

# A Modern Monk's Tale

By John Cavanagh

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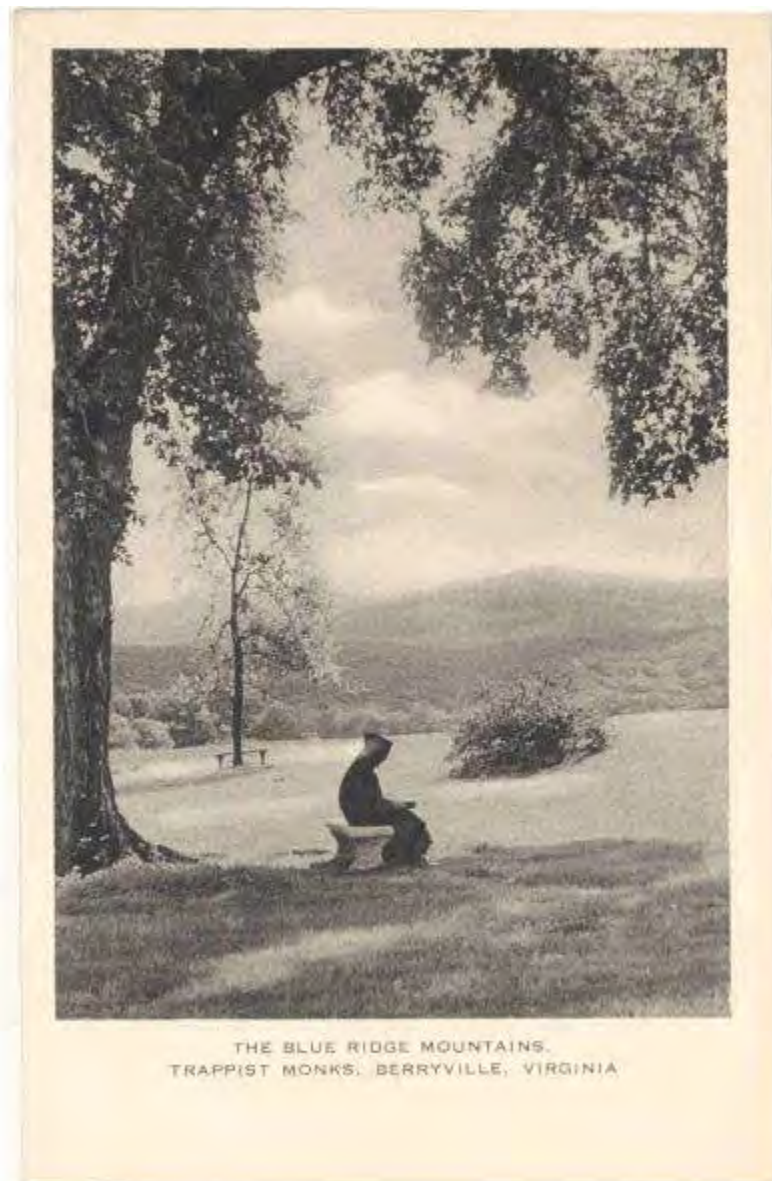
In the 1950's and until the mid '60's, the abbot of the Trappist monastery I'd entered in '59 was recruiting barely legal colts for his stable. Boys aged roughly seventeen to twenty were being accepted as novices, an age generally considered too young by the Order's standards elsewhere. These boys would often go on to become the abbot's lovers, and because he conducted himself discreetly, the clandestine affairs very possibly could have gone unnoticed indefinitely. But he dropped them as they got older, and eventually there was a row over the ensuing favoritism and how the place was being governed.



HISTORIC WORMLEY HALL AND CHURCH FROM SOUTH WEST,  
TRAPPIST MONKS, BERRYVILLE, VIRGINIA

1950's Virginia tourism postcard

In the Spring of 1964 this brought in a tribunal of two abbots from elsewhere in the Order to investigate the cause of the friction. But even after two weeks of listening to everyone's grievances, these investigating abbots were still openly puzzled about what the real stakes were. Encouraged by the spirit of *aggiornamento* we saw being implemented in the case, four of us went to them as a bloc and described what we had seen and heard, signing notarized affidavits, etc., which we agreed to do only after being promised immunity from any retaliations in return for our sworn testimony. I want to emphasize here as strongly as possible *that we were assured that the whole investigation was being closely monitored by the Sacred Congregation for Religious, and that the promise of immunity they extended to us had been pre-authorized from Rome.*



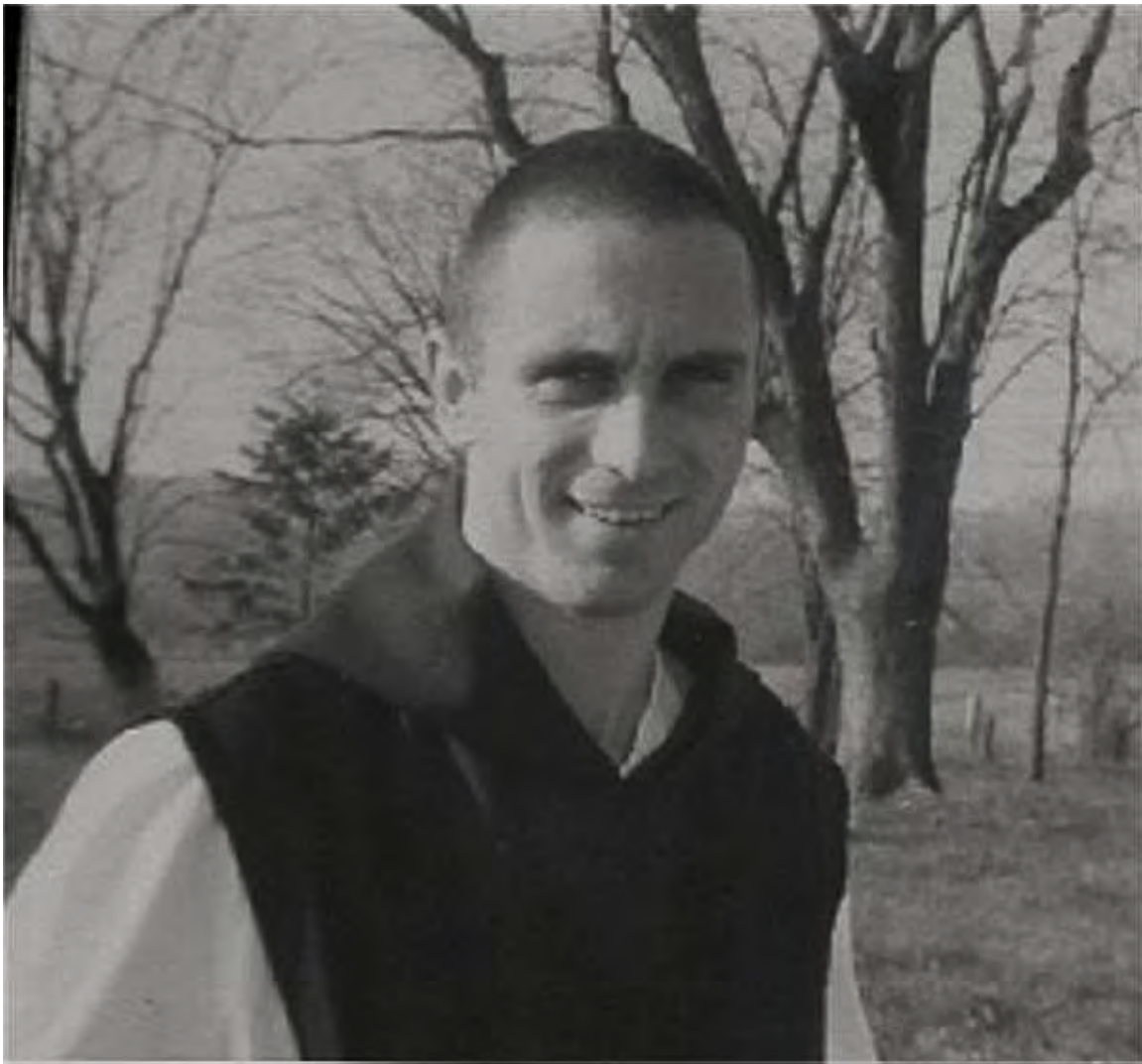
1950's Virginia tourism postcard

Then, over an intense four hour interview and cross-examination, both together and separately, we described various circumstances and fragments of conversations which, when pieced together, comprised a compelling picture of malfeasance in office. The investigating prelates thanked us rather solemnly for, "...sticking your necks out and risking your lives and futures in the Order." The abbot and his current lovers were expelled at once. The monastery's status as a self-governing community was suspended indefinitely, and we were placed under the direct supervision of a superior brought in from elsewhere in the Order by the hierarchy. A more enlightened and egalitarian epoch, it seemed, was at hand.



Me, abbot & family, 1961





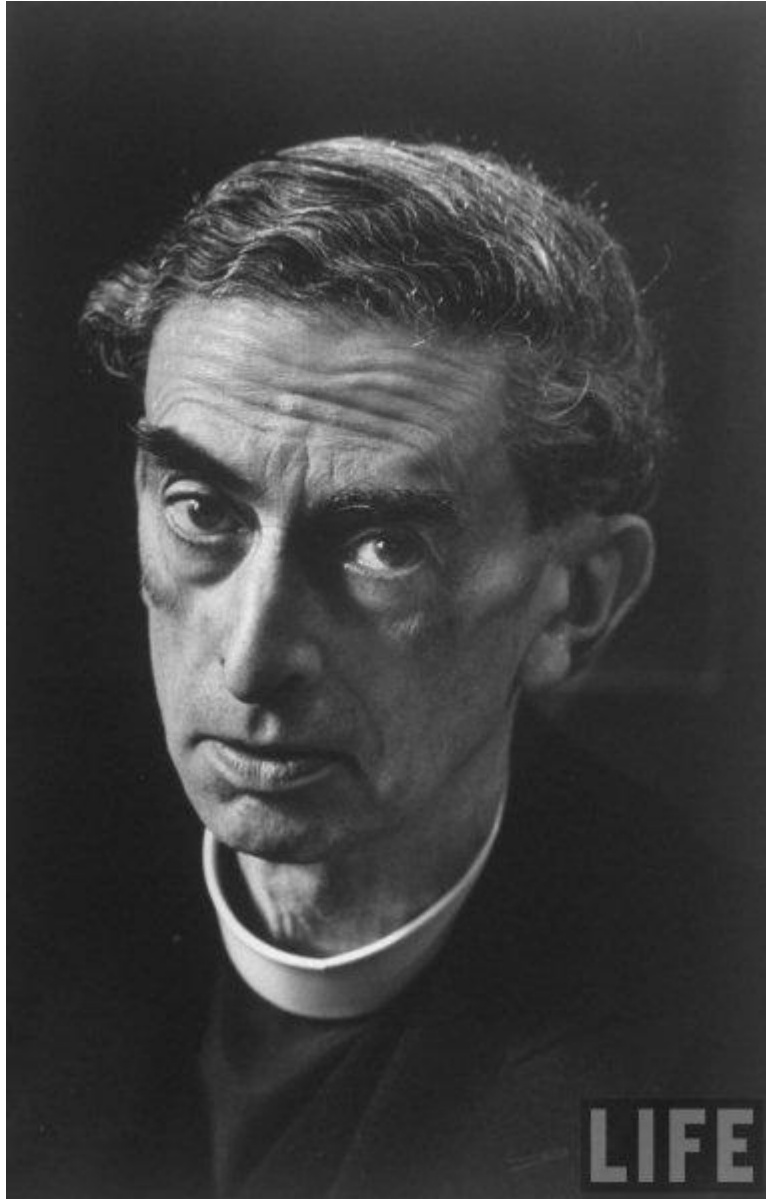
Me in 1964

But over the next year and a half we whistleblowers were separately told we'd never had authentic callings to be monks in the first place. This rationale is itself remarkable because, of the four of us, one had been in the Order for eighteen years, another for thirty. One by one we were advised that each of us had a serious psychological problem with authority, that we were ill-suited to the tranquil discipline of the monastic life, and hence we should all seek counseling for these neurotic twists some place more appropriate. On January 5, 1965 my two brothers came to give me a ride home. The guest house was empty because of a snow storm. Mike had brought fifths of Jack Daniels and Johnny Walker Black, and we drank until well past the monks' 2:15 A.M. wake-up time. The next day, even with my first hangover in five and a half years, things weren't nearly as scary as they'd seemed a day before. Booze gave me an adequate measure of hope and strength in a situation where I felt as though the metaphysical rug had been yanked out from under me, and for the next 24 years I suppressed my conflicts with alcohol.

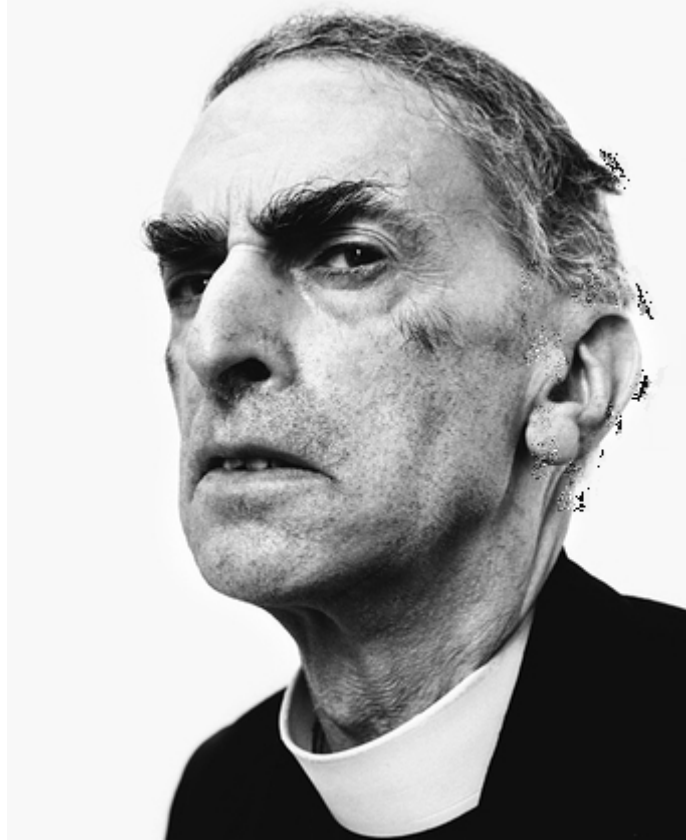
About six weeks after I left, I was at a dinner party at my parents' house attended by a close friend of the family, a very well-connected Jesuit named Martin Cyril D'Arcy, and a monsignor from a nearby parish, who was a canon lawyer as well. With us all in the living room after dinner, my aunt asked me why I had left. Suddenly all other conversations stopped and I told them roughly what I just wrote above. D'Arcy interrupted with uncharacteristic rage. "It never

happened." he shouted. "I forbid you ever to say again that it happened or even to believe that it happened. From now on, if anyone asks, you must say that you left the Trappists because you could not endure a life of obedience." The monsignor nodded his agreement, and after an awkward few seconds, someone changed the subject and the party resumed. But I swore that night that I would never again allow myself to be humiliated and silenced in that manner, and I never have.

The priest who forbade me to say it ever happened, Martin Cyril D'Arcy, SJ, was a frequent house-guest in my parents' home, and definitely not your friendly neighborhood Fordham padre. He was one of those rare Jesuits who were accountable only to the Father General of the Society of Jesus and who, in turn, answers directly to the Pope. Which is to say that he was exempt from the usual chain of command governing priests in that Order or any other. Even as teenagers, my sibs and I had surmised that he was a special Vatican envoy with directly delegated Papal authority. His covert mission was to seek out wealthy Catholics whose sins could not, under Church law, be forgiven by ordinary priests or bishops. In return, these penitents were expected to make meaningful contributions to the Vatican's coffers. Within that context, D'Arcy's gag order actually freed me to walk away from a corrupt Church with a clear heart. On the other hand, his tone was so vehement that I took it also as a personal threat on behalf of some prominent Catholics, primarily J. Peter Grace, who was the American Trappists' greatest financial benefactor and, as was my father, a Knight of Malta. And, prior to his death in 1995, Grace was in fact the U.S. Grand Pooh-Bah of that storied order of laymen. My only regret is that I let that implied threat inhibit me for so long. But I gotta tell you, when I first heard about that one hundred twenty million dollar jury award in Dallas to some former altar boys who had been molested by a priest, I gave God the high-five. And although that was only one of many similar verdicts in recent years, the staggering amount of that award was in itself a clear rebuke to a Church which still regards its internal codes of conduct as immune to democratic civil process.



Alfred Eisenstaedt's portrait of Martin D'Arcy in *Life*, circa 1962.



D'Arcy by Richard Avedon

To understand why I became a monk in the first place, a thumbnail bio is unavoidable. I was born into the uptown side of Frank McCourt's world, the New York Social Register Irish Catholics, the ones Stephen Birmingham depicted in "Real Lace." Mother, sitting next to her personally autographed photo of Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli (Pope Pius XII), would say that once a man had made real money, that man was a saint, and how he made that money was nobody's business. My parents and many of their closest friends were ideologically loyal to Pacelli as he is described in John Cornwell's book, "Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII" (Viking, 1999). In that book, you'll meet in passing (pp. 178, 201) my great aunt, Genevieve Garvan Brady (Mrs. Nicholas, d.1937). She and her husband (d.1930), the founder of Consolidated Edison of New York, had bought themselves the last Papal Duchy, and their "man in Rome" was Eugenio Pacelli. (See Stephen Birmingham: "Real Lace": Syracuse University Press, 1997, Chapter 17: "The Duchess Brady") Later, Gen's protégé in the Vatican and personal gopher was a young American Monsignor named Francis Spellman. "Gen got Spellman his red hat," my mother would say, "And don't you forget it." In 1934, Papal Duchess Genevieve Brady plucked my father out of the Harvard biz school to manage her estate, and he remained its Executor until it was finally closed down in 1995.

When I was fourteen, my father let me in on the "family business". One evening shortly before dinner, as if inducting me into a legacy, he showed me photos of an investment trip that he and Gen had taken under Pacelli's tutelage to Germany in 1936, as well as the tiny lapel swastika Hitler personally gave him to commemorate the occasion. The rationale for Gen's financial support, he explained, was that a strong, belligerent and anti-Semitic Germany was Christendom's only logical defense against its real enemies, namely Stalin, the Bolsheviks and their ideological comrades, the Jews. My parents' vision of the Church and its role in the world was in every sense aristocratic, and taxing the rich was its secular enemies' way of sabotaging

that sacred mission. Perhaps even more ironic and topical at this particular moment in Church history is that their spiritual guru in this strange mix of Catholicism and social Darwinism was Pope Pius XII.

When he was in his 80s, my father's whole outlook on life most of the time was calm and accepting. "I'm ready to go any time," he would say with apparent conviction. That serene veneer came off like a party mask, however, as soon as the subject was money. I remember one incident when my brother told him that a real estate deal they'd been trying for months to close might fall through, and his hands shook so badly that he splashed his drink on his clothes. After he died it turned out he had a few million salted away, but to listen to him you'd think he was one small dip in the market away from the poor house. Ditto my mother, who had predeceased him in 1988. "Once a man has made *real* money," she would say, "That man is a saint-- a *saint* I tell you-- and how he made his money is nobody's business."

My father's nightly ritual in his old age was to watch the evening news at 6:30, and then he never missed Louis Ruckheyser's *Wall Street Week* on PBS at 7:00. Unless there was a big financial story, the stuff on the news was worldly chatter and mere packing material, but when he tuned in Ruckheyser, he did so with the reverent solemnity of an acolyte entering the sanctuary. It wasn't money *per se* that he worshiped, but only insofar as it was a means to power. Power is what they really worshiped and spoke of in that breathless tone of voice that people generally reserve for what is truly sacred to them.

On one of my visits in the early '90s, my father and I decided to watch the A&E channel's bio of Stalin. With that sixth sense that only a close family member can rightly interpret, I watched my father's body language out of the corner of my eye during the first 40 minutes or so, and I could tell this was going to be the setting for something he'd been wanting to say to me, his prodigal and democratically brainwashed son, for a long time. During a commercial following some original and particularly gory footage of the mass executions, and in that strangely plaintive yet commanding tone of voice I recognized all too well as his way throwing down the gauntlet, he said, "You know, we need someone like that these days. People need authority."

This time I was prepared. I asked him, given the slaughter of 40,000,000 of Stalin's own countrymen, if maybe the price wasn't just a bit steep.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "Not if that's what it takes. I think people are better off when they know who's in charge."

The program continued and neither of us pursued the topic.

Paradoxically, I think that's exactly what a lot of people want and expect in Church leadership, prelates who are outlaws in the sense that they're immune to any sort of "human" justice that might hobble the Church's position as a major player in the global economy. And as I said, my father was very much of this peculiar ilk. He worshiped Wall Street and revered the stock market, but at the same time he adamantly defended the right of CEOs to run a company into the ground for personal gain and a golden parachute. And if you pointed out to him that he was only screwing himself as a stockholder by supporting the practice, he became even more entrenched in his position. It was, if you will, his way of being a martyr for a form of sacred self-immolation, a willing sacrifice for the sake of a participation mystique, the furtherance of a higher good from which he expected to receive a trickle-down but ultimately far greater benefit. "That's what I love about the Church," he would say. "It upholds the right of the rich to be rich."





Inisfada, the Brady estate in Manhasset, NY



The main chapel at Inisfada



The St. Genevieve chapel at Inisfada



Pacelli with Genevieve at Inisfada, 1936.





Genevieve & Pacelli in New York 1936

We then rejoined our dinner guests. These were again the British Jesuit, Martin D'Arcy, who was also the International Chaplain of the Knights of Malta, who periodically stayed in our house for weeks at a time, and a couple from Ridgefield, Connecticut, Frederick and Maria Shradly. Maria, an Austrian war bride (nee Likar-Waltersdorff), was a passionate Nazi who bragged openly that she had sold secret information on the whereabouts of Jews in hiding in Vienna to the Gestapo. (In 1980 I called an OSI deputy in Washington who confirmed that they were in possession of Gestapo ledgers in which routine payments to this woman were meticulously recorded. But he added that this activity did not constitute a war crime and hence was not grounds for deportation.) All of these people dreamed out loud of a Fourth Reich, an era when all countries would be governed by fascist dictators who favored the rich but nevertheless answered to the Pope. As you'll read in Cornwell's book, this was also Pacelli's vision of the future. I can't now recall exactly when I got the idea that I would be disowned, ostracized or worse if I defected or rebelled. But I did, and it scared the hell out of me. By the time I was nineteen, I'd been privy to too many such conversations to walk off the stage unnoticed--a kid who knew too much, if you will. Besides, I



despised everything they espoused: rigid authoritarianism, the jingoistic and brutal enforcement of their beliefs, and antisemitism. So following the pacifist, Thomas Merton, into the Trappists was not just a retreat of convenience. It was also a perfectly well understood snub to everything my parents and their political bedfellows stood for, and they responded to it as such. My parents, now both deceased, never fully forgave me for it. But I digress.

My first inkling that something was seriously amiss in the monastery was probably a year or more before things really hit the fan. Three or four of us were working in the bakery one morning, and I overheard Brother G. say to Brother R., "You know, if I ever told what's going on here and what I've done, I could wipe this place off the map." I found that very unsettling, in no small part because I liked it there and wasn't at all ready to have it wiped off the map! About a week later, Brother G. had suddenly left in the middle of the night, and the abbot told us rather casually that he had gone to Canada "for health reasons." The truth, of course, turned out to be that Brother G. had just been jilted for a younger monk, and he was bitter.



Cloister

Let's assume for a moment that Brother G. wasn't exaggerating. The sort of *omerta* it takes to bury facts like that not only requires a new corporate history all spruced up for the slick brochures, etc., it also requires the wholehearted cooperation of the so-called innocent bystanders who have a vested interest in feathering their own nest with the tissue of lies that has been created to salvage the institution. That's the difficult conclusion that I and my fellow whistleblowers came to before presenting our evidence to the investigating prelates, and even though getting thrown out was not the scenario we wanted, we pretty well knew it could happen. I certainly don't regret the decision now. But over the next 35 years, before I retired with a modicum of financial security, I lied about why I'd left in dozens of social settings, job interviews and the like rather than jeopardize my career any further by inadvertently alienating people I scarcely knew.



Cemetery

Twenty two years later (in '87) I stayed for a week in the guesthouse of that same monastery and spent one entire afternoon with one of the Brothers whom I'd come to know and trust, and who had been transferred there from another abbey in the mid 70's. I listened to the story he'd been told, the legend about the era of sophomoric naiveté that he affectionately referred to as "Camelot," the one in which the Abbot, who had in fact been ousted for keeping a stable of young lovers, was subsequently portrayed as a pre-Vatican II martyr and cult hero, a hapless victim who had been slandered and forced out of office by a ruthless gang of liberal, post-Vatican II thugs. He didn't realize, of course, that I had in fact been a member of that gang.



Front of complex



I sat there with my jaw on the floor. Then I told him my version, and because I had names, dates, etc. and could connect the dots accurately, I had his undivided attention for the next hour and a half. No one would have believed we could be talking about the same people, yet I still believe this guy was nobody's fool. History had been rewritten very convincingly, and with nobody around to contradict it, my friend had simply accepted it all as true. Why shouldn't he? But on the other hand, why should my version of what had happened besmirch the monastery's restored image? Clearly someone in this scenario had to be expendable, and once again that was me. And despite citations of abstract principle to the contrary, I remained characterized by my Catholic friends, family and fellow clergy as one who had betrayed his Church, not the other way around, and that stigma persists today. For my part, I was in dubious awe at the cool-headed efficiency with which the whole coverup had been carried out and had long since begun to wonder just how many other "facts" in Church history had been deleted and more expedient ones created in exactly the same manner. This was no ad hoc amateur performance, I concluded, but one that reflected centuries of trial-and-error experience within epistemological ground rules that the Church had set for itself, and which constituted a valid historical method wherein troublesome facts could be legitimately overridden by statements of purpose and renewed commitments to continue its salvific mission.

After that, I started looking at the whole process of saint-making and hagiographic storytelling in terms of their function as corporate legends to legitimize the current pecking-order. That conversation finally convinced me that I could not have stayed there or anywhere else in the Church and done my part to perpetuate the tall story he'd been told about the abbot and the fall of *Camelot*. Eventually, I think, dealing with the past in this manner has a corrosive and demoralizing effect, not only on that particular community, but on all who've repeated the story. One's whole way of life and the survival of the institution itself both come to depend on how credibly that bogus legend is passed along to subsequent generations. But the heart never forgets these things, so even as the institution survives, those who've sacrificed their integrity to make it happen are left with that residual and debilitating malaise of spirit that always follows when there's a skeleton in the sacristy closet.

I'm definitely what you could call a low-bottom alcoholic. In the Fall of 1988 at the age of 49 I was making six dollars an hour as a greenskeeper at a golf course, and winter was coming. I'd been evicted from five places to live in the previous two years. I wanted to stop drinking whenever I was dry-heaving, but twenty minutes later I was ready to start up again. By mid October I was living on seasonal unemployment and drinking around the clock in an unheated apartment with no electricity in Sharon, Connecticut. I couldn't stop and I wanted to die, and I was thoroughly agnostic about what might happen after that. But at the same time I was obsessed with the idea that if I died in that state of mind, I would only have to come right back and clean up the mess in another life. In other words, death wouldn't be the end of the show at all, but merely a postponement of unfinished business. Prior to that, the whole notion of reincarnation was simply incomprehensible to me in any factual or doctrinal sense. But in the face of imminent death, it was as real as jug of Scotch.



Merton the Epicure

Late that summer I'd gotten the idea that if I could reconnect with my lost faith, it might spark a real desire to stop for keeps. I bought the thousand-page edition of Thomas Merton's *Collected Poetry*, but it sat unread for months. Now Merton had been a huge influence on me when I was younger, so much so that in my twenties I spent five and a half dry years in his Order of Catholic monks, the Trappists, and left on January 6th, 1965.

Finally, on Friday, January 6, 1989, I took my last drink and on Monday morning the 9th I arrived at High Watch Farm in Kent, CT. In my suitcase, just in case I got really bored, was the Merton poetry book. Director Tom Steel checked me in with a couple of stories about how he and my uncle had been onetime drinking buddies, and how they would check into High Watch periodically, dry out for a week or two, and then go paint New Haven red to celebrate. Tom said they both used to bring their monogrammed croquet mallets to the Farm so everyone would know they were true-blue gentlemen! This at once made a strong impression on me, for my uncle had distanced himself from AA in favor of a late ordination to the priesthood, saying that AA's real function was to get people into church where their addiction problems would be permanently solved. Yet he had many embarrassing drinking episodes after that, and during his last illness in 1974-5, he would beg his more trusted visitors to sneak a bottle into his hospital room. This was in sharp contrast to his more iconoclastic and skeptical younger brother who had gotten permanently sober at High Watch in 1944 and died so, of cancer, in 1978. But I digress...



Uncle Garvan as a priest in Louisiana, circa 1962

Tom then turned me over to a staffer who showed me my room and told me to put the suitcase on the bed, explaining that they would rifle it for contraband during lunch. An hour later I was in the tiny chapel with forty two fellow boozers. While he was speaking, Tom pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and read from notes he'd made the night before. And as he spoke, I felt a strange new energy surge through my body, a sharp tingling sensation I've never had before or since, starting in the solar plexus and spreading out through the torso and into my arms and legs and lasting perhaps a minute.

For against what seemed incalculable odds, the man was quoting Thomas Merton. That apparently random coincidence was my first glimpse of what I call the mosaic or, even better, the tapestry-- one of those unpredictable moments when the frayed and irregular threads on the back of the fabric of our lives that suddenly weave recognizable and meaningful shapes when you turn it around and look at it from the other side. It was the beginning of what Thomas Kuhn in his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" called a paradigm shift, a



compelling new perception of reality that simply dissolved the validity of my old assumptions about life, death and the limitations of the human experience.

In my monk days I'd been intrigued by Carl Jung and read his books with great interest for over three years, and for reasons I hope are obvious here, especially liked the saying from the Oracle at Delphi that he had carved into the lintel over his front door in Zurich: "Vocatus atque non vocatus Deus aderit-- Summoned and even when not summoned, God will be there." That experience was so compelling that I became willing to turn every theological and therapeutic maxim I'd ever learned on its head, especially when I learned that it had been Jung who had first suggested to Rowland Hazzard in 1932 that while there was little that conventional religious piety and observance could do, how nothing short of a completely ego-deflating spiritual experience would be the solution to his problem, and that he had later carried that message to Bill Wilson. And though I'm certainly not a theist in any personified sense of that term, I still have a beginner's mind about these things. You might say I've come to trust the unexpected as a manifestation of "God not summoned." I haven't found it necessary to reach for the solace of either a drink or a theological concept system for well over 23 years.

Right after I got sober in January of '89, with naught but the clothes on my back and a few bucks in my wallet, I lived for five months with my one-time confessor and fellow whistleblowing renegade, Father Paul Fitzgerald in New Boston, NH. Besides the opportunity to get into a retreat-like setting to adapt to my newfound sobriety, as I saw it then, one of my most immediate and pressingly important amends if I were to get a foothold in this new way of life was going to have to be making my peace with the Order and the Church.

Father Paul had maintained loose ties with the Order, and ran a very casual monastery and halfway house for ex monks and other marginal Catholics. He was quite old and frail then, so that Spring the Order sent up a younger priest to help out. Now that priest (because he's somewhat famous these days, I'll call him Father Mole) and I had been contemporaries, he at the mother-house and I at the foundation, and as you might suppose, there's an unshakable bond among old beat-zen 1950's & 60's Trappist laybrothers. So we had many long and candid conversations over the two months that he was there. All I hoped for at that point was for the Order to offer some token of reconciliation, if only to reaffirm the investigating abbots' initial position, which had been to thank us for the risks we had taken in challenging an abuse of ecclesiastical authority. But it would be a cold day in you-know-where, Mole told me, before the Order would acknowledge what had really transpired, much less entertain any re-evaluation of, or apology for, the subsequent purges. Second, there could be no taint of scandal, past or present, involving J. Peter Grace's pet charity, namely the mother-house or any of its foundations.



Fr. Mole

Mole didn't elaborate much, but he did surmise that any such appeal would, at the very best, get "lost" in the bureaucratic shuffle, and I clearly understood that to include the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome. Then, bristling with anger, he brought me up to date on how gays in the Order had by then become a political bloc to be reckoned with, and told me this cautionary tale. A novice at his monastery had recently (1989) gone to the abbot and complained that someone had goosed him in a dark corridor. The abbot summoned the notorious Brother X and confronted him with the crime. "Was he made?" asked Brother X. "No." said the abbot. "Well then, it wasn't me. If it had been me, he'd have been made." Brother then flipped the abbot the proverbial *au revoir* salute and walked out. Times had indeed changed, but not exactly in a manner conducive to collegiality. Shortly afterwards, the Boston *Globe* conducted its own investigation into allegations of sexual abuse against a former priest named James Porter. When Porter was consequently indicted, I showed the *Globe* headline to Mole. He winced, pushed the newspaper aside, and said he wouldn't discuss it. The camaraderie was over, and I haven't pursued the matter since through any other ecclesiastical channels.

I know my case isn't unique. Many others I've met have had similar and equally disillusioning encounters with the hierarchy, and the fact remains that there is still no constitutional venue within the Church for the redress of such grievances. The reason I tell all this is because we who are being invited to "come home" are not only being asked to suck it in and disown whatever integrity guided our decision to leave, but we aren't even given an opportunity to explain why we left in the first place. So it's just as much a case of justice and common civility denied as it was in 1965, and yes, it matters *very* much that we can't do that except to come hat-in-hand as second-rate Catholics in the *mea culpa* mode of "fallen away" lapsers and backsliders. But the hard truth is that I was set up to give my testimony with a false promise of immunity from retaliation and then kicked out anyway by the ranking brass, and their gag order has never been rescinded. Once was quite enough to learn the lesson, and at my age I simply won't take the risk of being tricked, humiliated, disgraced within the Church and marginalized in society at large all over again.

One last and perhaps most salient point in this context. No Catholic anywhere on the spectrum of orthodoxy and fidelity has ever hinted that I did the wrong thing. As another know-nothing contemporary of mine who's currently the abbot of the place once told me, "I'm so glad I didn't see what you saw. I don't know what I would have done." He didn't have to add, "Now get off my property." That went without saying, of course. But when I reminded him that he might just owe me for still having a roof over his head at all and that Brother G. could indeed have wiped the place clear off the map, he laughed and said, "Ouch!"

The bottom line is that I wouldn't even consider returning until someone with the equivalent rank in the prelature takes the initiative to reverse this decision and formally release me from any further obligation to lie about what really happened. That ball is still in the Church's court, exactly where it has been for the last 47 years.