

# MY LIFE WITH GOD

IN AND OUT OF THE CHURCH



**Raymond Fontaine** Ph.D.

A Former Roman Catholic Priest



**RAYMOND FONTAINE**  
**2000**

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a former priest of  
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**Cover portrays gist of my story:**

**Like a bird that escapes  
from a man-made cage  
and returns to nature  
that God created,  
I too left the Church,  
replete with the supernatural  
attested to by clergymen,  
and returned to the natural life  
that God created**

*To all who blessed my life, notably  
God  
my beloved wife  
my parents and brothers  
my relatives and friends*

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## Foreword

To show the appropriateness and timeliness of this book, I submit excerpts from an article that appeared in the Los Angeles Times of March 12, 2000. Here Richard Landes, the director of the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University, writes the following:

“Today the Pope will deliver an extraordinary address in which he will acknowledge the sins committed by Catholics and the church against Christians and non-Christians, especially Jews....

“What the Pope does on the first Sunday of Lent in the year of the Great Jubilee, 2000, is an act of staggering novelty and daring, reflecting a revolution in thinking at the very center of the most hierarchized and centralized of all the religious institutions in world history. And he offers an apology precisely for the abuses of power that that institution - at its most authoritarian moments - committed in the name of the faith and the church. During that period (especially from about (1000-1750), myriad fervent believers - Jews and Christians - died at the hands of the Catholic inquisitors acting in the name of the Holy Mother Church; a further multiple died at the hands of crusaders for the faith. Quintessential messages of Christian faith - love and forgiveness - were trampled in terrifying exercises of thought control and sacred rage. And for centuries, the leaders of the church insisted that, whether these things were wrong, the church was not responsible, nor need it apologize....

“The act of acknowledging error and sin, and the asking of forgiveness for it, is a painful process...And the task becomes ever more difficult the greater the failing, the more official the agent, the more authoritarian the personality. It is all the more painful for an institution that has formally sought, *urbi et orbi*, to claim infallibility. And now, to the city and to the world, this pope, John Paul II, declares that the earthly church has made mistakes, terrible mistakes, sins of devastating consequence both for the victims and the perpetrators. This is a revolution in Catholic thought, an overturning, in some cases, of fundamental traits that date back almost two millenniums...The acceptance of this apology by Catholics alone, regardless of whether Jews, Protestants, Muslims, seculars and others are mollified, contains the germs of a radical rethinking of the role of the church in the world....

“This is an extraordinary opening to an enormous and fateful dialogue, an

invitation to a profound exploration of the dynamics that lead from credal arrogance to inquisitorial hatreds, and of the ways to avoid those paths...

“The terrain the pope has opened up with his apology is an opening to a vast, complex and rejuvenating conversation in which religions can learn to live with each other in mutual respect, rather than in a competition for empire...

“This is a great moment to know those Catholics who, upon hearing the pope’s apology, are stirred to the kind of introspection that it calls for.”

**Richard Landes**

## Introduction

If this book had been published around the year 1500, in the heyday of the Inquisition, I would have been hauled into an ecclesiastical court. There, cardinals and bishops would have charged me with heresy. If I did not retract my statements about the Church and her dogmas, the court would have used torture to change my mind. Had I remained steadfast, I would have been burned at the stake, as was Savonarola in 1498.

Savonarola's preaching focused on the Roman Catholic Church and exposed its corruption and crimes. He wanted to reform the Church. That is not my aim. My book is about me and my life with God in and out of the Church. It does not attack the Church and its doctrine. I simply want to answer the frequent questions of relatives, neighbors and friends. They ask, "Why did you leave the priesthood and the Church?" Until now in conversations and letters, I never provided an adequate response to their query. This book should put that question to rest.

After reading the reasons why I left the priesthood, my friends will be relieved to learn that I never abandoned God. My belief in the Creator is now based not on the word of other people but on the universe that he created. Looking at the wonders in the sky and on earth, I see that the creator is almighty, intelligent and good. In my heart I praise and thank God. For this basic and pristine religion, I do not need preachers or priests or popes telling me what to believe.

If my friends and readers believe in organized religion and find comfort and strength in its teaching, I am happy for them. I remember the inspiration, solace and peace that I received in Church. Such faith enriches life on earth and promises eternal happiness in heaven. I held on to it as long as I could and so should they.

But if the teaching of their religious Body should ever become burdensome, it might help to know that many people remain close to God on their own. My story could encourage some who have become disenchanted with their religious group to establish an independent and personal relationship with God.

## Chapter One

### My Birth and Early Childhood (1917-1922)

Four days after the bloody birth of Communist Russia, mine occurred on November 11, 1917. Our cuckoo clock sounded 11 a.m. Steeple bells rang; church organs erupted in sonorous strains that rattled the stained glass windows; choirs burst into “alleluias!” Was all that for me as for royalty? No. It was Sunday morning, the Lord’s day.

While that background music muted mother’s moans, she delivered me at home with father beside her. After squeezing through that tight situation, my first among many in life, I let out a victory cry. Like most parents, mine counted my fingers and toes and checked my front and backside. They smiled in relief. After a bath and brunch, I nestled in mother’s embrace, a safe, peaceful place to start life.

“Baptism!” grandma exclaimed, reminding dad that the regular Sunday ceremony started at three o’clock. “Can we make it on time?”

“Yes,” father replied, “we can’t wait until next Sunday. If the baby should before baptism, he won’t go to heaven, says the pastor. Let’s hurry.”

Mom’s sister, Nora, scurried for the family’s baptismal robe; grandma gathered diapers and pacifier; dad gave mother a hurried hug. “What a commotion!” my 18-month-old brother, Leo, must have thought as he mounted his rocking horse and galloped out of the way.

Outdoors, the nippy November air shocked my nostrils until a warm womb like blanket enclosed my in darkness. At the baptismal font, I heard other babies crying, but not me - not until some sadist poured water on my forehead not only once, but twice and a third time. My cries made him stop. After a bumpy ride home over cobblestones, I rested on my mother’s breast while the soothing rhythm of her heart lulled me to sleep.

During the fourth hour of my life, baptism meant only a surprise splash of water. Years later in school, Sister Gertrude explained baptism. She said that at birth all souls lack a sanctifying quality or grace. Without it, I could never enter heaven and share God's happiness forever. God first gave me sanctifying grace when the priest poured water on my forehead saying, "Raymond, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." At the baptismal font, had I comprehended that the water trickling over my eyes, into my ears, and down my neck was qualifying me for heaven, I would not have fussed like an ingrate. On the contrary, I would have gurgled with gratitude and joy.

After a full day with my parents, I had heard my father's calm voice, tasted my mother's milk and felt her heartbeat. But I knew nothing more about them: who they were and where they came from. Years later I learned that my earliest ancestors in North America had migrated from France to Canada in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many other French families crossed the Atlantic and settled in the Province of Quebec. The Fontaines chose the embryonic town of Saint Jude, 30 miles northeast of Montreal. There in 1895, my dad was born in a white two-story house still overlooking the town that today has 1,100 residents, one store, one church and a school of 3 classrooms, but no doctor, no undertaker.

Foreseeing the town's bleak future, the Fontaines longed to escape. Around 1900, they got a chance when factories and mills mushroomed in all six New England states. These industries welcomed workers from Europe and Canada. Thousands of Germans, Irish and Poles sailed the Atlantic for these jobs, while Canadians simply stepped across the border.

The Fontaines headed for Chicopee, a city in southwestern Massachusetts. So did my mother's parents, the Jettes, originating from another city in Quebec Province. Years earlier the Indians gave my hometown the name "Chicopee" which means "birch bark place" because of the white birch trees brightening the Berkshire hills then as now. There my father, Emile, met Rose and courted her a few months. They married on August 3, 1915, a red-letter day for them and for me.

On my first birthday, crowds gathered in the streets cheering, singing and dancing. The celebration spread beyond Chicopee westward as far as San Francisco and eastward reaching London and Paris. Oh, not because of me but because at 11 a.m. the Allies and the Germans signed an armistice ending World War I. Later Congress declared November 11 a legal holiday, first calling it "Armistice Day" and later in 1954 "Veterans Day". Whatever the name, November 11 is MY birthday.

My dad worked in Spalding, famous for baseballs, tennis rackets, and golf clubs. As a child, I watched him through the kitchen window as he walked to and from

Spalding only 500 yards down the hill. I loved my dad. A skilled carpenter, he made Leo and me a sled with facing seats. Dad pulled us to the park, to church, and to our relatives. He made me a desk and a swing. He cut our hair and repaired our shoes. In the evening, he would rock us and tell us stories about caribous and wolves in Canada. Today's children must wonder how kids survived 75 years ago without Ninja Turtles, TV cartoons and Nintendo games. We managed quite well with stories and toys provided by parents like mine.

Mother matched my father in devotion and love. She sewed us new shirts, pants and coats. She fed us well, baking bread, cookies and pies. With patience and tenderness, she cleaned and bandaged our bruised elbows and knees. As a child I wondered what my belly button was for. After the mystery was solved, my navel became a memento of my total dependence on mother not only before birth but also during my childhood.

One day, after rinsing his straight razor, dad placed it momentarily on the kitchen table. At that moment, mother covered it with freshly ironed towels. Out of sight, out of mind - for them perhaps but not for me. I had seen it and my chance to shave like dad. I grabbed it and slashed through my left cheek. My screams brought mom and dad to the rescue. The scar still reminds me of my beloved parents.

I also remember that mom and dad never called God simply "Dieu" but always "le Bon Dieu" (the Good God). In our evening prayer, when we said "Our Father who are in heaven", I had no problem imagining what God was like. He was good like my father, perhaps better. And when praying the "Hail Mary" and calling upon God's mother, I knew whom she resembled - my mother, of course.

In these last years, notably around my birthday, I have reflected upon my childhood, my beloved parents, and the eerie precariousness of my birth. November 11, 1917 marked my appearance in the world; but my life began nine months earlier in mid-February, perhaps on Valentine day. During a loving exchange of gifts, my dad's sperm and mother's egg united to form a complete cell - ME. Any other sperm and egg, even from my parents, would have produced someone else - not me. Without that unique union, I would never have existed; I would have been a vacuum in the universe - nothing. My existence also depended upon similar unique unions or links in the long chain of my ancestors down to the first human couple who existed almost two million years ago. Moreover, scientists agree that the first human bodies developed from some bipedal primate mammals who evolved through a chain of living beings originating on earth about 3 billion years ago. One mishap along the way and this autobiography would be one blank page. My chance to exist never rose higher than one in several trillions. I have always been grateful to my father and mother for giving me existence and a happy childhood.

## Chapter Two

### My Early Environment (1922-1931)

Before dad considered telling me about the birds and the bees, I asked him where babies came from. He answered, "From heaven."

"Do they just drop down like snowflakes?"

"No, storks deliver them."

"Storks? What's that?"

"Big white birds with strong wings and bills."

At 5 years old, I did not worry about possible mix-ups in the stork-delivery system. Now at 82, I realize that, if my bundle of bones had been deposited in the Hindu home, my parents would have raised me in their culture, disposing me later to murder Muslims at a religious site in India. If raised in an Israeli home, I could later massacre Palestinians in a mosque. Luckily, my stork selected Chicopee and nestled its precious cargo in a Catholic church and school in a city almost as Catholic as Vatican City.

Three centuries earlier, no Catholics prayed in Chicopee. The Algonquin Indians enjoyed an idyllic life in southwestern Massachusetts. In their Garden of Eden, the Chicopee River flowed into the Connecticut River on route to the Atlantic Ocean 60 miles away. Wigwams dotted the river banks from which Indian boys cast lines catching catfish and bass while their fathers hunted rabbits in the Berkshires. At home, the squaws planted pumpkins and corn while the children danced around the totem pole.

In 1636, the Algonquins sold a piece of their paradise, the Chicopee area, to white settlers for 75 feet of polished shells strung together and worth 42 dollars. The Algonquins rejoiced over the sale, considering that only ten years earlier in 1626, the Manahata Indians had traded Manhattan for a measly 24 dollars of trinkets. For one moment in history, Chicopee topped New York in the real estate market.

The new settlers traded fur and cultivated farms. In 1820 Boston industrialists realized the potential energy of the Chicopee River and its unlimited sewerage link to the ocean. The Dwight Brothers invested \$500,000 in building cotton mills and hauled massive machinery 100 miles from Boston by oxcart. In 1829, the Ames Manufacturing Company began hammering out swords and cannons that later

helped win the Civil War. Spalding, the leading manufacturer of sport goods, established its main factory along the Chicopee River in 1904 and produced the first American-made tennis ball and the first Major League baseballs.

As business boomed, mills recruited immigrants from Canada, Poland and Ireland - all Catholic to the core. Every Sunday, Catholics and Protestants made the long six-mile trek on horseback and river boat to attend church in Springfield. On the way, they were often harassed by the feared on-legged warrior, Chief Greylock, and his Indians brandishing bows and arrows.

To avoid this danger, the Protestants erected the First Christian Church of Chicopee in 1751. Then in 1838, Chicopee's Irish constructed the first Catholic church west of Boston. Not to be outdone, the French built the Assumption Church (mine) and the Polish erected Saint Stanislaus Church. By early 1920, ninety percent of Chicopee's 30,000 residents worshipped in Catholic churches. The Protestants prayed in their meeting houses while a handful of Jews and one Chinese family worshipped at home.

In my universe, the residents of Chicopee rotated around me in varying bands of influence. The outer circle included all the non-French adults and children with whom I exchanged little more than "hello" and a smile at patriotic parades and fireworks. The next circle contained the Franco-Americans who attended the Assumption church and school. I knew my classmates well. During recess we played together and on occasion teased or flirted with the girls. But outside the school grounds, I associated with them rarely.

My grandparents and my parents' nine brothers and two sisters filled my inner social circle with oodles of cousins. We visited and entertained relatives at least once a week. Baptisms and birthdays, graduations and weddings reunited our families. On January first, the entire Fontaine clan gathered at the grandparents to ring in the New Year with fried slices of salt pork, maple sugar cakes and joyful songs, dances and drinks. These 49 Catholic relatives influenced my youth more than the other 30,000 residents of Chicopee excepting of course my parents and teachers.

One morning in September 1922, mother laid out my new knickers (the style then) and a clean shirt. She double-checked my hands and ears. She slicked down my hair. Why the fuss? For my first day of school. After a warm oatmeal breakfast, chocolate milk and a kiss, mama entrusted me to my brother, Leo. This six year old veteran would show me the ropes.

All my elementary school teachers belonging to a religious order founded in 1706 in Brittany, France. Two centuries later, the government suppressed Catholic schools and outlawed religious orders. To continue teaching, six French sisters arrived in the United States on December 8, 1902. Soon American girls joined their convent. All were dedicated to God and devoted to their pupils. For their hard work, they received ten cents a week per child or \$4.20 for the school year.

In class, the sisters taught religion during the first half hour every afternoon. They explained the 10 cent Baltimore Catechism of one hundred 3x5 pages. In short questions and answers, this booklet summarized the Catholic doctrine which I recited verbatim. After catechism came history. We studied the Declaration of Independence and the stories of Columbus and Lincoln. Pictures of Jesus and George Washington adorned the classroom as did the crucifix and the flag. In school, religion was a subject taught and learned like history. In church, religion became an experience, a moral formative force. As a child I entered the church with awe. The giant pillars, the sunlit stained glass, the statute of Mary and the life-size replica of Jesus nailed on the cross impressed me deeply and indelibly.

For Christmas the sisters replaced the crucifix with a manger. With rock-color paper, the nuns created a cave in a hillside brightened with snow-covered pine and holly. Inside the cave, Mary was kneeling beside baby Jesus bedded in straw while Joseph and shepherds gazed upon mother and child. A donkey and sheep watched the Magi approaching with gifts. Living only three houses from the church, I visited the creche daily. I felt at home there because Jesus had been a boy like me and his father had been a carpenter like mine. We understood each other.

Allowing myself a flash-forward like in films, I recall a visit to the Holy Land with my father in 1950. One evening as we walked around Nazareth, I looked at the stars and told my dad, "That's the identical sky that Jesus and Joseph saw 2000 years ago." In the morning, we found an old carpenter workshop. Walking on the dirt floor, we examined the hand tools and the artefacts. Dad was pensive as in a church. "Somewhere nearby," he said, "Joseph and Jesus worked in a shop like this making furniture." For a souvenir, dad bought an end table with the label: "made in Nazareth". Today it adorns my living room.

During mass in the 1920's like today, the priest always read an excerpt from the Gospel about Jesus. In my youth what impressed me most was Christ's deep compassion. Feeling the pain of others, he wanted to alleviate their suffering. Matthew reports that seeing a great crowd, "he had compassion for them and cured their sick." Another time, "Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for 3 days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way". Then Jesus miraculously multiplied five loaves and two fish so as to feed 5000 men. Later, after

Lazarus died, his sister Mary went to his tomb. According to John, “when Jesus saw her weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Jesus began to weep.” Then Jesus restored Lazarus to life and to his family.

Christ’s compassion touched me deeply, marking my character for life. Henceforth, I was disposed, nay, impelled to comfort and assist people in need. Lacking divine power, I could not replicate Christ’s miracles; but human like him, I could experience compassion and alleviate suffering and sorrow. That’s what he expected of me.

He desired more. Before leaving his disciples, Christ made a final request: “Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Forthwith, the apostles carried out his wishes from Jerusalem to Rome, where Peter was crucified and Paul beheaded. Through disciples, their missionary work continued down the centuries throughout Europe, Asia and America. In my youth, missionaries preached Christ’s message in every country. Some came to our church annually for financial aid.

Once to inspire our parishioners to be generous, a missionary talked about Isaac Jogues, the Jesuit priest, who had worked among Indians in neighboring New York. On October 18, 1646 a band of Mohawks killed him with tomahawks. Three years later, Indians tortured Father Jean de Brebeuf for three hours before ripping out his heart.

Moved by this story, mama read me a short bio of Father Theophane Venard who arrived in Vietnam in 1854. He first worked in Nam-dinh where my future was born. Persecuted by officials, Theophane continued his mission hiding in the hulls of sampans and in the homes of Catholics, probably my wife’s ancestors. After months in a bamboo cage, he was beheaded. Father Venard’s compassion and courage inspired me for months.

About that time, a Franciscan missionary visited my classroom. Wearing sandals and a brown cassock with a thick rope cincture, Father Philip fresh from Africa described the poverty and misery of the black children. That evening, I slipped into sandals, tied my brown bathrobe with a piece of clothesline and ran to mother. “Look, ma, I’m going to Africa.”

Since all missionaries seemed to be priests, I too would become a priest. Moreover, priests offered a mass which I enjoyed serving. At six years old, I became an altar boy. After mastering the responses in Latin, all gibberish to me, I served my first mass in 1925, at the very altar where 20 years later, I would celebrate my first mass.

Soon my favorite hobby became saying mass on the kitchen table with round pieces of bread and a cup of grape juice. My younger brothers, Armand and Robert, served. Since we enjoyed this inspiring pastime, mom and dad surprised us one Christmas with a beautiful altar and vestments. Da Vinci's "Last Supper" graced the altar's front panel. A gold crucifix rested on the tabernacle enclosing a ciborium. Flowers and candles brightened the reredos featuring the Holy Family. Mom's handiwork matched dad's. She cut out and sewed a set of vestments from wallpaper pasted on cotton. The nuns contributed communion wafers too stale for church but not for me. Grandma provided a gold-colored goblet. When asked why I spent so much time playing mass, I replied, "Just practicing for later."

One Saturday in late 1930, I went to confession. Father Chabot knew me well. He saw me in church almost every day. He knew about my holy hobby. That day for the first time ever, he said, "Jesus is calling you to be a priest." Surprised and pleased, I ran home to give mom the good news. Then I reread a Gospel passage heard at mass. Jesus saw Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea and said to them, "Follow me." Then he saw James and his brother John mending the nets. He called them and they followed him. According to Father Chabot, Jesus was now calling me. I too would follow him. Until that day it was I who wanted to be a priest. Now it was God who wanted me to be a priest.

Today, seventy years later, I know that my call to the priesthood came directly from my early Catholic environment. Everyone around me recognized Jesus as God and the priest as his representative. I believe that, if my stork had delivered a baby Hitler and baby Stalin to my home, they too would have loved and followed Christ to the altar as did my brothers Leo and Robert.

Even today people ask me whether my parents pressured us to become priests. Never! We were their life. They would have preferred to keep us at home. But like Abraham, they offered us to God.

Friends also ask do I wish my social environment had set me on a different course leading me to become a doctor, a lawyer, a politician, or a general. Frankly no. The flightless penguin does not wish it had been born in an eagle's nest. The rabbit, watching the deer leap high and far, does not wish his mother had been a doe. The solitary holly, next to the oak alive with bluebirds and red-breasted robins, does not wish his original seed had been an acorn. The buttercup does not envy the rose. Each flower and tree, each animal and bird embraces the original environment responsible for its kind of life. So do I. As I enjoy the sunset of my life, I have no regrets about my childhood, my devotion to Christ and my vocation to the priesthood. I do not resent the influence of my parents, my teachers, and the priest in my youth. All acted in good faith, in

accordance with their beliefs and values based on God. All inspired me towards a beautiful and beneficent life that kept me close to God and the world.

## Chapter Three

### Minor Seminary (1931-1937)

In June 1931, as graduation from elementary school approached, I looked forward to answering God's call and becoming a priest. Just how and when I could start, I had no idea. Because of the deep depression following the 1929 stock market crash, dad was earning only 25 dollars a week. Even my jack-of-all-trades father and mother could barely feed the family. They surely could not afford the tuition of a Catholic high school and college.

About that time, a priest called Father LaChance knocked at the Assumption convent asking the Sisters to recommend a boy suited for the priesthood. "Raymond's the best," they answered. Soon a white haired priest knocked at our door and asked if I was interested in training for the priesthood. "Yes!" I blurted out.

"Not so fast, son," my father said and explained to the priest that we could not afford boarding school.

"That's no problem," the priest said. "Since the Sisters highly recommended Raymond, my congregation will educate him without charge in our seminary."

"Would you like that?" father asked me.

"Yes!" In a flash the boulder blocking my path to the priesthood disintegrated into dust. "Thank you, Jesus," my heart said. "I knew you could do it."

Later, I read about seminaries. The word came from the Latin "seminarium" which signifies a nursery where trees are grown for transplanting. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Catholic Church lost many members and priests to Protestantism, Rome realized the need of starting the formation of priests at a young age. After men experienced worldly pleasures, choosing and preserving in the clerical life was too difficult. Lifelong celibacy, absolute chastity, blind obedience to bishops, Christ's spirit of poverty, humility and self-sacrifice did not gratify man's primitive desires. But these could be curbed and denied with early training in a controlled environment like trees in a nursery.

Around 1550, the Catholic Church decreed that seminaries should be

established throughout Europe and wherever the Church spread in America, Asia and Africa. Every diocese headed by a bishop must have a major seminary, including 2 years of philosophy and 4 years of theology, Scriptures and Canon Law. Wherever possible, minor seminaries should start training boys in religion and Latin starting at 12 or 13 years old.

That 16<sup>th</sup> century decree inaugurated a system of seminaries that, during 400 years, provided an army of priests and all of today's Catholic clergy - 406,036 strong. The 1992 Catholic Almanac reported that 52,277 priests, trained in 235 seminaries, were serving in the United States.

That history of seminaries I did not know in 1931. What mattered then was that my journey to the priesthood would start in Suffern, New York, a small town nestled in the Ramapo Mountains, 30 miles north of New York City.

On August 23, 1931, I kissed my mom, hugged my brothers, jumped into dad's old Essex and waved goodbye to Chicopee for ten months. After driving 130 miles, dad entered the Seminary campus. Fragrant gardenias greeted us and orange marigolds spelled "WELCOME". We passed an apple orchard, a baseball and football field, basketball and handball courts and a swimming pool. "Wow! this looks like a summer camp." Was I wrong! Father LaMontagne, the superior, escorted us through the Ryan family mansion, bequeathed to the Blessed Sacrament Fathers for a seminary. The ground floor housed a refectory where the student body and staff dined. Appetizing odors from the kitchen announced the dinner menu. On the second floor, a study room accommodated 70 students with individual desks. Next door, a library contained classical books screened for young boys training for the priesthood. (No *Playboy* there.) On the third floor, the chapel focused our attention on the altar. Its backdrop represented a large royal mantle made of red velvet and ermine topped by a jeweled gold crown. This distinctive altar impressed upon us that Christ in the Eucharist was our King worthy of adoration and service.

The entire fourth floor housed some 70 waist-high dressers and thin mattresses on stretched-wire cots. After a long day from 5 am to 9 pm, who needed, who needed a Sealy mattress on a box spring? Surely not an exhausted 13 year old kid.

The steady breeze through many windows high upon a hill provided plenty of fresh air above the sweaty sneakers beneath the beds.

After dad left, I glanced at the notices on the bulletin board. One sent a shudder down my spine - the daily schedule:

5:am	Reveille	12:45	Recreation
5:20	Study	1:30	Study
6:00	Mass	2:00	Class
6:45	Breakfast	3:00	Class
7:30	Recreation	4:00	Recreation
8:00	Class	4:30	Study
9:00	Class	5:40	Rosary
10:00	Recreation	6:00	Supper
10:30	Study	6:45	Recreation
11:30	Prayer	8:00	Reading
12:00	Dinner	9:00	Sleep
Wed. & Sat.	free time	12:45-5:30	
Sunday am:	2 masses	6:00 & 8:00	
Study		10:30-11:40	
Sunday pm:	Letter-writing home	2:00	
Vespers		3:00	
Study		4:30	
	Prayer 5:30		

The daily schedule reserved about 40 hours a week for serious study and class. The curriculum emphasized languages, principally Latin and English, then French and Greek. During six years, I studied Latin some 3,000 hours mastering its complex grammar and reading Roman classic written 2,000 years ago, such as Caesar's war memoirs and Cicero's speeches. Latin poetry presented special problems. On his death bed, Virgil requested that his unfinished epic poem, the *Aeneid*, be burned. But the emperor Augustus ordered its preservation. Centuries later, while trying to unravel its intricate verses, I often wished that Augustus had minded his own business and honored Virgil's last wish.

Seminarians studied Latin surely not just to read the ancient literature of a dead language but to understand the official language of the Catholic Church. Rome still published its dogmas and decrees in Latin. Until 1963, a priest offered the Mass and administered the Sacraments like Baptism in Latin. If he did not understand the liturgical language, he was doomed forever to mouth meaningless sounds like abracadabra, as unintelligible to him as they were to the faithful. My professors and I worked hard so that later, as a priest, I would not be spouting gibberish like a dim-witted parrot.

Since I left the priesthood in 1967, I have not read or spoken a single Latin word. Latin has no practical value. But if I were appointed to Vatican City as US ambassador, I could converse with the Pope's octogenarian cardinals.

In the seminary, we learned Greek to read the gospels and other early Christian writings in their original language. In class, however, we first read the classics, such as Homer's *Iliad* written in the 9th-8th century BC. Years later Alexander the Great (323 BC) kept a copy of the *Iliad* near his pillow for relaxing reading after a nerve-racking day. Not me.

During my childhood, I learned the French spoken by my ancestors in the Province of Quebec and the New England States. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they had spoken the French of the day - now archaic or obsolete. Over time, that ancient lingo added local expressions; pronunciation changed; spelling and grammatical errors crept in plus many distorted English words. The result was a linguistic goulash, called Canuck. When my wife, Minh, who speaks Parisian French, visited my relatives in Canada and Chicopee, she could not understand a single sentence. I could because I never forgot the first language learned on my mother's lap.

Unless I had learned pure French in the seminary, I could never have worked later with French-speaking officials in Vietnam and Africa who knew no English. Father Godin melted away the impurities of my Canuck French in the crucible of his classroom.

Father Amyot, our English teacher, excelled in public speaking and drama. He organized a kind of amateur hour every Wednesday evening. Once a month, each student recited a poem or speech on the school stage. Sometimes a group performed a skit.

On one occasion, I declaimed Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. "Fourscore and seven years ago," I began, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation." On and on I went echoing Lincoln's stirring speech. I concluded with the enduring words: "and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln spoke with more feeling and passion than I. But he had an advantage. He stood on Gettysburgh's bloody battlefield addressing soldiers, some without legs, lost during the carnage. I faced a bunch of boys some yawning, others already dozing off.

To inspire maximum effort and success in elocution, Father Amyot announced that the best would perform in the closing play of the year. In 1935-1937 (my last years in Suffern), he selected three great plays of William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Richard III*.

These masterpieces were first produced around 1600 in the Globe Theatre near London. The most important acting company of the day was "The Lord Chamberlain's Men." Our teenage actors could not match London's best. They surpassed us in facial expressions and eloquence.

In one respect, however, our production surpassed theirs. The Globe stage had no scenery. Placards read: BAR or PALACE or MARKETPLACE. On our stage, an outdoor scene included painted trees along the sides and a stage-wide backdrop of a valley with flowers and hills or a seashore. Within minutes, we could convert a grove into a royal court by replacing the trees with painted columns and by rolling down a palatial backdrop.

For lighting, the Globe Theatre used candles and lanterns. We had white and colored bulbs, spotlights and floodlights, all controlled by dimmer switches at a main panel. Recorded sounds of musket fire and cannon shots increased the realism of the scene.

Who was responsible for this theatrical wizardry? Me, the stage manager, and my helpers. I loved this stage. In the fish bowl of seminary life, I enjoyed this precious privacy. Here I came to escape the boredom and to release tension. Here I designed new scenes, fabricated and painted them. In this little corner of the world, I developed skills that later enabled me to change careers at fifty and start a new life.

In English class, I remember reading James Howell's *Proverbs* written in 1659. The one that all students endorsed was, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Luckily the priests also accepted it as gospel.

The schedule provided 30 hours each week and more on holidays for recreation. During this time, the students had to play sports to develop and strengthen their bodies. Just hanging around and chatting was taboo. To create interest and competition, the Sports Committee organized leagues and teams for baseball, football, basketball and handball. The bulletin board in the locker room posted our schedules, scores and standings next to those of the national sports. On one side, my batting average; on the other, Lou Gehrig's.

Like Babe Ruth, I played in right field, where being the hero or the heel of a game sometimes depended on catching a fly ball. Later, I graduated to the pitcher's

mound where my greatest thrill was to snooker the batter with my sinker ball.

Every Easter, the students challenged the priests to a baseball game - the highlight of the season. The old timers (in their 30's) played well. That evening, the odor of Ben Gay wafted through the staff quarters. The following morning, as the priests limped into the classroom on aching muscles, they grunted or smiled depending on the game's outcome. Either way we applauded them for being such good sports.

Following Juvenal's ancient advice, "Pray for a sound mind in a sound body" (*mens sana in corpore sano*), the seminary stressed studies and sports. Mindful, however, of its primary purpose to train boys for the priesthood, the seminary placed special emphasis on prayer. The schedule focused our attention on God from sunrise to sunset.

Every morning at six, we offered Mass with Christ commemorating his sacrifice on Calvary. As on the cross, so on the altar, Christ offered himself for the salvation of the world. We joined him each day, renewing our resolve to serve God and save the world. During the Mass, we ate the consecrated bread, now the body and soul of Christ, and communed with him, pledging anew our allegiance.

Every day at 11:30, we entered the chapel where the Eucharist was exposed in a gold monstrance elevated above the altar. The white wafer of consecrated bread was the divine and human Christ. During 15 minutes, we meditated on his goodness and love. Sometimes a priest helped us along. At other times, we sought inspiration from the Bible readings of the morning mass. The gospel called our attention to the words and acts of Jesus; the epistle elaborated his message. Inspired, we praised and thanked God, regretting our failings, and prayed for help. The prayer service ended when the priest made the sign of the cross with the raised monstrance, invoking God's blessing.

As the sun warmed the world every day giving it energy and life, so God dominated our day, enlightening our minds, energizing our wills, and warming our hearts. In the seminary, God was the sun of our life.

During the week's 40 hours of study and 30 hours of sports, the boys burned mega calories of energy. They needed a daily resupply of fuel. For that, they depended on the most popular staff member - the cook.

From the chapel, the boys marched with lively steps to the dining room. Within seconds, 70 ravenous kids were sitting along 2 long tables, sniffing the air for clues of the menu. As large platters and bowls of food passed down the table, the waiters, after getting signals from the cook, held up one or more fingers to indicate the rations: 2 hotdogs, 1 cup of milk and 4 cookies. No cheating was possible; too many

eyes were watching to ensure the arrival of their rations.

Generally, we ate in silence while a student read aloud, often a biography like Lincoln's. Several times a week, the Superior granted us permission to talk, saying "Deo Gratias" (Thanks to God). At that signal, silence erupted into chatter and laughter. When the noise reached intolerable decibels, the Superior rang an alarm bell waving the clatter down to a bearable level.

At the table, we had a choice not between lobster or steak, but between the food served or nothing at all. I quickly learned to eat anything and everything. That talent served me well later in Africa when the natives offered me fried ants and roasted grasshoppers. Later in Vietnam, I could munch on tiny broiled birds including bones, brains, and eyes. On those occasions, however, I would have preferred a bowl of my favorite seminary stew.

No one knows who coined the proverb: "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." But it could have been someone familiar with the health records and apple orchard of our seminary. There, the staple desert was applesauce, almost every day. For variety, the cook baked strudel and pies - with apple filling of course.

Despite all the apple pectin streaming through their vascular system, the boys got occasional bellyaches, sniffles, poison ivy, and other minor ailments. The Superior, Father LaMontagne, dispensed aspirins, cough syrup, kapectate during the day. At night, he was on call in a cubicle adjoining the dormitory.

In more serious cases, Father called in his Jewish friend, Doctor Schwartz. This excellent physician and kind man took care of the priests and students for years without charge. He performed tonsillectomies, appendectomies and other required "ectomies". During a spell of Jewish religious fervor, he performed many circumcisions, "for therapeutic reasons," he said. Luckily, I never needed therapy and escaped his scalpel.

The seminary's isolation policy flabbergasted my friends. During the entire school year, between August and June, the students remained in the seminary. No holidays home, not even at Christmas. Family members could visit a few hours about 8 times a year. Letters were restricted to and from relatives. The only person we could visit in and around Suffern was the dentist. Without radio, television and newspaper, we were cut off completely from the outside.

Hearing this, close friends asked, "Weren't you lonely?" I answered, "Are monkeys in a zoo lonely, sharing their trees only with look-alikes? Are birds lonely in an aviary that excludes squirrels, snakes and cats? Are bees lonely in a hive? Neither was I

with 70 companions and priests.”

At home I had played with only 3 brothers. Leo and I had played football, one on each side. Here, we had complete teams. And my fellow seminarians were more than playmates. They were friends - almost brothers.

“Didn’t you miss your parents?” my friends asked. Of course I would have preferred to have them close. But in the seminary, there were 10 priests whom we called, “Father”. They resembled dad in so many ways. They were kind, devoted and supportive. They helped to develop our talents. Father Hebert trained me to direct the choir. Father Amyot named me stage manager, responsible for the scenery and lighting of the school plays. Thanks to these foster fathers in addition to plenty of playmates, I was never lonely.

Recently, while evaluating my seminary life, I recalled God’s assessment of creation. God looked at everything that he had made and “indeed, it was good.” In retrospect, I avow that my seminary life was good.

In Suffern, the students had a lot in common: families of modest income, similar customs and values - all Catholics to the core. The boys did not cheat, lie, steal or fight. During six years, I never saw a bloody nose nor a black eye. We got along like brothers of a loving family. The student body was good.

The priests were patient, helpful and devoted. I never saw a priest get angry, raise his voice or slap a student. The priests inspired trust. As all testified, the priests were good.

Six religious brothers, bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, served without remuneration. Living for God, they worked in the orchard, kitchen, laundry and furnace room.

They were carpenters and painters, mechanics and electricians. Many spent their entire life, sixty or more years, in the seminary. They too were good.

The seminary excelled in education. The priests opened our minds to the universe, the earth and the human race from the beginning to the present. They imparted their love of literature, their thirst for knowledge and, more importantly, their love of God and neighbor. In short, my seminary was a fine nursery of priestly seedlings, a lovely corner in God’s creation that he called good.

## Chapter Four

### Temptation and Initiation (1937-1939)

In India around 500 BC, Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha, spent 49 days in solitary meditation under a fig tree before making a definitive decision to preach his message. The devil, whom the ancient Indians called “Mara”, tried to dissuade Buddha by tempting him with visions of beautiful and alluring women. These bewitching creatures danced before him - but all in vain. The following morning, Buddha began his mission that has influenced the lives of billions to this day.

Five hundred years later, Jesus likewise spent 40 days in the wilderness. Here the devil tried to seduce Christ with promises of power and glory. In the end, Christ exclaimed, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’.”

During my 1937 summer vacation, I also endured a troubling temptation. In mine, neither Satan nor Mara was involved. Nor did I fast 40 days in solitary meditation like Jesus and Buddha. But like them, I envisioned an alternative way of life.

I was now 20 years old. During the last six summer vacations in Chicopee, I had witnessed the attractions of the world. Relatives and friends of my age had jobs; they played sports; they went fishing; they enjoyed dating and dancing. Some were happily married to charming women.

After completing the first stage of my priestly training and before beginning the second half, I had to make a definitive decision. What tempted me to abandon the seminary route was not money, power or freedom; it was girls, their looks, smiles, and affection. I had always considered girls the most beautiful creatures on earth.

Still undecided, I celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July at an amusement park with relatives and friends. One of them brought his sister along. Rita was 17 years old, beautiful, vivacious and joyful. All day, we stayed close, talking and laughing. Together we ate corn on the cob, went swimming, and finally watched the fireworks hand in hand. After the last salvo of rockets, we parted - no kiss, just “goodbye”.

That night, in my wide-awake reflections, Rita epitomized all women: their beauty and sweetness, their partnership and love. I had to choose between sharing my life with a woman or devoting it entirely to God’s service. All my human feelings and desires urged to choose Rita or someone like her. But my mind clearly realized that the

basic choice here was not between God and Rita but between God and me. The torment continued through the night. By dawn, however, the echoes of Christ's words spoken in the wilderness 2000 years ago reached me: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Then like Buddha and Christ centuries before, I arose determined to follow God's call to the priesthood. I never saw Rita again.

After the temptation, Jesus left the wilderness for Galilee; Buddha departed the village of Uruvela for Benares; and I abandoned my hometown for Cleveland, Ohio. Buddha and Christ traveled on foot; I rode the bus. On August 25, 1937, I entered the novitiate of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers.

In the Suffern seminary, the Fathers had housed, fed and educated me during six years without charge. To continue my education another six years of ordination, I was expected to join their congregation. Fair enough. Eager to resume my priestly training, I was ready to take the required vows of poverty, obedience and chastity immediately. But the Catholic Church insisted upon a two-year probation, after which both the Fathers and I would know whether I was qualified and disposed to spend the rest of my life as a Blessed Sacrament Father. I must first live in a religious house, observe the rules, and participate in all the prayer services. Moreover, novitiate included initiation practices still in vogue in primitive cultures: namely, isolation, indoctrination and tribulation. It would be no picnic.

In current cultures that have retained some primitive customs, a boy must leave home upon reaching puberty. Some go to special camps for initiation; others live alone for months. In some Brazilian tribes, the isolation lasts three years. The purpose of this separation is to reduce a boy's emotional attachment to his birth family, especially his mother so as to forge a stronger bond with the entire tribe or clan. It works.

In 1962, when I arrived in Uganda, Africa as a missionary, I soon realized that the native language had no word for cousin. The male members of a clan were all brothers. Traveling around Uganda, a muganda could arrive unannounced at any muganda house and receive bed and board for days. He was a brother.

Elsewhere, an 18-year-old African invited me to his home. Nine huts surrounded a courtyard where grown-ups chatted and children played. George introduced me to a dozen women, calling each one "mother". Pulling him aside, I asked, "Which one is your real mother? Who gave you birth?"

“I don’t know,” he replied. “No one ever told me and I never asked. During initiation, the elders stressed the clan mattered much more than the family. We should address our elders as father and mother and call our peers brother and sister.”

As in primitive initiations, one goal of novitiate training was to detach me emotionally from my natural family and attach me firmly to a larger group, the congregation of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers. For this the priests used the effective technique of primitive tribes: isolation.

From the first day of novitiate (1937) until my ordination (1945) I would not return home for vacation - not one day. I never saw my mother again; she died in 1939. The novitiate rule allowed one short letter per month, none during Advent and Lent.

Cutting the umbilical cord that united me emotionally to my mom, dad, and brothers was the first step in severing all ties with the world. Novitiate had no television, no newspaper, no radio, no magazines. We heard nothing about the 1939 killer earthquake in Chile, the social upheaval in Europe - not even who won the world series in 1937 and 1938. Total news blackout.

In novitiate, I associated only with two priests (the Master and his assistant) and six other initiates or novices. The rule allowed us to converse only during two brief recreations each day. Cut off from the universe, however, we had nothing to talk about - not even the weather which, during Cleveland’s gloomy winter, stunk. If my social environment in Suffern’s seminary had resembled a mini-pond with 80 fish, novitiate was a child’s aquarium with only 9 goldfish. As these captives swam up and down their glass prison, we novices paced back and forth within our fenced compound. The isolation was complete. Slowly my attachment to people withered but never died. It lay dormant, hibernating like a grizzly bear awaiting spring to resume normal life.

During primitive tribal initiations, as boys squatted around campfires, the chief told stories about the origin of the tribe, its customs, practices and rules. Similarly in novitiate, the Master instructed us about the congregation of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers.

He spoke glowingly about the founder, Pierre Julien Eymard. Born in 1811 near Grenoble, France, he later became a priest and headed a parish. Before long, his preaching focused on the Eucharist. According to the Catholic Church, the priest, who

celebrates Mass, consecrates and changes bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Jesus who lived in Nazareth years ago is alive in the Eucharist as he is in heaven. That truth - that reality - dominated Pierre Julien's life: his thoughts, aspirations and actions.

He read repeatedly *The Revelation to John* which describes myriads of angels and saints gathered around the divine throne while worshipping Christ day and night without ceasing. As Pierre Julien laid down the Bible, he concluded, "If Jesus deserves perpetual adoration in heaven, he deserves no less on earth."

Father Eymard realized that people, who work for a living and their families, cannot spend much time in church. But a group of celibate priests could dedicate their lives to the perpetual adoration of Christ in the Eucharist. Pierre Julien decided to establish such a congregation.

Simply by kneeling silently before the Blessed Sacrament day and night, these priests would proclaim the Eucharistic presence of Christ more eloquently than by sermons and books. Impressed by priests in perpetual adoration, the people would flock to Christ in church as they did centuries ago in Galilee. Close to him, they would find solace and strength, hope and peace, love and joy.

My novice master, Father Adrian Maheu, spoke in a monotonous voice devoid of spirit. His Indian counterpart, on the other hand, dramatized his stories. To be fair, Chief White Cloud related exciting events like buffalo hunts, canoe rides down treacherous rapids and bloody battles. Stirred by these stories, the boys jumped to their feet and danced around the campfire, beating drums and chanting wahoos.

In novitiate we never jumped up and danced. Sometimes we dozed off, but usually we listened in silence. Day after day, month after month during two years, Father Eymard's spiritual legacy seeped into our souls: the divine and human Christ living in the Eucharist deserves perpetual adoration. As I saw it then, if soldiers can stand at attention day and night before the tomb of the unknown soldier, priests can do as much for the living Christ in the Eucharist.

During primitive initiations, the boys endure the isolation, enjoy the stories but dread the traditional tests of their courage. Among the Aranda in central Brazil, elders tear out fingernails and gash open the heads of the initiates. In the Guianas, hornets sting and poisonous ants bite the stoic boys. In many groups today, such as an

Indian tribe in northern Brazil, the Hopi in Arizona, and the Somba in Togo, violent whippings still bite into and bloody the backs of youths. The boys must show no pain. That is the test. Whoever fails to endure the ordeal is stigmatized as a coward for the rest of his life, while the tribe recognizes the stoic survivors as adults and warriors.

In novitiate, Father Maheu, no Simon Legree to be sure, did not flog the initiates to test their willpower. For that, he relied upon the regulations prescribed by the founder, Father Eymard. The rule itself would test our mettle. It did not prescribe painful practices, like lying on a bed of nails, walking on glowing embers or wearing hair shirts. The rule had an inherent physical endurance test of its own: nocturnal adoration.

In a house of about ten members, perpetual worship of the Blessed Sacrament required that each religious spend one hour of adoration every eight hours, for example: 8 to 9 am, 4 to 5 pm, and midnight to 1 am. The following day, the eight-hour cycle started an hour later. Thus the nocturnal watch changed hour every night.

Father Eymard devised this rotating schedule to let everyone share the easier as well as the harder hours - surely not to torture the religious. But changing the adoration hours every night strained nature's adaptive capabilities. The loss of sleep each night was more than the one hour of adoration. Add on the time to fall asleep, the 15 minutes to dress and reach the chapel, and after an hour of prayer, the time to fall asleep again. When the merciless reveille rang at 5 am, no one could just ignore it and sleep on.

Unable to cope with sleepless hours every night, two classmates left novitiate within months. I survived despite the mental strain. If the rotation schedule of nocturnal adoration had been invented as a torture mechanism, I would gladly have exchanged it for a week on the rack, or several bullwhip lashings and torn off fingernails. In this case, the pain would have ended soon and I could have enjoyed uninterrupted sleep again. A few may have gotten use to this hardship. I never did during thirty years.

After the isolation and trials of tribal initiations, the boys, relieved and proud, enjoyed the closing ceremonies. As they danced, the young men jumped higher than ever before. Their joyful yells echoed through the hills. The buffalo steak never tasted so good. Children no longer, they could make personal choices and decisions on their own. Soon they would own a tepee, a horse, a gun. Tomorrow they could start courting the girl they had been watching at a distance. Later, their squaw would bear them a papoose looking like papa.

The closing ritual of novitiate could not match the hoopla of the tribal ceremony. After Mass, I took the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Unlike the initiated Indian who shed his childhood chains, I vowed to carry out the orders of my superior in all matters. I renounced ownership of all material things including money. I

sacrificed marriage and all sexual pleasure. No wonder that, unlike the young Indian's yells, my wahoos were mute. Instead of jumping and dancing like my counterpart, I knelt motionless before the Superior who in this instance represented the Big Chief himself, the Pope.

Through it all, peace prevailed because I was one stage closer to ordination. Tomorrow, after a two-year hiatus, I would resume my studies. Ordination had been my grail since childhood. Like Sir Galahad, I would never abandon my quest. Someday, I would be a priest.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Study of Philosophy (1939-1941)**

On September 8, 1939, I entered the major seminary, another building on the same campus. For the first time in my life, at 22 years old, I had a room all to myself. My 9 by 12 foot cell had a closet and bed, a dresser and sink, a crucifix and desk. What I appreciated most was the chance to escape the fish bowl of community life during a few hours every day. Oh! The luxury of privacy and aloneness.

Outside my cell, I associated with about 20 students, 7 priests and 4 religious brothers. With this number, I could play sports again. On rainy days, we listened to records (no rock and roll) and played games such as Ping-Pong and Monopoly. We had no radio and television, no newspapers and magazines, no visits home and no outside social life.

The daily schedule allotted 2 hours for recreation, 3 for prayer and 6 for study. During the first 2 years, philosophy would teach me what the mind can know about the basic principles of being without using telescopes, microscopes and divine revelation. Later during theology, I would acquire knowledge based entirely upon revelations reputedly from God. For the moment, however, I must rely solely upon reason.

In his opening class, the professor reviewed what humans believed about the origin of the world for thousands of years before the first philosophers appeared in Greece during the fourth century BC. Over a million years ago, humans expressed their thoughts and feelings in spoken language. Their descendants communicated their beliefs and achievements to future generations - all by word of mouth.

Around 3000 BC the Sumerians, who lived along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, invented the art of writing which spread to other cultures and races. Now humans could record in stone and clay or on parchment and papyrus their thoughts including those about the origin of the world.

Without scientific instruments, just from visual observation, humans found no explanation for the world: lightning and thunder, earthquakes and typhoons, floods and drought. In society, things happened when rulers gave orders and when craftspeople

got to work. In nature, beings who were smarter and more powerful than humans must be directing the elements and forces. To explain the mysteries of the world, the Sumerians created thousands of deities. So did the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and most civilizations for thousands of years.

The first people to seek non-divine explanations for natural phenomena were Greek thinkers, such as Thales (547 BC), Anaximander (547 BC), Plato (348 BC), and Aristotle (322 BC). According to Plato, the universe reveals design, purpose, and therefore a supreme architect.

Aristotle observed that nothing starts to exist by itself. Its existence depends on something or someone else. An infinite series of beings, each depending on another for existence, could never get started except by a being who needs no one or nothing for existence. We call that self-sufficient being God. Plato and Aristotle blazed a new trail for the pursuit of knowledge. Instead of running to the temple for answers about the world, humans should examine nature's elements and forces relying on intellect rather than on deities. During the next two years, I would follow the lead of Plato and Aristotle and probe the basic principles of being with my mind.

After much reflection, I reached the certitude that a powerful, intelligent and good being, who always existed, created the universe in which we live. This conviction is the foundation of my philosophy of life: my overall vision of and attitude towards life and the purpose of life. My life makes sense only because my belief in God is based not on revelations reputedly from God but on rational reflections upon the wonders of nature. Let me explain.

Walking through the woods one day, I picked up an acorn - a lowly nut with a lofty lesson. In the soil, the nut pops its cover. A tender stem emerges and evolves into a stately oak: trunk, branches and leaves. The acorn is an organism that, with common plant nutrients, develops not into a maple or birch or elm but into an oak - nothing else. The acorn is formed and fashioned that way. By what? Mindless matter or an intelligent force? By chance or design?

Later I examined a magnificent monarch butterfly. At first the original cell develops as a lowly caterpillar. After several weeks, the insect covers itself with a shell, becoming a pupa hanging by a thread from a branch. Later the insect breaks through its shell and emerges fully developed with exquisite black and golden wings. These paper-thin wings carry the butterfly from Texas to Canada every autumn and back again every spring. This amazing metamorphosis from seed-caterpillar-pupa to butterfly occurs without fail because the seed is made that way. Again the question: what or who fashioned the seed? Mindless matter or an intelligent agent? By chance or design?

I asked myself this question many times. Finally, I found the answer not in universities or libraries, not in observatories or laboratories, not in synagogues or cathedrals, but in a crib. Better than scholars and scientists, better than preachers and teachers, a baby answered my question definitely.

A baby originates from a single cell which measures 0.00004 of an inch. Soon the zygote divides into two complete cells, each of which again separates, and these 4 subdivide into 8 and so on until the process systematically produces more than 10 trillion cells, of which 500 average-sized cells can fit within the following period. If each cell measured 1 cubic inch, a human adult would be as big as a building 1800 feet wide, 1800 feet deep, and 1800 feet tall.

Early in the cell-producing process, certain genes call for organ-forming proteins. These specialists soon fashion a heart that can pump blood, carrying nutrients and oxygen, to each of the baby's trillion cells. A fresh supply is critical. Without renewed oxygen, brain cells suffer damage within 4-6 minutes and certain death within 10. The human heart, a marvel of bioengineering, beats about 72 times a minute or 103,680 times a day. And since each heartbeat delivers 2.5 ounces of blood into the arteries, the heart pumps 2025 gallons each day.

Keeping pace with the heart, the baby's lungs develop, not for immediate use, but for a surefire start when the newborn gasps for his first breath. Another masterpiece of engineering, the lungs inhale and store oxygen in 300,000,000 tiny sacs. Blood rushing from the heart passes through these sacs to collect fresh oxygen and distribute it to the body's multi-trillion cells. As the blood courses through the body, it also collects waste from every cell, flushing solids into the intestines and liquids into the kidneys, and depositing carbon dioxide in the lungs for exhalation.

But the most amazing and distinctively human organ is the brain. Only three weeks after conception, a brain appears as a tiny sheet of nerve cells, called neurons, and grows at a feverish pace creating millions of new cells each day. At birth they number 14 billion.

Since one neuron may form 5,000-50,000 connections with its neighbor neurons, the number possible communication-points in the brain reaches 20,000,000,000,000. Through this system, the brain operates an integrated network reaching every organ and every cell deep inside our bowels, down to our fingertips and toes. The communication systems of AT&T worldwide cannot compare with the complexities and activities of one human brain. The brain can communicate not only sound, shapes and color but also smell, taste, pain, thoughts, love, and especially awareness and consciousness of them all.

Scientists have discovered that brain activity depends on chemical reactions and electrochemical energy. Since neurons receive and send signals not over wires but through organic matter, the messages are encoded in chemicals. But if a finger touching a hot stove had to wait until chemical reactions worked their way to the brain and back before receiving the pull-away command, the whole finger would fry to a frizzle. To speed up transmission, the first neuron to receive the alarm charges the signal with electrochemical energy. From that moment on, the message speeds along at 120 miles per hour.

Whoever admires a baby smiling and gurgling in his crib, whoever feels his heart beat and his lungs breathe, whoever foresees that this little guy will someday reason and love, whoever looks into his eyes has to believe that this baby's existence was planned, set in motion and guided by a supreme, intelligent being whom we call God.

During a philosophy class I asked the professor, "What impelled God to create the world?"

"For the answer," he replied, "you'll have to wait until next year. Theology will reveal the reason." But such a burning question required an immediate answer. I would test my newly found intellectual powers.

Often in the evening, I would relax alone on the flat roof and admire the stars, openings into heaven. Through these peepholes I looked for a glimpse of God. I remember asking him, "Why did you create the universe? For what reason? For what purpose?"

Before creating the first node of energy that exploded into our universe, God existed a long time. He got along quite well without us. He surely did not need us for anything. Then why create us?

For his amusement? I can see creating a few monkeys for laughs. But dour donkeys with hollow hee-haws? Humorless hippopotamuses? Snooty, stiff-necked giraffes? For fun? NO!

Did he create this world because he was lonely or bored? To keep busy? Just for the heck of it? A loud definitive "NO".

Surely not for the praise of flowers and trees, insects and birds, animals and fish - none of which can recognize God and praise his deeds. If for human praise, why create a world billions of years before any humans existed? Why the trillions of stars

when a few would have served that purpose? Why blossoms in the unexplored forests of Brazil? Why fish beneath frozen Arctic seas? Why such a lavish creation beyond human perception? For the praise that God would receive from humans? If so, we surely let him down.

So many of us fail to admire the wonder of the world before our very eyes. We do not always see God's glory beyond the dazzling sunsets. The snowy mountain slopes do not always raise our minds and hearts to him. We watch graceful gazelles, brilliant butterflies, rainbow trout without seeing them as his handiwork. And when we do spend a few moments in prayer, our thoughts often center on our needs and desires. Before creating us, God must have known what to expect. Therefore, he cannot have created this grand universe for our scant and faint praise.

If not for our praise, then why? Could it be just to share his being? To give others a chance to exist and enjoy life? The weeping willow does not seem to enjoy life but does not want to die. Neither does the cactus which survives in desert sand by absorbing the morning dew. Salmon enjoy swimming even when they must struggle up waterfalls to reach their spawning grounds. Who doubts that porpoises enjoy forming graceful arcs in and out of the water? Monkeys go crazy swinging from tree to tree. Lion cubs play like kittens. Goats hop for joy. Even we humans have fun and hold on to life tenaciously. No animal, no bird, no fish commits suicide nor do flowers and trees. Only a few humans choose suicide, usually in moments of dark despair. For most of us, life is worthwhile. If sharing his existence and life was God's purpose in creating the world, he succeeded well beyond our understanding.

God's purpose in creation is revealed in the way he fashioned all living creatures. He designed a mechanism in their genes to reproduce and share their being. The maple tree, besides producing syrup and colorful leaves, scatters thousands of winged seed every autumn. At the same time, the oak drops oodles of acorns; and the neighbor tree, its chestnuts. Watermelons provide seed for next year's crop. Fish lay millions of eggs in calm water; turtles bury theirs deep and safe in sandy shores. And man, not to be outdone by his fellow-creatures, deposits millions of sperm every time he makes love. Turtles and humans, maple trees and oak did not fashion their individual mechanism of procreation. Through nature, God put it in every living creatures. It bears his imprint, his stamp, his label. It is God's way of ensuring the continuation of his creation and the realization of its purpose.

On earth, we call someone who gives abundantly to others without personal gain "good, good hearted, generous and loving". We define love as "an unselfish benevolent concern for the good of others". This definition applies to God eminently since he created the entire universe apparently for no other reason than to share his being with us. To all creatures, he has given the greatest gift of all - EXISTENCE. Without it,

we would be NOTHING. We would never enjoy starry skies and sunsets, flowers and animals and children. Nothing would exist without God's creative force, intelligence and goodness. My belief in this powerful, intelligent and good God gives meaning to my life and a purpose that hopefully harmonizes with his.

## **Chapter Six**

### **My Study of Christ's Revelation (1941-1945)**

During my philosophy studies, I observed nature. I admired the reptiles and fish, the flowers and trees, the animals and birds. I focused upon the design of their being evidently fashioned for a definite purpose. As the mountain lake reflects the snow-covered slopes supplying its crystal water, so nature reveals its very powerful, intelligent and good Creator.

From the senses, reason learns nothing more about God. That simple knowledge, however, inspires genuine worship. The wonders of nature-not only the starry sky and the Grand Canyon but a bluebird and a baby - move us to acknowledge God as Creator worthy of reverence, gratitude, praise and yes, love. That acknowledgment, that simple heartfelt sentiment is the quintessence of religion in its most concentrated and purest form.

As I started theology, a thought struck me. If God wanted more than the basic worship inspired by nature, he would have to reveal more about his being and wishes. In any case, this revelation would have to be intelligible to all humans and therefore simple.

Jesus believed that too. He spoke to ordinary people in Galilee: carpenters, farmers and herders. He reached them on their level in everyday language. God's message was simple and Christ's teaching was equally simple. As Christ once said, people with the simplicity and humility of children would be able to understand and embrace his revelation.

Christ knew that, after his death, others would have to spread the message worldwide. For this, if necessary, he could have recruited renowned teachers and writers, philosophers and scholars. Instead, he chose fishermen and other ordinary people. He revealed to them God's total plan; he pointed out what was important; he showed them how to reach the human mind and heart.

The apostles learned their lesson well. Fifty days after Christ's death in 30 AD, they began to preach the gospel. Hearing Christ's message in everyday language, the crowds grasped the divine revelation and joined the Christians.

After the apostles died, the Christian community realized that other eyewitnesses of Christ's life should record his revelation for future generations. Between

64-75 AD, Mark, a missionary companion of Peter and Paul, wrote an account of Christ's life and teaching. He reported whatever the apostles considered important, every essential element of Christ's revelation. In my copy, Mark's Gospel covers 13 pages; nine report events and four contain the whole substance of Christ's teaching.

When asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest, the first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." On that occasion, he repeated the ancient golden rule: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you."

On the eve of his death, while expressing his last wishes to his apostles, he said: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. And this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus reduced his revelation of God to one word: love. Humans understand what love is and they know how to love. As Jesus said, with love humans worship God and fulfill his wishes. Love suffices and without it, nothing else matters. How very simple!

In class, I learned that the early Christians listened to Christ's simple message without questioning the apparent significance of his words. Later, other people, the intellectuals, delved into the implications of Christ's teaching and offered various explanations. Opposing opinions hardened into convictions that spread confusion and conflict within the Christian community.

These discussions echoed the earlier ones that prompted Jesus to ask the apostles, "Who do people say that I am?" From then until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, they kept asking "Who was Jesus?" Some denied that Jesus was divine like God the Father. Others said he was two persons: one divine; the other, human. Another group rejected the idea that Jesus was both divine and human. To quell these discussions, a series of popes and their bishops gathered in solemn councils and condemned the above views as heretical. They defined that Jesus was one person, divine like God the Father and truly human.

My professor taught that, despite the doctrinal definitions of the Roman Church and its condemnation of heresies, the question about the person and nature of Jesus smoldered for centuries. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it erupted again and burst into flames. The Albigenses declared that Jesus was an angelic spirit, disguised and appearing as a man. He was either God nor man. As this doctrine spread like wildfire across southern France, the Pope convened an ecumenical council and declared it heresy.

The Pope with his 3-tiered tiara and the bishops attired in red, all spewing anathemas, did not scare the Albigenses away. The exasperated Pontiff despatched Cistercian monks to preach a Crusade against the heretics. France's king launched a fierce war against the Albigenses and ordered their wholesale massacre. When the Crusade failed to exterminate "the vermin", a new Pope created a special court, the Inquisition, to investigate suspects. If convicted, they were handed over to the civil authorities who tried to persuade them to recant using torture when needed. The stake silenced the stubborn for good.

When I first read this bloody chapter of church history, I wondered how the popes could forget Christ's admonition to Peter, "Put away your sword." I felt that Christ alive would have rebuked the popes ordering them to close down the Inquisition and recall the Crusade.

Before the question regarding Christ's person was settled, another controversy exploded shattering the unity of the Christian Church forever. The discussion revolved around Christ's revelation. Regarding its transmission, some believed that the totality of his revelation was transcribed in the New Testament. Luther held that view. The Roman Church preached that some elements of Christ's revelation do not appear in the Scriptures. These were transmitted to the early church not in writing but orally. This oral tradition and the written Scriptures contain the full revelation of Christ.

A related question ignited fierce debates among theologians. Did Christ appoint one person or one institution as the final arbiter of revelation? Before studying this question in class, I reflected upon the revelation of God in nature. To help humans uncover the complexities of nature, God did not commission one scientific organization and its CEO to judge the truth of proposed opinions and theories. Nor did any scientist claim divine infallible guidance in his final conclusions regarding the nature and forces of the universe and its destiny.

In theology, however, the professor taught that the Roman Catholic Church claims full jurisdiction over the contents of God's revelation through Jesus. According

to the Church, God has commissioned the pope, whether acting alone or with the bishops in council to determine the full meaning of this revelation. With God's guidance, the pope's teaching of dogma and morals is infallible.

In April, 1521, Luther made his contrary position eminently clear before the Diet of Worms where the pope's rep gave Luther a last chance to recant his heretical teachings. Luther declared that Scripture and reason directed his conscience, not councils and popes. He concluded by saying, "Here I stand!"

Across Europe, many Christians, scandalized by the simony, nepotism, venality and immortality of the medieval Roman Church, followed Luther's lead. Since Rome based its jurisdiction over revelation principally on oral tradition. Protestants rejected both, just like Luther. Then using Scripture and plain reason, numerous groups reached various interpretations of revelations.

In 1942, I admired the Catholic Church. All the priests and nuns I knew were devout, devoted and good. They firmly believed the teaching of the Church and so did I. Cloistered in my Catholic cocoon, I couldn't fly about like a butterfly and sample the nectar of various flowers. If I had ventured out, where would I find the authentic interpretation of Christ's revelation among the 208 differing Christian denominations dispersed in 320,000 congregations throughout the United States? I was satisfied with Christ's simple revelation in the Gospel. To accept "love-God-and-your-neighbor", I could ignore the questions of papal infallibility and supreme jurisdiction over revelation.

Suddenly like a monstrous boulder tumbling onto a narrow mountain road, a serious problem crashed across my path to the priesthood. It had nothing to do with Christ, his revelation and the church. The problem was not theological; nor was it organic or physical. But it was real - as real as liver cancer.

June 13, 1942, started like every other day in the seminary: reveille at 5:15, then study followed by prayer and breakfast. By ten o'clock, it had become the worst day of my life. Its trauma plagued me for years. Very often I wished that dismal day had never dawned.

What happened? Did I witness a gruesome at the altar? Did a rabid dog crash through the stained glass window? Did a fire consume the choir? Nothing like that. During Sunday mass, attended by some hundred worshippers, I simply approached the altar to chant, not Gounod's Ave Maria but a few lines of Scripture on one musical tone. No big deal.

But that Sunday, I suddenly felt very nervous. My breathing became shallow. Soon I was gasping for air. The chant stopped. After a few deep breaths, I chanted a few more words. Then more silence. By now I was perspiring profusely and my knees quaked. Haltingly I struggled to the bitter end. I closed the book and returned to my seat flushed and ashamed. The witnesses probably forgot the incident within minutes. Me? Never. After 50 years, the specter of that June 13 reappears almost every time I face an audience and it torments me anew. It will die with me - not a moment sooner.

Again the choir master directed me to chant the epistle during mass. Hoping against hope to escape a panic attack, I took a deep breath, braced myself and began chanting. Before long, my lungs were struggling for air. Racked with fear, I stopped, caught a few deep breaths and tried again. After three such scary cycles, I finally reached the end and slunk back to my seat.

At first, panic plagued me in the chapel; later it struck me in class. At the altar, fear constricted my lungs and impaired my breathing. In the classroom, fear rattled my mind and froze my thoughts. One morning while answering an easy question in class, I wondered if fear would ever strike me here. Seconds after this dreadful thought, my breathing became shallow. I paused to breathe. I noticed the professor's puzzled look and the students watching me sweat and quake. My thoughts focused on their reaction. What must they be thinking? Since I couldn't talk, why not sit down? My mind was locked on my fear. Could I break the stranglehold that fear had on my brain? After a few moments, I did and hurriedly completed my answer. For the first time, fear had halted my thought process by locking my mind on the fear that racked my soul and wrecked my performance in public.

After repeated episodes, I realized that what I feared was the panic and the organic turmoil it caused: paralysis of the mind, laborious breathing, a throbbing heart and sweat glands gushing like geysers. I was afraid of being afraid. I feared fear. Besides, my fear was not caused by something outside me like a growling Doberman but by something inside me - an internal time bomb ready to explode every time I appeared in public. Could I defuse that bomb and dispose of it forever?

For an answer, I consulted priests on the staff. "Your stage fright will disappear quickly," one said. Another admitted, "A jigger of gin calms me." A third used sedatives. In my heart I rejected alcohol and drugs as a solution. The pulpit was no place for drunks and zombies. Nor did I accept the idea that my fear would "disappear quickly". It couldn't because it was entwined with my deep-rooted desire and firm resolve to become a priest in response to God's call.

I wanted to be a priest primarily to communicate Christ's message effectively. To draw crowds, as he did, and move them to believe, hope and love, I must preach well. But that would not be possible if fear paralyzed my brain and my lungs and turned me into a bungling, babbling preacher or silenced me for good. I dreaded that prospect like a looming specter poised to pounce upon my priestly mission.

My terrible fear of not being able to preach well sprung from my deep desire to preach well. One fueled the other. The only way to overcome this fear was not to give a tinker's damn if I preached badly. If I didn't mind looking like a sputtering idiot in the pulpit, gasping for breath and grasping for thoughts, then I wouldn't fear its happening and it wouldn't. But I could not stop wanting to preach Christ's message in an effective way for the people's sake and for mine. This was my agonizing dilemma.

The apostle Paul endured a similar agony during his missionary work. Epileptic seizures or severe malaria attacks struck him repeatedly and impeded his preaching. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul wrote: "a thorn was given me in the flesh...to torment me...Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you'." To get rid of my phobia, I repeated Paul's prayer and got the same answer.

In our distress, both Paul and I remembered Christ's agony in the garden of olives. Thinking of his imminent crucifixion, Christ was distressed and deeply grieved. He threw himself on the ground and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." The evangelist Luke adds, "In his anguish, his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." Christ knew what fear feels like; he too sweat and prayed for deliverance. The Father did not tell Jesus to escape. Christ did not tell Paul to abandon his mission. Nor did Christ let me know that I should no longer pursue the priesthood. So I resolved to follow the path of Paul and Christ even if it meant carrying the cross of fear all my life. For courage I would keep close to Christ and on occasion call upon Paul.

On the way to the priesthood, I struggled through frequent panic attacks, but finally reached ordination. On May 25, 1945, the Bishop of Cleveland, Ohio ordained me and sixteen seminarians in the cathedral crowded with proud parents and friends. The ceremony lasted two hours - that much longer than when Christ ordained his apostles by simply saying "Do this in remembrance of me."

After fourteen long years of study and training, I should have experienced relief and peace. Instead, I felt dread churning in my gut because this ordination was nailing me to a fearful cross until death. I got some comfort thinking that my agony made me more compassionate and therefore more like Christ.

Next day, May 26, I celebrated my first mass in the seminary chapel. My

two brothers, Leo a priest and Robert a seminarian, assisted me during mass, making it a family affair. Seeing his three sons at the altar, my dad was in seventh heaven. I simmered in my private hell. That day, however, because I didn't have to chant and preach, the demons in my lungs and brain went easy on me. But I didn't thank them. I thanked God.

On that day, although surrounded by relatives and friends, I missed the smile and love of my mother. She died in 1939 at the age of 42. While mothering her children, she suffered a lot. Every pregnancy further weakened her heart. She had deserved the happiness of seeing her sons celebrate mass. I would have liked to bless and kiss her in gratitude.

I also missed my brother, Armand. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Navy. Soon he boarded the destroyer Meredith to supply ammunition to the Pacific Islands. On Oct 15, 1942, a squadron of Japanese planes torpedoed the Meredith and strafed the sailors in the water. Armand died. "He's in heaven with your mother and they're celebrating with us," my dad said to comfort me. I believed him then.

A month later, I celebrated my first solemn mass in the city of my childhood, Chicopee, Mass. The church bells summoned priests and nuns, relatives and friends, everyone. Peonies, roses and ferns adorned the altar. The organ music shook the stained glass windows. As I walked down the central aisle following the altar boys in procession, I recalled that 20 years ago I frequently served mass at this very altar, carrying cruets of water and wine. Today at mass I would change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. I would make Christ of Galilee present in Chicopee. "Who believed that?" some may ask. Everyone in that church and 90% of Chicopee's residents.

Among the priests there, I looked for dear Father Chabot who first told me that God was calling me to the priesthood. When someone said he had died, I told my mentor in heaven that I needed him now more than ever. At communion time, I gave the consecrated bread first to dad and Robert. Then I went to the nuns, my devoted teachers. As token of my deep gratitude, I offered them the body of Christ - better than the apples and flowers many years ago. As I gave the host to Emma Theroux, I wondered whether she still remembered our last kiss on graduation night 14 years ago? A sacrilegious thought? No, just a fond innocent memory.

Later, I prepared a birthday surprise for my dad. The beautiful altar he had made for me on which to play mass 18 years ago, still adorned my old bedroom. With

special permission, I placed a true altar stone under the white altar cloth that my mother had sewed. I borrowed a chalice and priest vestments from church. When all was ready, Leo asked dad to come upstairs. When he saw me at the altar, tears welled in his eyes. Robert, who first served my play-mass at 4 years old, now served a real mass at the same altar. The pictures of mother and Armand on the wall faced the altar. I gave dad Christ's body and my blessing. In a one minute sermon, I thanked him for his goodness, patience and courage. I concluded with, "You have always been my hero." Then I invoked God's blessing upon him, the man I loved most on earth.

## Chapter Seven

### Priest and Professor in Cleveland (1948-1955)

The Church teaches that ordination marked my soul with a spiritual character that enabled me to offer mass, administer the sacraments and preach the Gospel. Freshly anointed with holy oil, I was ready and raring to go. After all, I was 27 years old. At that age, Jesus too must have longed to start preaching; yet he waited three more years. So did I after my superiors selected me to get a Ph.D. in Washington, DC. After three lonely years in lecture halls and libraries, I grabbed my diploma and hurried back to Cleveland. At long last, I could begin my ministry at thirty years old like Jesus.

I was now a priest of Christ and a professor of philosophy. Jesus, the model of priests, and Aristotle, the granddaddy of philosophers, were both heroes to me but on unequal pedestals. Preaching Christ's message ranked higher than teaching Aristotle's metaphysics. Aristotle explained the basic principles of beings but Jesus revealed the essential spirit of Christian life: love of God and neighbor.

Such love, Jesus had explained, can exist only in a compassionate heart that lends a hand to people in need. My compassion focused first on my students of philosophy. Their textbooks, all written by priests, were in Latin, a dead language spoken only in Rome's elite Catholic circles. My students could read the books only with dictionaries. Dealing with abstract ideas, such as existential independence, philosophy was difficult to comprehend even in English. Why cloud it in obscure medieval Latin?

Christ would not do that. In Galilee, he preached in the everyday language of the people, Aramaic, not in the Hebrew of the priests. Following Christ's example, I taught philosophy in English, the native language of the students. I also wrote an English textbook. I felt certain that the compassionate Christ approved of my efforts to make life easier for the students.

One of them was my brother, Robert, eight years my junior. After his ordination, we went our separate ways, rarely seeing each other. Forty-five years later, in February, 1994, he visited with me. Afflicted with lymphoma, Robert ruled out sightseeing but enjoyed reminiscing about our past. Albums of old photographs prompted our memories. Bob recalled his classes of philosophy and said, "During my

first year, I didn't plumb the complexities of being; I simply thumbed the pages of dictionaries, translating Latin into English. Then you came along and removed the veil of Latin and shed light on the basic principles of being. You transformed the study of philosophy from torture into pleasure." Six months after his visit, Bob died. I will never forget him nor his parting praise of my philosophy class in English.

In 1948 when I began my priestly ministry, the goblin of Latin reappeared in the rites of the Church. Rome obliged Catholic priests in the U.S. to celebrate the liturgy in Latin. I sympathized with the faithful who could not understand my readings and prayers during mass and baptism. They were being cheated of comfort and inspiration. Finding this unfair and looking for an escape, I reviewed the history of Latin in the liturgy.

During Christ's life, only the Roman occupiers spoke Latin in Galilee and Jerusalem. Pilate condemned Jesus to death in Latin and, while the Roman soldiers crowned Jesus with thorns, they mocked him in Latin. At the Last Supper, Christ celebrated the first mass not in Latin but in Aramaic, the native language of the apostles.

A few decades later, when Greek became the common language of Christians, the Church celebrated the mass and the sacraments in Greek. In time, when many Latin speakers joined the Church, their language crept into the liturgy. By 350 AD the western Christians who were affiliated with Rome generally celebrated mass in Latin. Thus, as Christ had preached in the language of the people, so the early Church celebrated its liturgy in the people's language, adapting to its changes.

In medieval times, however, the Church did not imitate Christ and the early Church. When Christians no longer spoke Latin, Rome refused to introduce their new languages into its liturgy. The Church cuddled its darling Latin centuries after it died out.

In my philosophy class, I scrapped Latin and used English for my lectures and textbook. Now, in the mass, I dreamed of replacing the Latin missal with an English version and of chanting the gospel and the "Our Father" in English. But if I did that, my dream would quickly become an ecclesiastical nightmare. The Church would order me to desist. Refusal might not send me to the rack or the stake like in "the good old days". The Pope would simply suspend me from all ministry: no mass, no preaching, no sacraments. Suspension would render me liturgically impotent, in which condition I could no longer help the people.

Prudence dictated that I comply with the letter of the law and utter every Latin word prescribed in the liturgy. The ironclad regulations controlling the mass left no chink to slip English into the Latin ritual. So I turned my attention to baptisms which were attended by few relatives and friends. In that cozy environment, I introduced

English not to replace the Latin words but to explain the Roman jargon. During the Latin prayers, the parents and friends focused on the baby's burps, whimpers and cries. But the moment I spoke English, the adults turned their attention to me. They enjoyed hearing that baptism made the baby a child of God who promised his protection on earth and offered happiness in heaven. The English words gave meaning to baptism and comfort and inspiration to the people. Neither the baby nor God objected to the English since God listens to all languages while the baby ignores them as so much gobbledygook.

When I introduced prayer services in English, I did not intend to supplant but to supplement the Latin liturgy. For example, on Good Friday, after faithfully observing the Latin ritual in the afternoon, I offered an evening memorial service in English. Before a large crucifix on the altar, the seminarians rendered a dramatic reading of Christ's passion. Using only Bible texts, the narrator described the events. Another student, dressed in a long white alb, spoke the words of Jesus. Others represented Peter and Judas, Caiphas and Pilate, all speaking the very words of the Bible. The seminarians in the stalls, representing the rabble, shouted, "Crucify him. Crucify him." After Jesus cried out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," the narrator read, "When the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home." Then the seminarians left the sanctuary in solemn silence and the worshippers went home deeply moved by the words they had understood.

At the altar and baptismal font, compassion for the people prompted me to get around the Church's regulations enforcing a Latin liturgy. Likewise in the confessional, compassion found a way to bypass the Church's strict prohibition of contraception. One evening, a woman entered my confessional and confided her problem with birth control. "Father," she said, "I have been married six years and I have four babies, two of them after carefully practicing rhythm to prevent conception. That method doesn't work with me. Last year, a priest said that my only alternative was abstinence. Father, my husband and I are only 26 years old; we cannot live as brother and sister. I love my husband, my children and God. I pray everyday; I go to mass on Sundays; but the priests refuse to give me absolution and communion which I miss very much. Is it hopeless?"

If I parroted the Church's condemnation of birth control, I would dash the woman's hope for forgiveness and peace of mind. My priestly vow bound me to obey the pope. But my first allegiance was to the compassionate Christ of the Gospel. I told the woman, "The Church teaches that birth control is wrong; but Christ never condemned it; he never mentioned it. In the gospel, Christ shows great compassion to all including sinners. After stopping the pharisees from stoning an adulterous woman, Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you.' Reread that story and others that reveal Christ's deep compassion. Then you may believe that the living Christ would also tell you, 'Neither do I condemn you. Do what's best for your family.' If you believe that, and well you may,

you can follow the voice of God in the conscience. The matter is strictly between you and Christ who loves you.” The woman said, “Thank you, Father; I believe you have just saved my marriage and my family.”

For penitents who practiced birth control, I could do little more than bolster their confidence in Christ’s love and in God’s voice, their conscience. But for people racked with fear, I could provide relief. I had no personal experience with birth control but a lot with fear control. This I would share with others.

In January 1950, I started a series of lectures entitled: “How I Control Fear and How You Can Too”. Two hundred people attended the first lecture which I opened saying, “Welcome. I am Father Fontaine. I’m neurotic. Seven years ago, stage fright struck me for the first time upstairs in the chapel. In that single attack, a phobia of public appearance took root in my psyche. Since then, I have carefully observed what bring on fear, what feeds it and how to control it.”

In the first lecture, some asked, “What causes fear?” I replied that when the mind perceives danger, the feeling of fear follows automatically with organic reactions, such as accelerated heartbeat and shallow breathing. A growling lion behind solid bars does not strike fear because he is not perceived as danger. Let him loose and the crowd panics. The perception of danger and the fear it arouses are inseparable.

“How can one stop thinking about danger?” another asked. “If a horror movie on TV disturbs you,” I said, “you switch to an inspiring or amusing show. Likewise, instead of dwelling on thoughts of possible cancer, focus your mind on a loving child. At work, concentrate on the task at hand. At play, keep your eye on the ball. In short, switch channels in your mind as on TV.”

In another lecture, I said, “Just as a printer can blow up a picture or reduce its size, our mind can exaggerate or minimize the danger perceived. When phobia of public appearance first struck me, I used to visualize full paralysis of my mind and walking off the altar. Now when the phobia flashes, even during these lectures, I consider it a passing embarrassment.” Then I suggested that they downsize danger to the minimum.

After elaborating these principles and providing many examples, I concluded each lecture by having the people repeat after me, “I will be the master of my life and not the slave of fear.” For my lectures, the people expressed their gratitude not only then but down the years. One lady, whom I have not seen in 45 years, has sent me a birthday card every year with thanks.

Helping many people with their phobias and other problems encroached

upon my other duties of professor and priest. I taught philosophy, I preached, I heard confessions. I prayed hours every day and associated with my fellow priests. Frequently I ran out of time and energy. "Slow down," my superior cautioned me. "You should decrease the number of people you counsel and help." I agreed in theory; but in practice, I couldn't drive people away.

During that quandary, I watched a movie about a shipwreck. Many frantic survivors had scrambled into a life raft. Hundreds more floundered in the rough water clutching ropes tied to the raft. As more arrived and the raft began to sink, the captain had to drive some away to certain death. He looked around, made the cruel choice of the doomed, and broke their grip on the raft.

I reviewed the people hanging on to me for dear life. To whom should I say, "I cannot see you any more. Please, don't come or call again." The mother of five children, whose father lingered in a mental hospital? A young lady, a mild schizophrenic without friends, whose only relief from fear was talking with me? An alcoholic who needed help to stay sober and save his job and family? Whose grip should I break and cast away? I didn't have the stomach to break hearts and dash hopes.

While pondering this dilemma, I read the Bible's story about the prophet Ezekiel. As God's hand touched him, a spirit in human form grabbed him by the hair and lifted him between heaven and earth and brought him to Jerusalem. Something like that would solve my problem, I thought with a weak smile. Risking a handful of hair, I could be whisked away from my myriad entanglements with people in need of spiritual and emotional support.

Within weeks, my superiors, who represented God in the congregation, selected me to become rector-superior of a seminary in Hyde Park, NY. The official order requested that I report there within a month. I said goodbye to everyone individually, assuring them that I had no say in the matter. It was God's decision, not mine. I was not rejecting them but obeying God. One evening in June 1955, I went to the station alone and boarded the train to New York. As it pulled out into the moonlight and rumbled away, I heaved a sigh of relief. I thanked God for the transfer as Ezekiel undoubtedly did 2500 years earlier.

## Chapter Eight

### Rector of a Minor Seminary (1955-1961)

After a sound sleep on the train, I awoke on June 16, 1955 when sunbeams peeked into my compartment and invited me to watch a golden sunrise. What a beautiful morning to start a six year assignment as rector of the minor seminary in Hyde Park, NY. Most Americans knew about this town because President Franklin D. Roosevelt was born here, romped about Hyde Park in his youth, and was buried here in a rose garden. Less than a mile away, the Blessed Sacrament Fathers had just bought an estate and relocated their minor seminary, my dear alma mater, from Suffern, NY.

The awe, that struck me as I first entered the Suffern seminary grounds 24 years earlier, did not compare with my admiration of the seminary campus in Hyde Park. Octogenarian oak trees stretched out their branches like welcoming arms. Yellow orioles and red-breasted robins whistled hearty hellos. Orange-crested woodpeckers beat rat-a-tat-tats on maples and elms. Squirrels ran up trees for a better view. Butterflies and bees toasted my arrival with nectar of roses. So it seemed to me on this glorious day, the first of my new life.

“This resembles the Garden of Eden,” I thought, wondering if Adam’s was prettier than mine. Adam must have bragged about the ancient Euphrates River watering his garden. But I was equally proud of the Hudson River lapping the western shore of my Eden.

A remarkable tree stood in the middle of Adam’s paradise: namely, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil whose fruit God forbade Adam to eat. For sometime, Adam tilled the garden alone. Eve came later and so did the serpent. When I first inspected my garden, I did not recognize the tree of knowledge of good and evil. I saw no one resembling Eve. Nor did I spot the ancient serpent coiled beneath the bushes biding his time.

In Hyde Park, the Catholic priests took good care of their parishioners. They did not need my help. Under my authority, a principal handled the High School students and the dean directed the collegians. Another qualified priest managed the curriculum. The teachers knew their job and so did the brothers who worked in the kitchen, the laundry and the garden. And so, after my morning coffee, if I didn’t want to spend the whole day just chasing rabbits out of the carrot patch, I must find something else to do.

One area required attention: the isolation of the seminary from the local

community. As in Suffern, this campus was off-limits to the local residents, including the children. Way back then, Hyde Park had no swimming pool. But the seminary did. During the summer months, when our students were absent, the water in the pool beckoned the children peaking through the bushes. When I accosted them, they pointed to the pool and asked, "Can we jump in?" How could I refuse such a reasonable request? That night I invited a few parents and made them a proposition. If they would organize a group to maintain clean water and supervise the children at all times, I would open our pool to Hyde Park's children during the summer months. On July 4, the children inaugurated their new pool splashing and laughing for hours. After supper, they returned to our campus with their parents and spread blankets on the ground. Soon firework rockets exploded into mammoth mushrooms of red-white-and-blue sparks that slowly drifted down and disappeared in the Hudson River flowing towards the Statute of Liberty. Later, a flurry of explosions ended the fireworks and also the seminary's isolation from the townspeople. We had become one community.

Before then, the seminary's isolation policy had kept the local residents off our campus. Unfortunately, the same spirit of isolation separated the alumni from their alma mater, which means "fostering mother". Most former students appreciated the fine education and care that good and devoted priests had provided. I knew that many desired to revisit their alma mater, some with their wives and children. It was high time to replace the no-trespassing signs with welcome mats for loyal alumni.

I formed a start-up committee of lay alumni. At their suggestion, we located as many alumni as possible and invited them to a big bash in Hyde Park. "Welcome to your alma mater. If you're married, bring your wife. Meet your old teachers and classmates. The party is on the house." Over one hundred alumni showed up. After hearty handshakes and many stories, they were served a scrumptious steak dinner followed by applesauce, the staple dessert of their alma mater. Later, the guests agreed to form an alumni association; they adopted by-laws submitted by the committee and elected officers, all laymen. In the afternoon, they formed groups by the pool or the oak tree and reminisced about Suffern. An alumnus reminded a priest who had pitched an annual game between teachers and students, "Remember the winning home run I hit off you in 1934?" Nodding the priest replied, "I also remember your three strikeouts the following year, when I got my revenge." Smiles and uninterrupted chatter testified that the alumni felt at home, bonded again as brothers. As teenagers, all had received the same intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development from a single alma mater. "She made us brothers back then," someone said. "Now she has brought us together again." Later, as they left, the alumni expressed their thanks and joy. Waving goodbye, an alumnus suggested, "Perhaps we can help you build a gym for the boys."

A great idea! But where could we get the money? The Franciscan Fathers in NY let us participate in their successful lottery. They would guarantee all the prize

money and we could keep six out of every ten dollars collected. Soon the alumni were selling thousands of tickets every month throughout the New England States. Impressed by this effort, a NY benefactor donated \$25,000 to jump-start the building. After an engineer approved my blueprints, tradesmen erected prefab metal pillars and trusses, poured the concrete floor, and constructed cinder block walls. The rest we would do ourselves. Father Roger Prefontaine, Brother Alphonse, Brother Fernand and I did most of the work. We got help from local friends, some parents of the students, notably John Werenko, and on occasion my devoted dad. They completed the building in time for the annual alumni reunion. We dedicated the gym to all engaged in its construction: townspeople and alumni, parents and staff, all bonded in friendship.

After three years of hard work, my garden looked even better than when I arrived. So did Adam's Eden become more beautiful after he tilled it awhile. At that time, Adam worked alone. Then "the Lord God said, 'I will make him a helper'. So the Lord God made a woman and brought her to the man who named her Eve."

In 1958, my Superior General, to me God's highest representative beneath the Pope, asked me to assist a woman related to priests in our religious order. Her alcoholic husband had abandoned the family. I begged off, saying that group therapy of Alcoholics Anonymous succeeded better than individual counseling. He insisted because of my past successes in Cleveland. In religious orders, as in the army, generals don't take "no" for an answer. That is how I met my Eve, whom I'll name Eva.

After hearing her story, I easily sympathized with her and wanted to help the family. I provided some money for rent and food as my superior had suggested. Before long, Eva's beauty and sweetness transformed my compassion into passion. Never before in my life had sympathy blossomed into love. I committed adultery, my very first intercourse - at 42 years old. When I began writing this story, years after Eva's death, I wanted to come clean, naming places and dates. Then I realized the possible harm to Eva's children and grandchildren. All remember her devotion, beauty and love. My account must not tarnish her memory.

In my quandary, I wondered how past historians handled adulteries? For guidance I read the biblical account of King David's love affair in 900 BC, the most famous adultery in history. In 2 Samuel 11:2, the Bible reports that, while walking on the roof of his house, King David saw a beautiful woman bathing. She was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. "So David sent messengers to get her, she came to him, and he lay with her." After she conceived, David arranged for Israel's enemies to kill her husband in battle. "When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house and she became his wife, and bore him a son." Samuel summarizes the essential facts of David's adultery in six sentences. Taking my clue from the Bible, I condense my story which has no historical value into five words: my adultery lasted two years.

Like many husbands who truly love their wives even during an adulterous affair, I had to keep my love of Christ separate from my affection for Eva. At the altar, I prayed to God. In the pulpit, I preached about God. In the confessional, I begged God's forgiveness for the penitents. In my ministry, I suppressed all thoughts of Eva to avoid mental conflict and anxiety. Likewise, when alone with Eva, I never spoke about Christ and my priestly ministry. To reduce conflict to the minimum, I behaved like a schizophrenic with two distinct personalities: paramour and priest. But acting like a psychotic did not exculpate me from guilt. The fault was mine from beginning to end.

In the evening, after a tryst with Eva, I often strolled through my Garden of Eden at the seminary. Among the trees and under the stars, I regained my composure and frequently communed with God as did Adam in his Eden. The Bible reports that Adam "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." I heard no footsteps but I knew God was there. Then the Lord God asked Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Adam blamed Eve and partly God. I never blamed Eva or God. Later, however, when my Superior General asked me, "How could you do it?", I answered, "Remember, you sent to the woman." Recognizing Adam's accusatory words to God, he returned my smile and said, "You rascal."

"Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate'." Eva never blamed the serpent for our affair. Our hearts were smitten not by Satan's poisoned fangs but by Cupid's amorous arrows.

After the Lord God rebuked the serpent and Eve, he said to Adam, "By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. You are dust and to dust you shall return." Then the Lord God drove Adam out of the Garden of Eden and placed a cherubim and a sword flaming and turning at the entrance to keep Adam out of the garden.

In Hyde Park, God did not walk in my garden and speak to me directly. The Provincial Superior in New York City, who represented God in my religious life, assigned me to our church in Manila and asked me to leave Hyde Park within a month.

He never mentioned my relationship with Eva. No reprimands. Only thanks for a job well done. Apparently no one knew about my love affair except God and he was not talking.

I broke the news to Eva. Despite her sorrow and apprehensions, she contacted a reliable family friend who promised to take good care of her and the children. After a long farewell embrace, I left Eva one evening in a thunderstorm. Raindrops mingled with my tears. According to the Bible, God often spoke amid thunder. In tonight's thunderclaps, however, I could not make out his words but the Lord God was probably repeating the ancient words that banished Adam from the Garden of Eden. In the lightning though, I recognized the flaming sword of Eden turning and forming the words: KEEP OUT. Like Adam, I left forever.

## Chapter Nine

### The Snake Pit of Hypocrisy (June 1961)

That night, my heart had head waged a tug-of-war between spiritual and natural values, between Christ and Eva. I awoke with a pounding headache. Later, when I called on my superior in New York City, he noticed my weariness and suggested that I travel by rail to San Francisco, by ship to Honolulu before flying to Manila. “After six years of hard work,” he said, “you deserve a long, luxurious rest.”

That evening, I boarded the Twentieth Century Limited for my cross-country ride. Traveling north, the train soon passed along my Garden of Eden in Hyde Park. Against the moonlight I saw the giant oaks waving in the wind. Farewell, dear old friends. Later a sleeping pill and the drone of the wheels helped me doze off and sleep until the sun’s wake-up call in Chicago.

After breakfast, I glanced through the newspaper looking for good news. Nothing caught my eye. After rolling through miles of Iowa farmland, I took out my breviary, the priest’s prayer book that contains psalms and other Bible readings. On that day, the breviary presented chapter 23 of Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus fires dire warnings at the Pharisees: “Woe to you, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. You snakes, you brood of vipers!” “HYPOCRITES”, “SNAKES” - those were harsh words from the gentle Jesus who normally spoke kindly to sinners. Jesus came down hard on Pharisees because he just could not stand charlatans, especially religious fakes.

Suddenly I realized that Christ’s warnings also applied to me. For two years, I looked like a celibate priest while committing adultery. I had become what I despised most and what Christ abhorred even more, a religious hypocrite. To engrave Christ’s words in my soul, I read again his whole diatribe against the Pharisees. Jesus loathed hypocrites. He did not choose hypocrites as apostles then, nor did he want hypocrites as priests now - surely not at the altar. The thought sent a shudder down my spine. Oh God! What shall I do? Before answering that burning question, I needed time to reflect. To calm myself before bedtime, I watched the Nebraska prairies basking in the sunshine tempered by billowy white clouds sailing across blue skies. The cattle grazed in peace. I envied their tranquil minds.

Leaving Denver at dawn, we soon climbed straight into the Front Range of

the Rockies, mounting a two-hour assault on the Continental Divide. We twisted past narrow canyons and around towering mountain peaks. Somewhere in this wonderland, I resumed yesterday's reflections stirred up by Christ's angry words against hypocrites. Suddenly I remembered Sinclair Lewis's famous caricature of a religious hypocrite in the novel entitled *Elmer Gantry*. The book exposes and ridicules the religious quackery of the early 1920s. Elmer embodies the traits of various charlatans who preached salvation from hellfire through revival meetings and almsgiving. After the services, however, Elmer found his salvation in liquor and women. At that time, the unscrupulous rascal amused me because he did not resemble anyone I knew. But now, while I shaved on the train, the mirror reflected the trait that characterized Elmer - hypocrite. Both of us pretended to be what we were not; Elmer, a true believer and I, a chaste priest. To dispel that disturbing image and fall asleep, I took a sedative. It warded off nightmares, such as joining my look-alike in brothels and bars.

As the Golden Gate Bridge began to glow in the sunrise, we arrived in San Francisco. I overheard the tourists planning their day's activities: riding the cable car, zigzagging down Lombard Street's perfumed gardens, and dining at the Fisherman's Wharf. In no mood for sightseeing, I hailed a taxi and drove to the pier where the cruise ship bound for Hawaii welcomed passengers. I settled in my private cabin, looked out the porthole, and waited for the ship's departure that would wrench me further from my very dear friend.

On deck I observed a loud, enthusiastic send-off. Laughing and drinking champagne, passengers blew good-bye kisses and colorful streamers to family and friends on shore. Standing beside me, a 7-year-old boy waved at an elderly couple below. "Who's that?" I asked. "My grandparents," he replied. Spotting my roman collar, Andy said, "You're a priest, right? So's my dad on your left." I turned and shook hands with Father George, an orthodox priest, and his wife, Alexandra. They were a lovely couple. When the dinner gong rang, they invited me to join them at their table.

After a hearty meal and convivial conversation, Andy coaxed his mother to the game room. George and I leisurely walked the deck. "How did you and Alexandra meet?" I asked. "We were high school sweethearts," he answered. "I continued to date her not only in college but also later while studying for the priesthood in the seminary. A year before my ordination, we married in a church full of relatives and friends. Later they watched the bishop consecrate me a priest. Alexandra sat in the front row pregnant and proud. Within months, the bishop assigned me to a parish. The congregation welcomed me and my family with joy. When I presented Alexandra and Andy to my flock, they applauded. I never felt shame or guilt about my family because the orthodox church considers the married life normal and moral for all humans, including priests. I feel sorry for Roman Catholic priests who are not allowed to marry before ordination. Without a lifelong commitment to a lovely wife, how can priests resist the charm of

women? And if a priest should fall in love, what can he do?"

"Nothing" I replied. "He is doomed to misery and hypocrisy? Everyone knows that my Church doesn't ordain married men nor let priests marry. Therefore when a priest celebrates mass, the faithful believe that he is celibate and chaste. If he were not, the bishop would suspend and remove him. The people know that and so does the priest. Therefore, he cannot declare his love publicly nor reveal his sinister secret to anyone. The hypocrite pretends to be celibate."

At that moment our conversation came to an abrupt end when Alexandra and Andy returned ready to retire. Andy was beat. After we exchanged good-nights, my mind returned to the conclusion of my talk with George. A Roman Catholic priest can never legitimately love a woman and make love with her because a law forbids the ordination of married men. I wondered who had laid down that harsh, inhuman law. That burning question begged an answer - but not tonight. Before bedtime, I needed to calm my mind by communing with the stars.

As the outer rim of the Big Dipper directed my eyes to the North Star, thousands of stars turned my mind to their distant past. Born billions of years ago, they had twinkled over the Garden of Eden as they did tonight over the Pacific Ocean, the same stars. Before Eve appeared on earth, the lonely Adam may have gazed upon them looking for solace like me tonight.

Seeing his loneliness, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper as his companion." To ensure that they got and stayed together, "God made them male and female." He endowed them with a strong physical and emotional attraction to each other because God wanted man to love woman. "God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'." God would perpetuate his creation of humankind through human procreation. Clearly God has no problem with human sexuality which he created and blessed. "God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good."

I thanked the stars for taking me back to the Garden of Eden. My stars were the same as Adam's and so was my God the same as Adam's: loving and good. Since God does not change, I felt confident that in time he would forgive and bless me as he did Adam. That night, however, I did not request a helpmate like Adam's - that would have been testing Providence a bit much. I would trust God implicitly.

After a peaceful sleep and a jump-start cup of coffee, I embarked on an expedition throughout the Bible searching for a divine revelation that demanded celibate priests. I first searched through the Old Testament which reports God's revelations to his

chosen people, the Israelites, during thousands of years from Adam to Christ. I soon checked with Abraham who talked a lot with God. No, God never required celibacy for priests. Then I questioned Methuselah who kept a mental diary of God's revelations during his 969 years. According to all the patriarchs before Moses, God never expressed a preference for celibate priests.

Continuing my expedition, I reached Mount Sinai and met Moses. I asked him whether God had intimated that a celibate priest pleased him more than a married priest. Was the ritual service of a married man less acceptable because he loved his wife? In answer, Moses pointed to his chapters 25-30 in Exodus. There the Lord described the kind of worship that he wanted from the Israelites. He prescribed in great detail the material, dimensions and decorations of the furnishings, such as the altar and the precious ark of the covenant. God was meticulous or, as someone said, "fussy". With the same care, God chose the ministers of the altar. If celibate priests would give him additional glory, God could have selected them for worship. Instead, God said to Moses, "Anoint your brother, Aaron, and his sons. Consecrate and ordain them so that they may serve me as priests. This will be a perpetual ordinance."

In these simple words, God established the custom of ordaining married men to serve him as priests. Then the Israelites handed down God's ordinance to their descendants as part of their culture. With this tradition, the Israelites wandered in the Sinai deserts until they reached the Jordan River around 1200 BC. Carrying high the ark of the covenant, married priests led the Israelites into the Promised Land.

During the following 12 centuries until the birth of Christ, did God have second thoughts about married priests? Did he consider replacing them with celibates? For an answer I continued my search in the Bible. I checked with all seventeen prophets, such as the renowned lion tamer Daniel, and Jonah famous for his fabulous fish story. None reported that God had changed his mind about married men. They remained his choice to serve as priests up to the birth of Christ. Reaching that conclusion, I closed the Old Testament with a huge sigh of relief - God was on the side of married men.

Feeling fatigue, I walked wearily up the stairs to admire the stars that linked me to the patriarchs and prophets as well as to Jesus and his apostles. All of us shared these very stars. Tonight they would first relax me and then inspire me to search throughout the Gospels until I found the answer to the question: did God proscribe

through Christ what he had prescribed through Moses: namely, the priestly ordination of married men? Such a reversal of policy seemed unlikely. But I must be sure and I had to know tonight. I hurried to my cabin, grabbed a bottle of Coke and opened the Gospel of Mark.

In the opening chapter, Jesus began his ministry not by performing miracles but by choosing apostles. He could have selected John the Baptist, a celibate who lived in the wilderness and survived on locusts and wild honey. Instead Jesus went to the Sea of Galilee where fishermen mended their nets. His first choice was Simon Peter, a married man. Then he selected eleven other men, all of whom were already married or would be later, according to Paul (I Cor.9:5). In step with his Heavenly Father who had chosen married men for priests, Jesus selected them for apostles. Married men could serve them just fine.

After his Ascension, however, Jesus chose another apostle, Paul, a confirmed bachelor. By so doing, Jesus did not terminate the tradition of choosing married men for sacred rituals. He showed that the choice of apostles and their successors (popes, bishops and priests), should be based not on their marital state but on their faith in the person and message of Christ. He welcomed celibates to join married men in the dedicated service of God.

When Christ looked into the future, he saw his apostles selecting their successors. They would naturally follow the tradition that God originated when he chose married men for his priests and that Christ embraced when he selected married men for apostles. The apostles would follow that divine tradition rooted in human nature and choose married men to become priests. Thus, if Christ wanted to bar married men from ordination in the future, he should speak up now clearly and emphatically. But in all his public sermons and in his conversations with the apostles during the Last Supper, after his resurrection and before his ascension, Christ never revealed a preference for celibate priests. He never even mentioned clerical celibacy as if it never crossed his mind. Likewise the apostles never thought of restricting priestly ordination to an eccentric clique of celibates. As the apostles established new churches in an ever widening circle, they chose married men to head the new Christian communities. Like Christ, they followed the divine tradition of ordaining married men.

At midnight, bleary-eyed from perusing the Bible for hours, I reached a clear conclusion. Just as spring water originates on a mountain slope and spreads into the valley, so the tradition of ordaining married men, which God initiated on Mount Sinai, followed the Israelites into Palestine and reached Galilee. There Christ espoused

God's tradition and chose married men for apostles. Later the apostles established churches and ordained married men to head those communities. With a sigh of relief, I closed the Bible with a pat for revealing God's mind on the matter. Now I could sleep.

In the morning I joined Father George's family for breakfast. They were enjoying their vacation "with not a worry in the world," Alexandra said. What lucky people! After breakfast, I told George that I needed information about the Orthodox Church. He gladly stayed as Andy scampered away with his mother in tow.

"For two days, George, I have observed your family's affection and compared it with my loneliness. Married life is clearly more wholesome and happier than my celibate life. After rereading the Bible yesterday and confirming that God and Christ never required celibate priests, I'd like to review with you the origin and evolution of clerical celibacy. The church history I learned in the seminary was probably biased for the Roman Catholic Church and against the Orthodox Catholic Church."

"And my history lectures and books," said George, "were undoubtedly prejudiced in the opposite direction. Together we have a better chance to get a balanced view."

"Around the year 300," I began, "nineteen bishops held the Council of Elvira in southern Spain. They issued many harsh regulations, including clerical celibacy. They forbade bishops and priests to have wives and children."

"What grumpy old men!" said George with a smile. "In 325, their ringleader, Bishop Hosius, came East and attended the first Ecumenical Council of the Church in Nicaea. He tried to persuade the 300 bishops gathered there to impose clerical celibacy throughout Christ's Church. But the bishops, mostly from Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, voted him down and approved the ordination of married men. The priests were pleased."

"But the pope was piqued," I said. "In the year 366, his successor, Pope Damasus I, fired the first shot against a married clergy. The decretal stated: 'Marital acts are a defilement and repugnant to the sacred ministry.' Then his successors launched a barrage of decretals against the ordination of married men. In tow with Rome, Catholic bishops in Spain, France, and Italy convened Councils and parroted the papal decrees."

"Later," said George, "as the Western bishops and popes put the screws on their priests to be celibate, the moans of the oppressed reached the 165 bishops of Eastern Europe and Asia Minor gathered in Constantinople for a synod in 692. To spare

their priests the misery of celibacy, the bishops again approved the ordination of married men. Then like this cruiser on the calm Pacific, the Orthodox Catholic Church sailed smoothly for 1300 years with no one making waves about clerical celibacy.

“While your Church allowed a married priesthood,” I said, “mine demanded clerical celibacy. Rome’s novel course was not a leisurely sail on placid seas but a rough ride down treacherous rapids. The worst twists were the licentious conduct of cardinals and popes. Despite the scandals, the Church stood firm on celibacy.”

“I remember,” said George, “that in 1525, the priest Martin Luther further rocked the boat when he married. He said that the Scriptures did not require celibate priests nor did it authorize the Church to enact new laws, such as clerical celibacy.”

“A few years later, I said, “during the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church agreed with Luther that Scripture did not require celibate priests. But it reaffirmed its right to enact new laws absent in the Scriptures. For centuries both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Catholic Church stuck to their guns: the first opposing and the second approving the ordination of married men.”

“If I recall rightly,” said George, “the decreasing number of priests in the Church alarmed the bishops at the Council. Clerical celibacy was taking its toll. To ensure a steady supply of priests, the Council ordered bishops to create seminaries. Young boys as young as thirteen were recruited and secluded from the world and brainwashed to believe whatever the Church taught. In jest, a friend called seminaries, ‘Trent traps’ and explained, ‘to lure the boys, the Church offered free housing and education. But later, during ordination, the trap snapped shut and held the priest captive for life’.”

“Your friend has a wry sense of history,” I said, “but he’s right about a priest’s ties to Rome. He’s on a leash for life. When a priest struggles with chastity, what choices does he have?”

With a smile, George said, “He can castrate himself like Origen, the early church father. He can live alone in the desert like the hermit, Jerome. He can love women openly like Pope Alexander VI who fathered a number of children or he can love women secretly while wallowing in slimy hypocrisy.”

“A priest must avoid that snake pit at any cost.” I concluded, “even if he must jump ship.”

In a flash, my course of action became clear. My plane for Manila would leave in a few hours. The women there would be attractive and charming and I would be

human and vulnerable. For me, Manila could soon become another snake pit of hypocrisy. There was no more time to reflect and discuss but only to decide and act.

After bidding a hurried aloha to George, Alexandra and Andy, I walked down the gangplank, hailed a taxi and rushed to the airport. I changed my ticket from Manila to New York. Within an hour, I boarded the plane eastbound and changed the course of my life forever.

Later as the cabin lights dimmed, I looked out the window. The sky was dark like my future. Across the aisle, a child hugged a security blanket and her mother clutched a rosary. I held my Bible, now my only connection with God.

I trusted God. He had made man and woman to love and make love. God had chosen married men to be his priests. I didn't ask God why he allowed popes to impose on priests a law so contrary to nature. God lets humans determine their history. He did not intervene when Pilate condemned Jesus to the cross; nor did he interfere when popes condemned priests to celibacy. If I lacked Christ's courage to stay on the cross till death, God understood.

Christ too understood. Like his heavenly father, he knew human nature and chose married men for apostles. He never demanded celibate priests. If he did not approve of my jumping ship, he would forgive me, as he forgave Peter who also went AWOL for a time.

For more comfort and courage, I opened my Bible at Psalm 23:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He restores my soul and leads me in right paths.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff - they comfort me.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

David's words soothed my soul and helped me fall asleep.

## Chapter Ten

### A Fish out of Water (July 1961-March 1962)

At breakfast, when the stewardess offered me coffee, I would have preferred an amnesia-inducing drug to forget the memories of my priestly life. They now evoked only regret and guilt. Until I could recall them with pleasure and pride, I would have to bear them like a crown of thorns.

With that mental baggage and a duffel bag, I left the plane, boarded a bus for Grand Central Station and then a train to Albany, NY. I chose that city because it was close to family and friends in case of emergency and far enough from anyone who might recognize me. I had no time to answer a thousand questions and explain my actions.

With only \$394 in hand and not a penny elsewhere, I must find work fast. I scanned the classified page for “Help Wanted”. One ad caught my eye: “carpenter needed to remodel homes; transportation and tools provided; start tomorrow.” I hurried to the shop for a look-see. The small company installed customized additions to homes in a day. After the client approved a plan, carpenters in the shop constructed the addition in sections. The next morning, a team arrived on site, cut through the existing roof, and erected the walls and roof. Then they nailed plywood on the floor and plasterboard on the walls. By late afternoon, the room was finished. That kind of work I had learned in Hyde Park when we remodeled buildings in the seminary and built the gym.

Since I had no recommendations and no record of employment, I told the owner my story. A Catholic would have dismissed me quickly, afraid to displease the pope. Luckily the owner was a Jew. Like the Good Samaritan in the Gospel, “he was moved with pity.” Although he realized that I would not be satisfied for long with this humble work, he offered me the job.

The following day, after eight hours of hard work, I returned to my rented room, ate canned spaghetti and rested my weary bones. I soon recalled my sacred priestly ministry. At the altar, I had consecrated and transformed bread into the living body of Christ. In the confessional, I assured penitents that God had forgiven their sins. In the pulpit, I inspired hundreds of faithful with God’s message of love and his promise of heaven. For fifteen years, I carried on Christ’s work. I represented him.

The loss of that glorious work grieved me deeply. For solace, I sought sympathy from someone who had experienced similar sorrow. I soon found him in the

garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus said, “I am deeply grieved, even to death.” But he never revealed the somber thoughts flooding his soul with sadness. He let Peter and us surmise.

In my frame of mind, I imagined that Christ feared his impending crucifixion and the end of his wonderful ministry. He would no longer make the lame walk, the mute talk, the deaf hear, and the blind see. He would never again preach and reveal God’s love and inspire people to love one another. That glorious and merciful work would all end tomorrow on the cross. After experiencing near-fatal grief, Christ surely understood mine.

Besides mourning the demise of my ministry, I also suffered a deadly loneliness. Seeking sympathy, I followed Jesus when soldiers and police dragged him to the house of the high priest. Caiphas condemned Christ as deserving death. Quickly people spat in his face, struck and mocked him. Then the police put Jesus in a holding cell for the night - alone.

His disciples had deserted him. Later, when Peter sneaked into the high priest’s courtyard, he did not defend Christ; he denied knowing him. Christ’s close friends, such as Lazarus living nearby, did not come to support and comfort him. Nor did his mother Mary. Nobody ever felt more lonely than Jesus that night. After this heartbreaking experience, Jesus better than anyone else could understand my loneliness.

In Christ’s agony, “an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.” Similarly one evening, an angel appeared at my door. Mine had neither wings no halo, only Eva’s sky blue eyes glistening with tears. “Hi,” she said. “can I come in?” Sobbing I wrapped my arms around her in a long embrace. When I could speak, I said, “God sent you to me.” With a sheepish smile, Eva said, “That’s news to me.”

On the love seat, clasping her hands, I asked her, “How are you and the girls?” She answered, “After you left, I cried buckets. When the tears ran dry, I looked for a job and got one as secretary. Since then we have managed. The girls are well and at this moment they are visiting their grandma in the Bronx. I took this opportunity to come and see how you are.” With a quizzical smile, she added, “and to test the waters in Albany. Say, whatever happened on your way to San Francisco? Did the train crash into the Rockies?”

“No,” I replied, “I crashed into Christ’s warnings to hypocrites. He called us ‘snakes and vipers’.”

“Then you must have changed course on the ship. Why? Did you run into an iceberg?”

“No, I ran into Father George embracing his wife on deck without guilt. He was an Orthodox priest.”

“You were ordained in the wrong Church,” Eva said with a wistful smile. “Any chance for a transfer?”

“Too late, I replied, “the Orthodox Church allows a man to marry only before, not after ordination. In the Roman Catholic Church, I’m caught in the trap of celibacy for life.”

“Only if you stay in that Church. Why don’t you...” I interrupted her question with a kiss. “That’s a nice way to shut me up.” Soon we went to bed and made love.

The following morning, Eva shopped to dress up my drab apartment. She hung window drapes of reddish and golden leaves. She enlivened a dull wall with a painting of a mallard and his mate flying above their ducklings in greenish sunlit water. “Why that painting?” I asked. “To help you think positively,” she answered. For dinner, Eva decorated the dinner table with roses and candles. In a day, she transformed my cold bachelor quarters into a home.

For one week, Eva made every effort to lift me out of depression. Despite her devotion, beauty and humor, the loss of my priestly life and friends kept me submerged in grief. I felt no love, no joy. I was dead inside. The angel in Gethsemane could not give Jesus any joy, only strength to endure his agony. Likewise my angel could only help me bear my oppressive depression.

One evening, cuddled in my arms, Eva said, “In the Church, you were so happy. You comforted and cheered people; you gave them courage and hope; you had a great sense of humor; you were a lot of fun. Now you don’t laugh; you’re gloomy and dull. You’re like a fish out of water, sure to die unless it flaps back into the water.”

“Are you saying that my only hope for a happy life is to flop back into the Church?”

“That or evolve into a bird and fly away from the Church. Luther did and millions more. Why can’t you? Shuck your Catholic gills.”

“You mean my faith in the Church. I can’t scrap it like a cap. I imbibed this faith first in my Catholic home, then in a school run by nuns, and finally in the seminary controlled by priests for years. That faith permeates my mind like a deep dye,

coloring my thoughts and values, my character and conduct. I just can't rinse it out."

"Nor can I rinse out permanent dye. But I can let my hair grow out in its natural color and in time get rid of the artificial color. Why can't you grow out of your faith?"

"Not in my present frame of mind. Perhaps I should return to the Church and try to rekindle the fervent faith of my early priesthood. At that time, I resisted the attraction of women and remained chaste."

"Until I came around?"

"By then my faith had dimmed quite a bit. I should try to regain its brilliance. If, within three years, my faith in the Church isn't glowing again, it will have burned out."

"Meanwhile you have a fatal attraction to women. We're everywhere. Where can you go to escape us and avoid falling back into the snake pit of hypocrisy?"

"Where women are not attractive to me. Perhaps in rural black Africa."

"Isn't your brother Robert a missionary in Uganda? Why not join him? He could alleviate your loneliness and perhaps also your depression."

"Good idea," I said, "I'll call my religious superior tomorrow."

"Call him now," she said. Pushed by Eva, I called Father Laverdiere in New York and said, "This is Ray. The prodigal wants to return home. Will you take me back?"

"With great, great pleasure," he said. "Where would you like to go?"

"To Uganda, if possible."

"Perfect," he said. "I have to replace your brother, Bob, who is not well and must return to the States. You could finish his plans for the new church and supervise its construction. I really need you there."

"Thank you," I said. "Please tell Robert that I'll be there by Easter." When I hung up, Eva smiled and said, "It looks like the fish is flapping back into the water."

Later in the evening, Eva said, “When I arrived, you said that God had sent me to comfort and strengthen you. I have accomplished my mission. It’s time for this angel to return home.” We soon went to bed and made love for the last time. In the morning, I drove Eva to the station. After a long embrace, she boarded a train and rode out of my life. Bleary-eyed I drove to work and endured a lonely day.

On April 20, at noon, I entered a church and spent hours reading the Gospel account of Christ’s passion and death. It was Good Friday. I had done this ever since my boyhood. At three o’clock, after kissing the crucified figure of Christ, I left the church and hurried to catch a train to New York and later a bus to the airport. Around eight, I boarded the plane and headed for Uganda via Rome.

After dinner, I closed my eyes and again recalled Christ’s passion. I remembered Matthew’s words, “The soldiers twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on his head. Then they spat on him and struck him on the head.” While enduring that pain, Jesus foresaw more suffering ahead: the heavy cross cutting into his shoulder, the nails piercing his hand and feet and the excruciating agony on the cross.

Through the spittal and blood dripping from his brow, Jesus saw the rainbow of his resurrection. His dead body would live again. He would see, hear and feel once more. Forty days later his glorified body would ascend into heaven to enjoy eternal life.

Like Christ, I too foresaw intense distress ahead. I must learn an entirely different language and adapt to a foreign culture. Unlike Jesus, however, I saw no rainbow of sure victory. I could only hope to revive my faith in the Church and enjoy a renewed spiritual life.

Amidst these reflections, the stewardess offered me a nightcap -a glass of red wine. Her kindness reminded me of the compassionate Roman soldier who had “held a sponge full of wine to the mouth of Jesus.” After Jesus “received the wine, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” With that mournful memory, I ended the day and closed that chapter in my life. Dead tired, I buried my head in a pillow and eventually fell asleep.

## Chapter Eleven

### My Mission in Africa (April 1962-August 1967)

Soon after sunrise, we landed in Rome on April 21, too late for the onward flight to Uganda. I would spend Holy Saturday in Rome, privately remembering Christ's layover in the tomb. With those thoughts, I visited the burial site of the apostle Peter. His remains lay deep below the altar of St Peter's basilica. While hundreds of tourists admired the marvels above, I stood alone beside Peter's grave and communed with Christ's intimate friend.

I recalled that Jesus preached to the people seated on the grass amid wild flowers with trees shading the sunny sky. The church of Jesus was simply nature as designed by God. Christ's message was also simple: love God and your neighbor; be honest and just; your heavenly Father watches over you and awaits you in heaven.

In contrast, through the years the pope's basilica upstairs became the largest Christian church in the world. Successive popes added a magnificent dome, a gilded baldachin, burial vaults, statues and mosaics. The basilica was elaborate. So was the doctrine and moral code of the Church developed during centuries. It filled thousands of books, including some regulations unthinkable in Peter's time, such as Latin in the liturgy and celibacy for its priests. I knew that Peter did not applaud this elaboration of Christ's simple church and message. It bothered me too.

What troubled me even more was the fabulous claim of the Roman Catholic Church based on two gospel texts. First, Jesus said, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. The gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." (Mt 16:18-19) And then just before ascending to heaven, Jesus said to the eleven apostles, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news (the gospel) to the whole creation." (Mk 16:15) On that scriptural basis, the Roman Catholic Church claims that the pope is the only legitimate successor of Peter and that only the Catholic bishops in union with the pope are the true successors of the other apostles. Thus whatever they teach regarding Christ's revelation must be believed and whatever they order must be obeyed.

I did not ask Peter if that was true. I knew that he would not agree if it were false; nor could he deny it, surely not here so close to the pope. Besides, as my sense of humor suggested, a negative answer expressed aloud here in Vatican City could

cause an earthquake or a cave-in that would bury me alive next to Peter. With a smile I left Peter in peace. I would look elsewhere for a definitive answer to this burning question. That would be my mission in Africa.

Early Easter morning, I left Rome. The plane rose through a shroud of greyish clouds into glorious sunshine. The scene symbolized Christ's resurrection. Did it also portend my freedom from doubts regarding the Church's supreme authority over divine revelation? Was it legitimate or usurped? Only time would tell.

To distract myself from a crowded, uncomfortable plane, I closed my eyes and let my imagination run wild. I saw myself paddling from Rome to Uganda: first down the Tiber River, then across the Mediterranean Sea to Egypt, next up the Nile River to Lake Victoria bordering Uganda. A canoe trip all the way would have been feasible; but a plane ride was faster. Within six hours, we landed at Entebbe airport.

Among hundreds of black people, Robert stood out because of his white cassock and skin. Smiles connected us. Soon I embraced my favorite brother and best friend. Then we squeezed into a Volkswagon "beetle" and started our ninety-mile drive to the town of Masaka, where the Blessed Sacrament Fathers managed a mission.

On the way, I first told Bob my experience in Hyde Park and then I explained my personal mission in Africa: namely, to reevaluate the authority of the Church. "But my official mission, as you know, Robert, is to help or replace you in building a beautiful church in Masaka."

"I'm burned out," Robert confided. "I want to leave as soon as possible. Then you can complete my plans, change them or scrap them, whatever you think best."

At that moment, we crossed the equator, indicated by a roadside marker. "From this point," said Robert, "you won't see the Big Dipper pointing north. From here, a new constellation, the Southern Cross, points due south.

"Perhaps this new view of heaven will inspire a new vision of the Church," I said.

Then I asked Robert where I should start my work. "Before answering that question," he said "let me ask you another. In our childhood, what bogeyman did we fear?"

"The black man," I replied.

"Guess who's the bogeyman here," Bob asked.

“The white man?”

“Right,” said Robert, “and for the same reason. Since the black people never spoke to us, we never knew them. They scared us. Here in the villages, the children rarely see white men and never with them. The children don’t know them and therefore fear them. Unless you learn the local language, you won’t be able to speak with the children and you’ll be their bogeyman.”

“Where are the best teachers of Luganda, at the Makerere University?”

“No, they’re in rural villages where children know no English. I suggest you live five months in the village of Kalungu with Father Perinier who has been a missionary there for eighteen years. He speaks Luganda fluently.”

“But who will teach me Luganda?”

“The children will. They’ll teach you the words, how to pronounce and use them, while the dictionary will show you the spelling and a grammar book, the syntax.”

“For five months? I’ll go crazy from inaction.”

“Study and speak Luganda during the day and in the evening reflect upon your religious problem. Who knows, you may find a partial answer in Kalungu.”

About then, we arrived at our mission in the city of Masaka. The superior, Father Roger Pageot, a kind man, welcomed me warmly. After supper, Robert explained his blueprints of the church. Then we walked outdoors under my new heaven and reminisced. Three days later, we parted and headed for two totally different worlds. Robert flew to New York City with its skyscrapers and 7,000,000 people, while I bicycled to Kalungu with lowly mud houses sheltering 700 people.

The houses had thatch roofs, dirt floors, and wall openings that shutters closed at night. Families cultivated gardens, growing plantain, their staple food, and other vegetables and fruit. They grew coffee for cash. Nature blessed them with fertile soil, mild weather and plentiful rain. Nobody was rich in Kalungu, nor was anyone needy.

The pastor shared the simple lifestyle of his people. His house resembled theirs. He grew the same vegetables and fruit. Like the natives, he ate mashed plantain with peanut or bean sauce. Three times a week, he added a little meat or fish. In the evening a kerosene lamp lit up his bible and breviary. He went to Masaka about twice a

month and to France every eight years. He led a simple life - like Jesus in Nazareth.

In the humble church, also built of mud and thatch, he preached the gospel of Jesus. Like the Master, he based his teaching on two commandments: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. He repeated Christ's parables and explained them with homespun examples from life in Kalungu. Like Jesus, Father Perinier preached sermons as simple as his lifestyle.

One evening, after supper, I asked Father how he explained the complex dogmas of the Church, for example the Immaculate Conception of Mary. "Do you tell them that humans are born with an inclination to sin because of Adam's original sin? Do you explain that, without a special sanctifying grace, they cannot be children of God and enter heaven? Do you inform them that humans normally receive that grace only after birth at baptism but that God gave it to Mary at the moment of her conception? Do you tell them all that?"

"Jesus never spoke about it; nor did Peter; nor do I. None of that ratiocination, called theology, enlightens and inspires the people. Christ's simple message suffices."

One afternoon, Father Perinier suggested that we visit the Protestant mission in a neighboring village. The pastor, Mark MacArthur, welcomed us and introduced his wife, Martha, and their children, James and Jane. What a lovely family! A plantain grove and a vegetable garden surrounded their mud and thatched house. Like Perinier the pastor preached the Gospel message, using Christ's parables and some of his own. On the way home, I asked Father Perinier whether he envied the family of his neighbor? "With children and a wife, I would not be lonely in the evening."

After supper, I took my solitary walk under a clear sky. I saluted the Southern Cross and asked for direction. It pointed to chapter eleven of the Acts of the Apostles where the people who accepted Christ's message and followed his way of life were called "Christians". In my book, both Father Perinier and Pastor MacArthur were true Christians, more so than many popes and bishops in the Middle Ages. These lived in palaces and enjoyed all the luxuries of princes. Moreover they polluted the pure message of Jesus with tons of obtuse theological theories. Clearly, whoever accepts and

follows Christ's way of life is a Christian. A star is a star regardless of any connection with a constellation; likewise, a Christian is a Christian regardless of any church affiliation. A Christian need not be Roman Catholic, nor Episcopalian, nor Lutheran, nor Baptist, just someone who embraces Christ's spirit and his way of life. Enlightened by the Southern Cross, I soon retired and quickly fell asleep.

A month later, after testing my ability to converse and hear confessions in Luganda, Father Perinier said, "I'll tell the bishop you're ready to move on." The following day, after thanking Father and my young language teacher, I jumped on my bicycle and raced back to Masaka.

Situated on a plateau, midway up a long hill, the city of Masaka was flanked by two large villages: Kimanya on the East and Kitovu on the West. The latter rose to the hilltop whereas Kimanya sloped towards the valley. The Blessed Sacrament Fathers were responsible for the people of Kimanya.

Our parishioners worshiped in a small church with mud-block walls and metal-sheet roofing. It provided shelter for about seventy people. Hundreds of others remained outdoors watching and listening through window and door openings. Clearly they needed a larger church.

But the children needed a school even more. To get to school, our barefoot kids walked up one steep hill, then clear across town, and up another hill to Kitovu's school - a five mile trek. Every school day, in the morning and afternoon, the children passed by my office window. Each time, they waived and smiled.

One day, they called me outside and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Making plans for a church," I answered.

"Why don't you plan a school instead? We get tired walking three hours every day to and from school. Please, build us a school here."

"What's needed more, a school or a church?"

"A school," they all shouted.

"O.K. You win. We'll start with a school. But first I must raise some money."

“Here’s your first penny,” said a boy. The children clapped in applause and I was trapped in a promise.

As the children disappeared down the hill, I cleared away Robert’s blueprints of the church and spread a blank sheet on the drawing board. But before designing plans for a school, I needed an assured source of funds. I didn’t have time to grow coffee for the cash. Nor did I dare pray for a miracle because I was not sure of my credit in heaven. What to do?

In my quandary, I took a solitary walk beneath my new heaven. By following the stars, perhaps I would find a way to finance the schools. The Southern Cross pointed south away from Rome where, as I recalled, the medieval popes established a successful system of raising funds.

Around 1515, when Pope Leo X needed money to rebuild Saint Peter’s Basilica, he embraced the practice of many bishops and popes. During the last four centuries, these clergymen had raised fortunes by selling indulgences. Pope Leo X asked Johann Tetzel, the renowned Dominican preacher of indulgences, to offer a plenary indulgence to whoever donated funds for the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica.

In eloquent sermons, Tetzel first explained the need and efficacy of indulgences. Even after a sin had been forgiven, an obligation remained to repair or compensate for the wrong done. This debt was called the temporal punishment due for sin. If it were not fully satisfied before death, a person’s soul would suffer in purgatory for an unknown time before entering heaven.

Then Tetzel informed the people that they could make satisfaction for all their past sins and also for the sins of their beloved lingering in purgatory. This they could do by performing good deeds, such as prayers, fasting and almsgiving.

The Pope now offered a faster and surer way to erase the temporal punishment due for sins. He controlled the treasury of infinite merits accumulated by Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The Pope was now granting a plenary indulgence to anyone who contributed towards the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica. Since the indulgence was plenary, each donation guaranteed the immediate release of a soul from purgatory and its entrance into heaven. These donations would build Saint Peter’s basilica and empty purgatory.

It did not bother Tetzel and the Pope that Jesus and Peter never preached indulgences. It did not bother Tetzel and the Pope that the first claim that indulgences benefited souls in purgatory appeared only in 1476. It did not bother Tetzel and the Pope that the theories of indulgences, the temporal punishment for sin, and the Church’s

treasury of merits had no basis in Scripture. But it bothered Martin Luther, a renowned Scripture scholar. What disturbed him even more was that those theories were being preached not for the spiritual benefit of Christians but for the grandiose building plans of Pope Leo X. That also disturbed me a lot.

Like the southern cross, these reflections pointed me away from Rome. I surely would not raise funds for the school by selling indulgences. At that moment, like the shooting star above, a thought crossed my mind: why not get the money by selling lottery tickets. These would not release souls in purgatory but they could build schools for the children in Kimanya.

The following day, I planned a lottery based on my experience in Hyde Park. I would offer a substantial first prize, a dozen medium prizes and many smaller prizes. The seller of every 12 tickets could keep the revenue of two. Moreover, all the sellers of winning tickets would receive a cash reward, one-fifth the value of the prize money. More than half of the revenues from sales went back to the buyers and sellers of winning tickets.

The monthly drawing attracted huge crowds. When I announced the winners of the large prizes, cheers rent the air and echoed through the valley. Later, happy winners collected their money and celebrated. Some school children lingered and asked me, "How did we do?" I answered, "Enough to build one classroom." Clapping their hands, the children ran home to tell their parents. After every drawing, I have a progress report to the children who quickly spread the good news through the village.

Within two and a half years, we built a school complex of red brick walls and clay tile roofs. Fifteen classrooms equipped with individual desks accommodated 600 children. Toilets with running water and safe drinking water were luxuries that none enjoyed at home. In a large pavilion, the children ate a mid-day lunch cooked in electric cauldrons. After school, the boys played soccer on their school field. They would have liked to play basketball in their new gym but agreed to let the parish use it as a church temporarily.

There were no comparison between Pope Leo X's project and mine. To raise funds, the Pope granted spiritual indulgences whereas I sold mundane lottery tickets. He promised the remission of temporal punishment due for sins while I guaranteed cash prizes. His project supposedly liberated thousands of souls lingering in purgatory; mine benefitted only six hundred kids in Kimanya. The Pope's revenue from

the sale of indulgences rebuilt the glorious basilica of St. Peter; the profit from our sale of lottery tickets built a humble school. But neither I nor my children would have exchanged our project for his.

During the day, I managed the construction of our children's school. After sunset, under the stars that had witnessed all the blunders of the Church, I recalled those that had troubled me the most during my earlier studies of Church history. In the seminary the priest professors had brushed them aside, saying that the Church's survival proved God's special protection. At that time, I accepted their explanation. But now I believed that if God had truly protected the Church from error, it would never have committed those humongous blunders. How reconcile them with the Church's claim that the pope is the chief representative of Christ and the infallible authority on his teaching? That question haunted me.

Looking for an answer, I began reviewing my Church history which I remembered vividly. I started my search in the twelfth century. In the year 1163, to root out a fast spreading heresy that denied Christ's human nature, Pope Alexander III got what he considered a brilliant idea. Judges appointed by the Church would conduct inquests to determine the innocence or guilt of people suspected of heresy. The judge would receive and examine the evidence and then absolve or condemn the accused. Answerable only to the Pope, the inquisitor's decision was final. Pope Alexander should have known that this absolute power would be horribly abused.

The succeeding Popes, Lucius III, Innocent III and Gregory IX, adopted Alexander's brainchild and nurtured it until it became the monstrous papal tribunal called "The Inquisition". The chief inquisitor, usually a Dominican or Franciscan monk, did not work alone. He used spies, jailers, and sergeants at arms to apprehend suspects. To obtain a confession of guilt, the inquisitor often resorted to artifice, deception and torture. After the trial, the inquisitor turned the guilty over to the State. Those who abjured their crimes received life imprisonment; the impenitent were burned to death. One inquisitor, Torquemada, had 2000 suspected heretics killed at the stake. This horrible institution lasted 700 years under 75 popes. Any of them could have abolished the Inquisition in three words: "close it down." No one did. If God was protecting the Church from error, how could he permit such cruel abuse of power, all in his name and for his greater glory!

Many Popes used the Inquisition to exterminate heretics and some, to eliminate critics, as did Pope Alexander VI who reigned between 1492 and 1503. When only 25 years old, Rodrigo Borgia became a cardinal and vice-chancellor of the Roman Church. There he amassed enormous wealth and bestowed benefices among the papal electors. After he became pope in 1492, he appointed 47 cardinals and positioned them strategically to expand his political power. For three of his many bastard children he arranged marriages into the royal families of France, Castile, and Naples. To close such

deals, he annulled any first marriage in the way. He was a great wheeler-dealer but also the worst Pope in history.

The Pope's scandalous conduct troubled the people but none more than the Italian Dominican Savonarola, a sincere preacher. After reforming the city of Florence, he tried to change the corrupt Roman Church. He condemned its decadence. To silence the fiery preacher, Alexander VI offered him a bribe, a cardinal's hat with its privileges and influence. Savonarola refused it. When all else failed, the Pope ordered his lackeys in the Inquisition to exterminate the pest. After weeks of cruel torture, they finally wrested a confession of heresy from Savonarola and handed him over to the civil magistrates for execution. From Rome, the Pope sent him a plenary indulgence. What a cruel joke! On May 23, 1498, Savonarola was hanged and his body burned. With the flames, his efforts to reform the Church went up in smoke.

As I compared Alexander VI and Savonarola with Christ, only one resembled him - the preacher, not the Pope. Jesus was chaste, indifferent to worldly possession and totally focused on God's glory and man's salvation. So was Savonarola but not Alexander. Jesus had denounced the "greed and self-indulgence" of the religious leaders and the priests. The vengeful priests then condemned Jesus of blasphemy and handed him over to the civil authorities for execution. Repeating history, the priests of the Inquisition condemned Savonarola of heresy and wrested his death sentence from the civil magistrate.

In grammar school the nuns told me that the Pope represented Christ. Then during 12 years in the seminary, priests pounded that idea into my brain. Now far away in Africa, I faced the fact that Pope Alexander VI was not a true representative of Jesus but a grotesque distortion of the poor and chaste Christ. Savonarola was the look-alike.

In the seminary, the priests also drummed into me the idea that the Pope was the highest authority on Christ's revelation, interpreting it with infallibility. Tonight while listening to the distant drums in the village below, I reviewed Pope Alexander VI's record. Clearly he never learned the ABC's of Christ's simple message. If he couldn't grasp Christ's explicit doctrine, how could he deduce dogmas from it and proclaim their truth with infallibility.

Clearly the Pope didn't have the brains and the faith and love to do that. In my black mood that night, I wished that a universal church council had quickly deposed that incompetent immoral misfit and replaced him with a more Christlike pope.

For over 300 years, the papal tribunal responsible for the murder of Savonarola and many others was called "The Inquisition" - a name that struck fear everywhere. In 1542, perhaps to whitewash the Inquisition's blackened reputation, Pope

Paul III renamed it the “Holy Office”. Despite this new sanctimonious name, the Holy Office continued its sinister game of hounding and harassing anyone who crossed the Church, notably the renowned astronomer, Galileo.

One evening, with a heavy heart I took a walk under a full moon that lit up the sky and kindled my memory of Galileo. I pictured him peering through his homemade telescope. In 1609, he was the first human to see the moon’s pitted and mountainous surface, the four moons circling Jupiter, and thousands of stars invisible to the naked eye. These stars flashed signals supporting the Polish astronomer Copernicus who wrote in 1543 that the earth circles the sun. The gleam in Galileo’s eyes reflected the stars in the sky and the joy in his heart.

Others did not rejoice, notably the advisors of the Pope. For centuries, the Roman Church had accepted and taught Ptolemy’s 1500-year-old theory that positioned a stationary earth at the center of the universe. In this system, the planets and the sun revolved around the earth - and Rome. What a glorious place to be! So, when Galileo endorsed Copernicus’s sun-centered theory, the papal court cried, “Heresy.”

To determine the orthodoxy of Galileo’s writings, the Pope did not consult astronomers, only theologians. Before advising the Pope, these churchmen did not search the heavens through a telescope. They simply perused the Bible searching for texts that supported the Church’s position. They found two. One stated that “at Joshua’s order, the sun stopped in mid-heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day.” (Js 10:13) The other text read, “the sun rises and the sun goes down.” (Eccl 1:5) On this basis, the Church’s theologians declared that Galileo’s sun-centered proposition was “philosophically foolish and absurd and formally heretical, since it expressly contradicts the doctrines of Holy Scripture in many places, according to their literal meaning and the common exposition and interpretation of the holy Fathers and learned theologians.” These very words of the Pope’s commission first read in the seminary, scarred my mind as with a branding iron.

With that accusation, the Holy Office had grounds to brand Galileo a heretic. If he refused to recant, the Holy Office could hand him over to the civil authority for execution by fire, like Savonarola and Giordano Bruno and thousands more. So, the commissary-general of the Holy Office gave Galileo an absolute injunction “not to hold, teach or defend his opinion in any way, either verbally or in writing.” Galileo surely felt like defying that arrogant judge. But he wanted even more to continue probing the sky to prove Copernicus’s theory. Death could wait.

During sixteen long years, Galileo kept a low profile, making research at home with his telescope. He suspected that stars would play a role in resolving the sticky mystery of the earth revolving around the sun. He was right. Two hundred years later, in

1838, the German astronomer, Friedrich Bessel fixed his telescope for months on the star called 61 Cygni and observed its apparent motion on the celestial sphere. The only explanation for that parallax was the orbital motion of the earth around the sun.

As I continued my evening walk, I imagined how Galileo would have reacted if he himself had made that discovery in 1632. He would have rushed to the Vatican and the Holy Office and given the Pope and his entourage the good news. Then Galileo would have danced round and round the obelisk in Saint Peter's Square, chanting, "So moves the earth around the sun."

In 1632, however, Galileo had not yet discovered the definitive proof of Copernicus's heliocentric system. He had only indications that the earth revolved around the sun - enough to convince him but not the commissary-general of the Holy Office. Then one day, after sixteen years of forced silence, Galileo shouted, "Enough!" And published *Dialogue on the Two Great World Systems*. He did this not to spite the Pope, but to stir up further discussion and research on the subject. What he stirred up, however, was a hornets' nest in the Vatican.

Again the Pope sought counsel from theologians. Within days, they reported that Galileo had blatantly defied the Holy Office's order not to defend the theory of Copernicus. This time Galileo was not charged with heresy but with disobedience of the Church. Against the Church's command, Galileo had continued to believe and teach that the earth revolves around the sun. For this so-called crime, Galileo was restricted to house arrest for the rest of his life. In 1637 Galileo became totally blind. No more telescope, no more stars; only darkness and frustration until his death in 1642. Feeling sad for Galileo and mad at the Church, I returned home, collapsed into bed and fell asleep.

The following night, the stars quickly rekindled my memory of their champion, Galileo. After publishing his *Starry Messenger* in 1610, he had a serious problem with the Church. Basically it was similar to mine: the Church's claim to absolute authority over God's revelation. We both wondered whether the Church really had the full right to determine what God had revealed and to defend her position as she saw fit. Galileo never resolved that problem before his death. But from the grave, by my recalling his struggle with the Church, he helped me find the solution.

One evening, as I pondered Galileo's tragedy, the infamous words of the commission, still smoldering in my mind, burst into flames. By that light, I saw the Church's habitual way of formulating doctrine and defending it against all attack.

First, the Church searched the Scriptures for texts that supported its doctrine. Many texts that she advanced in favor of a doctrine in fact proved nothing; but the words satisfied the unlearned. In that way she disproved Galileo's sun-centered theory. Similarly, she proved Christ's divinity by quoting Peter who called Jesus, "the Son of the living God". More than likely Peter only meant that Jesus was approved by God like the other holy men whom the Bible called "Sons of God."

Secondly, when proposing a doctrine, the Church regularly sought the support of the Fathers of the Church. These were pre-seven-century writers, mostly bishops, who agreed with the Church's teachings. Her doctrines gained credence by having been taught in the centuries just following the apostles. The Church claimed that the New Testament did not contain Christ's entire revelation. Some truths were handed down orally for some time and eventually written down by a Church Father.

When proposing a doctrine as revealed by God, the Church always valued the testimony of the Church Fathers, especially when Scripture contained no relevant text. For example, the Bible reported Christ's Ascension but said nothing about Mary's Assumption into heaven. To make matters worse, no Church Father mentioned it before the seventh century. Around 625, an obscure bishop, called Theoteknos, spoke about a feast of the Assumption. He reported that Mary's devotees celebrated her entrance into heaven, happy for her and hopeful for themselves.

In Theoteknos's brief statement, the Church saw a revealed truth, just as she uncovered other revelations in simple Bible texts. For example, the Church says that the four words of Jesus "This is my body" reveal his real presence in the blessed bread. The Church also teaches that, when Jesus said, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church," he revealed that Peter and his successors would be the highest authority on revelation. According to the Church, when the angel Gabriel called Mary "full of grace," he made another revelation. These texts and hundreds of others resemble tiny seeds which the Church Fathers first nurtured and which theologians then developed into trees, as described in the Gospel parable of the mustard seed.

For theologians, unfolding and explaining spiritual phenomena was glorious work. But it was also difficult because Scripture revealed spiritual realities that humans could not observe and prove. Moreover all human concepts were derived from physical and material things. Such concepts cannot grasp spiritual reality. At best they only catch a glimmer of the supernatural.

Thus, when theologians applied human concepts and logic to explain and develop the seeds of revelation in Scripture, they could only express opinions and theories. Inevitably other theologians thought differently. Alone they could not resolve their differences. They needed a reliable, authoritative arbiter to declare what was true.

Very early the Roman Church claimed that ability as guaranteed by Jesus in the Bible. To certify the truth of revealed realities, ecumenical councils were convened. There the bishops of the Church including the Bishop of Rome decreed what God had revealed through Jesus. The councils needn't prove anything; they simply declared the truth.

When many refused to believe the Roman Church, it managed to have some ecumenical councils declare its infallibility. In 1870 the Roman Church went a step further and had Vatican Council I decree the infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. Thus the Pope alone acting in the name of the Church can declare without fear of error a doctrine to be true. For example, on November 1, 1950 Pope Pius XII solemnly defined Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven as a dogma of faith. He said, "We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." The Pope didn't have to prove Mary's Assumption; he simply said it was so. No spiritual reality can be proved or disproved. It lies beyond the ken of humans, including popes. Arriving at that conclusion, I called it a night and headed home with peace of mind. This evening I had made some progress towards solving my problem with the Church. I felt confident that the end was near. Looking at the stars, I thanked my friends and they winked back in support.

Days later, on August 15, Catholics celebrated the Feast of Mary's Assumption. As the sun rose into the sky, our parish offered Holy Mass to glorify God and honor Mary. At sunset, the women, many with babies on their backs, returned to the church to see Mary's statue arrive that day and to pray the rosary. In the village down the hill, the men continued the day's celebration by beating drums and drinking banana beer - "in Mary's honor," they said.

Starting my evening walk, I passed by the church and heard the women praying. Their singsong repetition of the Hail Mary revived many memories of Mary. Soon these thoughts lined up beside my recollections of Galileo and struck a spark. In a flash, I saw how differently the Church had treated Mary's Assumption into heaven and Galileo's assumption that the earth circles the sun.

Since Galileo's theory tried to explain the physical process of earth circling the sun, the Church demanded the observation of this movement. Without the trustworthy testimony of eyewitnesses, the Church would not accept Galileo's theory.

The Church would continue to teach what all humans experience: the earth does not move while the sun clearly rises in the East and sets in the West.

Like the movement of the earth, the ascending of a human body into the sky is a physical phenomenon. It can be observed and reported. That's what happened when Christ's body ascended into heaven. As the apostles were watching, Jesus was lifted up into heaven. They saw his body go up into the clouds and later they recorded the event in the Acts of the Apostles. (1:9-11)

Jesus could have ascended into heaven during the night in secrecy. He chose to let the apostles observe the event to strengthen their faith in heaven where Christ awaits his followers. For the same reason, if Jesus had assumed Mary into heaven, he would have let someone observe and record her Assumption. But during the first 600 years after Christ's Ascension, no one ever mentioned seeing or hearing about the event.

Despite this total silence, Pope Pius XII stood ready in 1950 to define infallibly Mary's Assumption. Where and how did he learn about the event? Did God speak to him in the papal garden as he did to Abraham from the burning bush? No! Did angel Gabriel inform him about Mary's Assumption as he told Mary about her conceiving Jesus? No! Did Jesus speak to him as he did to Paul in a blinding light? No! Pope Pius XII simply received letters from the bishops supporting his proposal to define Mary's glorious Assumption into heaven. With that and nothing more, the Pope declared that Mary's body was assumed into heaven. Then and there I felt strongly that the Pope, in doing so, had strained his infallibility beyond belief. Too tired to pursue this thought further, I turned around and headed home reviewing today's celebration of Mary's Assumption.

These thoughts evoked childhood memories of the Assumption Church in which I was baptized and made my first communion. There, as an altar boy, I served Mass thousands of times and later as a priest I offered mass at the same altar. Tonight, I clearly recalled the 15x20 foot mural above the altar. The marble sculpture depicted Mary ascending into heaven. Flanked by cheerful cherubs, Mary raised her eyes heavenward as though looking for her son or already seeing him in glory. Her serene smile brightened the heavens more than the crescent moon at her feet.

I then remembered that in 1939 during my mother's funeral mass, I gazed up at Mary's mural above the altar. I strongly believed that someday I too would go to

heaven and see my mother again with Mary and God. Belief in Mary's Assumption provided solace in my sorrow then. But tonight I was deeply disturbed, thinking that the Pope might have defined Mary's Assumption simply to shore up a fairy tale without historical foundation.

After I fell asleep, my anxieties concocted dreams that mixed the past and the present in a ghastly way. The original flawless marble of Mary's mural was now stained with greenish mildew and cracking badly. The entire sculpture threatened to crumble. In my dream, the pastor explained that the basic problem was the foundation of the church which proved to be shaky shale and not solid rock as originally believed. The priest said that my boyhood church could collapse with its granite pillars and its marble mural of Mary's Assumption. Before that could happen in my nightmare, I opened my eyes.

In the Bible, some patriarchs and prophets had dreams that predicted future events. But my dream last night did not prophesy the collapse of the Church and the demise of its dogmas. It simply indicated that my belief in Mary's Assumption and every other dogma of the Church was founded on my faith in the infallibility of the Church. If this fundamental faith should disintegrate, the whole superstructure of the Church, its dogmas and laws, would crumble and leave a landscape of rubble in my soul. Following the direction of my dream, I recalled that in July 1870, the First Vatican Council solemnly defined the infallibility of the Pope. It declared that the Pope, even without a General Council, has the authority to pronounce definitive judgments on questions of faith and morals. When so doing, he has God's guaranteed assistance that prevents him from teaching error.

When Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Assumption of Mary, he had zero evidence that it happened. How could he dare define this dogma, knowing that God should stop him if it were not true? Apparently he did not fear God - and surely not man. Nineteen centuries after Mary's death, who could possibly discover and identify her body? With a steady pen, he signed the Assumption decree. He was safe.

Likewise down the centuries, Popes and Ecumenical Councils never feared to define supernatural events and realities because humans cannot disprove things spiritual. For instance, the Church teaches that, during Mass, the priest changes bread into the living body of Christ. Nobody can prove otherwise. The Church also declares that, for every human embryo, God creates a special spiritual soul. It is immaterial and immortal. At death it separates from the body and goes to heaven or hell for all eternity. That whole doctrine and every other dogma of the Church cannot be disproved by humans.

Nor can the Church prove her doctrines. She cannot demonstrate the reality

of anything supernatural because the spiritual is beyond the ken of humans. For example, the Church cannot prove the existence of original sin and grace, the efficacy of sacraments and indulgences, the reality of heaven and hell, the divinity of Jesus anymore than the Assumption of Mary. The Church cannot prove any of its supernatural doctrines. She can only allege that one or more persons in the distant past said so. Then, claiming infallibility, she defines and elaborates doctrines and offers them to the world. To accept without doubt the Church's unquestionable and glorious vision of the universe, one need only believe in her infallibility.

Some 600 million adults affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church are assumed to believe in her infallibility. But about 400 million Protestants do not, although they base their faith on the same Bible as the Catholics. Sharing the same Bible, some 200 million Orthodox Christians do not believe in the Pope's infallibility. Nor do one billion Muslims, 800 million Hindus, 300 million Buddhists, 13 million Jews and countless others. In all, some five billion people do not believe in the infallibility of the Pope, his Church and their doctrine. At that moment, I wondered whether I was now a believer or a nonbeliever.

To answer that question truthfully, I quickly reviewed my entire life. In rapid replay, it seemed like one long day beginning with a sunny sky. About noon, clouds appeared. Light and grey at first, they became increasingly thicker and darker. By mid-afternoon, clouds blackened the whole sky turning day into night, as when Jesus dies on Calvary.

In that comparison, I recognized that my faith in an infallible Church was the sun of my spiritual life. Just as the sun illumined physical things such as birds, so also the Church revealed spiritual realities such as angels. Clearly the visibility of physical things depended on the firelight in the sun and the credibility of spiritual things depended on my faith in the infallibility of the Church.

Throughout the mornings of my life, I was educated by nuns in elementary school and by priests in seminaries. They gave my life a third dimension filled with spiritual realities as real as the physical world. God, all-powerful and good, was real like my father. Mary in heaven was real like my mother in Chicopee. The resurrected Christ was as real in the Eucharist on the altar as on his heavenly throne. The sacraments and grace were real like flowers and trees. The entire spiritual world as revealed by the Church was beautiful and very real. No cloud of doubt blurred my faith in the Church and none marred my spiritual sky for years.

Not long after I began my priestly ministry among the people, clouds of doubt regarding the Church's wisdom appeared and crept across my spiritual sky. I soon saw that the Church was wrong when she refused to replace Latin with the vernacular so

that the people would understand the Bible readings and the prayers during mass. When I fell in love with Eva, I realized that the Church wrongly imposed celibacy upon her priests against God's design as expressed in nature and the Bible. The Church was also wrong when she instructed bishops to attract young boys into seminaries and isolate them from the world in order to indoctrinate (brainwash?) them fully before ordination.

In Africa, darker clouds of doubt appeared while I reviewed the blunders of the Church during my evening walks. The Church was clearly wrong when she preached a crusade to hunt down and kill thousands of Albigensian heretics. The Church was wrong when she organized the Inquisition that tortured thousands and condemned them to life imprisonment or death. The Church was wrong when she had Savonarola burned to death for decrying the immortality of the Roman Church. The Church was wrong when she granted indulgences to raise funds for the construction of monasteries, churches and Saint Peter's basilica. The Church was also wrong when she condemned the astronomer Galileo for trying to provide irrefutable proof that the earth circles the sun.

At this point in tonight's moonlit walk, I lingered awhile on the last years of Galileo's life. After the Church condemned him in 1633, Galileo returned to his home in Florence. Before long, his eyesight began to fail. By 1637 his left eye saw nothing and a year later Galileo was totally blind. My empathy for him inspired a comparison between his loss of sight and my loss of faith in the Church.

Both losses were not sudden and total; they were scarcely noticeable at first. Mine began in Cleveland when I disagreed with the Church about using Latin in the Liturgy. Later, when I fell in love with Eva, the Church's celibacy law dealt my faith a severe blow. Yet I still believed in the Church, if only halfheartedly, just as Galileo could see only with one eye for a time. Then in Africa, as I reviewed the Church's blunders night after night, the flame of my faith gradually waned to a flicker. The arrogance of the Church in ridiculing Galileo's sun-centered system and condemning him to house arrest smothered the last ember of my faith. The Church's blunders had finally reduced my former towering fire of faith to ashes.

When the blind astronomer walked in his garden, he could not watch the roses unfold their reddish petals. Nor did he see the golden butterflies flutter above the marigolds, while the red-breasted robin rushed to a nestful of hungry chicks. Nor did he see fluffy white clouds float across the bright blue sky. In the evenings, when he looked up to heaven, he could not see his beloved stars, not a single one.

In contrast, I could see nature's wonder; but I could not believe the spiritual world that I had accepted on the authority of the Church. I no longer believed in original sin and grace, in the Eucharist and the priesthood, in heaven and hell, in an eternal afterlife, in the divinity of Jesus, in Mary's Assumption and all the other spiritual realities

and events proclaimed by the Church. All that had vanished with my faith in the church.

To believe in God, however, I had never needed the testimony of the Church. The admirable universe revealed the handiwork of God: his wisdom, power, and goodness. Galileo believed in God to the end. So would I. With that final thought and a last look at the stars that were watching over Galileo's grave in Florence, I returned home at peace.

The following morning, I lingered in bed recalling my work in Masaka. My official mission had been to build a church for the people of Kimanya and my personal mission was to reevaluate the infallibility of the Church. I had built the church, plus classrooms and a cafeteria. I had also reviewed the horrific blunders of the Church which totally discredited her infallibility and authority - at least for me. Thus I had accomplished my mission in Africa. It was time to go.

Within a week, I closed my accounts for the lottery and all construction. I said farewell to a very good bishop, Adrian Ddugu, and the nuns. I wished the best to all the workers. Then I went to see the school children. They met me in the open-air cafeteria and chanted a farewell song. Then the boy, who five years ago had given me a penny to start building the school, now offered me some bananas: "one for each classroom," he said "and one for the church, one for the cafeteria, and three for the soccer field." The children clapped loud and long. Later they waved goodbye as I drove to the airport. From there I made a beeline for America with no layover in Rome. Except for Peter's resting place I had no interest in Rome.

## Chapter Twelve

### **The Lord Is My Shepherd (August 1967-April 1975)**

Like a huge albatross, the Pan Am plane rose above Lake Victoria and veered towards the Atlantic Ocean and headed for New York via Dakar. The long flight provided a lot of time for reflection. Hours later, like millions of earlier immigrants, I would be welcomed into America by the Lady of Liberty standing tall in New York harbor. Years ago I had visited her monument and pondered the poem engraved beneath the statue. There, she is named “Mother of Exiles” and called “a mighty woman with a torch.” Her words read, “Give me your poor and those yearning to breathe free. Send the homeless to me.”

After thirty-six years in seminaries and monasteries, under Church control, I sought freedom from unnatural restrictions like absolute obedience and celibacy. I yearned to breathe free. Moreover, with all my possessions in a suitcase and my entire wealth in a wallet, I was indeed poor and homeless. Surely, the Lady of Liberty would “lift her lamp beside the golden door” and welcome me into “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

I must indeed be brave because my immediate future was scary. With few dollars in my pockets, I needed a job fast. But I was fifty years old with no work experience outside the Church. I carried no letters of recommendation. My resume and PhD diploma qualified me only to teach medieval philosophy in a seminary. With such credentials I could not land a satisfactory job quickly. No matter, I would accept any menial work like washing dishes or parking cars, just to survive on my own.

I would be alone - except for God, the Provider of all creatures on earth: the animals and birds, the reptiles and fish, the rodents and insects, excluding none, not even rats, skunks, snakes, and fallen priests. God did not abandon his creatures. He looked after them and he would take care of me. I recalled some verses of Psalm 23:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

Reassured by David’s words, I closed my eyes and rested.

Later, after registering in Brooklyn’s cheapest clean hotel and eating supper at the corner diner, I opened a 12 oz can of Schlitz and slumped into a frayed armchair. Nearby, neon signs and traffic noise pierced the darkness and silence of my stark, lonely room. At this time, I could have watched “I love Lucy”; but tonight I did not need Lucille Ball to cheer me up; I needed God.

So I turned to the Bible and reread parts of Exodus. I saw no resemblance between the Israelites’ escape from Egypt and mine from the Church. But their long trek through the desert to the Promised Land resembled a little my search for a new meaningful and satisfying career. Like the Israelites, I believed that God would lead me there.

Unlike the Israelites, I did not need “a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.” I did not need a wonder-worker like Moses to lead the way. I did not need angels to open doors for me nor God’s resounding voice to recommend me nor lightning bolts to intimidate employers. All I needed was God’s hand even if it remained invisible to others and me. Faith that God was taking care of me sustained my confidence and hope.

Almost penniless, I was eager to find a new career. But the eternal God is never in a hurry. For instance, after igniting the Big Bang, God let the universe evolve ten billion years before forming the earth. Then four more billion years passed before humans appeared. Clearly God can wait and make others wait. When the Israelites complained and distrusted God’s Providence, God let them wander forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. I would not repeat their mistake.

Each morning the Israelites found food, called mana, on the ground, enough for the day. Unlike the Israelites, I did not hope to find mana at my door each morning. All I wanted was work to earn my living. This I got - probably with heavenly help. First I transcribed invoices by hand at the minimum wage. Then Brooklyn’s Welfare Services hired me to assess the needs of poor families and then check their expenditures as authorized for shelter, clothes and food. Neither job matched my dreams of a meaningful career, my Promised Land. But, unlike the Israelites, I did not complain. In due course, my shepherd would lead me to greener pastures. I would wait upon the Lord.

November, December, and January passed without any noticeable action from heaven. Then in mid-February, out of the blue, a voice over the phone called me,

not from heaven but from Washington, DC. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), where I had sent my resume in October, informed me that recent battles in Vietnam had driven a near million refugees from their homes. USAID was hiring people to provide these refugees with clothing, shelter and food. Did I want to help?

Believing that the inspiration for this call could have originated in heaven, I did not refuse and hang up. Instead I asked why USAID thought I qualified for the job. "First," the voice replied, "refugee relief work requires compassion that priests normally have by nature or nurture. Secondly, at this moment, you seem to be free to serve immediately. Thirdly, with fluent French, you could communicate easily with Vietnamese officials who all speak French. Are you interested?" Without hesitation, I answered, "Yes."

The following day, I flew to Washington for an interview. After signing a contract, I returned to Brooklyn, notified my employer and soon began my orientation and training in Washington. I got a crash course in Vietnamese culture and customs. I learned the everyday expressions of courtesy, like "thank you", "how do you do?" and "excuse me." Within two weeks, I was ready and raring to leave on the scheduled date, May 6.

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese communist forces had plans of their own for that time. On May 5, they attacked Saigon and battled during seven days. The fierce fighting destroyed 9,000 houses, killed 127 civilians, injured 2,950 victims and drove 103,354 persons from their homes. On May 16, when the all clear arrived, I boarded a plane and headed for Vietnam. During the flight, I had time for meditation and prayer. I recalled Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd...Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me."

In Hong Kong, we transferred airlines because US planes flying over Vietnam were prime targets for the communist gunners. Two hours I landed safely in Saigon on May 18. Vietnamese soldiers swarmed the airport to protect the passengers and runways from communist saboteurs. On route to the Oscar Hotel, which would be my home for the next six months, I noticed the barbed wire barricades and soldiers around all government buildings. A solitary soldier guarded our hotel lobby.

That evening, my first in Vietnam, noise sounding like fireworks startled me. Curious I climbed to the roof for a look-see. The entire city of Saigon surrounded me: the red brick Catholic church on my right; an outlet of the mighty Mekong river on my left; bars, where GI's sought solace, in front of me; and the cacophonous cries of nervous animals in the zoo behind me. On the streets, the noisy sputtering of cyclos sounded like the rat-a-tat of machine guns. Flares lit up no-man's-land across the river.

Suddenly shells swished overhead, streaking towards their targets. Caution quickly quelled my curiosity and sent me scurrying to my room.

Uneasy and unable to sleep, I sat up in bed to read. I picked up *The History of Vietnam* which lay on my night table beside the Bible. In the first chapter, I saw similarities between the Israelites and the Vietnamese. First, the Israelites trace their origin to Abraham who lived in 1900 BC while the ancestral roots of the Vietnamese stretch back to 2000 BC. Secondly, just as the Assyrians and Romans dominated Israel for centuries, so also the Chinese occupied Vietnam from 111 BC to 939 AD as did the French between 1858 and 1954. On May 7, 1954, the Vietnamese finally defeated the French and freed their country from foreign occupiers.

By then, however, the Vietnamese were deeply divided between those for and those against a Communist form of government. Each side wanted to impose its will on the other. The specter of civil war loomed ahead.

To prevent this bloodshed between brothers, several countries sent representatives to Geneva on May 8, 1954. They proposed the division of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Vietnamese who favored Communism should gather in the North while the others should repair to the South. The following year, the Vietnamese should hold general elections and choose one form of government for all. This Geneva plan sounded simple but it was simplistic. In Vietnam, where many had experienced the harassment of Communists for years, political unity under them would never be achieved by choice but only by force.

Just weeks after the Geneva accords, the Vietnamese began their Exodus. In view of the general elections that the Communists could easily control in the North, their cadres tried to prevent people from moving South. They fired on ferries, blew up bridges, separated children from their mothers, cut off ears and, in one case, drove nails into a priest's head. Despite such obstacles, the refugees proceeded to the ports and embarked on friendly ships. Within months, 928,152 Vietnamese abandoned their homes and fled Communism for freedom. Fortunately for me, one of them was my future wife, Minh.

Steaming south, the boat carrying her family passed Soviet ships heading north with 90,000 armed Vietminh and their 40,000 dependents. Some 5,000 well-armed

communists and 3,000 political cadres remained in the South. By day, they played possum; by night they proselytized, house by house and village by village. They worked like demons to ensure a Communist triumph in the coming general elections.

Early in 1956, North Vietnam's President, Ho Chi Minh, envisioned victory at the ballot box. As I read the story, I imagined that, during the Tet celebrations, Uncle Ho, as the children called him, rejoiced with his followers. Sure of success, he enjoyed the crackling fireworks and the dragon dances in the streets.

At the opposite pole, South Vietnam's President, Ngo Dinh Diem, feared failure at the polls. I imagined that during Tet, instead of celebrating in the streets, Diem cowered in his palace and brooded about losing the elections. So after the last firecracker popped signaling the end of Tet, Diem emerged from his isolation and refused to hold elections. He claimed that Ho would never allow free elections in the North.

After Diem cut off the only peaceful way to unite Vietnam, Ho chose the alternate route: force. He ordered thousands of armed and political cadre to infiltrate back into the South and conquer the countryside. They should first attempt to persuade the people and, if needed, threaten, punish, even torture. The obstinate, like obstacles on the road, should be cleared away. This was war.

As Communism spread in the South, President Diem requested American military supplies and advisors - but no combat units. President Kennedy agreed. Neither president wanted US soldiers to fight and die for Vietnam's freedom. Unfortunately their common policy of "no-US-combatants-in-Vietnam" ended tragically when an assassin gunned down Diem and another shot Kennedy in November 1963.

After murdering President Diem, the Vietnamese generals admitted to the US ambassador in Saigon that the communists were rapidly gaining ground. To stop them, the South Vietnamese soldiers needed the support of US combat troops. Without them, South Vietnam would lose the war. Agreeing with this alarming assessment, Henry Cabot Lodge dispatched the generals' SOS to Lyndon Johnson, the new US President and recommended action.

After reviewing the report, the big Texan resolved to drive the communist forces the hell out of South Vietnam. On March 6, 1965, two battalions of Marines landed on the beaches of Da Nang and 180,000 soldiers followed within months. By 1968, when I landed in Vietnam, 525,000 GI's were fighting with mighty military hardware: helicopters and bombers, flamethrowers and tanks. With such fearsome firepower, the war would end quickly - so Johnson thought.

In other US wars, soldiers fought battles on open fields and desert sands but

not so in the Vietnam War. There our forces engaged the enemy where he was: in and around villages and towns. Those fierce fights killed and wounded not only combatants but also civilians. Between 1965 and 1975, the battles claimed the lives of 247,600 civilians and caused injuries, like loss of limbs to some 900,000 other victims. In addition, millions had to leave their livelihood and homes.

In tears and near despair, the survivors rushed to the nearest refugee camp set up and secured by the South Vietnamese government with US support. There the displaced persons received shelter and blankets, water and food, medical care and protection. These camps were not sumptuous resorts but empty government buildings or US army tents. Overcrowded, they provided zero privacy and quiet. It seemed that the crying of children and the moaning of mothers never ceased. In these noisy and cramped camps, refugees remained: the lucky ones for only weeks; the less fortunate, for months; and the desperate, for years. All yearned to return home.

Their dreams became reality only after the South Vietnamese and US forces drove away the communist terrorists. Then the refugees hurried back home to rebuild their lives. They received metal roofing sheets, rice seed, and food for six months. Soon they resumed a near normal life.

Not so thousands of in-camp refugees whose native villages remained under communist control. These people had to resettle on new land, sometimes within walking distance of their rice fields, but often hundreds of miles away. For these exiles, the South Vietnamese Government, always with US funds, cleared land, dug wells, and built homes creating new hamlets in secure areas. Thousands of refugees cleared out of dreary and crowded camps to begin a new life on open fields under God's glorious sky.

I visited many such settlement sites because, as chief of USAID's refugee division, I had to know firsthand the condition and needs of Vietnam's refugees. Today, I still remember one such visit in 1972 to the newly created hamlet of Suoi Nghe in Phuoc Tuy Province. Earlier in March 1967, all Vietnamese farmers living near the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, which separated North and South Vietnam, were moved ten miles south to Cam-Lo village. All efforts to transform this area into a viable habitat failed. The arid soil produced no food and the isolated location provided no jobs. Helpless and hopeless the refugees languished in misery. Five years later, in January 1972, American planes transported 851 refugee families of Cam-Lo to Suoi Nghe, some 500 miles south. With renewed energy and hope, the refugees built homes and surrounded them with gardens. During my October 1972 visit there, refugee Mr. Tran showed me his red-skinned sweet potatoes, long cucumbers dangling from vines, yellow sweet corn, papaya and banana trees dripping with fruit.

At that moment, Mrs. Tran, with six children in tow, emerged from the

garden with a handful of marigolds for me. “Thank you for your visit,” she said. I bowed my head in gratitude and asked her, “Do you like it here?” Smiling she answered, “Compared to Cam-Lo, this is heaven. Up North, I prayed to God everyday for help. This year he answered my prayers and rescued my family from the communist demons. When we arrived here empty-handed, I continued my prayers to God. In response, he gave us housing materials and food. He also sent abundant and timely rain for my flowers and fruit. Just look at this garden!”

Moments later, the helicopter, taking me home, raised a cloud of dust and whacked the air. The noise prevented conversation aboard but not reflection upon Mrs. Tran’s comments. Like many other Vietnamese refugees, Mrs. Tran gave God credit for the entire refugee relief. She believed that God intervened directly to provide assistance, be it with rice or rain. Such God-fearing refugees, like the Hebrews in the Bible, attributed their rescue from misery and their subsequent survival to Divine Providence.

Like Noah’s wife in the ark, Mrs. Tran believe that God produced rain when and where he wished. The Bible reports that God started the deluge simply by “opening the windows of heaven.” Mrs. Tran knew nothing about the many enormous forces of nature that produce and deliver rain. She never heard of air mass, fronts and low-pressure areas. Such knowledge, however, would not have affected her faith in Divine Providence. God manages the rain-making forces of nature as easily as opening the windows of heaven. Either way Mrs. Tran’s marigolds got rain thanks to God.”

As for delivering rain, so for providing assistance to Vietnamese refugees, the process was enormous and complex. From 1968 to April 1975, (my years in Vietnam) the governments of South Vietnam and the United States provided assistance to 7,702,800 refugees. That relief effort cost the American people 100 million dollars each year. It involved estimating the number of refugees, their needs and the cost of relief assistance to them. It required that the US Congress appropriate the funds. Then followed the purchase of relief supplies in the US, their shipment to Vietnam, and their distribution to every refugee camp and resettlement site. This delivery required military escort to remove land mines and ward off ambushes along the way. The entire process involved thousands of Vietnamese and American workers, including me, a mere cog in the huge machinery of refugee relief.

This complex operation remained unknown to Mrs. Tran as was the invisible process of rain-making. She only saw the relief worker handing out rice and the grey cloud dropping rain. Without more information about the relief operation and the

rain, Mrs. Tran and others accepted the simple religious explanation that both blessings came from God. Behind the relief worker and the cloud, the Divine Shepherd took care of his faithful flock.

The success of Suoi Nghe also depended on the hard work of many relief workers, notably the new chief of the resettlement of refugees, Doctor Phan Quang Dan. He personally planned and directed the resettlement in Suoi Nghe. When the refugees arrived in January 1972, they found a new water supply, electricity, a dispensary, and home sites. They received metal sheets for roofing, a six month supply of rice as well as farm tools and funds to build their homes. Doctor Dan saw to it that the refugees received all necessary food, medical care and supplies on time. Doctor Dan made Suoi Nghe succeed.

In contrast with Suoi Nghe, some resettlement sites, those established before Dan took over refugee assistance, were not havens of prosperity and peace. Here the refugees had little or no fertile soil to grow rice. Moreover they had no job opportunities to earn a livelihood and they often received dirty rice and poor medical care. At one of these miserable sites, Mrs. Le bitterly complained to me about the officials who ignored and neglected the refugees.

For years Mrs. Le had seen no signs of divine intervention and eventually lost faith in God's Providence. In Suoi Nghe, however, Mrs. Tran had received many blessings and believed more than ever that God took care of his children. During my priestly ministry and for sometime after leaving the Church, I too believed that God intervened in human lives. But after witnessing the misery of a million refugees, I began to doubt Divine Providence. Now I did not believe as much as Mrs. Tran but more than Mrs. Le. Where did I stand exactly? I should find out.

When the noisy chopper landed in Saigon, I drove away in a noiseless car with a fellow worker called Tom. Still comparing Tran with Le, I shared my thoughts with Tom and asked his opinion. He said, "In Mrs. Le's center, where there is misery and a great need of God's help, he's doing nothing. In Mrs. Tran's community, where Doctor Dan provides everything, God is not needed and there is no evidence of his intervention." Here I interjected saying, "Perhaps God is inspiring and guiding Dan and intervening in that way." Tom continued and said, "You're a close friend of Doctor Dan. Ask him if God gives him directions whether in person or through angels." I knew that Dan would smile and respond, "I sure wish he would." Minutes later, I reached home and ate supper. Before retiring, I resolved to probe my soul honestly and assess my faith in Divine Providence.

During the following weeks, I spent many evenings reevaluating the evidence of divine providence in my life. In Vietnam did God intervene in the normal

course of events to ensure my well-being? How and when? Perhaps the twinkling stars, undisturbed by the shells streaking across the sky, would enlighten me. They had helped me in Africa to scrap the myth of papal infallibility. In Vietnam, would they dispel Divine Providence as just another myth? I surely hoped not; but, no matter what, I needed to know the truth.

One evening, as I reviewed my many blessings in Vietnam, I realized that all depended on my original choice to work in refugee relief. Another decision would have set my life in another direction. On my first day in Saigon, I met the Deputy Director of the Refugee Directorate, Norman Firstahl. Hearing that I had been a priest, he confided that he too had studied in a Jesuit seminary and left before ordination. He understood my total ignorance of the jobs available in Vietnam and which one best suited my personality and provided a long-term career. Without hesitation, he replied that refugee-relief work would satisfy the compassion that I had nurtured first in the seminary and then during my priestly ministry. “The refugees and you need each other,” he said and added, “here you can become a refugee-relief expert for whom there is a constant need. There will always be political strife which starts wars and generates refugees. This job is custom-made for you.” Believing that Norm was right, I accepted the job he offered and thanked him.

That night under the stars, I examined my interview with Norm that would affect the rest of my life. Did God intervene directly in my decision? I knew that Norm spoke from experience and his desire to help a soul mate. That bald, burly man with horn-rimmed spectacles did not look like an angel nor like a puppet just mouthing the voice of God. Apparently Norm’s words came directly from his heart and not from heaven. Nor did I hear any heavenly whispers. But in case that God had inspired Norm or me in some imperceptible way, I thanked him in general for his care of all creatures including me.

My good fortune in Vietnam brought me a terrific career and also a wonderful wife. In the prior process, I had seen no indication of direct divine intervention. To determine whether God intervened in bringing Minh and me together as he did Adam and Eve, I had to ask Minh how she got from her office in Hanoi to her desk smack in front of my office.

So I took Minh to lunch in a nearby outdoor café. After ordering a bowl of tasty chicken noodle soup, Minh described her family’s decision to escape from North to South Vietnam in 1954. Four years later, Minh decided to learn English. She studied in the evenings after working all day in the Department of Public Works. In 1963 she joined the VAA where Vietnamese and Americans associated to make friends while speaking English. One evening in 1965, an American told her that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was employing Vietnamese translators.

The next day Minh got that job. When I arrived in 1968, Minh was already working in the Refugee Directorate but in a different building from mine. Without a transfer soon, we might never have met. Luckily for us, for administrative reasons only, Minh was moved to a desk directly in front of my office. In the entire process of linking me with Minh, the ancient Roman god of love, chubby little Cupid, never shot an arrow through our hearts. Nor did a matchmaking angel like Gabriel get involved. But did God play a part in my meeting Minh and in my other blessings?

Before appraising my faith in divine providence, I must first reassess my belief in God's existence. He could not intervene in our lives and help us unless he existed in reality and not just in human fantasy like Santa. If we made him up, he did not make us.

Earlier the Church had taught me that the Bible unfolds God's supernatural plan to help humans lead a moral life on earth in order to merit eternal life in heaven. God first revealed this plan of salvation to a chosen few, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Then God inspired and guided scribes to record his revelation without error. Using their account in the Bible, my seminary professors told me that Jesus established a church to communicate God's revelation. Moreover, Christ promised to assist his Church in preserving and teaching his message without flaw. With that divine assurance, the Roman Catholic Church claimed infallibility in defining what humans should believe and how they should live. Helped by God to preach his word as expressed in the Bible, the Church could not err.

With each Catholic tenet resting on another like pieces in an arch, the entire structure depended entirely on the keystone - the Church's infallibility. If this crumbled, the entire arch would crash. That's what happened twenty-five years later in Africa as I reviewed the Church's history of humongous blunders. Her long list of errors which included her infamous Inquisition that tortured non-believers, her criminal Crusades that exterminated heretics, the sale of indulgences to build basilicas, the murder of Savonarola who simply tried to reform the immoral Roman Church, the condemnation and arrest of Galileo for teaching that the earth revolves around the sun. So, when I left Africa in 1967, my belief in the Church's infallibility had crashed into smithereens toppling the entire arch of my faith.

On second thought, the collapse of all my beliefs resembled more the cataclysmic death of a massive star. When such a star runs out of fuel and collapses, its infinite density exerts a fierce gravitational pull on all surrounding matter. Like a gigantic vacuum cleaner, it sucks in clouds of gases and dust, as well as comets and planets. Allowing nothing to leave, not even light, it creates a black hole in the sky.

Similarly, when my massive faith in the Church's infallibility died out, the

resulting black hole sucked in all tenets of faith that I held on her authority. Like so much dust and gas, religious trifles like indulgences quickly disappeared into the darkness of disbelief. Then like a comet crashing into a black hole, my faith in the divine inspiration of Scripture imploded. No longer the very Word of God, the Bible became the mere scribbling of ancient scribes. Finally, like planets plunging into a black hole, the dramatic dogmas of Christ's divinity and his real presence in the Eucharist disappeared into the bowels of the dark hole of disbelief forevermore.

One belief - that in God's existence - lay beyond the gravitational pull of my collapsed faith in the Church and escaped the black hole of spiritual skepticism. I had never accepted God's existence solely on the authority of the Bible and the Church. I had reached the conclusion that God exists while studying philosophy in the seminary and at the university.

Among all the great philosophers, the one that made most sense was Aristotle who lived from 384 to 322 BC. Before Jesus and the Christian church existed, this Greek philosopher, through simple logic, realized that God exists. Aristotle had observed that beings on earth come from and depend on other beings to exist. Such dependent beings, no matter how long the series, require at their origin a Being that is not dependent on anyone or anything to exist. That independent Being, whom humans call God, simply is and must always have existed because he could not have come from nothing. Nothing cannot produce being.

Aristotle said that God is, not what he is. But as I observed nature and the and the amazing wonders of the stars and the human body, especially the brain, I concluded on my own that God is infinitely powerful and intelligent. He must also be beneficent and good. Why else would he create the universe, surely not for pleasure and gain.

Unlike Aristotle's book, the Bible said a lot more about God. In Genesis and the Exodus, God speaks and expresses emotions. Sometimes he gets angry; then he is pleased. God also works miracles like nourishing the Jews with manna and separating the Red Sea for their escape. In the Gospels, the evangelists portrayed the self-sacrificing and compassionate Jesus as God's Son. Later Christian churchmen elaborated upon the Scriptures and published volumes about God. In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo painted a portrait of God as a muscular man with a lovely beard. All those

writings and paintings represented the wholly spiritual and invisible Being in a totally human way. But Aristotle simply called God, “the Being without beginning from whom all other beings come.” He knew nothing more about God’s being, nor did he know when that Absolute Being produced the first dependent beings in the universe.

Similarly the Bible does not date the creation of the world. It simply states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” But in later passages, the Bible provides chronologies of major events and geneologies of important people like Jesus. Scrutinizing this scriptural data around 1630, James Ussher, the Anglican bishop of Ireland, concluded that the creation of the world occurred in the year 4004 BC. His view prevailed throughout Europe and America for two hundred years. It was repeated in sermons and books, even in Christmas carols. I still remember the French hymn that we children sang in church around 1930. Like the angels in Bethlehem, we too announced the good news of Christ’s birth linking it with creation. In clear soprano voices, we sang, “Four thousand years after God created the world, the divine child was born.”

Bishop Ussher believed that the Bible revealed not only the fact but the date of creation. But as I sang my favorite carol in church, the starry skies were providing new information to the astrophysicist Georges Lemaitre. In 1927, this Belgian Catholic priest wrote that the galaxies were flying apart and expanding the universe. Later Lemaitre mentally ran the film of an expanding universe backward and envisioned the galaxies no longer carried apart but moving together. The distances between galaxies dwindled from the unimaginable to mere miles. Then in 1931, while I still caroled about Christ’s birth and creation, Lemaitre wrote that, before the expansion of the universe got under way, there existed “a primeval atom” with a weight equal to the total mass of the universe. This matter existed in a highly compressed, exceedingly hot state. Lemaitre compared the primeval atom to a cosmic egg that flung its contents outward in a gargantuan explosion. Dust particles and gases spewed out, speeding through space and eventually forming billions of galaxies, like our Milky Way which includes the sun and the earth. Most scientists accept Lemaitre’s explanation of the world’s beginning and call the original explosion “The Big Bang”. They also agree that it occurred around 15 billion years ago, surely not in the year 4004 BC.

One evening in April 1971 under Saigon’s starry sky, after weeks of assessing my faith in God’s existence, I came to a definitive conclusion. Like my mentor, Aristotle, I believed that only an eternal, absolute Being explains the zillions of dependent beings in the world. In the beginning, he may have created a single nodule with infinite potential and sparked its explosion, expansion and evolution. But no matter when or how it happened, only the eternal, absolute Being, God, could have created the first dependent beings whether in this or another previous universe.

The original question, before I began to evaluate my faith in God, was

threefold: does God exist; did he create the world; and does he intervene in our lives? Now only the third question remained moot. I would seek a definitive answer in subsequent evenings but always under the stars, my peepholes into heaven. Hopefully through them, I would see whether God passively observes what happens on earth or whether he actively intervenes in the normal course of events to influence their outcome.

When this question first surfaced in the seminary years ago, the Church pointed to the Bible and responded, "God always intervenes." But since I no longer believed in the infallible Church nor in Scripture as God's very word, the question about God's Providence in our lives remained open. Tonight I stood alone before the absolute Being looking for the truth. Just recently I had answered the question about God's existence by returning to the origin of the universe. I would follow the same route to determine the reality of God's intervention in the world.

Immediately after the Big Bang, gases and dust particles scattered far and wide and in time coalesced to form ten billion trillion stars. After a while, all gathered in various galaxies, such as our Milky Way. In this galaxy, one of its billion stars is our sun. About 4.6 billion years ago, nine planets formed and rotated around the sun. The earth settled in an orbit about 93,000,000 miles from the sun, where it would not be too hot nor too cold for organic life. The scientists agree that this mind-boggling expansion of the primeval atom and the perfect positioning of the earth's orbit around the sun could have happened without outside help. Though God's intervention was logically required for the creation of the primeval atom, perhaps he need not intervene again to form and position the planets and the stars. Needed or not, if God did intervene only once, hallelujah; if more often or possibly at every step, a million hallelujahs.

Around 4.5 billion years ago, the newly formed earth looked like a round barren rock, without water and vegetation - not a single blade of grass. Then, as the earth's center heated up, chemicals rose to the surface and formed life-giving water. About 3.6 billion years ago, the first living things appeared on earth - the one-celled bacteria. Three cheers for those brave little critters!

About 1,100 million years ago, coral, jellyfish and worms lived in the sea. Around 410 million years ago, forests grew in swamps while fish, including sharks, swam in salt or fresh water, as they chose. Later the first reptiles and insects appeared. In 240 million years ago, turtles, crocodiles and dinosaurs enjoyed life on earth. Later the first birds joined the fun and, in 138 million years ago, red and yellow flowers decorated the earth. By 55 million years ago, horses, monkeys and whales strutted their stuff.

Around 24 million years ago, apes appeared in Asia and Africa. Then at long last, about 1.8 million years ago, the first humans walked, chipped stones and hunted - not far from my stomping grounds in Uganda.

During this wondrous evolution, did God ever have to intervene whether for every leap in life or only for major changes, as from apes to humans? Scientists believe that the primeval atom of our universe had the potential for indefinite evolution. While accepting this possibility, I still praised God for the evolution of his creation - the primeval atom. But I still wondered whether God had intervened actively in its evolution? How often? How much?

Looking for answers, I focused momentarily on the mighty forces of nature. Watching the sunrise in the morning to sustain life on earth, I thanked God for creating whatever had produced that magnificent source of energy, warmth and light. But apparently the sun's furnace does not require continuous stoking from God. Later in the day, when clouds dropped invigorating rain on my raspberries and roses, God need not personally turn on heaven's sprinklers. Similarly, God may not activate and regulate the other forces of nature. He gave them the needed jump-start at the Big Bang and now they operate on their own.

Sometimes, however, the formidable forces of nature cause widespread destruction. Is God involved in that? The Bible clearly answers yes and reports many deadly divine interventions, such as when "the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire, overthrowing those cities and all their inhabitants and what grew on the ground." But the Bible's most dramatic story of an angry God destroying humans and nature appears in Genesis, Chapter 6 and 7. In the scribe's very words, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth....And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created - people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air...I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, everything that is on the earth shall die'...As commanded by God, Noah went in the ark with him family and a male and female of every animal, bird and everything that creeps on the ground...Then the windows of the heavens were opened and the rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights...The waters rose above the mountains...All flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals and all swarming creatures...Only Noah was left and those that were with him in the ark." That's the story in the Bible. I believed none of it. God, as I now conceived him, would never intervene and unleash nature's powerful forces in order to destroy humans. My God was not a Hitler, nor a Stalin but someone like Jesus of Nazareth.

While believing in God's love, I did sometimes wonder why he did not

intervene and check nature's forces whenever they ran amok and threatened the lives of innocent people. Since God created those forces, he could control them. On August 24, in the year 79 AD, Mt. Vesuvius erupted and buried the city of Pompeii in 60 feet of lava and ashes, killing 16,000 people. God could have vented the volcano in some other way. Why didn't he intervene then? Later in August 1931, when the swollen waters of the Huang He River leveled its levees and flooded China's countryside, 3,700,000 people died. God could have contained the killing flood somehow; but he didn't. Why not? Then on November 13, 1970, a furious cyclone ravaged Bangladesh and killed 300,000 people. Surely God could have saved those helpless victims; but he didn't. Why not? Just as God allowed the forces of nature to determine their course of action during the formation of the universe and the evolution of life, so also now he lets nature operate normally even when animals, plants and humans die. Death is natural to all living things on earth.

When people are murdered, however, not by blind forces of nature but by ego-maniacs, it's harder to understand why God does not intervene. From the 1930s to 1953, Joseph Stalin secured his position as top dog in the Soviet Union by "purge" trials and the execution of several million people. One lightning bolt from heaven would have stopped Stalin in his bloody tracks. God did nothing. Meanwhile, in Germany, another tyrant, Adolph Hitler, ordered the Holocaust of six million Jews, God's favored people in the Bible. God saw the greyish smoke rising from the furnaces of Auschwitz. One Biblical downpour could have doused those hellish fires and drowned the satanic monster in Berlin. But God did nothing. Just as God does not spare the victims of nature's physical forces, so God does not save the victims of mass murderers and other criminals. He allows creatures to act according to their nature which, in man, includes free choice for weal or woe.

Apparently God did not intervene even when the victims of murderers prayed for help. In the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus foresaw his impending arrest and crucifixion, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." In an earlier account, the Bible says, "At the east gate of the garden of Eden, God placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning guard its entrance." That same God could have positioned another cherubim and sword flaming and turning at the garden of Gethsemane and prevented Judas and an armed mob from entering. But God did not intervene. Later, soldiers flogged Jesus, crowned his head with thorns and crucified him. God watched the long agony of Jesus and never intervened.

Thirty years later, Nero, the infamous Roman ruler, condemned the followers of Jesus to confront lions in the Colosseum. The Christians surely prayed to God, perhaps in the very words of Jesus, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Centuries earlier, when Daniel was thrown into the den of lions, "God sent his angel and

shut the lions' mouth so that they would not hurt Daniel," - so says the Bible. But now, to save the Christians from Nero's lions, God did not intervene.

Nor did God intervene many years later to save the millions facing death in Hitler's and Stalin's concentration camps. The God-fearing people among them must have prayed and pleaded with God for deliverance. But God did not intervene and save them. Why not?

Before I could answer that burning question, another had already scorched my mind. If God did not intervene to save innocent people from murder even as they prayed for deliverance, why should he heed the prayers of people seeking help in everyday events of life? People pray for everything: for sunshine on a picnic, for success in exams, for a raise in salary - even to win the lottery. They hope that God will intervene because it is so easy for God to grant a request. Why wouldn't their heavenly Father help them?

Could the answer be that God allows his original creation of the universe to develop and evolve on its own? Could the primeval atom have the potential for indefinite progress without further intervention from God? Very probably God did not intervene to set off stars and position their planets. Most probably God did not intervene to jump-start life on earth. Certainly God does not originate hurricanes and tornados, nor earthquakes and floods. Very probably God did not intervene to fashion billions of new species on earth, including that of humans. Moreover, God does not intervene to prevent their extinction, as that of the dinosaurs. God does not intervene when animals feed on one another, like lions and gazelles. Nor does God intervene when humans brutally kill one another.

If for thirteen billion years God did not intervene to cause or prevent the dramatic and cataclysmic events of the universe, why should he intervene in the everyday events of humans, even when they pray? Why should God make an exception to his universal policy and practice of non-intervention, just because humans pray? Some people believe that God never intervenes in the events of the universe. Others believe that God does intervene whether all the time or only sometimes.

For fifty years, in a Church that swears by the Bible, I strongly believed that God intervenes in human affairs and natural events. I had attributed to divine intervention many blessings in my life. But now, after much reflection, I came to the

conclusion that God does not originate or prevent natural and human disasters like hurricanes and holocausts. God does not intervene in the everyday events of human existence even when people pray for help. Perhaps God never intervenes.

While not believing that God intervenes in the world, I do not deny that he does. What God is and what he can do and what he does is beyond human comprehension. I never deny what I cannot see or understand.

In summary, I believe that dependent beings, such as everything in the universe, need an eternal independent Being at the start. I also accept the possibility that all dependent beings may depend on God for continued existence and development and action. We cannot know how totally dependent we are on God. I praise and thank God not only for his creation of the universe but for whatever else he has done or is doing for us all. I shall never forget or take for granted God's goodness in starting and sustaining our existence - hallelujah!

In the ancient legends and myths, as reported in the Bible and other mythologies, divine intervention in human affairs was visible and audible, sometimes to many and at times only to one person. In my life, however, all blessings could be explained by my environment, especially the people close to me. If God intervened in my life, he did so through them. That was true during my childhood with my parents, in school with the nuns, in the seminary with priests, then in Hyde Park and Masaka with associates, and now in Vietnam. If my recent blessings of a custom-made career and a well-suited mate originated in heaven, they reached me through human messengers. In the future, if an event should seem unusually fortunate, I would look closely for a sure sign of divine intervention. Just maybe the event would have no other logical explanation. It could be my long-looked-for peephole into heaven.

While I spent those many evenings reflecting upon God's possible intervention in our lives, I worked like the devil during the day providing relief to refugees. The Communists kept us very busy. On March 30, 1972 they launched a massive attack throughout South Vietnam and, by December, they had generated 1,288,800 refugees.

During those nine dreadful months, the US and South Vietnamese forces repelled the communist invaders in many areas. There, some 400,000 refugees had already returned home. But where the communists remained entrenched, the refugees stayed away. Some 200,000 lived with relatives and friends. The rest, about 674,000, found shelter and food in refugee camps.

In the fall, inspectors from Washington visited these camps and found them wanting. They said, “Some camps were terribly overcrowded, with poor sanitation, often insufficient water, clothing and blankets, inadequate schools for the children, and poor security. But worst of all, the camps offered little opportunity for employment and activity. As a result, most refugees simply vegetated and thereby lost their self-respect.”

To remedy this situation quickly, USAID and the South Vietnamese government created two “impact teams” each containing 10 members involved in refugee relief. The teams had the authority and funds to hire labor, purchase supplies and to do whatever else was necessary to correct the problems in the refugee camps.

One December morning, both impact teams arrived at the Saigon airport. Team A, headed by a Vietnamese brigadier general, was scheduled to fly in plane A fully fueled for the northern provinces. Plane B was prepared to carry Team B, my group, to lower provinces. Just before take-off, the General changed his mind for reasons he didn’t share with anyone. He chose to board plane B and my team climbed into plane A.

After a two hour flight and a quick lunch, my group inspected several camps around Da Nang, notably Camp Book. According to a report, “the conditions in this camp were sickening: over-crowding, filth, lethargy. Newborn babies were dying side by side with dying adults. Individual cooking fires filled the airless tents with dense smoke. The hapless souls huddling together in their misery in this hell on earth didn’t have the energy to complain and protest.”

After taking every action to clean up this mess, we returned to the hotel for dinner and rest. There we learned that, earlier in the afternoon, the General’s plane had crashed, killing him and the American Officer in the seat originally reserved for me. I had narrowly escaped death. A few months ago, when I still believed in Divine Providence, I would have reacted to that close call not only with a huge sigh of relief but with a sincere prayer of gratitude. The Lord, my shepherd, had watched over me.

Today, however, I knew who was responsible for my good fortune. It was the general. For whatever reason or whim, for convenience or caprice, he had chosen the region and the plane originally reserved for me. He didn’t ask me nor did he ask God. He did it on his own.

Fully conscious, however, that God exists and may intervene invisibly in the universe at all times, I said a silent prayer of gratitude. I thanked God for my existence, especially precious when most precarious. Close calls kept me close to the Creator.

Another incident with indications of possible divine intervention occurred

during 1975 when the Communists launched their final offense against South Vietnam. As the communist forces rapidly advanced, the residents fled away. In MR II, 200,000 men, women and children straggled down a treacherous mountain road while the enemy shelled them. In late March, another million refugees left the city of Hue and headed towards Da Nang. There the terrified refugees jammed the airport and the docks. On March 29, when the last plane was leaving, 300 Vietnamese clambered aboard in ten minutes. Others, clinging to the rear stairway, fell to their death.

While the frenzied mobs fled for their life, some 21,000 parentless children remained safely snuggled in orphanages, such as “The Warm Nest” managed by a remarkable Australian lady, Rosemary Taylor. To hurry the evacuation of the orphans already processed for adoption, Rosemary asked my wife, Minh, to escort two babies bound for San Francisco. The commercial flight would leave the next day. Minh accepted and got ready hastily.

Early April 3, Rosemary called and gave Minh a choice: either to fly as planned on a commercial plane or to await a flight organized by USAID exclusively for orphans on April 4. With her suitcase at the door and a plane ticket in hand, Minh decided to go now. We drove to the orphanage and picked up Minh’s precious cargo: a two-year-old girl and baby boy of eight months. Later as the threesome disappeared into the plane, I asked God by habit to take care of Minh and the babies.

The following morning, April 4, an Air Force C-5A Galaxy, a giant cargo plane arrived at Saigon’s airport. Two hundred forty-three children and 62 accompanying adults were loaded into the plane’s huge belly and it took off. After a short distance, the rear cargo doors blew open and the plane crashed in a muddy rice field. Seventy-eight babies and several escorts were killed.

One of them could easily have been Minh. With my earlier faith, I would have believed that God had intervened to save Minh. But now I realized that Minh was not on that ill-fated plane because she and I had deliberately chosen the earlier flight. My new faith, however, allowed for the possibility that God had intervened and influenced our decision. If so, God deserved a Hallelujah from my willing heart. But my more sober brain believed that, as with the birds, God let us choose our flight without his special help.

Three weeks later, the Communist forces were fast approaching Saigon. With little time left before their final assault, I hurried to help relatives and friends escape. I first gathered Minh’s immediate family of eleven, including a newborn still in the hospital, all of whom I drove to a plane bound for Guam. Then I rushed Minh’s aunt Tho and her family of seven to catch what would be the last plane out of Saigon. Moments later, the Communists began to shell the runways. As the plane safely rose

behind the cover of clouds, aunt Tho, with rosary in hand, thanked God for inspiring or pushing me to save her family. I for one never heard God's voice or felt his hand. But aunt Tho could well be right. My new faith allowed for God's intervention.

The following day, April 29, three US military buses collected foreigners working for USAID. Driving a bus for the first time, I picked up only Koreans and Philipinos with valid passports. At an intersection, a Vietnamese friend with his wife and five children approached the bus and begged me to help them escape. I knew that my Vietnamese passenger could jeopardize our passage at the checkpoints. For the sake of my charges already aboard the bus, I refused my friend's request and told him why. Then raising his baby boy to my open window, the father said, "Please, you can hide him under a seat and take care of him." Deeply saddened, I shook my head and took off.

Near the airport, barbed wire was stretched across the road. A Vietnamese soldier stood guard ready to turn us back. In a split second, I floored the accelerator and barreled over the wire. Several shots rang out but missed whether by intent or good luck or God's care. In minutes, my passengers with thumbs-up dashed into the gutter along the road and reached the clattering choppers safely.

Later, I learned that the other two buses transporting civilians to the airport never made it through the obstacles. Did God intervene to help me? Did he impel me to brave the barbed wire and the guard's gun? No angel waved me on. I heard gun shots, not heavenly voices. Perhaps as with rabbits and deer zigzagging through forest fires, God let me manage with my wits and guts. But out of habit and just in case he did help, I whispered a hallelujah loud enough for only God to hear.

After several hours, helicopters swooped down to rescue American personnel. With one small suitcase, I boarded the whirlybird. Suddenly, just outside the open door, an eight-year-old boy holding the hand of his four-year-old sister tried to climb into the chopper. Should I shoo them away? Looking around, I saw their mother signaling to me to take them in and away. She expressed her plea with hands joint in prayer. As the chopper revved its motor for takeoff, the boy grasped my ankle and, as if by reflex action, my hands gripped the children's wrists and pulled them aboard. Surely the US Lady of Liberty, who welcomes the poor and homeless seeking freedom, would take care of them.

In the whacking noise of the chopper's blades, I did not hear a voice from heaven; nor did I see any angelic signals in the blinding dust during liftoff. Probably, just as God does not direct camels during desert storms nor eagles in thunder storms, he let me act according to my best judgment and character. But again, never knowing whether or when the heavenly Shepherd intervenes, I secretly said, "Lord, if you helped me haul those helpless waifs into the chopper, I thank you for that in addition to our existence."

Within minutes, the helicopter whacked its way over the abandoned US military headquarters in Saigon. Like tombstones in cemeteries, the buildings stood as memorials to the US massive involvement in Vietnam. The war had killed 57,605 US servicemen and wounded 303,700 more. It also killed 664,000 Vietnamese soldiers and wounded millions. Moreover the war had cost the Americans 152 billion dollars. Why did the US engage in such a bloody and costly war?

For an answer, I quickly recalled the US involvement in Vietnam from start to finish. When World War II ended, Russia spread Communism into many East European countries. Not to be outdone, China planned to follow suit in its neighbor countries, including Vietnam. The new US President, Harry Truman, resolved to stop any further expansion of Communism. "In symbolic terms," someone said, "the American Bald Eagle would keep the Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon at bay."

France seemed eager to stop the expansion of Communism in its former colony. But to do that France, which was not bankrupt by the war, would need foreign funds. So, President Truman agreed to finance the return of French troops in Vietnam. On September 23, 1945, the French landed in Saigon and fought the Vietnamese Communists for nine years to no avail. Finally, on May 7, 1954 the Communists defeated the French and booted them out of Vietnam.

With the French gone, the Vietnamese Communists, already entrenched in the North, moved to overthrow the democratic government in the South. Unable to stop their advance, South Vietnam's officials requested aid from the US. In 1962, President Kennedy sent military supplies and advisors. In 1965, President Johnson despatched combat troops. All failed. Tomorrow, April 30, 1975, the victorious Communists would enter Saigon and control the whole of Vietnam. What would take place tomorrow would have happened ten or thirty years earlier if US Presidents had not intervened. In that case, both the US and Vietnam would have been spared the destruction of forests and fields, the creation of countless refugees, millions of wounded and dead, and the loss of billions of dollars. What a mind-boggling and heart-rending waste of precious resources to accomplish nothing!

At that moment as I stood in the crowded chopper, I looked westward and saw Vietnam's coastline disappear behind the horizon along with a blood-red sun. Then

as I turned around, a monstrous creature was rising from the sea. It reminded me of the giant sea monster, Leviathan, that the Lord described to Job. Luckily for us, what loomed ahead was not the Bible's Leviathan threatening chaos and evil but the US aircraft carrier, Midway, on a mission of mercy. It approached us to provide a haven for people fleeing Vietnam.

Soon our whirlybird alighted on the carrier as gently as a seagull. Hastily a smiling sailor carried my young charges to a Vietnamese family on board who would take care of them. Then we adults dismounted the chopper and quickly cleared the deck for other aircrafts arriving with refugees. In the crew's sleeping quarters, vacated for the emergency, I claimed a bed simply by placing my suitcase on the pillow.

Then while the Midway lingered to pick up refugees arriving on fishing boats, I sat on my cot amidst silence refugees. Since on one felt like talking, I took out my Bible for inspiration in this stressful situation. As I thumbed through the Old Testament, the story of Jonah caught my eye. It seemed timely.

Both of us were fleeing danger. I was escaping from the Communists hell-bent on booting all Americans out of Vietnam. Jonah was running away from a difficult mission given to him by God. Like me, Jonah boarded a boat. But when a God-driven tempest tossed Jonah's boat about, the sailors threw him overboard. Then, as the Bible says, "The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

Stuck in the whale's stomach, Jonah reflected on the role of God and his own recent events; and so did I while lying immobile in the bowels of the carrier. But we did not see eye to eye about God's intervention in our lives. For instance, Jonah believed that the Lord had deliberately whipped up a killer storm to get his cooperation. My God did not inspire our presidents and generals to drop a million tons of bombs in Vietnam. My God did not order or help soldiers to torch villages with flamethrowers. My God did not inspire the generation of a million refugees. The God in whom I believe did not intervene in Vietnam to kill people and destroy nature. Nor did I.

On the contrary, I was totally occupied in helping refugees to escape the ravages of war. I helped to provide them shelter, water and food. I helped them to return home and rebuild their lives. I helped them resettle elsewhere, at first within Vietnam and finally in the US. Like God, I did not deliberately harm anyone.

Like me, God may have intervened actively to help refugees. That kind of activity presented no problem for God. It was in line with his nature of goodness and his action of creation. His participation in refugee relief was not visible like that of Doctor Dan and so many other Vietnamese and American refugee relief workers. But I strongly

believe that God may have intervened at times and perhaps through it all. I found comfort in thinking that, in refugee work, I had worked in concert with God and probably hand in hand.

The Bible says that, after Jonah's prayer, "the Lord spoke to the fish and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Similarly, after receiving word from above, whether from an admiral or the President or perhaps God, the Midway spewed out its refugees in Bangkok. Like Jonah, I was glad to see the sun again and to breathe fresh air.

After phoning my wife in California to assure her of my safety, I boarded a plane for the US. In a little while, I ate dinner with red wine. Then I reclined my seat and reviewed my stay in Vietnam. I remembered my refugee relief work during the day and my evening reflections upon Divine Providence. I had observed that the presence and quality of refugee relief seemed to depend entirely on the dedication and diligence of the workers. When they worked poorly and failed, God clearly did not intervene; when they worked hard and succeeded, God's intervention seemed not needed. I pondered this problem for months.

Tonight as I flew out of Saigon, I recalled my first flight to Vietnam in 1968. Then, my faith in God's Providence was childlike and simplistic, based entirely on the teachings of the Church. Now my view was more complex but more mature, rational and realistic. Like a jeweler cutting diamonds, I ground my belief of divine intervention into 10 facets, just as Moses reduced God's moral code into 10 commandments:

1. My reason says that our universe did not emerge from nothing because what does not exist cannot make something exist. The world came from a being who never was nothing but always was. In a word, God is eternal. Moreover the wonders of the world proclaim his infinite power and intelligence.

2. Today's best scientists believe that our universe began as a small mass of infinite density. They calculate that the primeval atom or nodule exploded about 15 billion years ago and spewed out dust particles and gases. These eventually formed galaxies of stars like our sun with its planet earth.

3. According to all scientists, the formation of the universe after the initial explosion could have resulted entirely from the innate potential and force of the dust and gases issuing from the original nodule.

4. Accepting that probability, human reason does not require God's direct intervention in the development of the universe. He need not intervene to form stars in the sky and water on earth. Nor need God intervene to form the many species of living

beings on earth, including humans.

5. The Almighty, who had intervened to create the first nodule of our world, then watched its expansion and evolution apparently without further intervention. But God, as I conceived him, could have intervened at any time for whatever reason. We shall never know if he did.

6. There is no evidence that God intervenes when natural disasters develop and erupt, such as earthquakes and hurricanes. In my vision of God, which contradicts the Bible's version, he never intervenes to start these disasters simply to punish humans. They happen naturally.

7. Moreover, my God does not intervene to start or stop man-made disasters such as the Inquisition, the Holocaust and wars. Nor does he intervene to initiate or prevent the daily crimes of murder, rape and abuse.

8. Many good things happen everyday in the universe like sunshine and rain. God could but need not intervene. If God should ever intervene in nature or in our lives, his presence and action would never be visible and tangible. God is spiritual beyond all human perception.

9. Living things on earth are born with the ability to survive with help from the environment. With sunshine and fertile soil, the oak tree grows and lives. After suckling its mother's milk for awhile, the lion finds food entirely on its own. God does not seem to intervene in the lives of animals and fish, butterflies and birds, flowers and trees.

10. Why need he intervene in the lives of his most gifted creatures - us humans? I firmly believe that God lets humans survive and develop the best then can, getting help from and giving help to one another. God's Providence is always coordinated with or is none other than humans lending a helping hand to one another.

In this light, I quickly reviewed my entire life. During the first thirty years, I had received help from my parents at home, from nuns in grade school, then from priests in the seminary. No one seemed to depend on me for any significant help.

After my ordination in 1945, when I emerged after fourteen years of seclusion in seminaries, I met many people who needed financial and material help. But as a religious priest, bound by vows of poverty and chastity, I had nothing physical to share with them. All I had to give was spiritual stuff. I offered mass and distributed blessed wafers of bread to the people. In the confessional I gave absolution to contrite sinners. At the font, I baptized babies with water that made them cry. I also anointed the

dying with holy oils. In the pulpit, I preached the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church regarding Jesus Christ and Mary, sanctifying grace and sin, heaven and hell - all stories spun from the Bible. What I gave to people may have inspired and comforted them but none of it helped them in their physical difficulties and needs.

Later in Africa when I reflected on the Church's many mistakes, she lost her crippling grip on me. I freed my hands to start helping people in a physical way. Hand in hand, the people I managed a nationwide lottery for years. By selling the tickets and winning occasionally, the people improved their lives. With the profits of the lottery, we built 18 classrooms, provided uniforms for the children, free lunch at noon, a gym and a football field. Those blessings clearly came from the hard work of people helping one another. For sure, angels did not help. If God intervened in any special way, we shall never know.

Then in 1968, after I left the priesthood and joined the US Agency for International Development, whose official symbol was a helping hand, my full time job was to help refugees in distress. Working hand in hand with Vietnamese and American refugee relief workers, I helped to provide shelter, clothing and food to millions. Here again, angels did not help. If God intervened in any way, we shall never know.

At this point, my long reverie ended with the rumbling sound of the landing gear. Soon we would land in America. In a flash I compared this return from Vietnam with my arrival from Africa in 1967. Then, by leaving the Church, I had broken all ties with my Catholic family and friends. The only one who received me then was the Lady of Liberty made of metal and mounted on stone. Now my wife, Minh, awaited me with open arms and a loving heart. In 1967, I had no family to welcome me; now I had Minh's entire family: brothers and sisters with their children, many uncles and aunts, and cousins galore. In 1967, I had no friends in the US. Now I had a large number of American and Vietnamese friends with a bond that had been forged in the fury and fire of war.

The only similarity in my two returns to America was my belief in God: more emotional then and more rational now. As I ventured into the next chapter of my life, I believed that the creator of the world expected all creatures to rely first upon themselves and then on their environment while helping others in need. God would remain behind the scene. Just knowing that he was there spurred me on to help others during the rest of my life from 1976 to 2000.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **A Helping Hand (1976-2000)**

In December 1996, Minh and I moved to Seal Beach, California by the sea. Here I often watch colorful sunsets over the Pacific water that reflects the purples and pinks, the oranges and reds of the sky. As I walk barefoot along the beach, I frequently reflect upon the more memorable events of my life. I review them in the light of my post-Church vision of God as established definitively in Vietnam. I firmly believe that God lets humans survive and develop the best they can, getting help from and giving help to one another. God's Providence always seems to be coordinated with humans lending a helping hand to one another. By helping my fellow creatures, I am helping God to conserve and enhance his creation. Now my life with God continues, no longer on the supernatural level established by the Church, but on the level of nature created by God.

During one sunset, I recalled my first assignment after returning from Vietnam. In early 1976, my Agency for International Development, symbolized by a helping hand, sent me to Chad in Africa. This land-locked country, triple the size of California, has three distinct regions: fertile land in the South, a full-blown desert in the North, and a mid-section of dry grassland called the Sahel. In Chad, the Sahel region has no rivers and lakes and its people depend entirely on rain for water. When little rain falls, subsistence crops fail and people die.

That was the situation when Minh and I arrived in Chad. The Sahelian people had suffered several years of severe drought. Surface water rose in scarce oases miles away, while potable water flowed only forty feet below the ground. With shovels and buckets, the people had tried to reach the water table by hand; but the shifting sands filled the holes as quickly as they were dug. The people needed drilling rigs and supplies like pumps and pipes, all beyond their means. From their government, always strapped for funds, they received little more than commiseration.

The desperate people, with dying babies in arms looked to heaven from whence came rain. The Muslims, 44% of the Chadians, prayed to Allah while the Christians, 33% of the population, called on God. The Chadian farmers and herdsman prayed in more than 100 tribal languages, all of which, they assumed, God understood. But, unlike the Lord in the Bible who simply "opened the windows of the heavens" to release rain, God apparently waited for humans to lend a helping hand to the Chadians.

Believing this, I prepared a project proposal for USAID's consideration. I sought information from the Chadian experts in the Department of Public Works. I

consulted a group of US Peace Corps volunteers who had drilled wells elsewhere in the Sahel. These young men agreed to carry out the project in Chad if USAID provided the necessary equipment and materials.

Within a month I dispatched to Washington a project proposal designed for drilling wells in Chad's Sahelian region. When USAID called an urgent meeting to discuss the merits of the project and decide its fate, I flew to Paris and boarded the Concorde. I arrived just in time to answer all questions related to the project. After USAID's technicians agreed that my proposal was whole and sound, the Director approved the project on the spot.

A few months later, when the pipes and pumps arrived, the Peace Corps workers jumped into their trucks and rushed to the villages most in need of water. Within days, crystal clear water gushed from the pumps to the cheers of children and the applause of parents. I saw adults look heavenward, most probably to praise Allah for this latest blessing. Similarly, I thanked God for his creation that in time produced water and gathered some below the desert sands.

The Bible reports that, after creating water, "God saw that it was good." Now as water flowed from our wells in Chad, God surely saw that this water too was good and so was his policy to assist people principally through their fellow humans. His plan worked. I too was pleased to have had a hand in this project along with the helping hands of many people in Chad and the tax payers in the US. Without our help, God would not have provided well water to the Chadians in the Sahel.

During a later sunset in Seal Beach when fluffy pinkish cloudlets floated before a reddish sun, I recalled moving to Rio del Sol, a housing development adjoining Brownsville, Texas. While still in Chad, Minh and I had designed our dream house and had it built. It awaited us in 1981 when I retired from government service. On a half-acre of land along a wide river, Minh duplicated her garden in Chad, planting vegetables, fruit trees, and roses while I installed a sprinkler system and planted a carpet of grass.

Directly in front of our home, the boulevard forked and formed a Y. The large triangle of land between the branching streets belonged to no one. It lay abandoned without bushes and trees, with only anthills and weeds. It was an eyesore irritating the residents who must pass by it whenever they entered or left the Rio del Sol development.

One day a neighbor, who admired Minh's beautiful backyard, suggested that I transform the ugly triangle into a lovely garden. He knew no one else who could or would do this. Before accepting his challenge, I consulted with Minh. She said, "That's in line with your philosophy of life and your motto to lend a helping hand to people in need. You've got to do it." As always, she was right.

To minimize the future maintenance of the garden, I selected flowers and plants that could endure Brownsville's long, hot and arid summers. In the abandoned ranches across the highway, I dug up prickly pear cactuses, yuccas and sage bushes that had survived many years solely on the rain provided by God's heaven. To relieve the austerity of those desert-like plants, I spaced them with hardy flower-bearing oleander bushes. Beside them, I placed large rocks salvaged from abandoned railroad tracks. Since God's rain would not support lawn grass, I fertilized the existing wild grass which soon covered the ground with greenish blades. Kept mowed, it looked fine.

Months later, the edges of the cactus spines burst into diaphanous lavender flowers and the yuccas sprouted large panicles of white blossoms. The sage bushes draped their branches with grayish-green leaves and the oleanders lit up the garden with fiery red blossoms. Many residents brought their children to the garden for a closer look. The cactuses attracted them more than everything else. While the boys focused on the needle-sharp thorns, the girls admired the delicate flowers. Everyone was pleased with the garden. I imagined that God too must have been pleased not only to see his flowers and plants in full bloom but also to see that his hands-off policy worked when people intervened and lent their neighbors a helping hand.

During another kaleidoscopic sunset in Seal Beach, I remembered other occasions when I helped people in need. In the early 80's, two young mothers, Corinne and Lorraine Lapeyre, opened Brownsville's most beautiful day care, called Teddy Bear Care. TBC had licensed, trained teachers and space for ninety-three children.

Unfortunately during the recession of the 80's, many parents in Brownsville found it cheaper to farm out their children in private homes. So, after nine months, TBC had only a score of children, unable to cover the operating expenses, let alone the monthly mortgage payments. In their distress, the Lapeyre sisters prayed to God for help.

Despite their pleas, no storks dropped babies at the door. Nor did angels deliver checks signed by God. But, either accidentally or providentially, I heard about their problem and prayers. Believing that God would not intervene directly but depend on me or someone else to help them, I have them a hand.

To attract children to TBC, I first built six swings, three seesaws, two slides and a 8-by-8-foot sandbox. For the toddlers, I crafted several two-seater rocking boats.

One little guy, undoubtedly a future sailor, rocked enough hours to cross the nearby Gulf of Mexico.

Besides making playground equipment, I helped in many other ways. I beautified the grounds with evergreen junipers and red oleanders. Every morning before the children arrived, I washed and deodorized the toilet rooms. Later I rushed to buy groceries for the day. Sometimes I replaced teachers during coffee breaks. Once when reading to the children seated on the carpet, I inadvertently diverted from the text. The children stopped me cold, saying, "That's wrong." I then reread the text correctly and the children applauded. In emergencies I changed diapers. At Christmas, I played Santa, hiding behind a big belly and beard, and gladdened the children with gifts.

Within a year, TBC reached its full capacity of 93 children. Corinne and Lorraine contributed the most the success. The staff also worked hard and well. I too played a part in accordance with God's hands-off policy. He could have answered Corinne and Lorraine's prayers directly and personally as he reputedly did in Biblical times. But now he let the Lapeyre ladies succeed by doing their best and getting help from family and friends like me. I approved of God's policy and happily cooperated in his plan, especially with children just getting started in life.

I also helped people at the opposite end of life as they prepared to die. One such person was my brother Robert, a priest in California. In August 1994, he called me with bad news. For several years, he had slowed down the ravages of lymphoma with radiation and chemotherapy. But now his body couldn't take any more treatment; nor could it produce red corpuscles to carry oxygen throughout his body. He deferred death only by frequent infusions of fresh blood. When he called me that night, he had just decided to stop the transfusions.

All he wanted now was to spend his last days among friends. To be more accessible to them, he would leave the church's barricaded rectory for an apartment of his own. "I'm barely able to walk," he said. "I cannot move my belongings by myself. I need a hand - yours." I replied, "I'll be there tomorrow." Almost seventy years ago, I had helped my baby brother take his first steps in life. I would now lend him my hand for his final steps.

When I arrived at Bob's new address in Albany, California, he was lying in bed breathing heavily. Smiling he said, "Am I glad to see you!" We embraced and shed a few tears. "I'm in my own home for the first time in my life. It feels good." He would enjoy his home even more after I cleared out the mess in his living room. The movers

had left fifty loaded boxes and furnishings pell-mell on the floor. After retrieving what Bob needed now, I carried the rest into the basement. Bob watched me as I passed by his bedroom window up and down the stairs.

After six hours, I put the finishing touch on the room. I placed a vase of roses near the TV and hung Bob's favorite paintings. One depicted a glowing sun sinking into a dark ocean. The other showed a bright sun rising again above another shore alive with flowers and birds. Bob would see how these paintings symbolized the end of one life and the beginning of another.

With help, Bob slid into a wheelchair and navigated through his apartment with ease. He first approached his computer and then the refrigerator. Looking up, he saw the paintings and smiled. "Thanks," he said, "they'll help." Then he reached for the phone and called his friends.

They came for a final farewell. All wanted to thank Father Fontaine for inspiring their lives. One couple told me how Robert had witnessed their marriage and baptized their children. He had blessed their home and comforted them when their first baby died. In childlike simplicity, the mother said, "Father, when you get to heaven, please look for our child and hug her for us. Tell her that we love her very much and that we will see her again." Bob promised that he would. Other friends told different stories, all pivoting around the priest who had blessed their lives.

Around five o'clock, the last friend bade farewell, leaving Robert exhausted. He rested as I prepared supper. Later we recalled what we had shared in life, especially our home, the same elementary school and seminary. Bob had followed in my footsteps all the way to ordination. Later I had followed him to Rome and then to Masaka, Africa. Born of the same parents and nurtured by the same environment, we shared similar personalities and values, common interests and tastes. In our feelings and thoughts, Bob and I were identical twins.

We differed, however, on one fundamental point - our relation with the Church. To evaluate that difference, for my sake more than his, I broached the subject. "Bob, you know the Church's long history of blunders, such as her condemnation of Galileo and her infamous Inquisition. How can you still believe in her infallibility?"

"I don't," he replied. "The Church made mistakes in the past and continues to blunder even now. For instance, her condemnation of all birth control devices is crazy and cruel. The Bible doesn't mention birth control and Jesus never condemned condoms."

"Bravo, Bob. Where else is the Church failing?"

“The Church won’t marry Catholics a second time while the original spouse lives.”

“But I know Catholics who recently married again at the altar before their first spouse died.”

“Yes, but only after the Church has declared their first marriage invalid, sometimes for reasons as flimsy as immaturity.”

“In doing so, doesn’t the Church make the children of the first marriage illegitimate?”

“To avoid that embarrassment, the Church annuls the first marriage and legitimizes its children in the same breath. Thousands of times a year, the US bishops make this end run around the Church’s adamant doctrine that a legitimate marriage of Catholics in church cannot be dissolved by divorce.”

“How about the Church’s imposition of celibacy on its priests? Is that another mistake?”

“That law,” said Bob, “does not come from God. Contrary to nature, it should not be obligatory. Just before cancer struck me, I considered following in your footsteps once again and leaving the priesthood for married life. But time ran out. So you see Ray, I too don’t believe in the Church’s infallibility.”

“Unlike you,” I said, “when I lost all faith in her infallibility, I could no longer believe in her dogmas. Why? Because I had accepted everything she teaches about the supernatural life on her authority.”

“In my case,” Bob said, “the Church’s infallibility is only one of her many dogmas. I can reject anyone and accept the others just as in a smorgasbord which offers a variety of foods. I don’t have to eat everything.”

“For me,” I said, “the Church’s infallibility was not just one item on her menu of doctrines but the table that supported all her dogmas. When her infallibility folded, all her supernatural teachings tumbled into nothingness.”

“Ray, perhaps your logic is too rigid and drastic.”

“For a philosopher like me,” I added, “knowledge of reality comes first. I must know that something is before I make it part of my life. Truth matters most.”

“Luckily for me,” said Bob, “I’m an artist who values beauty even more. The truth may satisfy the mind but the beautiful stirs strong emotions through the senses and exalts the spirit.”

“Give your dull logical brother an example,” I said.

“Take Michelangelo,” Bob said. “On the basis of just three words in the Bible ‘God created humankind’, the artist painted the magnificent creation scene in the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo had no photos of Adam and God. So using his imagination, he painted God as a powerful man with grey hair and beard, dressed in a whitish robe and surrounded by angels looking a lot like humans.”

“As I recall,” I interjected, “God’s outstretched arm reaches out to another extended arm - that of Adam’s robust naked body.”

“Right,” said Bob, “and where their fingers touch, the artist added a spark, signifying the flow of vital energy from God to man.”

“I remember that spark,” I said, “and Adam lying on the bare earth while God looked airborne by his reddish mantle.”

“Aristotle the philosopher,” said Bob, “could never have painted such a scene. He conceived God as the Supreme Being on whom all other beings depend. He could not represent pure Being in any visual way.”

“You’re right,” I said and added, “if a philosopher like Aristotle had been asked to paint the Sistine Chapel, the ceiling would have been one solid color.”

“But,” said Bob, “the artist Michelangelo painted a masterpiece of breathtaking beauty that strikes all admirers with awe.”

“I’m glad that the Church used artists to display its dogmas in imaginary figures and scenes. Unfortunately, the Church also engaged theologians and preachers who lavishly elaborated and embellished her doctrines.”

“A good example of that,” said Robert “is the ample theology of Mary, the mother of Jesus.”

“Yes,” I said, “on the basis of a few sentences in Scripture, the theologians wrote thousands of books about God’s blessings on Mary: her Immaculate Conception, her virginal birth of Jesus, her Assumption into heaven and many more.”

“Then the artists followed,” said Bob, “representing Mary in myriads of masterpieces, such as Titian’s painting of the Assumption.”

“With the help of theologians and artists,” I said, “the Church embellished her doctrines far beyond evidence and reality.”

“So what?” Robert asked, “Millions find comfort and confidence in praying the rosary not only in church, but at home and on the road. Devotion to Mary does no harm - only good.”

“So does faith in the Eucharist,” I agreed. “The people believe that Jesus is really present in the consecrated bread reserved in the tabernacle. That closeness of Jesus, who experienced human suffering and who can help, give a lot of courage and hope.”

“And in my present situation,” said “Robert now breathing heavily because he was tired, “it’s comforting to believe in heaven. Instead of dreading to disappear into nothingness, I firmly believe that I’m going to see Jesus and Mary, mom and dad, our brothers Armand and Leo, and many friends.”

“Suppose there’s no life after death and no heaven - just nothing. What then?” I asked.

“In your supposition,” replied Robert, “I won’t be around to be disillusioned and disappointed.”

“But if heaven doesn’t exist,” I persisted, “you will have sacrificed so much in life and worked so hard for something that just isn’t. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No,” Bob said, “mere possibilities don’t trouble me. Besides, if that dogma of the Church and the rest of her doctrines turn out to be mere myths, so be it. My life has been enriched by my belief in Christ’s divinity, Mary’s Assumption, the Eucharist and heaven. They made my life more meaningful and beautiful.”

“Seventy years ago,” I said, “I felt that way about my belief in Santa Claus. When I realized that Santa didn’t exist, I did not regret the masquerade and fantasy. He

had provided an added reason for being good; he gave me hope, excitement and joy. My belief in Santa was good.”

“Right,” said Bob, “that’s how I feel about the inspiring and glorious history or stories of Jesus and Mary. They added another dimension to my world, filling it with beauty and goodness. What harm in that?”

“None,” I agreed. “Even though I don’t believe that the Church’s dogmas are real, I can accept them as I do religious paintings. Like art, religion embellishes reality, enriches our lives and inspires us. Both make us feel good and be good.”

“Now that we agree,” said Bob, “I can rest and hopefully fall asleep.” In time, he did as I lay on a cot beside him ready to help.

In the morning, while the entire parish celebrated the Sunday high mass praying for Robert, he quietly slipped away and died. I hoped against hope that he awakened in heaven next to Jesus and Mary, his family and friends. I felt a deep sorrow for the loss of my best friend.

Three days later, in a solemn funeral mass, hundreds celebrated his loving life on earth and his new life in heaven. During the offertory, a friend of Robert, Cecilia Burrough, sang his favorite hymn, the “Ave Maria” in a rich warm voice. Was Bob listening to that heavenly song? If so, he was smiling again. The thought of that possibility eased my sorrow.

After the burial, I boarded a plane bound for Brownsville and soon arrived home. Minh embraced and comforted me. In her arms, I regretted that Robert had never known the joy of being welcomed home by a loving wife.

After lending a hand to my brother during his final days, I waited for another call for help. It would probably come from a relative or friend perhaps miles away. On May 20, 1995 a cry came from my best friend right at my side, my beloved wife.

On that Saturday morning, the sun rose as usual but not Minh. She complained of a heavy right leg and a weak right arm. I drove her to the emergency room where a CAT scan and an EKG revealed nothing abnormal. But the doctor, suspecting a stroke, admitted her into the hospital. Next morning Minh awoke with paralyzed right limbs that retained full sensation but zero mobility.

When Minh asked me what had happened, I explained in simple terms the

nature of her stroke. Just as the human body needs oxygen to live, so does every single cell in our body and brain. After picking up oxygen in the lungs, the blood courses through blood vessels and dispenses this precious cargo to every cell. Without a continuous supply of oxygen, the cell dies.

At Minh's urging, I explained that the movement of arms and legs originates in specialized cells in the brain. These motor neurons send electro-chemical impulses to the nerves and muscles in our arms and legs. Without these impulses, a healthy limb cannot move, just as a perfectly good blender cannot work without electricity.

"In your case," I continued, "something blocked the flow of blood and oxygen into the brain cells that control the motion of your right arm and leg. Deprived of oxygen for a time, the motor neurons suffered some degree of damage. Just how much, no one knows. If your motor brain cells can still function, you'll be the first to know."

At that moment, some friends arrived with flowers and get-well cards. They inquired about Minh's condition and prognosis. Hearing that the doctors could not repair damaged motor neurons nor replace dead brain cells, a friend said, "But God can." She recalled how Jesus had cured several paralyzed persons and resurrected Lazarus from the dead. Another friend reminded me that many paralyzed persons were cured at Lourdes, leaving behind hundred of crutches. Believing in God's power and love, Minh's friends promised daily prayers for her full recovery.

Like them, Minh and I believe that an all powerful and loving God created the universe. But we do not believe, as they do, that God directly intervenes in human lives and alters the course of nature in answer to prayers. We think that God has endowed humans with bodies and brains to live on earth the best they can, with help from their environment and fellow creatures.

In the hospital, Minh and I did not expect a miracle from God. If her motor-brain-cells were dead, God would not revive or replace them. If they were simply impaired, they would send motor impulses, albeit weakened, to the nerves in Minh's right limbs. For a sign of such impulses from the brain, we watched for the slightest movement of Minh's arm and leg. We waited and waited and waited.

Three days later, as I entered Minh's hospital room, she greeted me with a smile, her first since the stroke. "Why the grin?" I asked. "Look," she replied pointing

to her toes. She wiggled them. This slight motion indicated that some motor neurons which controlled her right leg had survived. They worked. Just how well, time would tell.

After breakfast, Minh rang for the physical therapist and said, "Please, Lisa, help me to take my first step." With a wide belt around Minh's waist, a male nurse lifted her weight off the lame leg and kept her steady. On her knees, Lisa guided Minh's right foot. Then with great effort, my brave wife took one small step, then two and finally ten. Looking at me, she flashed a winning smile and said, "I can walk." The nurses nearby clapped their hands but none louder than me.

Later I consulted Lisa and her sidekick, Wanda. "Please explain to us the purpose of physical therapy." Lisa said, "When the brain sends impulses to the arm and leg, these must be ready and able to move." Wanda then added, "If the muscles and joints are stiff or rigid, they won't obey the brain's commands." Lisa continued and said, "Exercises and massages will keep Minh's limbs as supple as possible." Wanda gave another reason for therapy. The motor neurons, affected by the stroke, may need a jumpstart just like a weak battery in a car. By exercise and massages, we try to contact the impaired neurons and reactivate them." Then Lisa concluded with a gentle warning, "Therapy works slowly. Both of you will need tons of patience."

One morning, weeks later, while Wanda worked with Minh, I sat in the waiting room brooding over my situation completely dominated by Minh's condition. Suddenly Maria appeared in the room. This fifteen year old girl, with lovely dark eyes and black hair, sat crumpled in a wheelchair. Her head gyrated awkwardly while her arms flailed uncontrollably. Unable to speak, she communicated with grunts and groans. Paralyzed since birth, she depended upon her fifty-year-old mother. I'm sure that Maria wanted to jump out of her chair, wrap her arms around her mother, and say, "I love you." With zero control over her limbs and speech, Maria had sunk to the bottom of misery and helplessness.

Against the dark backdrop of Maria's infirmities, Minh's simple actions shined like athletic feats. Minh could express her thoughts and desires. She walked with a walker. With her good arm, Minh fed and groomed herself. My wife enjoyed reading and exercising. She laughed. Maria could not. In a flash I realized that, if Minh's stroke had affected a few more neurons, she would be like Maria and I would be agonizing like her mother. As Maria left the room, I waved at her and smiled. She gave me a small smile, a bit contorted but all the more precious and memorable. For months, Maria's smile lingered in my mind, inspiring me to focus upon my many blessings.

On June 30, after forty days of therapy, Minh left the hospital. Then she returned as an out-patient three days a week for two-hour sessions of therapy until December 1995. Just before Christmas, Wanda and Lisa admitted that their therapy could only keep Minh's limbs supple awaiting effective impulses from the brain. Minh and I could do as much at home. So we thanked Wanda and Lisa for their help and they wished us joy on Christmas and much progress during the New Year.

On Christmas morning, when Minh hobbled into the living room, she was surprised to see a spruce tree decorated with blinking lights and glimmering tinsel. "Who brought it?" Minh asked. "Santa's elves," I lied. They had also assembled a stationary bicycle with a comfortable seat and backrest. A wide red ribbon looped into a bow, graced the handlebar. Another set of bicycle pedals, mounted on a small table, beckoned Minh to exercise her arms. So did a pulley hanging from the ceiling. Minh smiled at me and said, "Thank you, Santa for this wonderful surprise."

After breakfast, Minh mounted her bicycle for the first stage of what she later called "my trip around the world." From that Christmas day in 1995 until now January 2000, Minh has bicycled 9 miles every single day. The odometer on her bike reads 13,326 miles. Yesterday, she said, "I've passed the halfway mark around the world."

In addition to this record-breaking distance on a bicycle, Minh has worked 20 minutes on her pulley every day for four years. Her sound left arm pulls up her disabled hand that clutches the other hand for dear life. Later for another 20 minutes, Minh sits at the table mounted with bicycle pedals. There her healthy arm gives a free ride to its crippled partner. After that stint, my Special Olympic champion ventures outdoors with her walker for a 100-yard walk.

Despite four long years of arduous exercise, Minh never regained control of her right arm. It remained useless and cumbersome. In June 1995, Minh hobbled out of the hospital leaning heavily on a walker. During the next 48 months to this day, Minh has needed a walker for every step. So, whenever she stands, her right hand dangles by her side while her left hand clutches the walker. On her feet, therefore, Minh has no free and able hand to work.

Seated, Minh has only one hand for menial tasks, such as holding a book or the phone or TV control. With one hand, Minh can also comb her hair, brush her teeth, scratch an itch and blow her nose. For almost everything else, she needs my help.

During four years without a day's relief, I kept our home afloat. Only another caregiver, such as a mother with a severely crippled child, can understand the exhaustion of care giving without respite. Each act of care by itself is a mere drop in the

bucket. But for Noah, many drops of rain became a deluge after 40 days. My deluge has lasted 1,634 days. Like Noah, I survived because I believe that God relies on creatures to help one another. That's life as designed by God.

While embracing God's plan of Providence, I often longed for an occasional respite in Minh's care. On Christmas Eve 1999, after an exhausting day, I collapsed into my recliner and slipped into a reverie about Santa. At the mall that morning, I had seen children climb on Santa's lap and tell him what toys they wanted most. In my day dream I asked Santa if, after the Christmas rush, he could spare a few elves to help me take care of Minh.

"What would they do?" Santa asked. "One would cook and serve Minh's three meals and several snacks, plus frequent cups of herbal tea. He would also shop for groceries and wash the dishes."

"What else?" asked Santa, and I replied, "A girl elf could help Minh bathe and change clothing many times a day for various activities. Another elf could keep the house orderly and clean. She could also wash and iron the clothes. Someone skilled in therapy could massage Minh's paralyzed limbs to keep them supple. He could help Minh get on and off her stationary bike and at times rub her aching muscle and joints with Ben Gay."

"My dear chap," said Santa, "you're old enough to know that I don't personally provide Christmas gifts. I rely on family members and friends to do that."

"As you know," I said, "that's also God's policy. He too relies on humans to help one another. Like you, God does not intervene personally in human affairs."

"Moreover," added Santa, "I don't believe that God has angels to assist humans. I surely don't have elves to help you take care of Minh. That's your responsibility with some support from family and friends. During your life, you have helped many people, especially the million refugees in Vietnam. Surely after that Herculean task, taking care of just one more needy Vietnamese should be a snap for you."

"Quite the contrary," I said, "caring for Minh has proven infinitely more difficult. First of all, in Vietnam when US army trucks arrived in refugee camps and unloaded tons of rice and wheat, water and milk, blankets and cots, I felt that we had achieved something important. We were saving thousands of lives. Now while helping Minh, I have no pride of work, no gratification in putting on her shoes and massaging her arm, in washing dishes and clothes, in cooking an omelette and rice. No act of routine care gratifies me."

“Is that all?” asked Santa. “No,” I replied. Since each and every act of caregiving is insignificant, it doesn’t deserve nor get recognition. My accomplishments in Vietnam impressed my superiors who rewarded me with letters of commendation and promotions. First, they named me Chief of the Refugee Division. Later I became the primary American assistant of the Deputy Prime Minister, Doctor Dan. Here and now, however, I’m only Minh’s assistant. In helping her, there is no glory and fame, no medals or ribbons of honor.”

“To offset that loss,” said Santa, “your care of Minh is less onerous and wearying than your work in Vietnam.”

“No so, Santa,” I replied, “In Saigon, after eight hours in the office, I rested at home with Minh. We often ate out with friends, played bridge, or danced rumbas and tangos. On weekends, I relaxed in the pool or on the tennis courts at the US military compound. I also enjoyed annual leaves in Australia, Hong Kong and Hawaii. Away from danger and stress, I recharged my batteries and returned to work with renewed energy. Here during the last four years, I have not enjoyed a single day of relaxation away from home.”

Noticing that my tale of woes began to weary Santa, I concluded with a last remark. “In Vietnam,” I said, “when I married Minh, I acquired a slew of relatives, including dozens of cousins. Also at work, I made friends with many Vietnamese and Americans. My social life overflowed with comradeship and affection. Here, during four years of isolation tethered to my paralyzed wife, my social life has dropped from torrent to trickle. Without it, my relief work at home is more difficult and draining than my refugee-relief work in Vietnam.”

During my colloquy with Santa, he not only looked like Michelangelo’s God but also sounded more and more like him. My daydream seemed to switch from one to the other without confusing their identity. One was merely a fictitious figure to amuse children; the other was the very real Creator of the universe.

I bade farewell to Santa in my reverie and held on to God in my life. I believe in his existence and I accept his plan of Providence. He relies on his creatures to help one another. In Minh’s case, the sun provides heat and light; the rivers provide water and fish; the earth provides flowers and rice; and I provide care. If the sun, the

rivers, the earth and I should stop assisting Minh, God will not intervene to save her. So, I willingly and proudly participate in God's grand plan of providing for his creatures. Besides, I love Minh.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Last Sunset (2000-??)

In 4.5 billion years from now, our sun will exhaust its fuel and die out. It will no longer radiate light and heat. Without the sun's warm rays, the earth will plunge into a deep freeze fatal to all organic life. When the sun's brilliant fire finally fails, no humans will watch the earth's last sunset. But in my concept of an eternal God, he will be around to witness the final setting of our glorious sun over our beloved earth.

I too will witness a last sunset on earth, hopefully not too soon. Since death presents no imminent threat to Minh and me, we can joke about it. Last evening Minh said, "Since I now depend on you to function throughout the day, I want to die first." With a straight face, I suggested that I kill her first and then myself. "In no way," she replied, "I don't trust you to follow through." Faking shock I said, "I couldn't live without you." She blurted, "Baloney" and changed the conversation to a more serious subject - the practical preparation for death.

Neither Minh nor I fear death, the inevitable and natural end of all life on earth. What we dread is not being allowed to die if life should ever become unbearable, as it did for my neighbor Jack. Nine months ago, he suffered a severe stroke and lost control of his arms and legs. Besides he cannot speak or communicate in any way. Unable to swallow, he receives a sustaining diet through a tube into his stomach. Worse still, Jack knows, like everybody else, that there is no cure.

Last week, I visited Jack in the nursing home. He greeted me the best he could with a weak wink and a slight smile. I was deeply saddened to see his alert mind trapped inside an immobilized body. Jack's utter frustration must be torture. When he muttered some gibberish into my ear, I recognized no words. Empathizing with my friend, I imagined he was trying to say, "Yank those damn tubes and let me die." The law stopped me from helping this totally helpless man.

Such helplessness, I resolved, must never happen to Minh and me. I quickly verified that a person deprived of all liquids dies within two weeks. Then I ascertained that a patient in a medical institution can refuse any or all medicine, liquid and food. By law his or her wishes dictate the care.

To make sure that my final wishes are known, I prepared a legal document called "the durable power of attorney for health care decisions." If I should become incapable of giving informed consent to health care decisions, this document grants my

agent full power and authority to make those decisions for me. In that document, I declare that, if I should become dependent on others for the daily functions of life, I do not want any medicine, food or liquid - only painkillers. Then I gave a copy of the document to my agents for health care decisions and to my doctor. Doctor Leo gave me his word that my wishes would be honored.

After arranging for our final health care, Minh and I discussed the disposal of our remains. To spare Minh's relatives the burden of our burial, we chose cremation. We made a prepaid contract with a service that will pick up our bodies anywhere, cremate them according to California's law and scatter our ashes three miles offshore in the Pacific Ocean.

Now, when I walk the beach at sunset, I sometimes glance at my future burial site. I see the glorious reflection of the sun and clouds sink into the water. Later during the night, the moon and the stars provide light for the fish. Dolphins often leap out of the water for a better look at their starry beacons. In the future, fish of every color and shape may swim through my scattered ashes and gently rock them as in a cradle. I feel good about my choice of cremation and burial at sea - much better than the gloom of a tomb.

One afternoon, in Seal Beach's library, I thumbed through the large book entitled Vatican Museums - Rome published by Newsweek in 1968. Page 97 displays Michelangelo's painting of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel. From 1536 to 1541, using his creative imagination and artistic brush, Michelangelo painted the Last Judgment on the 45 by 43-foot altar wall.

In the center, a vigorous man, identified as Jesus by the reddish wound near his heart, is rising from his throne. He raises his open right hand to banish the sinners to hell while his curled left hand beckons the righteous to heaven. A large group of saints have already gathered around Jesus. In various ways, Michelangelo identifies only ten of them: Mary and John the Baptist, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Saint Andrew and Saint Bartholomew, Saint Lawrence and Saint Sebastian, Saint Catherine and one more person. For special consideration, Michelangelo did not select an illustrious pope, bishop or theologian; he chose Simon of Cyrene. Why? The artist reveals the reason by painting Simon carrying the cross of Jesus. He deserved to be singled out because he had lent a helping hand to Jesus as he stumbled up the hill of Calvary.

I also noticed that, on the left side of the painting, many of the righteous are stretching out their arms to help their brethren below. On the mural's other side, demons are pushing away and dragging sinners downward. One damned soul, seated on a bank of clouds, covers one eye while the other observes in horror the hell below. In the dark cave of hell, a ghastly pair of eyes reveal the terror and despair of the damned.

Those horrified eyes pierced my soul and haunted me all the way home.

That evening, I sought reassurance of my security in the Gospel account of the last Judgment that had inspired Michelangelo's painting. In chapter 25, Saint Matthew writes: When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all his angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...I was sick and you took care of me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you (and did all this?) And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'." Then according to Matthew, the king will condemn the sinners on his left for not helping his brethren when they were hungry, thirsty and sick. Finally, he will say, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And then, according to Matthew, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Keeping the Gospel open on my lap, I realized that Christ's criterion of righteousness was "helping a neighbor in need." Jesus mentioned giving food to the hungry, water to the thirsty and care to the sick. After leaving the Church, I had helped to feed a million Vietnamese refugees. I had helped to provide potable water to the poor in Africa. I had taken care of my paralyzed wife, Minh, day and night for five years and would continue this until my last sunset.

With my record of helping others, I need not fear the Last Judgment. If Christ should ever return to resurrect the dead and judge their deeds, I felt confident that my skeleton would reassemble into a human frame and don my flesh just as Michelangelo portrayed the resurrection. Leaving my grave, I would start ascending towards the judgment seat. If I should hit a snag along the way, I felt confident that the people whom I helped in Cleveland, Hyde Park, Africa, Vietnam and Brownsville would offer me a helping hand. The person who would help me most would be my wife surely among the righteous. With her right arm whole again and strong, Minh would pull me up the Judge's throne. Like none other, she would vouch for my helping her. If need be, she would recall a thousand instances of my help. Before long, amused by her stubborn

support, Jesus would smile and wave us in. Then arm in arm Minh and I would enter heaven and greet our families and friends. There in eternal glory, as Saint John says in his first letter, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning, crying and pain will be no more.”

Thus, if the Church is right and I am wrong about a Last Judgment ever occurring, I still have nothing to worry about. Christ made love and help of neighbor the criterion and touchstone of righteousness. I have done that all my life in and out of the Church. Fully assured of Christ’s approval if need be, I closed the Gospel on my lap and soon my eyes for a sound sleep. Likewise tonight, with undiminished confidence in the goodness of God, I end the story of my life with a resounding “Alleluia.”

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