this particular job; he could use him at Bishop House, if he’d like to go back there.

Brother Paul fell to his knees, next to the Father and groped for his arm. He then held the thin old arm tightly as he looked in the direction of the cardinal’s voice. When he spoke, his voice was both urgent and pleading;

he sounded desperate. "Please don't send me away, Eminence. For the first time in my life, I've found a way to God; a meaning in living. Take this away and I have... nothing!"

"But your sight...?"

"Was a small price to pay for what I've received, Eminence. And with that great priest, Father Joyceson, and our Father, I have never, before, in my life, had the feeling that I am doing something worthwhile. I really, now have two fathers. This is a privileged position... *Eminence, I have access to the Father- that is a grace I have never merited and am terrified of losing.*"

"Righto son. I shall not take you away then. But I am going to send you away now, with Father Joyceson, as I want to talk to the Father alone. OK?"

"Certainly, Eminence. I'll go to the new common room; I can find my way there, so that's no problem." He patted the shoulder of the old man sitting on his board bed and left the room with Father Joyceson. Saint Tom remained, utterly content; he had the human being he loved, more than life itself, and settled happily at the Father's feet.

Father Joyceson walked with Brother Paul to the common room door then asked him to wait. The blind man stood still.

The parish priest put his hand gently on the arm of the young, blind, man. "Brother Paul, I am just going down to the Solicitor, Mr Price, to sign the final documents for the building and all the other wretched forms that have to be forwarded to the Council, and then

to other Government departments. I have let the other priests know where I will be. When I get back, we will have Angelus and then lunch. Father Mark, the new VG is getting it ready now; he is going to cook it, thank God – he is a good cook, they tell me.

“You would be welcome in the community room, Brother. Would you just stay there with the Bishop and the other priests, until it is time to take the Father across to the Church for Confessions? Ok?”

“Yes, Father, don’t worry, I’ll be all right.” The Brother answered, quietly.

XLVI

The cardinal was nearly a full hour with the Father and at the end of the time asked, humbly, for the Father to hear his confession. He knelt on the hard floor and recounted all the slips and slides he had committed on the road to perfection.

He then asked if the Father would like him to send the new Bishop Edward Lipgurd in to see him. The Father, agreed instantly, but then reminded the cardinal he was due in the confessional in fifteen minutes. He asked that His Excellency be informed of this and if Brother Paul could be reminded of the time as well; Brother would then take him over to the church.

Bishop Lipgurd was intrigued, and a little afraid, to be with the Father on his own, but after a minute or two, he was chatting as if he had known the Father for ever. He dared to ask some questions about a problem that was worrying him; he was edified and assisted in the advice given by this old priest who bore in his body, the outward signs of the battle, he himself had been through, but also the signs of the glory, that could be attained, if the battle was sustained to its conclusion.

Before leaving, Edward Lipgurd knelt and asked for a blessing from this extraordinary priest – one with the stigmata! He then helped the Father to his feet, kissed one of the wounded hands and left the room hurriedly, where he found Brother Paul, waiting patiently, to take the Father to the church.

Bishop Lipgurd joined the cardinal in the common room where he was soon talking to both Fathers Brad Tulliver and Bob Healy, and they – with Father Mark Coggins, the new VG, listening intently – were soon chatting about all the duties they did in this outback parish of Burnside.

XLVII

Two hours later, Brother Paul, who had remained kneeling in the chapel, his fingers touching his special wristwatch, with its raised figures, stood up and approached the confessional. He tapped lightly on the confessional door and stood aside waiting for the Father. The Father knew it was the signal for him to finish up and come for the meal. He opened the little trapdoor and faced the wire screen, knowing this would be the last one before the afternoon session started with one of the other priests.

The little town of Burnside lived in the middle of a living miracle, and they knew it. However, that had not suddenly transformed all the inhabitants of the town into saints. Even though, usually, most of the confessions were from 'out of towners', there was a steady stream of their own parishioners, who often fell by the wayside. They were human beings and human beings are always prone to sin. The important thing, to the Father, was the true repentance shown for the sin, not the sin itself. After all these years, he had no illusions about any human being, including himself. Why had he suffered so much? It was because he was as inclined to sin, as any other

person, and it was the struggle against every evil inclination that caused the pain and suffering.

He had learned much during these years in the Hermitage and was now never ever surprised at what he heard through the grille ~

- that is, until this time!

This day, his last penitent had an unusual request to make. He asked if the Father would come outside, after this confession, to meet his mates - they were all locals, the leader was Toby Malone's eldest son, David. The Father knew David, a young man, who had nearly broken his good father's heart. To the Father's knowledge there were about five in his group and they sometimes roared through the town at night in their cars, high on drugs, hurling vile obscenities at the priests, as they went past the Hermitage.

The Father was surprised to hear the voice which he recognized as that of Patrick Kennedy, the son of Toby Malone's neighbour. Patrick had declared, some years ago, he had given up the Faith and was a believer in nothing at all; life was simply about getting rich and enjoying yourself as much as you could. His parents, and his other brothers and sisters, were all decent, hardworking, people, and quite fervent parishioners; they had tried so hard with Patrick, to no avail. His parents made their rosary each night for their son's conversion.

The Father wondered, briefly, if Patrick had had that conversion, but after a minute or two, he was aware of the absurdity of such an assumption. The young man -

twenty-one at the time – asked if he could receive Absolution, *for a crime he was about to commit!*

There was a momentary silence from behind the grill, and a sigh, as if from pain.

The Father then, spoke, quietly, explaining that he could not do that: he could not give forgiveness *before* the event; that would be the equivalent of condoning the crime; giving a *de facto* permission for it to be carried out. Patrick was silent for a moment, then said: “Well, there’s no use in me hanging around here then, is there?” He started to get up. “Don’t forget you promised to come out to meet the boys, will you?”

The Father answered slowly. “I’ll be there... I said I would; I have never lied to you Patrick... Please listen to me, son....” He realised that he was speaking to no one, the young man had left the confessional.

He prayed briefly for Patrick, sighed again, stood up, and went to join Brother Paul. He explained, briefly, that he would be ready to go back in a moment; he had to see some wild boys at the front door – he asked Brother to just wait for him; he would only be a minute or two.

Brother Paul became agitated. Something was wrong; he did not know what, but he knew, *definitely, something, was going to happen...*and he would be involved in it.

He moved closer to the doorway. When he heard the first of the voices and what they said, he was terrified; the Father was urgently in need of help! But, merciful God, how could he get the help?

His mind swept, at great speed, over various ways of summoning help then he thought of *the bell!* The bell,

what about the bell? *Where was* the bell-cord? He knew it was near the door somewhere – it must be on the side, but which side? The Brother moved silently closer to the door his fingers scrabbling all over the wall at his side: Please God, let it be on this side, he muttered to himself...Please help me...it must be here....it *was*! Thank God!

His hands clasped the thin bell cord, and he was so afraid of dropping it and not being able to find it again, he tied it around his arm, making a loop and pulling that tight. With his arm, now imprisoned in the cord, he moved to the top of the steps.

When the Father had come to the doorway, he had stood at the top of the three steps and had looked at the group of drug-soaked young barbarians. The leading one, David Malone, was holding a gun; another one had a rifle. Seeing this, the Father deliberately walked down the steps towards them, his arms outstretched.

David shoved himself up to the Father, his lips curled in contempt. He held the handgun steady, pointing it straight to the priest's chest. "Listen up, you old creep! You can float around in the ceiling as much as you want – it's good for business, I'll give you that – but what we want, is for you to hand over the loot you took from last Sunday's enormous crowd here. We saw fifteen buckets full of money, largely notes. We took what we could – as we do each Sunday – before my stupid father gave it all back to you – or, to one of your gang of black skirts.

"You've bewitched my old man, but you can't do that to me. So, either hand it over, or I let you have this and,

remember, old senior citizen, I'm a great shot; you know that."

He stepped back, holding the gun steady. Brother Paul had heard all that was said from inside. He began screaming for help... for Saint Tom; then he remembered he had the bell-cord on his arm! He began to pull the bell as fast as he could. The bell swung crazily, ringing madly. It made a terrible racket. Brother fell several times, but each time, got back up to his feet, and continued to scream for Saint Tom, ringing the bell as strongly as he could; the huge 'clanging/crashing' sound went zooming out over the entire town. The noise sent the group in a mad panic; they wanted to run; David told them: "NO!"

Over in the common room, Saint Tom, suddenly sat up, growling loudly, then ferociously. He listened attentively, then grabbed hold of the cardinal's cassock and dragged him out to the door. As soon as the cardinal had come through the door, he heard the heartbreaking cries of Brother Paul, screaming for help, and the bell ringing madly.

The cardinal shouted: "Come on! For the love of God come quickly! Something's wrong! The Father's in deadly danger!"

Saint Tom and the cardinal were both running as fast as they were able, the bishop and the other priests, slower in starting, behind him. By the time they reached the church, the cardinal was nearly out on his feet. Saint Tom led the way inside the church through the sacristy door, and the gasping cardinal was just in time to hear the explosion of the gun, and he caught a glimpse of the

Father falling backwards, down onto the steps – his arms outstretched.

Saint Tom was there first and leapt at the man with the gun, who calmly shot the dog high in his right leg, smashing the hip. Saint Tom screamed in agony and fell across the Father.

The group now were all panicking; they were all screaming instruction to the ones with the guns: “Shoot the bloody bell ringer! ...It’s that insane, blind bloke!” ... “Get him! he’ll bring the whole town here!” ... “What are you doing you, bloody idiot? – the bell ringer; Stop the bloody, bloody bell!”.

Two of the groups were backing away: they wanted no more of this - this was crazy; they edged to get away from their leader.

David coldly took aim, and shot the bellringer, who, in falling, was held up, with his tangled arm, in the bell rope. In the poor Brother’s death throes, his body jerked back and forth, so the bell continued to ring loudly, as the body of the blind man swung back and forth over the tragic scene below him on the steps.

XLVIII

In falling down the steps onto his back, the Father had thrown out his arms, but his right arm was flung back and lay across his chest, while the bandages unfurled and the blood was flowing – *not from the chest, but from the wounds in both hands!*

Saint Tom, lying on his left side with his smashed right leg, was moaning pitifully in agony, but managed, with his left leg, to push his body upward, and in his last desperate, gasping, agonizing efforts, he managed to put his nose under the Father's right arm. He finally pushed his head still further, until it was near the Father's throat... both priest and dog would die together.

The drugged gang, including David, realizing for a moment, clearly, what they had done, were suddenly terribly afraid; their only thought now was flight!

They turned away, screaming like mad creatures, and reaching their car, jumped in and went for their lives, driving off at a tremendous speed. They passed Father Joyceson who, when he had heard the bell ringing madly, from down the town, then had heard the gun shots, had begun to run, with many of the shop keepers with him,

up to the Church, shrieking aloud in his fear for the Father.

As they were speeding down the main street, in their little town, Patrick Kennedy then, smiling sadly, calmly took the gun from David – who was driving – and shot him dead. He knew that the car would now crash.

The car careered out of control and ended up smashing into the façade of the new Hall.

Patrick, shaking badly, collected the rifle and threw it from the window of the car. He then picked up the handgun and put it in his mouth. As his finger was on the trigger, he smiled as he heard the siren of the security van approaching at great speed.

He knew, he was now finished. He had killed Truth; there was nothing left now. The madness was over.

He pulled the trigger.

XLVIX

Back at the Hermitage, the other priests had arrived and were appalled at the carnage – the young Father Mark nearly fainting in his horror. They were distraught as they stared in unbelief at the tragic carnage.

Bishop Lipgurd untangled the dead body of Brother Paul from the bell cord and placed him on the steps close to the Father, whom he had served so faithfully, while the cardinal, as soon as he could get past the three dying figures, on the steps, knelt on the path to the door and said the words of Absolution; then gave the Last Apostolic Blessing, with the indulgence for the dying. Kneeling, at the side of the Father, His Eminence, Terrence Cardinal McViver, picked up the wounded bleeding hand, which seemed to be holding Saint Tom ... kissed it ... and wept like a child.

He watched, entranced. He was beholding a miracle: while the heart was still beating, albeit slowly, in the Father's body, the blood flowed, not from the chest, but still only from the hands; a torrent of the Father's blood flowed from the wounded hands *only*! When the heart finally stopped, the blood ceased altogether.

The Father

The Father, the extraordinary gifted and blessed, stigmatic priest, was dead.

L

Father Joyceson was the last of the clerics to arrive, panting dreadfully, his face white; he was nearly out of his mind with grief! He knelt with the cardinal, his head near the ground, his body shaking convulsively; his mind trying to take in the horrors of what his eyes were witnessing. He clutched the Father's left arm as if it were his only hold on life. He wept unceasingly.

When he was mentally capable of doing so, the parish priest discovered that most of the town shop owners were already there.

The good, town Doctor, was there and, although clearly affected himself, had immediately notified the police and the coroner. He then also forbade any more persons touching either of the bodies. He advised the police to call the ambulance.

He gently, lifted to his feet, with great tenderness, first the cardinal, then Father Joyceson. Seeing the state of the younger priest, the doctor kept his arm around him and let him cry into his shoulder. When Father Joyceson had quietened a little, the doctor, began to take photos from every angle, for the coroner.

Every priest and lay person there present, was utterly shocked and anguished.

A sense of bewilderment and loss, that was almost palpable, descended on all the people present. They raised themselves from their knees, looking vaguely at each other; unsure of what to do, or where to go, then just wanted to go home. They felt bereft. Something had gone from their lives which would never be replaced. They knew they, and their village, would never, ever be the same again.

Their beloved Hermit, his true and loyal, blind Carer, and his ever, faithful Saint Tom, were all... dead.

Quicumque baptizati sumus in Christo Jesu,
in morte ipsius baptizati sumus.

epilogue

Seventeen years later, the Lady Abbess of the Enclosed Benedictine Monastery of the Transfiguration, Abbess Angela of the Crucified Christ, stood in her separate stall in the chapel of her monastery.

The annual Anniversary Solemn holy Requiem Mass for the Father of Burnside Hermitage, had just finished with the Catafalque, carrying the effigy of the dying priest, ready to be taken and handed over – at the door of the Enclosure - to a lay group of local men – led by Mr Francis Kennedy, father of Patrick – who would carry it, in procession, to the shrine built for it – by the town people – at the Church of All Saints, in a special place at the left-side of the front door. Later it would be returned to the Abbey.

At the Abbess's request the 'pretend' brass moulding of the original effigy had been made into a permanent structure and now adorned the coffin itself which now reposed within a permanent Tomb with the same effigy on the top – that one in concrete. In line with the great Desert Fathers of the Church, in the history of the Catholic Church, an animal was part of the effigy; it would be seen by all the thousands of people who came

to this holy place each year to venerate a holy and blessed priest.

The Archbishop, His Grace, Edward Lipgurd, was shaking slightly with emotion, as he did the final asperges of the catafalque; they then sang together, the Litany of the Dead and then the beautiful 'in Paradisum' was sung magnificently by the nuns.

The Abbess watched as the Catafalque was moved out of the chapel. She firmly, believed the priest, who was represented by the effigy, would be declared, one day, to be a saint of God.

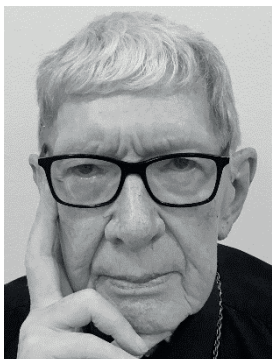
Abbess Angela understood well, she had been involved in the great mystery of the life of this great priest; also, with his trusted holy Cardinal who had died when he turned 87, just as the Father had foretold. Both this simple, hermit Father, and his cardinal, were integral to her position in the Church today. These men were sent by God to do great things and, somehow or other, she, herself, was involved in the mystery.

'Give me Wisdom, Lord,' she prayed, 'and courage to do whatever you ask of me and give me the one thing necessary: Living Faith, as you gave it to him!'

The Abbess knocked with her knuckles on the top of her kneeler.

The Mass was over.

about the author



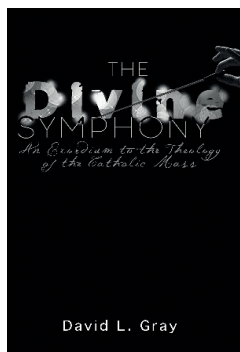
Father Antony was born in Australia to a family of Irish/English background. He taught for a time in universities, firstly in English Literature, then in Neural malfunctions of the brain. He then entered Religious Life. He began as a monk then was transferred to the Diocesan priesthood where he worked in many difficult parishes, with major social problems and great poverty. He was recalled to Bishop House and worked in close contact with the bishop for years. Overwhelmed by the problems in the Church, he asked for, and received, permission, to go and try his vocation as a hermit in an extremely isolated place, utterly alone. He loved it. He loved the utter silence, the benefits of fasting, the awareness of being alone with Christ, and the hard physical work he did in the wrecked church and grounds. When it was time to return to the Bishop's House, he knew the haven of peace was over.

Retiring from active life, eventually, with cardiac problems, he continues to use the 1962 Missal to offer the holy Mass. He writes for hours each day – his first degree was in English Literature – and so far, he has written fifteen, or sixteen books, including six in one series, and a Trilogy which he says was 'just for fun'. He has a quirky sense of humour.

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The Liturgy of Gregory the Theologian: Critical Text with Translation and Commentary, by Dr. Nichols Newman, offers a new edition, translation and commentary of the Greek Liturgy of St. Gregory the Theologian. In this discussion of the Greek text, which exist alongside a Coptic version, the origins of the liturgy and its programmatic use in the turbulent theological world of the fourth century are discovered. offers a new translation of several of Remigius dei Girolami's political works, the *De Bono Communi*, *De Bono Pacis*, *Sermones de Pace* and the *De Iustitia* is offered.

