

# My Father's Business

*A Memoir of a Teenage, Catholic Seminarian  
in the Turbulent 1960s*



by

**Charles W. Morel**

*Published in 2013 on the centennial  
of the founding of the Venard*

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## His Father's Business

*And his parents were wont to go every year to Jerusalem at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. And after they had fulfilled the days, when they were returning, the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem, and his parents did not know it. But thinking that he was in the caravan, they had come a day's journey before it occurred to them to look for him among their relatives and acquaintances. And not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem in search of him.*

*And it came to pass after three days, that they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who were listening to him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold, in sorrow, thy father and I have been seeking thee."*

*And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about **my Father's business**?" And they did not understand the word that he spoke to them.*

*And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them; and his mother kept all these things carefully in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men.*

Luke 2:41-52

# Dedication



*This memoir is dedicated to my father,  
Charles J. Morel  
1917 - 2004*

*He taught his four sons, through his example,  
to be good men, husbands and fathers.*

*He went about his Father's Business  
with dignity, humor and faith.*

*He is loved. He is missed. He is emulated.*



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## Preface

We live in an age in which time itself seems to be accelerating. The rapid changes that occur continually push events and experiences further and further into the distant past. While there is unquestionable value in living in the present, the past remains important too, if for no other reason than as a means to measure our growth and progress in life. Change is a universal constant. In the midst of continual change, and with attention on the future, we may overlook our past as simply being over and done with. We may even dismiss our past as ordinary. But can there truly be any life that may be considered ordinary? Each person's life offers a unique and fascinating story. Sadly, we don't hear many of these tales. Usually the stories we read or hear about are either of the heroic or the horrific. Admittedly, most of our lives could be considered ordinary when compared with those of Mother Theresa or Osama Bin Laden. Yet just as they surely experienced ordinariness within their lives, we experience extraordinariness within our own.

The insightful Mark Twain said: "There was never yet an uninteresting life. Such a thing is an impossibility. Inside of the dullest exterior, there is a drama, a comedy, and a tragedy". There simply is no such thing as an ordinary life. I believe each of us has a life story worthy of a published biography. That's because each and every one of us is extraordinary and absolutely unique. Through our stories, we can recognize the universality of each other's struggles and triumphs. This is because at an essential level, we are all connected. We can relate to the familiar themes within each other's lives, and at the same time relish the details which surely differ from person to person. Though the details and specifics of our experiences may be

unique, the themes are universal. No matter how plain and ordinary our lives may be by the standards of the world, each and every one of us has moments of greatness!

This is the story of a sixty-something year old man recounting the events of high school some fifty years past. That sounds pretty ordinary, doesn't it? Well yes, but the high school was not ordinary. It was a seminary, an institution for preparing teenage boys for the Catholic priesthood. The roots of this time-honored means of preparing priests grew out of the monasteries of the Middle Ages. By the mid-20th century however, the junior seminary was becoming an anachronism. Efforts to retain the tradition were failing and high school seminaries were languishing due to changing times and subsequent decreasing enrollments. The turbulent and revolutionary 1960s provided the final blow.

Though the specific events recounted here will undoubtedly differ from your own, the searching, the questioning, the struggling may be familiar to you. Questions of divine and sinful nature, mortality and immortality, right and wrong, heaven and hell, meaning and meaninglessness, are faced by each of us. In this, we are all ordinary. What makes our lives extraordinary and unique, are the myriad ways in which we discover our own answers to these universally vexing questions.

This is the story of my teenage years as a Catholic and as a seminarian studying for the priesthood. I did not complete my journey to the priesthood. My seminary experiences are threads woven within the fabric of my life-long spiritual journey. My purpose in writing is to document a way of life that has vanished and is in danger of being forgotten. As a memoir, it is written from my personal perspective, and so includes elements of my spiritual development and thoughts about the Church itself.

Within seminary life in the 1960s, I experienced the joy of community living, guidance from excellent role models, a first-rate college preparatory education, and close relationships that affect me to this day. For this, I am grateful and will always hold my seminary experiences dear within my heart.

*Note: The events recounted here are true. They are, however, recalled from my memories of fifty years in the past and may not be absolutely or historically accurate. I used the actual names for all adults. The names of all seminarians have been changed. Information about Catholic doctrine or practices are from my recollections as an adolescent and may not be entirely accurate.*

CWM

## Chapter 1: Vocation

The Catholic Church of my youth was familiar and comforting to me. Born to life-long Catholic parents and baptized as an infant, I was steeped in the culture of the Church from birth. My childhood recollections are filled with memories of Sunday Mass, First Friday breakfasts (crumb buns, cinnamon rolls and hot cocoa in the cafeteria of St. Anthony's School), evening Novenas, and Christmas midnight Masses. I abstained from eating meat on Fridays. I served as an altar boy for weddings on Saturdays. I wore ashes on my forehead each Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, and abstained from eating meat until Easter Sunday. Every year I went with my family to the Holy Name Day Parade in Paterson, New Jersey and cheered as Dad and the other men of the parish marched by, each carrying a blue, triangular Holy Name Society pennant. My favorite marchers were the Knights of Columbus, resplendent in their fancy uniforms, complete with ceremonial swords and plumed hats.

As a Catholic boy, I treasured my rosary beads and fingered each bead hundreds of times as I prayed the rosary, repeating an "Our Father", "Hail Mary", or "Glory Be to the Father" for each bead. I wore Miraculous Medals, St. Christopher Medals and green scapulars around my neck. I possessed an awesome collection of holy cards depicting Jesus, Mary, and many of the saints. I was frequently exposed to - and listened with fascinated horror - to the stories of the many martyrs of the Church who willingly suffered all manner of imaginative tortures. I amassed centuries of indulgences, a means for deducting time from my future sentence in purgatory, by the uttering short invocations such as "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph". For years, my Saturday evenings were spent selling cigarettes, candy, hot dogs, soda pop and coffee at countless Bingo games in the smoke-filled auditorium of St. Anthony's school. I was a Cub Scout and Boy Scout

in St. Anthony's Parish and I sang in *Pueri Cantores*, the boys' choir at church. I was an acolyte, which was what amounted to a junior altar boy. Then after learning my Latin prayers and responses, I became a full-fledged altar boy with black cassock and white surplice.

I was a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic kid and I took great joy in hanging around the priests and helping in the rectory, the sacristy and the sanctuary. Despite the stories of sexual abuse of children by priests, I never had a hint of trouble like that until I returned to the closed seminary for a visit during the summer between high school and college. It had been converted into a retirement community for elderly and impaired priests. But that's a story for another time.

My childhood and adolescence were idyllic. I experienced a positive, nurturing family life as well as a positive, nurturing religious life. I identified so much with the Catholic Church that I was convinced the non-Catholic kids from Lincoln School looked different, in some indescribable way, from the Catholic kids from St. Anthony's. Perhaps it was simply that we wore school uniforms while they wore what we called play clothes. We called the public school "Lincoln Stinkin'" and looked down on the non-Catholic kids for their ignorance or rejection of what we knew to be the True Faith.

### **Sister Grace Louise**

My elementary school nemesis was Sister Grace Louise. In her opinion, I was lazy. She never allowed an opportunity to pass without reminding me and everyone else in the class how accurate her appraisal of me was. As evidence, she cited her observation of me walking my bike past the convent one day. "He's so lazy he doesn't even ride his bicycle, he walks it!" This was her pronouncement to the class one Monday morning. I had served as altar boy the previous Saturday for a wedding Mass at the church. The route home from church took me right past the

convent from where she had spotted me. She didn't know that a nut had worked loose from the bolt that held the fender strut to the hub of the bicycle's front wheel. Before I passed by the convent, the nut fell off, the bolt slipped out, and the strut suddenly went into the spokes. When it did, the bike came to an abrupt stop, and I was catapulted over the handlebars. It was a terrible spill but fortunately there were neither broken bones nor a head injury. Protective bicycle helmets were not in use in those days. After I recovered from the shock of flying through space, I examined my bike and determined that it couldn't be ridden without some repair work and that it was necessary for me to walk it the rest of the way home, passing directly in front of the convent and Sister Grace Louise's surveillance. From her vantage, she couldn't see my torn clothing nor the abrasions on my knees and hands. All she could see was me walking the bike past the convent. That was all she needed to make her judgment. From that day on, she repeatedly tormented me by reminding the class how "lazy" I was. I suppose it might have been her misguided attempt to spur me on to work harder at my studies. Of course, it didn't work. All it did was make me an object of ridicule in front of the class and create within me a rage at the injustice of her treatment toward me.

One day, Sister Grace Louise selected ten students from the class. I had the misfortune of being one of them. The selection was based on our above-average grades. She had us sit in an area segregated from the rest of the class. She called us the "cream of the crop" as we were supposedly her best students. The honor worked to my disadvantage however, because I ranked at the bottom of her elite group. She would never miss an opportunity to ridicule me publicly about what she considered my mediocre performance and laziness. I hated it and I despised her for putting me in this position of feeling like a failure even while being in her "cream of the crop". She was my teacher in the sixth and seventh grades, and then became principal during my

eighth grade. Through her misguided abuse of power, she fostered humiliation and failed in her responsibility as an educator to promote self-esteem and a love of learning.

## **Vocation**

When I was in the seventh grade, Sister Grace Louise had planned a reenactment of the celebration of the Mass in our classroom. She had even obtained child-sized vestments and a chalice for use at the faux celebration. She initially chose me to play the role of the priest because of my active participation as an altar boy. I was as proud as could be because I had been quietly considering the priesthood for some time. Then I had the misfortune to displease her for some reason and she withdrew the honor from me and gave it to another classmate. I was envious of him and angry at her for rescinding the honor. I felt that an injustice had been done and that I was the one who should have played the role of the priest. In that climate of anger and disappointment, I realized how much I wanted the priesthood for myself, not the pretence, but the real thing. The realization was long in coming but for the first time I articulated the desire. At the age of twelve I announced that I wanted to be a priest. I felt that I had a vocation, a calling from God to the priesthood. That announcement won great favor with Sister Grace Louise and I never had any more trouble with her after that. She bragged about me as if *she* were responsible for my vocation to the priesthood and in an ironic way, she was – at least in my realization of it. From that day on, the nuns and other adults in the Catholic community treated me quite differently. I was known as the future priest and I relished the attention.

The priests with whom I was familiar were those in our parish at St. Anthony's. They were classified as secular priests, which I suppose, meant they lived within the secular community rather than in a monastery or the missions. It would have been natural for me to be

attracted to the secular community of priests but I had a yearning for adventure and travel. I had read copies of *Maryknoll Magazine* which were filled with stories and photographs of the missions in Africa, South and Central America, Japan, Korea, and China. I eagerly read the tales of priests who traveled in open Jeeps or on horseback from village to village serving the needs of those who lived lives so alien to my own. I was hooked. I could easily visualize myself doing that and spent many hours fantasizing about riding horseback through the mountains of Peru, carrying the Word to remote villages. I imagined myself traveling in a small boat along the rivers of China, bringing medicine to the poor. I envisioned saying Mass on the hood of a Jeep in the wilds of Africa. They were tantalizingly romantic visions and they served as a compass needle pointing me in the only direction I ever considered at that time in my young life.

Psychologists and analysts would have their own ideas of what prompted me to desire the priesthood: escape, adventure, or perhaps the need to feel special in light of low self-esteem. Maybe it was one of these reasons or maybe not. I knew at the time that I wanted to be a part of what I saw going on within the pages of *Maryknoll Magazine*. I also noticed the *Sister Grace Louise Phenomenon*. Whenever I told others in my community that I wanted to be a priest, I observed that I was treated differently than I had been treated. It was as if I was elevated in stature within their eyes and was seen as someone special. I was told I had a vocation. The word is from Latin meaning a calling, presumably from God, to do His special work. I certainly had my doubts. I hadn't heard a voice or seen a sign. But I was told by those who supposedly knew that this was the way it works. I was assured that there usually wasn't a Voice booming from the clouds. Instead, there was a stirring from within, pressing me onward to do God's work.

At that time, I identified with Jesus, the boy of twelve. He and his family were traveling when Mary and Joseph, his parents, realized that Jesus was not among the group. After three

days of retracing their route back to Jerusalem and frantic searching by Mary and Joseph, they found Jesus engaged in intense discussion with the learned men in the temple. I can only imagine Mary, in the manner of a Jewish mother, saying, “So *this* is the way you treat your mother? I was worried nearly sick to death about you!” The version, as told in the *Book of Luke*, is a bit more reserved. It simply quotes Mary as asking Jesus why he brought them such sorrow. He replied, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” (*Luke 2:49*) I figured that if Jesus knew at the age of twelve what his life’s work was, so could I, and I would pursue it even at that tender age.

I intended to be about my Father's Business - although I had only a vague, romantic notion of what that was. It seems unusual for any child of twelve to have a clear vision of what to do for his life’s work. Of course, Jesus was an unusual twelve-year-old. I suppose that's why the temple story was included in Luke's Gospel. When I expressed doubts, I was told that this was the nature of a vocation and to ignore the doubts by placing the matter in God's hands. I reasoned that perhaps it was God who was sending me the doubts as a way of testing my determination. I never shared that notion with anyone. I rode the wave I had created and despite doubts, it was the only path I could imagine myself taking.

I was assured that I was special to have this calling. And I felt special too. I could not envision myself going to one of the local high schools as my eighth-grade classmates were planning. I was ready to begin my journey toward the priesthood and looked far into the future through four years of seminary high school in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania; four years of college at Glen Ellyn, Illinois; one year of novitiate at Brookline, Massachusetts; and an additional four years at the senior seminary in Ossining, New York. I looked ahead thirteen years and saw myself wearing a black cassock with the red *Chi Rho* symbol of Maryknoll embroidered

onto the black sash. The *Chi Rho* symbol consisted of the Greek letter P superimposed with the letter X, surrounded by a circle. It represented Christ within the world and symbolized the mission of Maryknoll and Catholics everywhere: to spread the Word of God throughout the world.



*Chi Rho* Symbol

My parents were supportive of my decision. Most Catholic parents were honored to have a son who was called by God to the priesthood. To their credit, they neither pushed me in the direction of the seminary nor discouraged me. I spoke with them about my desire and they helped me contact Maryknoll. The organization sent some literature about their seminary program and then dispatched a priest-recruiter to my home. I can't remember his name but I clearly remember the meeting in our living room. I felt nervous excitement as he asked me questions about my intentions and desires. We discussed my grades and my involvement in religious activities. He left a copy of a book called *The Meaning of Maryknoll* by Albert J. Nevins, M.M. It had been published eight years earlier in 1954. It was in part about James E. Walsh, M.M. a Maryknoll priest who had been imprisoned and tortured by the Communists in China. It was frightening to read the accounts of torture but I was not deterred. I instead found myself attracted to the relationship he had with the people, the good he had done by establishing medical clinics and schools, the comfort he had brought to the people by bringing them the sacraments. That's what I wanted to do. The priest-recruiter invited us to an open house at the

Maryknoll headquarters and senior seminary at Ossining, New York. The building and grounds overlook the Hudson River and it is an incredibly beautiful place. The building was filled with antique Chinese furniture and artifacts. The senior seminarians went out of their way to welcome us. The recruiter was wise as the book he left with me and the visit to Maryknoll headquarters crystallized my desire to become part of that exotic life.

I took the written entrance examination at the bedroom desk my parents had gotten for me some years earlier. The pine desk and chair were purchased unfinished and Dad had sanded, stained and varnished it. I did well in the test and was accepted for admission. This was in the spring and I was to enter the seminary in September of 1963. I remember the other eighth grade boys speaking of their plans to attend the local high schools and I felt so apart from them. I remember feeling that I couldn't identify with them at all. After all, I had a vocation. I was different. I was going to be a priest!

Now I wasn't so different that I hadn't noticed some of the girls filling out the tops of their uniforms. I was immensely intrigued about that. Those budding breasts ignited early sexual fantasies. This had a significant impact on me. It began a period in which I was tormented by terror of hell for the sin of entertaining *impure thoughts*. The nuns frequently warned us about them, though they were quite vague as to what they actually were. Certainly no one ever counseled that these thoughts were normal and natural. What priest, bishop, cardinal or pope has not entertained impure thoughts as an adolescent? This universal and healthy phenomenon was deemed unmentionable, shameful, sinful, and damnable by the Church. I interpreted my desires and fantasies as a sure sign of my sinful nature. Only with rigid self-control and diligent prayer, could I free myself from these troubling fantasies so that I might serve God as a celibate priest.

I saw my vocation to the priesthood as overshadowing any desires for marriage and fatherhood. Oh, the nuns would tell us that marriage too was a vocation. Their mentioning of it always seemed to come as an afterthought however, and I always interpreted this as a small consolation for those who did not have the desire for the religious life. The seminary was the path of the *real* vocation and other choices were ordinary, uninspired, and paled in comparison to the glory of the priesthood.

Obviously, the expense of what amounted to private boarding school tuition in contrast to the cost of the local public high school was considerable. The annual seminary tuition, including room and board, was \$750. That doesn't seem like much now but at that time it was impossible for my family. We four boys were always sheltered from any discussion of the details of our family's financial situation. We couldn't avoid observing Mom and Dad, however, discussing money matters in hushed voices so we couldn't hear. Even though the words couldn't be heard, the mood was unmistakably full of tension. Although we were spared the details, we knew enough to know that it was a struggle to raise four boys on a letter carrier's wage. I never thought we were poor but I knew for sure we weren't rich either. Oh, I knew there were rich people – and they weren't like us. We viewed their homes on our Sunday drives and we saw them on TV. I knew we weren't like them. We were *normal*, like everyone we knew. I remember thinking that we were a lot like the Cleavers in "Leave it to Beaver." Dad however did not wear a necktie at the dinner table and Mom did not wear a pearl necklace while doing housework.

Born in 1949, my childhood spanned the 1950s and '60s. For many it was an era of prosperity and unprecedented consumerism. With a little financial help from my frugal grandparents, and the option of buying on credit, we participated in that era's good life as well. I recall the excitement of getting our new Chevy Bel Air in 1954. I watched my share of "The

Howdy Doody Show" and the "Farmer Gray" cartoons on our tiny black and white TV in the mahogany cabinet. I remember the ringer clothes washer that was replaced by a modern automatic washer. It was joined a few years later by a gas dryer. No longer would I hear my mother, who upon noticing the flapping laundry on the clothesline and the dark skies of a coming storm, frantically yell for us to "Quick, get the clothes off the line before it starts to rain!" Every other year took a week-long vacation to the Jersey shore. We would rent a small house a few blocks from the beach. Sometimes it would just be Mom, Dad and the four kids. Sometimes we would share a bigger house with aunts, uncles, and cousins. From my point of view, it seemed like a comfortable lifestyle for us. But \$750 tuition, in addition to other expenses, was a lot of money at that time.

Shortly before my mother's death, she told me that she and Dad had approached Monsignor O'Sullivan, the pastor of St. Anthony's, to see if the parish might provide some tuition assistance. Our family had been members and supporters of the parish since moving from Paterson to Hawthorne in 1950. All four boys attended school at St. Anthony's and were altar boys, Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. We were a participating and supportive parish family. My dad belonged to the Holy Name Society and for years volunteered on Saturday evenings to work at Bingo. We boys also volunteered at Bingo and could keep our tips. We would walk up and down the smoky aisles between the tables of Bingo players selling coffee, cigarettes, candy, and hot dogs with sauerkraut. After the game was over and the gamblers left for the night, we would clean up the auditorium and take down the tables and chairs. When all was cleaned up, the men and boys would gather in the school cafeteria and have a feast of Mama Meile's fabulous meatball sandwiches or maybe thick ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches on rye bread. The men

washed theirs down with beer and we boys drank soda. We sat together at a table apart from the men.

It was at one of these post-Bingo feeds that one of the boys told us about nudist colonies. It was an astonishing revelation for me to discover that there were places where people, men and women, boys and girls, walked around unabashedly naked! I gave the matter a *great* deal of thought and my curiosity about sexual matters was kicked up a notch. The notion of nudist colonies fueled my imagination and seriously escalated the newly developing and enjoyable *impure thoughts* about which the nuns were continually warning us. The uneasy coexistence of the desire for the priesthood and the desire for sexual exploration had its beginnings at this time.

Getting back to Monsignor O'Sullivan, it must have been difficult for my parents to ask for the assistance. They were certainly not slackers when it came to supporting the parish. We were immersed in parish life. It was reasonable to hope that the parish would help with a portion of the seminary tuition as their way of assisting loyal parishioners and fostering the education of a future priest. It was considered an honor for any parish to produce a priest. Despite all this however, my parents' request for tuition assistance was denied. I don't know why. Perhaps it was because of the petty rivalry between the secular priests and the missionary priests. Perhaps it was because the parish did not have the money, though that seems unlikely. Perhaps the Monsignor, shepherd of his flock of parishioners, simply wasn't interested.

In any case Mom and Dad contacted the financial office at Maryknoll and informed them of their situation. The seminary made it possible for my parents to pay only \$20.00 a month! That was partly covered by Dad's World War II disability check which at that time amounted to a paltry \$11.00 per month. I didn't know about this financial arrangement until I was gathering information for this memoir. Imagine the cost of tuition in a private school, plus room and board

for ten months totaling only \$750.00. Then imagine paying only \$200.00 (\$20.00 per month) for all that. It's astonishing!

MARYKNOLL JUNIOR SEMINARY					
Clarks Summit, Pa. 18411					
QUARTERLY TUITION STATEMENT					
Name <u>Charles Morel</u>					DATE <u>DEC 1 1963</u>
Agreement: 10 Months		@ \$20.00	per month		Total \$200.00
Current School-Year	Amount Paid				Debit Balance Previous Years
Sept. 20.00	Dec.	Mar.	May		
Oct. 20.00	Jan.	April	June		
Nov. 20.00	Feb.				
Balance	None				
Total balance due to date		\$ None			AMOUNT PAID
					\$
This is not a bill, merely a statement of your account. Please notify us if there is any error.					
Business Office					

*1963 Quarterly Tuition Statement*

I am grateful to my parents and to the people of Maryknoll who made it possible for me to pursue my dream of the priesthood and at the same time obtain an excellent college preparatory education. And if that weren't enough, the four years I spent at the junior seminary gave me an experience of community living that I would never have had in a typical secular high school.

**Preparing to Leave**

The summer of 1963 was spent making preparations for my departure in September. There were several trips to Bamberger's, J. C. Penny's, and other stores at the Paramus Mall, the world's largest shopping mall at the time. It wasn't enclosed as malls are now. The many stores,

a small number in contrast to today's mega-malls, comprised a retail island in an asphalt parking lot sea. The individual stores were connected by covered walkways and offered a convenience that was novel at the time. We had no idea that the suburban mall model would grow to today's proportions, becoming indoor mini-cities with everything imaginable within. We purchased my wardrobe of black pants and jackets, sports coats, white shirts, black ties, as well as work and play clothes. Clothing alone was a big expense yet I never heard a complaint from Dad who worked a full-time and a part-time job to make ends meet.

We prepared for my September departure. My mother had ordered clothing labels from the Cash Label Company. They came in a long strip of white cloth in which my name was stitched in black thread. An individual label was cut from the strip and sewn by my mother onto each article of clothing, including each sock. I still have a strip of those labels put away with my special stuff.

During that summer after eighth grade there was a Communion Breakfast sponsored by St. Anthony's, honoring the boys and girls who were heeding the call of their vocation and would be departing for various seminaries and convents in the fall. There were about eight of us. A photographer posed us portrait-style, seated around Father Jannucci, one of the younger and popular parish priests. I remember feeling so proud that I was seated next to him, the priest, as if I was more special among the special.

## **The Venard**

I was quietly anxious about the upcoming change. I had only a vague sense of what life was going to be like in the seminary. But I figured if I was willing to travel to foreign lands as a missionary, I could handle going away to a seminary. On September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1963, the family

packed into the Chevy and made the three-hour drive from Hawthorne, New Jersey to Clarks Summit in northeast Pennsylvania. I remember the trip well. I handled my anxiety by studying Morse code. I had read there was a Radio Club there and was very interested in getting involved in that. Knowledge of the code was necessary for me to obtain a Novice radio license. I passed the miles along the New Jersey and Pennsylvania highways memorizing the patterns of *dits* and *dahs* as I traveled nervously toward my new life.

Maryknoll Junior Seminary was informally called “the Venard” and was named after Blessed Theophane Venard, a French missionary. He practiced his ministry in Vietnam despite a royal edict banning such activities. He was arrested on November 30, 1860 and tried before a mandarin. He refused to renounce his faith and was imprisoned in a cage. He was permitted to write letters to his family and his letters were written to console them. His writing was filled with joyful anticipation of his martyrdom. His bishop wrote of him: “Though in chains, he is as gay as a little bird”. In a letter to his father, Theophane wrote:

*A slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower which the Master of the garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted in this earth, which God plucks in His own good time: some a little sooner, some a little later... Father and son may we meet in Paradise. I, poor little moth, go first. Adieu.*

He walked joyfully to his execution and was beheaded in Tonkin, Vietnam on February 2, 1861. His severed head was displayed on a pole as an example to others. He was beatified, that is declared Blessed, a step towards sainthood, in 1909. Maryknoll Junior Seminary, or the Venard, was established in 1913 and named in his honor. Blessed Theophane Venard was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II in 1988.

While the new seminary building was in construction, the seminarians lived and attended classes in a wood frame building which I presume was the original farm house on the acreage. It was used as the convent or nuns' residence during my time there. The completed seminary building with its prominent bell tower was an architectural landmark in the area. Brick and stone blended with the location and landscaping and the result was a place of serene beauty.

In the fall of 1963, my entering class was the fiftieth freshman class to begin there. In 1967, we were the fiftieth and final class to graduate. The school closed to students immediately after our graduation. The completion of this memoir in 2013 marks the 100th anniversary of the Venard's founding.

## Chapter 2: People

Those of us within the seminary community fell into five categories: seminarians, priests, nuns, brothers, and outsiders. Each group contributed to the wonderful diversity of skills, talents, personalities, and experiences that characterized the Venard.

### Seminarians

Throughout my four years at the Venard, there were seven classes that passed through (mine, the three classes behind mine and the three ahead). That would be about one hundred and forty seminarians. Each class (freshman, sophomore, junior and senior) had about eighteen to twenty-two students. Classes had been larger at one time but vocations to the priesthood had begun to decline in the 1960s. There were none in my graduating class of seventeen who made it to ordination which would have occurred some nine years after high school graduation.

St. Luke wrote that Jesus knew his path at the age of twelve. We thought we did too. But how can a twelve-year-old make a choice that involves thirteen years of education, commitment to a life of celibacy, and membership in the hierarchy of a two-thousand-year-old organization that demands absolute obedience to its authority? There are, no doubt, some in the past who did just that and enjoyed lives of clerical competence and contentment. But now in the 1960s, institutions, even Holy Mother Church, were subject to the clamor of the people demanding relevance and personal freedom.

We were all ordinary kids. We each had our strengths, our quirks, and our fears. At the same time, we were unusual. After all, it was the 1960s and we were living a lifestyle based on a

monastic model from the Middle Ages, about thirteen hundred years previous. Some of us came from small families and some from very large ones. At the time I was there, there were three pairs of brothers, which included a set of twins. None of us came from wealthy families. Almost all were lower-middle class. We came from the eastern half of the country and in my class, there were students from as far north as Massachusetts, as far south as Florida, and as far west as Ohio and Michigan. The student body included a typical mix of interests and personalities. Some of us were jocks, some played musical instruments, some of us were talented students and some not so much.

Naturally, many quirks of human nature could be found within the seminary walls. For example, contrary to what you might expect, there was some bullying activity. This was not a big problem but it did occasionally occur. For example, during my freshman year I was part of the Grounds Squad and we were shoveling snow from the walkways around the large building. The bully, first ensuring that his minions were there to support him and witness his use of power, dumped a shovelful of snow on my head and loudly proclaimed, "I crown you king." This was not done in a playful manner – which would have been OK. This was malicious. He sneered and looked around to make sure his buddies saw his clever coup. While he was looking away, I quickly scooped up a shovelful of snow and dumped it on his head while proclaiming, "I crown you King Shit." As with all bullies, he could give it out but he couldn't take it. And he couldn't lose face in front of his buddies. He of course resorted to a predictable and primitive response: he punched me squarely in the jaw. This was the first, and only, time I've been punched in the face. I was shocked, in pain, and seeing stars. From somewhere within me I found the wherewithal to simply look him in the face and say, "Does that really make you feel better?" He stormed away and I never had any further trouble from him. The incident made me wonder why

someone professing the desire and studying for the priesthood would engage in such hateful behavior.

We seminarians were very much in tune with the Civil Rights Movement and the abolishment of racial segregation. As entering freshmen, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was delivered just one month earlier. It was the era of Freedom Riders and the upheaval of the traditional relationships between Blacks and Whites. The Venard was very nearly, totally white. At the time I was there, we had black upper classman, though we lowly freshmen had little contact with him. For one year however, we had a black student as a lower classman. This didn't seem to be a problem for him or anyone else - at least to my knowledge. Bill was easy to like. He was friendly and comfortable to be around. He was one of the guys. This was new territory for many of us who came from all white elementary schools and communities and who had had no personal experience with Negroes, the term in use at the time. It seemed like a non-issue for us.

Bill endured the good-natured ribbing to which he was subjected. There was never any malice as far as I knew. And he never seemed to take offence. He was the target of jokes and teasing that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be considered racially insensitive. The fact is, we all endured an equal measure of the same - though for our own unique reasons. In a small way, this is tied in with the notion of *bearing one's cross*. This is in the Catholic consciousness and is used to describe carrying on despite the burdens and hardships that are unique to each of us. In the Big Picture, if you want to get to heaven, it behooves you to *carry your cross* with courage and strength. You can resist this, but it just makes it harder.

Now within the seminary milieu Bill's cross was his skin color and racial identity. Mine was my surname. The matter of a nickname based on adolescent humor is hardly a cross, but for

an individual, I don't think it matters what the focus for the teasing is. When persons are the butt of jokes about a physical deformity, a mannerism, their name - or their race - it can certainly hurt if done maliciously. However, good-natured teasing can be helpful in the bonding within a group. I think we need to look at the spirit in which teasing is intended.

Even though good-natured, this teasing can become wearisome. My last name, *Morel*, is the same as the edible and much sought after wild mushroom. Now I don't know who it was, but someone made this connection and began referring to me as "Fungus". Immediately everyone else piled on. For this, and no other reason, I had to endure four years of repetitive mycological jokes and jibes and all that go along with it: "Oh, look, there's a fungus among us!" Most of us learned very quickly that to take offence was to invite a more intense and sustained barrage of insults and teasing. Though it didn't kill us, we really didn't like it but we learned to endure. So, I carried my cross and Bill carried his, and everyone else carried theirs and we all did unto others as they did unto us. We were each on the giving and receiving end of our insulting and puerile humor. In that, we were truly integrated. The seminary was an equal opportunity ball-buster.

To my knowledge, there was never any racial hostility or discrimination directed toward Bill. I never heard discussions or comments of a negative nature spoken about him, either in or out in his presence. We accepted him and he seemed to accept us. Yet, despite this acceptance, it must have been difficult for him to be in the exclusive company of those whose backgrounds and life experiences were different from his own. He never said how he felt about this yet he surely must have experienced some awkwardness and isolation. We perceive by seeing differences. That which is different stands out. So, in a racial sense, there is no denying that Bill stood out in this overwhelmingly white population. I don't know how this affected him. He never spoke about it and I never asked. He was there for only one year and then he left and we never heard from

him again. I often wondered if his leaving was due to the difficulties of being in an extreme minority, or if it was simply a matter of his choosing another path in life.

There were many differences among us but what we all had in common was our Catholicism and our vocations. We wanted to be priests. That's what gave us our identity. Curiously, we didn't feel that we were much different from our peers on the outside. We listened to rock and roll, smoked cigarettes, and told dirty jokes. We thought we were in tune with our generation. The thick calluses on our knees from hours of praying on bare wooden kneelers told a different story however. We were different in some fundamental ways from teens on the outside.

## **Priests**

The priests occupied the top of the seminary hierarchy. In addition to being ordained and highly educated, they were also seasoned missionaries who could tell tantalizing tales of adventure in foreign lands. Father Vittengl, our history teacher, had been stationed in Hong Kong and had been editor of *Maryknoll Magazine* for several years. He also rode a motorcycle which we all thought was very cool. Father Milroy was our physics teacher and he had been assigned to the missions in Peru. Father Davis, our librarian, had been in Manchuria and had lost a leg over there. Father Ratermann, our Latin teacher, had been in Guatemala. Some of the priests were older and approaching retirement. Some had been in the missions for years and had suffered imprisonment and torture.

The priests were the elite within the organizational structure. Church doctrine held that only they had the power of transubstantiation, the ability to transform ordinary bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ. They had the power to forgive sins in the confessional

and to impart blessings to persons and objects. They knew the rites and practices passed down through the centuries. They were held in high esteem, as were all priests in the eyes of the Catholic laity. Yet, because we were aspiring to their ranks, and because we all lived in community, we were more likely to see their frailties, imperfections, and ordinariness.

The priests wore three types of clothing. Formal wear consisted of a black suit and shirt with a prominent white, clerical collar. Still in uniform, but for everyday wear, priests wore black cassocks with a less prominent white collar, and a black sash about six inches wide. It surrounded the waist and had a section which hung down on the left side nearly to the floor. This vertical part of the sash was adorned with a red embroidered symbol with a black background. The symbol is called the *Chi Rho* and we were told it symbolized Christ within the world. It was also used as a symbol for the Maryknoll order. The third type of clothing was *civilian clothing* which was worn for work or recreation but not out in public.

Father Wolken was the top official at the seminary during my first year at the Venard. He was appointed by the Bishop and held the title of rector (from Latin *rector, rectoris*, meaning ruler, governor, director). Fifty years earlier, Father James E. Walsh, written about in *The Meaning of Maryknoll*, the book that had bolstered my vocational desires, had been the first rector at the Venard. In all, there were about a dozen priests and each had his specific responsibilities. They taught our college preparatory classes such as algebra, geometry, French, Latin, Greek, hygiene, biology, history, physics, and literature. In addition, they had responsibilities such as supervising some of the manual labor jobs, overseeing many of the clubs and activities, monitoring the dormitories, and providing support as spiritual and academic counselors. They also served as role models, as did the brothers, and nuns.

As the seminary faculty, the priests did not freely socialize with the seminarians though there was plenty of contact in both formal and informal ways. We would often see them walking alone along one of the many outdoor paths, reading from the *Breviary*, a book of Latin prayers that were to be recited not only every day, but at several specific times throughout the day. We would see them on the tennis courts and seated at the head table in the refectory. They were our teachers, role models, mentors, spiritual guides and parent designees. Each of us looked up to the priests knowing that some day, we would achieve the spiritual heights to which they had attained.

## **Brothers**

It took a great deal of work to operate and maintain the seminary. While the nuns, also called the sisters, kept the kitchen going, the brothers kept the rest of the place functioning. I admired them greatly. These were regular guys who had devoted their lives to service within the Church, yet they were not priests. They lived lives of simplicity, celibacy, and service. They didn't carry the aura of authority that the priests did, though they wore the same garb. We respected them, and at the same time, we liked them. If the priests were the fathers, the brothers were like the uncles. They taught us things. Not Latin and philosophy, but practical things like how to prune an apple tree, how to tune up a truck, how to repair a broken guitar. They were the guys who kept the place running. Among the dozen or so, there was a carpenter, an auto mechanic, a groundskeeper, a livestock farmer, a boiler and heating specialist, an executive secretary, and others. The brothers did the grunt work of maintaining the facility.

The brothers were not at the top of the seminary hierarchy. That place was reserved for the priests. As a result, they were always in the shadow of the priests. The relationship was much

like the one in the military between the officers and the NCOs. The officers get respect but the NCOs get things done. Brothers were generally more approachable than the priests. As an example of the pecking order, the priests were all referred to by the title Father, followed by their surname as in “Father Smith”. The brothers, on the other hand also had their title but it was followed by their first names as in “Brother Paul”. This difference allowed for a feeling of informality and familiarity that was discouraged in our relationships with the priests.



*The Brothers' Residence*  
(Ray Voith, 1999)

The brothers had their own residence just as the nuns had their convent. The brothers' residence didn't have a formal name like *convent*. We just called it the *brothers' residence*. It was a brick building that also housed the boiler in the basement. There were times when some of us would hang out at the brothers' residence and watch football with them on their color TV.

That didn't happen often but we relished those times because we felt more grown up, hanging out with the older guys. We would never consider hanging out with the priests and they wouldn't have allowed it anyway.

Many of the brothers headed up manual labor details yet our comfortable relationship with them never interfered with getting the work done. I spent several quarters working with Brother Fred. I estimate that he was in his late sixties or early seventies at the time. It's hard to judge as he was so fit. His age was no impediment to vigorous work. He had been at the Venard over twenty years and managed the grounds and the apple orchard. That was a huge task as we had lots of acreage which included mowed fields, wooded areas, a lake, and a large apple orchard. Brother Fred was a quiet man who never spoke about himself. He was always busy. He could often be seen alone or with some of the other brothers walking on the grounds. Brother Fred would stop along the way to pick up fallen twigs or branches or perhaps a piece of paper blowing in the wind as he walked along. I can't ever recall seeing him simply relaxing. He typified the adage, "Idleness is the Devil's workshop." I don't think he kept busy to refrain from sinning however. I think he kept busy because he loved his work.

Brother Paul loved what he did too. He was also in his sixties, possibly early seventies, and had been at the Venard for over twenty years. He was a carpenter, a boiler operator, and a dreamer. It was said that he once built a huge kite. His intention was to have two or three others fly it while he, secured in a harness attached to the kite frame, could get a bird's eye view of the surrounding countryside! His efforts were for naught however because he was forbidden by the rector to attempt it.

Brother Paul managed the monstrous boiler that provided heat and hot water for the brothers' residence as well as the main seminary building. I occasionally helped him down there.

The boiler was enormous, and so loud and so hot, that I found it was frightening just being near it. I always had the anxious feeling of imminent explosion. Years later I experienced a similar feeling while working in the Intensive-Coronary Care Unit at Wilford Hall, the Air Force's largest medical center, located in San Antonio. The hospital would receive occasional bomb threats and all non-essential personnel had to evacuate. We nurses were considered essential and had to remain with our patients, as they were in critical condition and couldn't be moved. Some of us would have to conduct a search closets and other spaces where a bomb could have been hidden. Fortunately, we never found one but that feeling of imminent explosion brought me right back to Brother Paul in the boiler room.

The monstrous boiler had a small peephole of very thick glass. It was round and about two inches in diameter. Some years in the future I would peer through similar peepholes. They would be in the heavy doors of the thickly padded seclusion rooms at Eastern State Hospital in Washington. This was a late 19th century psychiatric hospital building, similar to the one in the film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". I worked in the section with patients who were considered criminally insane.... But that's another story. When I looked through the boiler's peephole I could see into the bowels of the Venard's great heating system. The fiery interior was so intense it was like peering into hell itself.

### **Learning to Drive**

I have one of the brothers to thank for my first driving experiences. I don't quite remember how it came about, but he allowed Ed and me to use his car so that I could learn how to drive. It wasn't as if he was volunteering to teach me. He was offering his car for the *sink or swim method* of driver education. Not that I was totally without instruction. Ed was to show me

what I needed to know. Ed was also sixteen and never had a driver's license but claimed to have driven at home *lots of times*. This claim was apparently taken at face value. We drove around the back roads of eastern Pennsylvania on six occasions for about an hour each time. Just the two of us. We were very responsible and never had a bit of trouble. It was exhilarating! I experienced a feeling of freedom on these excursions and it was amazing. Of course, we had to keep our automotive adventures a secret between the three of us.

I was fortunate to have had this experience at that time of my life. I gained some confidence with each mile I drove - not simply confidence in driving but confidence in living. Now that I think about it, it was like a rite of passage for me. Though needless to say (*and this is the adult speaking*) I question the judgment of this well-meaning brother. Here I was, a sixteen-year-old kid with no license or driving experience, no instruction, and with no responsible supervision. I can't imagine anyone allowing such a thing these days. For better or worse, life was much simpler then. Poor judgment notwithstanding, I'll always be grateful to him. And by the way, I have never gotten a traffic ticket in my fifty years of driving so Ed deserves a nod of appreciation as well.

## **Humility**

As a seminarian studying for the priesthood, I wondered why a man would choose the life of simplicity, celibacy, and service within the Church and yet not choose the priesthood. I would watch the brothers in the chapel and observe their individual expressions of piety. Each seemed very devout. In the ignorance of my youth, I saw brotherhood as being *less than* priesthood. Influenced by my own arrogance as a future priest, I failed to grasp the profound humility that

the Brothers demonstrated. It was like the humility of St. Francis of Assisi. Ironically, in their humility, was their greatness.

## **Sisters**

Our kitchen functions were handled by a group of French speaking nuns. They were not Maryknoll sisters. They were Antonian Sisters and belonged to a Canadian order whose mission was to cook and bake for seminaries and monasteries. The sisters spoke French, with only a smattering of English. Though Father Knipe, our French teacher, did his best, our speaking-French was limited. We could converse enough to understand their instructions while working in the kitchen despite the comic misunderstandings which occurred from time to time. They used their limited English and we used our limited French, and when we were really stuck, we resorted to our common language, Latin. Our communication was quite superficial so we never learned much about them. We worked side by side and though our relationship was relaxed, it was always clear that they were in charge of the kitchen. They were always seen in their habits, one set for work in the kitchen, and another for all other times.

One of the nuns was quite elderly. Her facial skin, the only skin visible except for her hands, was lined with hundreds of wrinkles. In our juvenile way, we called her “Prune Face,” though never directly to her even though we were convinced she neither spoke nor understood a word of English. Though the nuns were our bosses in the kitchen, they were benign bosses, and we all had respect for them despite our nicknames for them and the frequent good-natured language humor.

We seminarians weren't involved in the food preparation. We cleaned the refectory after each meal. We set the tables for the following meal. We rinsed and fed the dirty dishes into the

maw of the giant steam-belching dishwasher. We mopped the floors in the kitchen and after separating the trash into burnables, non-burnables, and leftovers for the pigs, we hauled it all outside where it would be picked up later by the manual labor trash detail in the old beat-up pickup. It was hard work and we all had our turn.

I enjoyed working in the kitchen. I had the opportunity to observe the nuns operate the amazing potato peeling machine and the giant ovens that handled the baking of our bread and the many apple pies made from the fruit in our orchard. When the nuns served apple pie, it was always with a slice of yellow cheese on top. We were told this is the way it's done in Canada. Few of us ever ate the cheese. We would all dutifully return the drying slices to the kitchen where they were used to make grilled cheese sandwiches for the following day's lunch. This practice began long before I arrived there and continued for all my four years. The routine never changed. The routine never changed because the menu never changed. If it was Saturday evening, it was certain that we would be having hot dogs and beans with cornbread and apple cider. I remember because it was one of my favorite meals.

The Antonian Order to which these nuns belonged had a coat of arms with a Latin phrase which characterized their spiritual orientation. This custom is still in practice as in for example, the motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, *Semper Fidelis* (Always Faithful). The English translation of the nuns' motto was the declaration *She knows the Faith*, certainly appropriate for an order of nuns. The Latin script beneath the coat of arms (*and forgive me Fr. Ratermann if I am incorrect about this*) consisted of two words: *Fidem* meaning “faith” and the third person singular of the verb *scio*, meaning “to know”. The Latin motto then, for this order of cooking nuns, was *Fidem Scit*, which is pronounced: “Feed 'em shit”! Well this provided an endless source of hilarity for us. We would sometimes ask one of the nuns what was written on her order's coat of arms. When

she would innocently say, "*Fidem scit*", we would go into gales of laughter. We believed they didn't have a clue, and to this day, I can't say for sure if they understood our amusement at this exquisite linguistic irony.



*The Convent and original Venard building*  
*Photo from Venard Archives courtesy of Jeff Broderick of the Baptist Bible College*

Our contact with the nuns was almost exclusively limited to the kitchen. Only once in my experience, did we visit their residence or convent. It was reached by a path through the small woods between the main building and the convent. It was a wood framed structure several hundred yards from the main building. It was close to the barn and had probably been the original farm house. It was also the original Venard from 1913 until the new building was completed in 1919. Since it was the nuns' residence, the convent was off-limits to seminarians and there was really no reason for us to violate that. One year we were invited by the nuns to come down to the convent for a Christmas concert and home-baked cookies. In the spirit of

Christmas, the rector granted an exception to the off-limits rule. About twenty of us walked down the snow-covered path through the trees to the convent. The nuns treated us to a live performance of French-Canadian Christmas songs with piano accompaniment. The cookies were not the mass produced, baked-in-the-seminary-ovens variety of which we were accustomed. These were a special variety baked lovingly in the convent oven. We were all squeezed into their living room. I remember thinking how strange it was to be inside the convent. I was amazed to find they even had a living room, and it was like one you would find in any typical home! This realization was silly, really. It demonstrated that we didn't view the nuns as people. It was like they were a species of their own. They offered the only trace of female influence to be found at the seminary. Here were twelve women in a male, monastic environment, yet they weren't really perceived as women. They were just "the nuns."

## **Outsiders**

We were a closed community and there was little contact with those outside the community walls. There were a few exceptions to this however. Mr. O'Dey was our basketball coach. He lived in the community and had a contract to coach our team which played other high schools in the vicinity. We also had a longstanding rivalry with the Franciscan junior seminary in Callicoon, New York. Once a year, either our team would make the three-hour bus trip or they would travel to the Venard for the spirited game. Though I wasn't on the team, and basketball did not particularly interest me, this annual contest always captivated me because I had two cousins who were seminarians at the rival institution - and one of them was on the team. One year I was permitted to travel to Callicoon with the team. I saw my cousin, Dick, play and witnessed our team's ignominious defeat at the hands of the Franciscans.

The other outsider was better known by all of us and so didn't seem like an outsider at all. He was an institution within the institution. He was around for all four of my years at the Venard and had been there before my arrival. I'm referring to Tony, the painter. He was a full-time employee at the Venard. The building was large enough that when he finished painting the interior, it was time to begin again. He was a short guy who wore white, paint splattered overalls. He often had a stubby cigar in his mouth and a three to four-day growth of beard. Years later when seeing the popular Mario Brothers video game, I immediately thought of Tony. We'd pass him in the hallways on the way to classes or in the stairwells as we climbed under his scaffolding and walked over his paint splattered, canvas drop cloths on our way to the chapel. He'd always have a comment about the day, or make a joke, or just say hi.

### **The Knights of the Road**

Several times a week, we students who were working in the kitchen would be asked to bring plates of food to the back door where two or three men with grizzled beards and tattered clothing would be waiting quietly and patiently. These were known as the *Knights of the Road* and they were engaged in a tradition that extended back decades before I arrived at the Venard, probably during the Great Depression of the thirties. These hobos would ride the rails, jump off the freight trains in the Scranton area, and make their way to our back doorstep knowing that the good nuns would fix them a meal. This practice was taken for granted and was never talked about among us. It was a longstanding tradition and we all accepted it.

I was intensely curious about these men and tried to engage some of them in conversation about their lives and travels but none of them were eager to do that. They were quiet and respectful and very hungry. They didn't need to complete an intake application or endure a visit

with a social service worker. They simply came hungry and left with a meal in their bellies. They knew through their informal communication network that here they could get a good, hot meal with no strings attached. As for the nuns, it was simply the practice of charity and a following of Jesus' directive to feed the hungry.

## Chapter 3: Institutional Life

### Visiting Sunday

When twelve-year-old Jesus was about his Father's business and speaking with the learned men in the temple, he experienced the first documented separation from his family. Seminarians at the Venard came from all over the east coast and we also experienced separation from our families at an early age. I was always rather independent and did not suffer from the homesickness that many of my classmates did. That didn't prevent me from looking forward to Visiting Sunday, the first Sunday of each month. Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters who lived within a few hours drive would visit for the day. Mom, Dad and my three younger brothers would make the three-hour drive. Sometimes my grandparents would come along as well.

We seminarians always enjoyed Visiting Sundays - even those whose parents lived too far away to make the trip. These Sundays meant an influx of our favorite homemade foods (no disrespect to the nuns) and everything was shared with those who had no visitors. Birthdays rarely coincided with these Sundays so the Visiting Sunday of that month would serve as the day to celebrate the event as a family. My request to Dad was always for his special chocolate cake and he would somehow find time to make it for my birthday. Naturally, it was perfect each time. It is called *Gay '90s Chocolate Cake* and is the most rich and moist chocolate cake I've ever tasted. Now, as an adult, I make it for my own children when they request it for their birthdays.

My first Visiting Sunday in October of 1963 occurred just days before my fourteenth birthday. I asked for a baseball glove. This request surprised my parents because I was never much of a sports enthusiast. Participation in sports was required however, and I figured if I had

to do it, I might as well have equipment that would give me a fighting chance. It was a beautiful glove but I was disappointed to discover that there was no magic in it. I still stood in the outfield praying that the ball would be hit to anyone but me.

It was always an interesting experience seeing the families of classmates. It clearly demonstrated that families come in all sizes and types. Take Mike's family for example. Mike had a passion for baseball and his hero was Sandy Koufax. He could quote every statistic and fact and would use any opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge of Koufax. Mike's nickname was "Wabbit" because of his prominent front teeth. (his cross to bear). His numerous brothers and sisters were strikingly similar to Mike in appearance. On Visiting Sundays, we'd be amused to see his many younger brothers and sisters pile out of the VW bus. Like Russian nesting dolls, each was a very similar, but smaller version of Mike.

Tom's family came from Staten Island in New York. He was studious and quiet and probably the most brilliant student in our class. As I recall, he was just about the only student in the class who did not smoke cigarettes. Tom's father was Italian and his mother was Irish and they would always bring plenty of good, home-cooked food for everyone who didn't receive visitors. Their lasagna was always a hit!

Sometimes the Visiting Sunday afternoons were spent on the grounds of the Venard itself. We would occasionally have a musical production or play that would be performed for the visitors. When there was nothing planned, Dad would take us off the grounds and we would have dinner or ice cream sodas at the diner in Clarks Summit.

## **The Blizzard of '64**

It was a thrill to live away from home for high school. For me, it was an adventure not unlike sailing the seas or going abroad to study. Leaving home at the age of thirteen was a choice made without knowledge of the consequences. Ordinary family activities became unusual and sometimes difficult. I received an emergency call in January of 1964. My grandmother had died and I was asked to come home for the funeral. That meant packing a bag and walking to the nearby town of Clarks Summit and catching a bus to Scranton. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been a big deal. We were accustomed to the walk from the seminary to Clarks Summit. We did it frequently to get to the diner where we would hang out and drink coffee. On this particular day in January however, we experienced a huge snowfall. The storm was still in progress and the country roads had not yet been plowed. Under these conditions, there were no seminary vehicles capable of taking me into Clarks Summit. If I was going to get to the bus in Clarks Summit, I had to walk the two miles, carrying my suitcase, through white-out conditions in the deep, drifting snow.

I vividly remember struggling through the snowdrifts on the country road. Since the snow plows hadn't been out yet, there were no vehicles on the road. I was breaking a new trail through the still falling snow for the entire trek to Clarks Summit. I felt like an explorer crossing the wastelands of the Siberian tundra. If it hadn't been for the barbed wire fences on either side of the road, I might have unknowingly wandered off into the cow pastures. I could see nothing. It was one of those times in which I had some very serious doubts about whether I would make it or not. I don't mean catching the bus in time - I mean surviving the journey in the blizzard! But what could I do but keep on? I put one foot in front of the other and made slow progress.

I was spurred on by the thought of someone finding my body, lying blue and stiff in the ditch by the side of the road, suitcase by my side. I could imagine the newspaper headline:

**SEMINARIAN FREEZES IN BLIZZARD**  
**Rosary Beads Clutched in Icy Hands**

That would have been too embarrassingly tragic and I wouldn't have any of that, so I kept slogging through the drifts one step at a time until I eventually reached town and the local bus stop. The main roads were somewhat plowed and traffic, though slow, was moving. The local bus took me to the bus station in Scranton from where I would travel about three hours to New York City. From there, I took another bus to Paterson, New Jersey and then another bus to Hawthorne which was home. Despite the severe weather, I made all my connections and I made it to the funeral. I also discovered that I had more inner strength than I had realized. This was like a rite of passage for me. This was one of many successfully completed tests in my journey toward adulthood at the Venard.

I discovered the photo below on Ray Voith's wonderful website at [www.voith-usa.com](http://www.voith-usa.com) which is a touchstone for all former Maryknoll seminarians. All photos in this publication, other than my own, are from there. The photo above is part of Fr. Louis Wolken's collection. It pictures the Venard and surrounding trees blanketed with snow. Fr. Wolken's accompanying note: "The trees with their heavy burden of snow after a record breaking 21.4 inches in 24 hours Jan 1964" That was *my* snowstorm!



*Blizzard of '64 (from Fr. Louis Wolken collection)*

## **Vacations**

In addition to exceptional circumstances, such as my grandmother's funeral, we had the opportunity to return home for about ten days at Christmas and a week at Easter. I don't remember if we had time off for Thanksgiving. Summer vacation started around mid-June and continued through Labor Day. Our families always brought us or picked up at the beginning and end of the school year. This was because there was lot of stuff to bring or send home. We had to empty our lockers and take everything home for the summer.

For Christmas and Easter vacations however, those of us who lived in the New York City area would just take a suitcase and take a bus from the station in Scranton to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. It was usually a Trailways bus and though it wasn't chartered, it was

mostly filled with adolescent seminarians free from the restraints imposed by the priests, brothers and nuns. The Christmas trips were often subject to snowy conditions that lengthened the journey by an hour or more. Sometimes we got a little rowdy, what with our whoopee cushions and plastic vomit and all. But whether the reactions of the other passengers were anger or bemusement, it was all harmless, goofy, adolescent, full of piss-and-vinegar fun.

About fifteen or twenty miles from New York City, the bus would pass by Little Falls, New Jersey on Rt. 23. It was walking distance from there to my Aunt Ruth's place but the driver would never let me off at the unscheduled stop. I'd have to continue on to the Port Authority Bus terminal in New York with everyone else, arriving there about an hour later. Sometimes we would hang out in the City for while. We'd stash our suitcases in pay-lockers and venture out of the terminal. We soon began to feel like natives. We learned to ignore the crosswalk lights. We learned to step over or around street people, many drunk and passed out on the sidewalks. There was so much to see and experience. Our sensory processing was in overdrive. The aroma of food from the open markets and delis was indescribable. The intermingling of races, and languages, and cultures, and customs, and dress was intoxicating. We experienced New York with equal measures of caution, excitement, and discovery.

Usually, we were in somewhat of a rush to get home so we wouldn't spend a great deal of time in the City. We knew we'd return just for fun sometime during the vacation. At that time, we'd go to a Broadway play or musical, or one of the museums. I particularly enjoyed the Whitney Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Natural History. When we were in New York on our way home, however, we would only linger long enough for a lunch complete with beer, thanks to our counterfeit draft cards. The proprietors surely realized we were underage but in those days, showing a draft card with your name on it, or someone else's name on it, usually

did the trick without question. We never got drunk or caused a problem. We simply wanted to taste forbidden fruit. After lunch, we'd go back to the bus terminal, retrieve our suitcases, and go our separate ways.

The bus terminal itself, called the Port Authority Terminal, contained a rapidly moving flow of humanity. Every class and economic ranking within the City of New York was represented there. Everybody was in a rush so there was little time to make extended observations. It was a feast for the senses that bordered on sensory overload for someone living in a rural seminary. I felt a curious blend of dazzle and danger. Being in the flow was OK. It was safe. There were those places outside of the flow that were dark and dangerous however.

One of those areas out of the flow was a balcony-like overlook on the second floor. It provided a vantage for observing the throng below. For me, it was a place to get out of the flow and be more of an observer rather than one of the multitude. So, I'd go there and watch the people below while waiting for my bus to depart. It sometimes reminded me of observing ants through the transparent walls of an ant farm.

I found that my observing was interrupted repeatedly by men who wanted to have sex with teen-age boys. Not just *any* teen-age boy....me! I had become skilled at warding off these very much unwanted advances as it was simply a part of being in the City. It took me a while to discover that this balcony on the second floor was known as the *meat rack*. It was the specific place in the terminal where men would go to pick up other men or boys for sexual activities. I suppose a naive, teen-age seminarian might be considered **USDA Grade A - Prime** on *that* meat rack! Once I realized what was going on there, I found a different place to wait and wasn't troubled nearly as frequently.

The men's rooms, of course, could be dicey. They presented a bit more of a challenge, as they didn't offer the relative safety of the openness of the meat rack. They were filthy, smelly and imbued with a sense of desperate loneliness. I would only go into one if it was absolutely necessary and then be as quick about it as possible. I was successful in fending off all solicitations and learned to *almost* take it in stride.

When it was time to catch my bus to Paterson, I'd stow my suitcase in the storage area under the bus and settle into my seat. There were many unusual and interesting people in New York City and it was exciting and unsettling all at the same time. I'd unobtrusively study the others on the bus and hope that some strange person wouldn't sit next to me. A kindly old lady would be nice. A businessman with his newspaper would be OK too. Despite my anxiety though, I never had any problems on the bus.

The ride to Paterson, New Jersey took about an hour. For the most part, the scenery was devoid of trees and living things – other than people – and so many of them seemed devoid of life. People were everywhere. Everything seemed gray. The sky, the air, the buildings were all gray. Trash was in abundance everywhere, spilling out of the battered trash cans into the streets. As it was getting dark in the late afternoon of the Winter Solstice, I'd sometimes see a light in one of the dozens of identical windows in one of thousands of shabby apartment buildings. And sometimes I'd see someone, maybe a man, a woman, or sometimes a child looking out the window and I'd wonder what his or her life was like. Because of the bleak setting and the brief glimpse of anonymous faces in the windows, I sometimes experienced feelings of meaninglessness and despair. I hoped and prayed that their experience of life was better than I had imagined it to be. In truth, I had no idea of what their lives were like and was surely projecting my own fears onto these strangers framed within the windows.

From Paterson, I'd get on the third bus of the day. It was a local that would take me to Hawthorne, New Jersey where my family's home was located. There was no storage space under this local bus so I had to jockey my suitcase down the crowded aisle until I could find an empty seat. I would steel myself against the hostile stares of some of the passengers, many of whom were so angry. At that youthful age, I was at a loss to understand why. The rest of the passengers made little or no eye contact and hid behind their walls of isolation. Often there would be no empty seat as the bus was filled with weary Christmas shoppers or those returning home from work. I'd have to stand in the aisle, one arm hanging onto an overhead strap to brace myself during the frequent turns, stops and starts. The other hand held my suitcase firmly. Eventually, the crowd would thin out and I'd be able to get a seat with room for my suitcase next to me.

I've never minded riding the bus. Once, in kindergarten I hid down behind my seat in the school bus and didn't get off at my stop. I was discovered by the bus driver after he had returned to the bus barn and was cleaning up at the end of the day. Naturally, my parents were frantic. After we were reunited they asked me why I hadn't gotten off the bus on the corner by our house. (No, I didn't reply that I was about my Father's Business). I replied that I wanted to see where the bus went after it dropped me off. I was very curious about that - though I couldn't see much crouched down behind the seat.

I would have further bus adventures when I worked graveyard shift as a nursing supervisor on the Legal Offender Unit at Eastern State Hospital, in Medical Lake, Washington. I spent eight years with those who were found to be criminally insane after having committed murder, rape, torture and other heinous, antisocial acts. On weekends, graveyard shift, I would supervise the entire hospital of three to four hundred patients plus staff. This was a late 19th

century structure which was one of two Washington state psychiatric institutions. The setting was like that portrayed in the film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Many of the staff had their own issues and it was said that "the only way you can tell the difference between the patients and the staff is by who's got the keys". There were several state government institutions within the vicinity of Medical Lake. I'd often take the bus with the sign above the windshield displaying "Institutional Workers' Bus". I worked midnight shift and caught the bus at 10:30 p.m. beneath a freeway underpass in Spokane. But all that's another story.

Once I entered the seminary at thirteen, I had the feeling that it was my home. When away, I'd yearn to be back with my friends. While home on vacation, I would catch a bus to New York City. I'd meet Tom, from Staten Island and spend time in the City, and then we'd take the ferry and spend the night at his house. His parents were terrific people and I think fondly of them to this day.

One year, I didn't go home at all for Easter Vacation. Instead, I remained at the Venard. The huge building was unnaturally quiet as I was the only student there. Many of the priests and brothers were gone as well. It was spooky and I enjoyed it immensely. I was struck by how quiet the place was in contrast to the usual ambient noise of bells, singing, shuffling of feet, doors opening and closing, and other sounds of living. Normally there were periods of silence, of course - this being a seminary and all. Periods of silence for prayer and meditation were part of the daily routine. But this - this was more profound than any of that. It was like the silence of the nearby abandoned railway tunnel that was cut a mile through a mountain of solid rock.

One of the priests offered me the use of his bicycle and I took advantage of that to explore the miles of roads surrounding the seminary. For the most part however, most of my time was spent at the seminary itself. This experience of isolation produced some interesting

experiences for me. I could walk through the immense building and come across no one, yet in my mind, I could hear and see the others as if they were there. I felt like a sole survivor of an apocalyptic event in which the physical setting was intact but all the people disappeared.

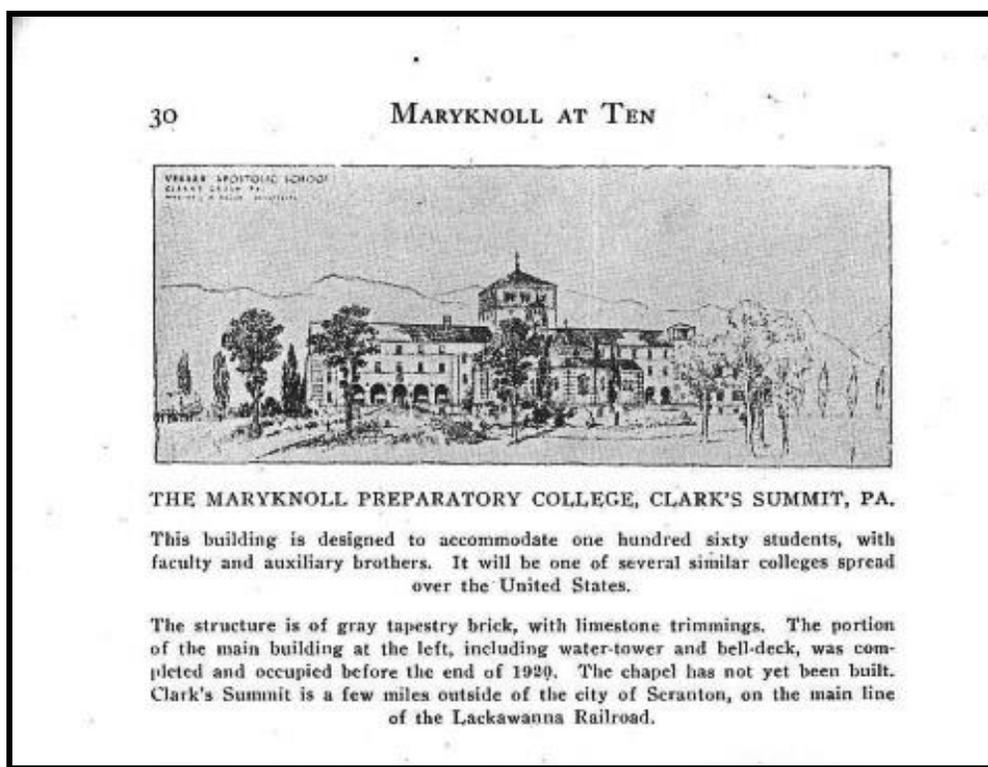
And then there were the eyes in the painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus! That painting hung in the south stairwell. The eyes followed and stared at me more piercingly than ever before! No matter where I stood, and I made this a matter of considerable study, Jesus' eyes were always staring right at me as if he was saying "I know all about you and I'm always watching." Some might find comfort in having Jesus watching all the time, but at the time, I found it rather disconcerting.

For a short while I imagined myself as a ghost, wandering in some netherworld of isolation and solitude. I roamed the silent halls, walked past the empty beds of the dormitories, and was the lone diner in the refectory. It was a very weird experience. Some years later, I related the experience to the movie of the Steven King novel, *The Shining*, in which Jack Nicholson portrays a caretaker in an isolated, vacant hotel.

Some were curious about why I wanted to stay there instead of going home for vacation. Was there trouble in my family? No, there wasn't. I had noticed though that after three days at home, I'd become restless and would be ready to return to the seminary. It's not that there was trouble at home though. I remember the first day of kindergarten. All the kids were lined up against the side of the brick building. The mothers were there, many of them crying. The other kids were kept in line by the nuns, and most of the kids were crying - but I wasn't. I probably had a thoughtful and slightly puzzled expression on my face. I remember thinking, "What is the big deal here?" I suppose I was always a bit independent. My week, alone at the seminary, was like a retreat and I enjoyed it immensely. I was, however, also happy when everyone returned.

## The Building

The Venard was located in northeastern Pennsylvania within the foothills of the Pocono Mountains. It was actually in Clarks Green, which at one time was called Skunks' Hollow. It was just outside the small rural town of Clarks Summit, which, as I recall, was roughly eight miles from Scranton. The countryside was beautiful there. The seminary was on the top of a hill overlooking a broad valley. Looking east, the tall hills across the valley provided a backdrop of exceptional natural beauty. The trees were mostly hardwoods and the fall colors were equal to anything seen in the New England states. Winters were cold and snowy. The spring and fall were ideal. It was a wonderful place to live.



*From Maryknoll at Ten, by Fr. William Stephens Kress, published circa 1930s*

The current building, with its bell tower which could be seen for miles around, was mostly completed in 1919. It was a beautiful architectural design. The building had three staircases, one at each end and one near the center. Each step was made from a slab of slate about one and one-half inches thick. I noticed this because each slab was visibly eroded by the tread of over forty years' worth of countless footsteps. Those worn stair-steps, more than any other aspect of Venard life, kept me in touch with the hundreds of seminarians who preceded me, some of whom were in the field doing the work of priest-missionaries. They had helped wear down these stone slabs by going up to the dormitories and down to the chapel and refectory several times each day for all those years - just as I was doing myself at that very moment. That realization kept me in touch with the comforting notion that I was literally following in their footsteps. They left evidence of their journey in these worn slabs of slate and some had gone on and achieved their goal. If they could do it, I could too. Though thirteen years of seminary education seemed like an eternity at that time in my life, the eroded slabs of slate reminded me that the goal could be achieved little by little, one step at a time.

The staircases served the basement, first, second, and third floors. Since this was an institutional building with lofty ceilings, the distance from the top landing to the basement floor was considerable. Dan, one of my classmates, was fond of taking a running leap from the third-floor landing. He'd grab onto the rail and swing himself over the open space above the basement landing three long stories below. After hanging there for a few seconds, he would climb back over the railing and back onto the landing. He was the only one who ever attempted such acrobatic foolishness as far as I know. Our opinion of him was that he was a bit crazy and we all viewed his attention seeking exhibition with a curious blend of horror and adolescent respect.

## **Rec Room**

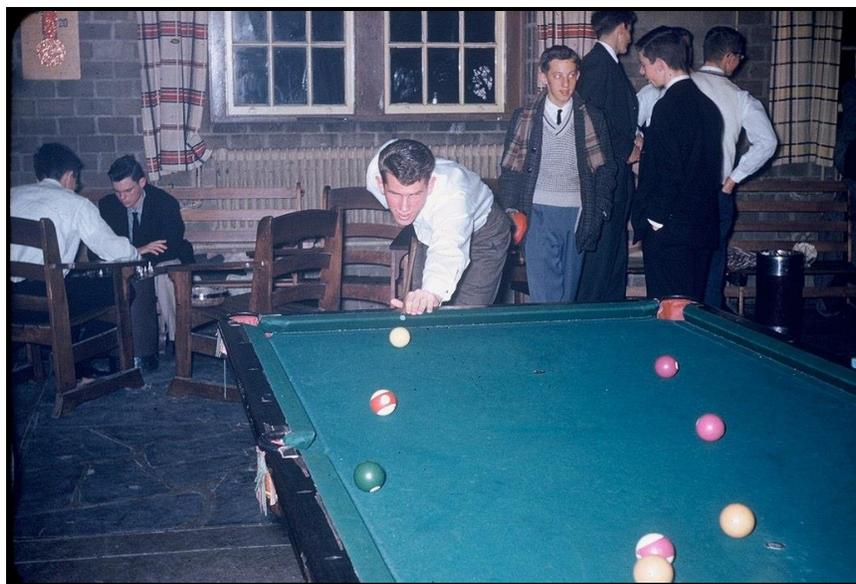
The living room at the Venard was a large basement area that was located between the refectory/kitchen area and the locker room/gym area. It was called the Recreation Room (from Latin *recreo, recreare*, to restore, refresh, invigorate, revive). We called it the Rec Room for short. It was here that we gathered during free time and after every meal to smoke and hang out. The floor was made of irregularly shaped slabs of slate set in place with concrete. It was sealed, waxed and buffed to a glossy sheen. The ceiling was supported by pillars that would invariably obstruct one's view during student council meetings or indoor hootenannies. The furniture was heavy, institutional, without cushions, and not at all like that which you would find in any typical living room. The many freestanding ashtrays were of necessity serviced each day during manual labor. The sand was carefully filtered through a sieve removing the cigarette butts, half burned matches, and gum wrappers. Everything was institutional. There wasn't a single soft place to sit.



*The Rec Room (Glen Deutsch, 1959)*

The radio was always tuned to WARM, the local Scranton station that played rock and roll. In 1963, that was the radio on which I heard the Beatles for the first time. That was the radio on which I heard the Rolling Stones sing about getting no satisfaction. That also was the radio on which the rest of the seminarians heard four or five of us sing two songs in French and in harmony, in a live broadcast. As an encore, we performed the theme song from the "Mickey Mouse Club," in harmony of course. We hadn't prepared that one for broadcast, but we sometimes sang it in the marvelously resonant locker room showers. Though I've done several live interviews on radio, that was my only venture into live entertainment on the air.

Two billiard tables served as a focus of never ending activity. They were old, heavy, Victorian style tables with ornately carved legs supporting the massive bulk of the felt covered, slate tabletop. Nearly all of us played. It was not unusual to have disagreements about whose turn it was to use the tables. The seams of many of our suit jackets and sports coats were torn out behind the shoulders. This was evidence of growing adolescent bodies stretching to make difficult shots at the pool tables.



*Pool table (note, no cushions on chairs) (from Tony Kaliton)*

In an open area, away from the radio and pool tables, there might be an impromptu game of "raisin box." Someone would toss out an empty, individual sized raisin box and it would be batted about within a circle of any number of players. The idea was to keep it from hitting the ground for as long as possible.

The student Christmas tree was always placed in the Rec Room. It was a live tree, of course, cut by Brother Fred from somewhere in our own woods. It was as high as the tall ceiling and was beautifully decorated by the students. Best of all, there was a generous supply of colored lights. We sat on the heavy institutional chairs around the tree. Christmas songs played on the radio and we'd sit for lengthy periods of time simply staring into the multi-colored, blinking lights. Culturally, the celebration of Christmas and family are intertwined. As adolescents approaching adulthood but still enmeshed in the experience of childhood and family, sitting around the Christmas tree in the rec room was a flirtation with the melancholy of homesickness.

## **The Farm**

Self-sufficiency is part of monastic culture. We had our own livestock and apple orchard. The heart of the farm was the hexagonal shaped barn. It was red with white trim and it had a cupola way up top with windows all around. I often pictured myself being up there having a 360-degree view of the area. There was no reasonable way to get up there however. The windows weren't for looking out but rather to let light into the interior of the barn. It didn't help much. It was very dark in there, especially when just coming in from the outside brightness. It seemed to take an inordinately long time for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. The interior darkness was pierced by a thin shaft of light, filtered through the dusty glass of the cupola high above. Everything on the inside was in muted shades of brown: the interior wood, the cows, the manure.

In the 1960s, our livestock consisted of cattle and pigs, both for our own meat consumption. At one time, there were chickens. The coops were still there but there were no chickens in residence at that time. Brother Dave managed the farm. That included raising and then slaughtering the animals, and butchering the meat. We had large walk-in freezers and refrigerators in which the meat was stored. Seminarians who came from farming families were assigned to work with Brother Dave. It wouldn't have been productive to have a city boy like me working there!



*Early view of the barn (The original Venard building, the eventual convent, is on the left. Across the road, on the hill at the top of the photo, is the site of the yet-to-be-built Lourdesmont)  
Photo from Venard Archives courtesy of Jeff Broderick of the Baptist Bible College*

Once a year, in the early spring and after morning Mass, we would form a procession from the chapel to the barn. We sang hymns along the way but our interest was more on the freshness of early spring. Once we were all gathered at the barn, the priest, still in liturgical vestments from morning Mass, would recite special prayers and sprinkle holy water upon the cows and pigs as he blessed the animals and the farm. The idea was to thank God for the sustenance and productivity of the farm, at present and in the future.

The apple orchard provided one type of farm work that I could do. I'm not sure how large the orchard was but as I recall, there must have been about one or two acres of apple trees. They were lovingly cared for under the direction of Brother Fred. We pruned in the early spring and harvested in the fall. We produced enough apples to carry us through until the following fall. It was an immense number of apples. A good portion of the crop went into making cider which we had year-round. Another went to make apple sauce, pies and other baked items. Another portion of the crop was used in the practice of putting out a bushel of apples every day after manual labor. As far as I recall, that bushel was usually emptied each day. The huge supply of picked apples was stored in a bunker-like cellar. It was underground and lined with concrete. It was divided into two rooms, each illuminated by an overhead, bare light bulb which never seemed bright enough. We would pack in dozens of bushels of apples in the fall, and then haul bushels out all year long until next fall. Even though it was a little creepy in there, the concentrated aroma of apples was intoxicating and is forever engraved in my olfactory memory

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### **The Bell Tower**

Every organization needs schedules as a means of keeping activities in order. In the seminary, these activities were coordinated by bells. There were two systems of bell ringing within the seminary. The modern, automated method was controlled by the master clock located in the alcove near the front entrance to the building. The alcove also contained the house phone, the only phone available for use by seminarians. It was not unusual to wait in line to call home considering there was only one phone for a hundred students. The master clock was electric with an eight-inch diameter gear that had removable pins about one-half inch long. The gear was marked off into five-minute increments and there was a hole at each for inserting a pin that

would trigger the electrically operated bells throughout the building. The pins could be inserted or removed to allow for different schedule patterns according to the occasion or time of year. The bells were the shallow bowl type with a rapidly vibrating clapper located on the inside. It produced the long *brrrrring* type of sound that at that time could be heard in factories, school buildings and playgrounds all over the country. There was also a manual override that would sound the bells if one pressed a big, black button. It was like a doorbell button but with a diameter of a nickel. I always felt a thrill of power whenever I had occasion to press that big, black button. I think it was the knowing that my direct action would be ringing bells all over the building and causing many others to stop what they were doing and redirect their activities.

The second bell ringing system was with the huge bell in the tower high overhead. Just outside the doors to the chapel, over in a dark corner hidden behind a pillar, was a rope that hung down from a hole in the ceiling. The rope was as thick as a fat carrot and it ended in a knot about three feet above the polished tile floor. The hole in the ceiling was just large enough to allow the rope to pass through, continuing upward through the second and third floors and finally up into the bell tower. It then extended to a great height up inside the bell tower. On those occasions when I had the task of tolling the bell, I'd stand beside the rope in that dark corner. I'd reach up and grasp it in both hands, as both were needed to do this job. I'd take a deep breath and pull down with all my weight. As I pulled on it, it would extend downward about two or three feet. As the knot at the bottom of the rope approached the floor, I would be rewarded with the booming sound of the bell high in the tower above. I pulled it again trying my hardest to make each strike equal in loudness and spaced evenly from the one before it. I pulled again and again. The sound of that tolling could be heard throughout the valley for a mile or two all around! What a feeling of exhilaration I experienced as I sounded that massive bell so high above me, knowing

that the other seminarians, priests, brothers and nuns would be hearing all over the campus, stopping their present activities and moving on to the next.

In the corridor between the two dormitories on the third floor, there was an elevation of about five feet. From each side, there were several steps leading up to the elevated portion of the corridor which was directly below the bell tower. On each side of the corridor there were three or four doors. One led to the Radio Room, another to the Yearbook Room. One was vacant and became the location of our short-lived *coffee house*.

The bell tower itself was accessed through one of these doors. The tower door had a lock that required one of those old fashioned long keys that fit into a keyhole through which one could peer into the room beyond. It was quite dark on the other side of the door. Clever boy that I was, I had previously bought a *skeleton key* at the novelty store where I had purchased my Whoopee Cushion. I hoped this would grant me access. I waited for a time when there was no one around. I stealthily made my way to the dark wood door which provided - and prevented - access to the tower. In the gloom, I carefully inserted the key into the keyhole and heard the sound of metal sliding against metal. I wasn't sure that the skeleton key would work - after all, it came from a store that sold practical jokes. There was a lot of play in the lock. As I turned the key I could feel it hang up slightly. Then it turned fully and the lock was opened! I carefully removed the key from the keyhole and I felt for the cold, smooth, brass doorknob, turned it, and slowly opened the heavy door. As it turned on its hinges it creaked like the knees of an elderly arthritic. The sound was intensified by the emptiness of the hallway and I thought for sure someone would hear me. No one did. I slipped inside and closed the door behind me. I used the skeleton key to lock the door from the inside.

I stood there for a moment, heart pounding in my chest while my eyes adjusted to the gloom. This room was little more than a large closet. As I waited there, I could smell the odor of dry wood, old plaster, and over forty years of dust. It was not an unpleasant odor. There was a light switch but no one had gotten around to changing the dead bulb. Towards the back of the small room there was a round hole in the ceiling that admitted a soft shaft of sunlight from somewhere above. I could see dust motes floating in the light. The light illuminated a circular staircase, winding its way upward and out of sight. The iron circular staircase was very compelling as it stood in the ghostly shaft of soft light. I walked over to it, and placed my hand on the cool metal railing. The circular staircase was strong and solid. As I looked upward through the iron helix, I was quite anxious and had the nearly irresistible feeling that I had to pee. I ignored it and ascended the staircase, one step at a time for who knows how many steps, until I realized it was getting a bit brighter.

The staircase opened into a large, square room with brick walls and a ceiling that was about twenty-five feet above my head. The dimly-lit room was undivided and was of the same area as the tower itself. It was nearly empty except for a few items that had been stored there for years. There were a few musty mattresses and some Christmas decorations, and some other deteriorating cardboard boxes full of who knows what. Granted, there was plenty of storage space, but how and why mattresses and boxes were muscled up the narrow circular staircase was a mystery to me. In the opposite corner, there was another circular iron staircase that led through opening in yet another ceiling. Near that second set of stairs and in the corner, the thick bell rope could be seen stretched between an opening in the floor and an opening in the ceiling. I crossed over the creaking wooden floor to the second staircase and again began climbing. It became progressively brighter.

The top of the staircase opened into bright sunlight and I had to squint until my eyes adjusted. As my head cleared the opening, I could peer over the edge and see across the floor of the highest level of the tower. This space, like the cavernous room below, was square, about thirty-five or forty feet on each side. The arched ceiling came to a point at the center, high overhead. It was supported by columns of brickwork with open archways. The columns were resting on a masonry railing about three feet high. There were only two items up there: the huge bell set up on a massive wooden platform, and the ten foot Christmas star which was wrestled into place each year to illuminate the spirit of the Season. As we were located at the top of a hill and the lighted star was high up in the tower, it could be seen for miles around and was a tradition in the area. It was now unlit and lying ignominiously on the floor.



*From the tower, looking west over the chapel (from author)*

As I walked over to one side of the tower, I was thrilled to see that I could look over the railing and view the Pennsylvania countryside for miles around. Each of the four directions provided a different vista and each was spectacular. As I looked down, I experienced that

uncomfortable sensation in my gut that I only feel when looking down from a great height. Despite that, the experience was amazing. I imagined I was a king regarding my realm from the castle tower. I surveyed the familiar landscape now rendered fresh by this new perspective. Then I saw myself as an eagle, perched on a high limb, serenely but intensely scanning the fields below for signs of movement. I probably spent ten minutes looking out over each of the four directions. It made quite an impression on me.

I then turned my attention to the huge bell and was surprised to discover that it did not swing when the thick rope was pulled from far below. Instead, the rope was attached to an arm of a striker. When the rope was pulled, the striker or clapper rose on the opposite side of the pivot and struck the stationary bell on the inside. This was quite a revelation to me as I had always imagined the bell swinging freely as in the cathedral towers of Europe. Though the reality was not as fanciful, it did not diminish the power and majesty of the bell and the tolling which could be heard for miles around. I was grateful that some unsuspecting seminarian far below didn't choose that moment to pull on the rope. I imagined that the sound would be so loud and terrifying that it might have stopped my heart!

## **Dormitories**

There were three dormitories. (from Latin *dormitorium*, for sleeping). Each was a large room that accommodated thirty to forty students. There were bunk beds in the Freshman dorm, and single beds in the other two. They were aligned with military precision. Bedspreads were identical. The lockers were of wood and mercifully quieter than the metal ones in the gym locker room. They were all the same and no decorations were allowed on the outside.

Within all this uniformity, there was one concession to individuality. Each seminarian was permitted to display one religious item on his bed. It would be placed on the bedspread leaning against the pillow so it would be on display and easily seen by others walking by. Many beds sported a cross, a crucifix or a laminated holy card. The cruciform items were of all manner from simple crosses of wood or metal, to actual crucifixes depicting the suffering body of Jesus. Some of these crucifixes were very traditional and realistic, while others, as in the fashion of the '60s, were simply a stylized impression of Jesus on the cross. Not all chose crucifixes. The laminated or framed pictures of the many popular saints such as St. Francis of Assisi or St. Joseph were in the company of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in some of her manifestations such as Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Our Lady of Lourdes. Though it was never discussed, the selection of the item said something about the person, as it was a reflection of his spirituality.

Each night as the dorm monitor snapped off the long rows of fluorescent lights, he would utter an invocation such as *Pax Domini vobiscum* (May the peace of the Lord be with you). The response murmured by the retiring seminarians was *Et cum spiritu tuo* (And also with you). It was surprisingly easy to become used to the sounds of thirty to forty others sleeping in the same room. The sounds of sheets rustling, coughing, farting and sleep talking soon became routine.

Still, it was not an easy task for that many teenagers in one room to fall asleep on demand. Not unlike a camping trip or slumber party, there were times when we were so wound up that it was simply too much to maintain silence. Father Condon, whose room was just off one of the two third-floor dormitories, was known to sometimes remove one of his shoes and then walk in the dark between the rows of beds. The sole shoe (*pardon the pun*) created the illusion of

walking at a pace one-half slower than it actually was. He snuck up on a few us troublemakers in this way. We caught onto his trick quickly however.

When I was a freshman, upper classmen were used as dormitory monitors. These unfortunates were assigned to this duty and relied on our fear of the seniors who seemed so much older than us. There were times after pressing limits, a few of us would be rounded up and taken out of the dormitory into the hallway. We were ordered to kneel on the hard, tile floor for what seemed like at least two hours. I recall seeing the moon out one of the windows and then seeing it reappear at another window some time later. It was the first time that I really noticed the movement of the moon and its use as a visual means to mark the passing time. I detested those occasions of prolonged kneeling on the hard floor. My knees, each of which would have surgery within a year or two, ached painfully. The calluses that had formed from kneeling in chapel, grew even thicker.

There were other nights when sleep was elusive and not all those nights were due to the disturbances of others in the room. Many were just due to the insomnia of teenage angst or the nervous excitement of the next day's special activity, or the opportunity for uninterrupted thinking. I remember lying awake at night, the light of the full moon so bright that it was nearly possible to read a book, though all the lights were out. I remember being able to hear the eighteen-wheelers on Route 81, less than a mile away in the floor of the valley. I would mentally hitchhike and take long rides with those truckers. I was amazed that even in the dark of night while most persons were sleeping, there was an entire world of ongoing activity. I liked being awake while others were sleeping. Shift work and remaining awake and productive when most were sleeping has been a large part of my work history. Though I didn't know it at the time, I would spend many years in the future working graveyard shifts on the ambulance crew and in

hospitals and nursing homes. I believe the seeds for that nocturnal orientation were planted in the dormitories of the Venard, as I lay awake imagining myself in the cab of one of those rumbling trucks, heading for distant and mysterious destinations.

### **Tiptoe Through the Tulips**

The dormitories were off limits during the daylight hours. Despite this, we occasionally risked using them as a means for getting from one end of the building to the other without having to go down to the first floor. On one beautiful spring afternoon, my friend Ed and I had been working in one of the third-floor rooms near the entrance to the bell tower. When we were finished, we opted to go through the third floor, north dormitory to access the north stairwell and descend to one of the lower floors. At that time, Tiny Tim, the ukulele playing performer with long stringy, black hair was popular. His falsetto-vibrato rendition of the 1929 “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” was so bizarre that it was a hit at the time. Ed and I were intoxicated with the warmth and brightness of the outbreak of spring. On pure adolescent impulse, we sang “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” in falsetto voices as we skipped through the long dormitory...until Father Knipe intercepted us. His room was at the end of the dormitory at the top of the stairwell. He was a lover of classical music and had been in his room sublimely listening to one of his many classical phonograph records. Two Tiny Tim imitators interrupted his trance-like reverie. He was very angry - and much more, we thought, than the situation warranted. We reasoned that it was spring and we were kids having spontaneous fun with no harm done. We didn't have a chance to articulate these arguments however. All we could do was stand there as he chewed us out. Father Knipe was our French and Music teacher and was generally pleasant and well liked by the students. He did though, have a short fuse that matched his short stature. On this afternoon, his appearance in his black cassock with white collar and black beret resembled the old joke

“What’s black and white and red all over?” His florid face was nearly purple. We must have touched a nerve or caught him on a bad day despite the intoxicating arrival of spring. After chewing us out for about ten minutes we were instructed to report to Brother Dave for a work assignment at the barn on Saturday morning. We were then imperiously dismissed.

We had no idea what lay in store for us on Saturday. Brother Dave oversaw the farm so we figured we would be working with him for a few hours. That didn't sound so bad. Saturday morning came and it was one of those cold, rainy spring days, not at all like the weather that had caused our spirits to soar for a few brief bars of “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” a few days earlier.



*The Hexagonal Barn (Gary Deutsch, 1959)*

We met Brother Dave by the barn at 8 a.m. as instructed. He greeted us with a grunt and two shovels from the tool shed. We followed him into the cavernous barn and he provided us each with a pair of one-size-fits-all rubber boots which went up above our knees. We put them on over our sneakers and with dawning horror realized what our punishment was to be. The cow manure in the barn had accumulated over the winter and was now about one and a half feet deep.

Our job was to clean out the barn by shoveling the manure into the spreader. It was cold, dark, and smelly in the barn and we were shocked and incensed over a punishment so disproportionate to the crime!

There was no reprieve for the condemned however. We knew there was no hope of getting any pity from Brother Dave. After all, he was the one who reputedly drank steaming cow and pig blood from the freshly slaughtered animals! He was the one who was 6 feet, 4 inches tall and weighed well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He was tough as nails and a man of very few words. All we could do was meekly and silently set about the odious task of filling and refilling the spreader with excremental cargo. Our only possibility for short breaks occurred when Brother Dave pulled the full spreader out of the barn with the tractor, and spread its contents on the fields. As soon as he pulled away, we staggered out of the darkness of the barn into the blinding light of day with air so pure it almost hurt to breathe it in. Then we quickly lit cigarettes! We bitched. We smoked. And as soon as Brother Dave returned with the empty spreader, we returned to the muck.

For two city boys, the odor in that barn was just about unbearable. It felt like the air itself had substance, as if it was viscous as well as noxious. It felt as if it was oozing its way into every pore of our being. Well, we shoveled and shoveled for six hours, right through lunch. A single shaft of light passing through the dusty panes of the cupola high overhead to the floor of the hexagonal structure, did a slow pivotal dance as the day wore on. We finally cleared out the barn and finished up at about 2 p.m. Brother Dave dismissed us and told us to go to the kitchen and the nuns would have some lunch for us. Lunch was the farthest thing on our minds however. We immediately doffed our malodorous clothes and headed straight for the showers where in spite of vigorous scrubbing, the smell of cow manure lingered for the rest of the day. It seemed like the

taste of it was in our mouths, in our saliva and in our sinuses. Our classmates teased us unmercifully and our humiliation was refreshed by their strains of the offending Tiny Tim tune for months afterward. At the time, it seemed like a very high price to pay for the innocent impetuosity of youth!

## **Refectory**

Our dining room was called the refectory (Latin: *refectio*, repairing, restoring). It was a large rectangular room just under the chapel. During my first two years at the Venard, the floor in the refectory was the same as in the Rec Room: irregular pieces of slate set in concrete. It was sealed, waxed, and buffed frequently. During my time there, the floor was replaced and covered with white linoleum-like square tiles. The floor needed to be stripped often. We used a vacuum device resembling a shop-vac, for drying the floor before applying the new wax. The vacuum canister was bright yellow. Sprouting from the side, near the top, was a black, four-inch diameter suction hose. When the device was sucking up the excess water from the floor, it made a screeching noise not unlike the trumpeting of an elephant, hence, our nickname for it: the *yellowphant*.

At the far end of the large room there was a concave area which was directly under the altar in the chapel above. This alcove had an elevated platform of about four or five inches and served as the dining area for the priests. Their tables were arranged end-to-end. The rector sat at the center with the other priests to his left and right. They looked like a living diorama of DeVinci's painting of the "Last Supper". The placement of the tables in the alcove created an aloofness and a distancing from the tables at which the brothers and students were separately seated. In addition, two seminarians served as waiters for the priests at dinner. Perhaps that was

for special dinners, though I think it may have been a daily practice. That is where I learned the rule of "serve from the left and take from the right".

The placement of the priests' table in the alcove had a drawback. It did not provide the privacy the priests thought they enjoyed. Due to a miracle of physics, the curved wall of the alcove acted like a parabolic reflector. It projected the priests' voices outward, and if you were in just the right spot, their conversations could sometimes be heard. Anyway, after the new floor was installed, the priests' tables were moved to a different location.

Each of the student tables accommodated six. Seating assignments were changed quarterly, with a mix of class levels at each table. The change of seating arrangement was sometimes welcomed, sometimes not. As with many families, the oldest, in this case the upperclassmen, controlled the conversation as well as the food. Though no one was denied food, the matter of portion sizes and allocation of seconds was at their whim. In keeping with the diversity of human nature, some were benign and fair-minded while others were tyrannical and self-serving.

We used white linen napkins and each of us had a bone colored, plastic napkin ring with his name engraved in blue lettering. Twice a week an announcement would be made at the evening meal to place the used napkins in a basket upon leaving the refectory. The nuns would clean, press, fold, and place them in our napkin rings so that they would be available for the following morning's breakfast.

The ceiling was supported by eight columns which for many, blocked the view of the podium as well as the view of the projector screen on which slides or films of the missions were regularly shown. On the other hand, the eight columns afforded a means of concealment from

observation by the priests who would intervene if our behavior became too raucous. It frequently did.

We filed in for meals and stood in our assigned places without speaking. When the priests were seated, then the rest of us could sit. A selected student, standing at the podium, lead us in a prayer of grace. When that was concluded, the meal could begin. In keeping with the monastic nature of the school, the first half of each meal was consumed in silence. The student at the podium remained there and read selections from the New Testament. The sounds of silverware on the serving bowls and plates seemed magnified. Midway through the meal, the rector would give a signal, the reading would be concluded, and our conversational fast was broken. The din of a hundred voices would immediately rise and frequently exceed a level that was acceptable to the rector. At that point, a bell was sounded as a signal to quiet down. It was all highly regimented but we were accustomed to it and usually enjoyed mealtimes.

The nuns, despite their Latin motto, were fine cooks. In addition to pancakes or scrambled eggs and bacon, breakfast always included an individual sized box of cereal. The Bran Flakes, or Shredded Wheat or Frosted Flakes were packaged in cardboard container that was perforated to allow the box to be opened on one side. Milk was poured into the box in lieu of a bowl. Each table had a basket filled with red packets of single-serving Maxwell House instant coffee. There was always plenty of milk at each meal. Lunch often consisted of sandwiches made from the nuns' freshly baked bread. At lunch or dinner, there was often an aluminum pitcher of apple cider that was pressed from the apples in our orchard. We each had our favorite meals. Mine was hot dogs and beans with cornbread. It was served without fail every Saturday evening for dinner.

Apart from ice cream, all desserts were homemade and included a variety of sheet cakes, cookies, and apple pie (or apple cobbler, or apple crisp, or apple dumplings, or apple turnovers). When ice cream was on the menu, each table received a half-gallon block, corners drooping as it softened in the large, white, oval shaped bowl. The flavors were quite bland: vanilla, chocolate, or Neapolitan. The oval ice cream bowls were always emptied though. We grew through adolescence on those meals. Sports jackets with one or both shoulders torn open in the back due to growth spurts were about as common as acne. None of us suffered from malnutrition.

### **Store**

Just outside the refectory, on the way to the recreation room, was a small room that we simply called "the store". A student was assigned to manage the store for the quarter but if aptitude was shown, that student might be reassigned for several quarters. A Dutch door, in which the top half opened while the bottom half remained closed and locked served as a counter at which a shopper would request what he wanted. The store manager obtained the items and brought them to the door where he then collected the money, the proceeds of which was used for student activities. The store was only open each day for thirty minutes after dinner, and was a regular stop for all of us. It carried cigarettes, candy, toilet items such as shaving cream and toothpaste, and stationery supplies such as paper, pens, compasses and rulers. The most frequently sold items were cigarettes and pipe tobacco as nearly everyone smoked.

### **Laundry**

Once a week our soiled laundry was sent out to a commercial establishment called Mother's Laundry. I never had the good fortune of meeting the dear woman. Each item of

clothing required a sewn-in, cloth label identifying its owner. It was the job of those assigned to work in the laundry room to sort each item into a box for each student. Socks were supposed to be in a net laundry bag so they wouldn't have to be sorted individually. The bags often opened and spilled their contents out among the underwear, shirts and pants. The whites and colored clothing must not have been separated because our white underwear and socks were dyed various shades of pink for the entire four years at the Venard.

## **Library**

We had a library at the Venard and it was the site of numerous hours of study and research. Father Davis was our librarian. He had been a missionary in Manchuria and was imprisoned and subjected to torture by the Communists. He wouldn't talk about his experiences, so we never knew for sure what had happened to him. One of his legs had been amputated and he walked with two aluminum crutches. They weren't the old-fashioned wooden type that go up under the armpits. Instead, they were a newer, aluminum type that had a rounded cuff which supported the forearms.

Whenever Father Davis left the library for a few moments, the studious milieu degenerated into adolescent horseplay. We were rarely caught in the act however. Father Davis could easily be heard making his way back down the long, dark corridor because his aluminum crutches made a repetitious clicking sound with each step. The clicking sounds were amplified as they echoed off the tiled floors and plaster walls of the long hallway approaching the library. It reminded me of the crocodile that swallowed the ticking clock in *Peter Pan*. The crocodile, like Father Davis, could be heard long before he could be seen.

Father Davis had a nervous habit that of course was the object of our adolescent mimicry behind his back. When delivering a sermon or filling in for one of the other priest-instructors in a

class, he would repeatedly turn his head far to the right as if he were looking at someone or something that was there. Whatever it was, it was invisible to the rest of us. I don't know if he was aware of this tic or not, but for four years of knowing him, his pattern of delivery never changed. He never mentioned it, and we never mentioned it - not to him anyway.

I was in the library on November 22, 1963. The date etched into America's memory, as it was the day President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed. Fifty years have passed and it is still unbelievable. I left the library and went down to the crowded and smoky TV room. Classes were cancelled for the rest of the day and everyone was glued to the black and white television, smoking in stunned silence and watching as a nation went through a tragic loss of innocence. It was the first national tragedy that received extensive, live TV coverage and the rest of the nation was doing exactly what we were doing. The walls of the seminary were not able to keep out the impact of that violent act. I was reminded of these feelings on September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center towers were attacked and destroyed. I was working that day and as I went on my rounds visiting my patients in their homes, I found the TV on in every house. I entered each home and joined the occupants who stared at the screen in shock and silent disbelief. Despite the passage of fifty years since the Kennedy's assassination, I noticed very similar reactions in myself and others to this new horrific incident. Some things never change.

### **Guitar Blues**

Overall, I cherished institutional life. There were disadvantages however. I had received a new guitar for my birthday in my sophomore year. It was inexpensive but it was new and shiny and without blemish. I treated it with the care that any musical instrument should be treated. I

always returned it to its case and kept it under the auditorium stage, the designated storage place for our musical instruments.

One afternoon I went into the storage area and pulled out my guitar case. As I placed it flat on the floor and opened the lid, I immediately saw a scratch on the front of the instrument. It was more than a scratch. It was a gouge in the beautiful finish and it revealed the lighter colored, naked wood from below the finished surface. I looked at it with disbelief and felt a sinking feeling knowing that whatever the circumstances and whoever had done this, there was no way to undo the damage. Investigation revealed that the culprit was a classmate. When I confronted him, he denied having anything to do with the damage even though he had been observed by another classmate taking my guitar out of its case! The actual doing of the damage was not observed however, and I had no way to prove that he was the perpetrator. There was nothing I could do. I experienced the bitter reality of feeling victimized by a person who himself owned a better guitar than my own, yet had the gall to damage mine and then dismiss it with a callous denial. It was one of those losses of innocence which we all experience in our own ways. I remember the anger and heartsick clearly.

Since there was no way to undo the damage, all I could do was prevent further damage. There was no lock on the case itself. Instead, I set about moving the guitar from its storage place under the stage to another place that could be locked. The only place where we could lock our possessions was in the gym locker room where we showered after manual labor and recreation. The locker room had the perpetual smell of Right Guard spray deodorant, used by nearly all of us. By carefully maneuvering of the case, I could just fit it into the narrow locker, close the door, apply the combination lock and feel secure that my guitar was not accessible to the careless and insensitive.

I felt satisfied that my guitar was safe and available only to myself and that I had found the perfect solution to preventing further damage....or so I thought. The next time I went to my locker to retrieve the guitar, I opened the case and was horrified to find that the bridge, the piece of wood on the face of the guitar to which the strings are attached, had become unglued due to the heat and humidity from the showers in the locker room. This damage was far worse than the damage of the gouge! That was merely cosmetic, not functional. Isn't that the way it sometimes happens though? We take pains to prevent a disaster only to bring another, sometimes greater disaster upon ourselves. The so-called *Law of Unintended Consequences*.

I sought out Brother Paul, our carpenter and boiler room operator, and requested his help. He was always willing to help us out when he could and this time was no exception. He looked at the guitar with the six strings still attached to the dangling bridge. He said he thought we could repair it and he began without delay. First, we removed the strings so the bridge was free. Then we prepared both facing surfaces and applied a liberal portion of wood glue to each surface. We carefully positioned the bridge and placed weights on it until the glue had set. We allowed about a week for that to occur. It was a very long week but finally it was time to re-string the guitar. I was quite anxious during this procedure, as I was aware of the tremendous force that the six tightened strings would place on the untested, newly adhered bridge. I held my breath and closed my eyes as I gingerly tightened each string. The bridge held! Except for the gouge, my guitar was as good as new. Brother Paul was beaming and yet he was to help me even more. He installed a hasp on the guitar case so I could secure the guitar with a small padlock. I wouldn't have to leave my guitar unprotected nor store it in the humid locker-room. My guitar was protected from further damage due to unauthorized use, and I felt a whole lot better.

## **Infirmary**

The Venard had an infirmary (from Latin, *infirmitas* meaning weakness, feebleness) which was for use by those who were too ill or injured to participate in the normal seminary routine. It was managed by one of the students as a manual labor assignment. That student had no special training but whatever came up seemed to get handled OK. One of the infirmary's two rooms was a small dispensary where a student could obtain some aspirin, a hot water bottle, some Pepto-Bismol, an Ace bandage, or Band-Aids. The dispensary provided remedies that you might find in any typical family's medicine cabinet.

The second room was larger and contained four hospital beds, complete with bedside stands and over-bed tables. The beds faced a set of French doors that opened to a semi-circular porch which was the roof of the rotunda below. It was no accident, I'm sure, that the infirmary had this access to the outside. The building was designed at a time when fresh air and sunshine were recognized as significant elements in convalescence. It was built at a time when hospitals had solariums. These were often corner rooms, often one on each floor, in which the outside walls were filled with windows that could open. These healing rooms were there expressly for patients to experience the therapeutic benefits of sunshine and fresh air.

The beds in the infirmary were used for those experiencing illness or recovering from an injury. There wasn't really any direct care provided. It was a place of confinement and isolation. It physically separated the patient from the rest of the seminary population. It also exempted him from much of the routine seminary activities. If a student was too ill to be in class or to work at manual labor, he had to be confined in the infirmary.

It was rare for a student to spend more than a night or two in the infirmary. In my freshman year, I spent two weeks there due to a head injury I sustained on the frozen lake. This

was our own small lake on the seminary grounds. It was a large pond really, about three or four acres in size, but we called it the lake. It was surrounded by huge pines and it was never used for swimming, though I'm not sure why. Perhaps it was because we had a swimming pool on the grounds. There was a rowboat for a while but it disappeared with no explanation. The lake received its most prominent use in the winter when it froze solid. Brother Dave was the official ice tester. He would make some preliminary tests and then finally drive the tractor out on the ice. We always held our breath even though Brother Dave knew what he was doing. He had a snowplow blade on the front and once he determined that the ice would hold the weight of the tractor, he pushed the accumulated snow off to the side.

My injury on the ice occurred on the first day of the ice skating season. I am not what you would call a natural athlete. I could skate from *point a* to *point b* - but with the grace of a moose on a unicycle! I was on my wobbly way when Rick, a classmate, came up from behind and gave me an unexpected shove. My feet went out in front of me and my head slammed back into the ice. I hit the back of my head and those on the pond said it sounded like a rifle shot. I was instantly knocked unconscious. I vaguely remember waking up in Father Ratermann's black Volkswagen. I was vomiting in the back seat, on the way to Moses Taylor Hospital in Scranton. Later I was told that I had been hospitalized for three days but I have no recollection of it.

I have a vague memory of the trip back to the Venard. Father Whelan (*photo below*) and three classmates came and picked me up at the hospital. I remember the guys performing *Chinese Fire Drills* at each red light along the streets of Scranton. Father Whelan and I were exempt, but the rest would jump out at a red traffic light and run around the car yelling wildly. By the time the light turned green, they would have returned to the car but in different seats than they were at the start of the drill.



*Fr. Whelan cutting cake at his going away party down by the pool  
(author's photo)*

When I returned to the seminary, I was taken up to the infirmary where I remained for two weeks. I felt OK but due to the concussion, I continued to be dizzy whenever I stood up, particularly during that first week. I was unable to go to classes or participate in any of the other routine activities. Tom, the student infirmary-manager at the time, would check on me in the morning, at noon, and at dinnertime. I was officially allowed visitors only in the evening although in truth, there were guys stopping by all the time. The door to the infirmary faced the chapel choir loft just across the hall. I could hear the organ music from the chapel during the morning, noon, and evening prayer services. I could also hear the bell tolling in the tower high above, announcing the times for prayers and the end of manual labor. Those sounds kept me in touch with seminary life even when I was out of circulation.

I acquired a roommate in the second week of my convalescence. Bob was a junior and as such would ordinarily have little to do with a freshman. We became friendly in this period of enforced companionship however and we talked for hours. I remember him sagely telling me

that life would have many hard lessons for me. Though he would not elaborate, he implied that he had been experiencing some of those hard lessons himself and that it was a great burden. He would not elaborate. This ominous message greatly affected me and I spent much time after that wondering what those hard lessons of adolescence might be and when might I experience them. Then when I did experience some hard times, I wondered if these were the times of which he had forewarned.

I don't recall why Bob was a patient in the infirmary. Towards the end of our confinement, we were both experiencing an increase in our appetites for food and mischief. We found a way to satisfy both. The infirmary was equipped with a dumbwaiter that was used to send meals up from the kitchen below, and to return used trays, dishes and utensils back to the kitchen. The dumbwaiter was a mini-elevator that was hand-operated by ropes and pulleys. There was no motor. It had three or four shelves upon which the meal trays would be placed.

There was no access to the kitchen at night. When the nuns left in the early evening, they locked the doors and reopened them the next day at 5 a.m. The kitchen doors were locked so hungry seminarians, teenage boys all, would not help themselves to leftovers. I had seen the door to the dumbwaiter when working in the kitchen. Though equipped with a bolt-type locking mechanism, I noticed that it was always left in the open or unlocked position. I hoped that the dumbwaiter door was now unlocked as it was critical to our plan. Naturally, as the freshman, I was designated to make the trip to the kitchen – even though I was still experiencing dizziness when out of my bed. Around midnight, after deciding that the dumbwaiter ropes were *probably* strong enough to hold my weight, we began. I climbed onto the top of the dusty lift and held on to the ropes which served as the cables allowing the dumbwaiter to ascend or descend in the

shaft. Bob pulled on the rope in the infirmary and lowered the creaking lift into the dark shaft as it descended to the kitchen in the basement far below.

I distinctly recall looking up and seeing his face getting smaller and smaller as I was lowered into the dark shaft. It was scary. The apparatus was designed to carry a few meals - not a teenage boy. I wondered again if the ropes would hold my weight. I wondered if anyone had ever done this before. Finally, after descending from the second floor, then past the first floor, the dumbwaiter stopped in the basement. It was the end of the line. I opened the door into the kitchen. Thankfully, and as I had hoped, it hadn't been locked. I realized then that someone probably had done this before and that was the reason for the bolt on the kitchen side of the door. It was a narrow fit, but with the dumbwaiter lowered all the way, there was just enough space through which I could squeeze my body into the kitchen. From there it was an easy matter to gather up bread, ham and cheese slices, apple pie and other desserts, as well as milk and apple cider. As the nuns always left the kitchen immaculately spotless, I had to be careful to leave no evidence of my culinary interloping. After placing the goods on the shelves of the dumbwaiter, I managed to climb through the narrow opening back to the top of the lift. Remembering to close the door behind me, I stage-whispered to Bob to pull me up and endured the ascent from the basement to the second floor. Bob and I feasted in this way for several nights and no one ever knew. I never got comfortable with the trip up and down that dark and dusty shaft though.

### **Study halls**

The Venard was a college preparatory school and academics played a large part in seminary life. There were two study halls of unequal size. One held about thirty students and the other about fifty. Each room was filled with identical oak desks, each with a straight-backed oak

chair with no cushion. The desks were precisely aligned in straight rows. There was one desk/chair combination assigned to each student. The seating assignments, which would be in effect for the entire school year, could not be changed for any reason. There were huge windows in the study halls and long rows of humming, flickering, fluorescent lights.

Each day after breakfast and dinner, there was a short free period for smoking and playing pool. Then everyone headed to the study halls. There was an hour in the morning before the first class, and two hours in the evening. There was no talking or moving out of the chairs. There was no TV, stereo, Cokes, chips, or phones. There was old-fashioned academic grunt work that was monitored by one of the priests who would not allow any deviation from the studious routine.

Despite these Spartan conditions however, there were inevitable expressions of freedom that always seem to erupt in situations of tight control. There were, for example, squadrons of paper airplanes, barrages of spitballs, and clouds of flatulence. Keith sat behind me one year, and we were fortunate enough to have our desks next to the huge windows. Keith was the drummer in our band, the Sabres. He was a brilliant student who didn't need to study much. He was also a skilled artist and spent hours drawing sketches of fantastic hot rods driven by monstrous beings with bulging, blood-shot eyeballs and long stringy hair. He'd furtively pass drawings back to me to see. The antics provided a break in the interminable two hours but undoubtedly contributed to a few of my failed Latin tests.

It took me about three years to finally develop study habits that worked for me. It was only in my senior year that I realized I had never learned some of the fundamental rules of Latin grammar back in my freshman year. There was no logic to them as is the case with many language rules. They simply needed to be memorized. Once I realized this, and set about

memorizing some of those basic rules that I should have known all along, my facility with Latin increased dramatically - well, a little bit anyway.

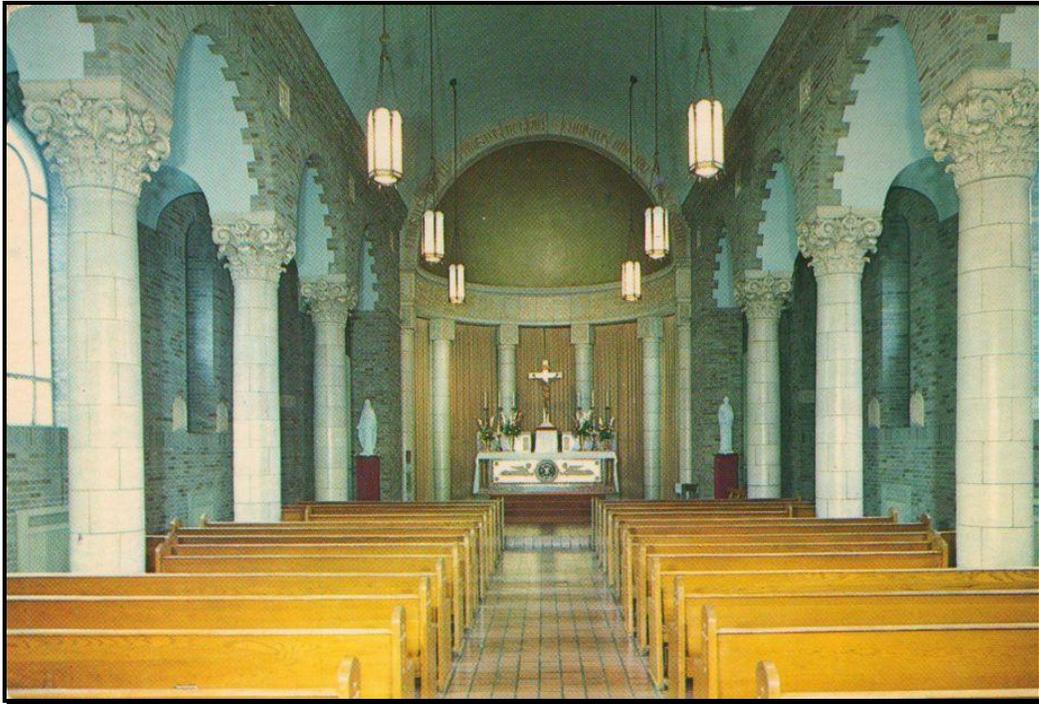
## Chapter 4: Spiritual Life

Because the Venard was an institution dedicated to the nurturing of future priests, prayer was integrated into nearly every activity of seminary life. The rituals began with the 6 a.m. bell, our institutional alarm clock. A student jumped out of bed and flipped the switches that controlled the rows of overhead fluorescent lights in the cavernous dormitories. As the dazzling brightness invaded our consciousness, he then proclaimed something like, “*Dominus vobiscum*” (May the Lord be with you). The reply, mumbled by the thirty or so sleepy seminarians was, “*Et cum spiritu tuo*” (And with your spirit). Occasionally an irate student offered an alternative response not found in *any* prayer book.

For four years, the task of managing the morning and nighttime dormitory lights resided with Tom, but not by assignment. He was the only one willing to do it. He was not only willing, he relished the task. Tom was one of those straight arrows who did everything by the book and this task was particularly suited to him. When the bell rang, he jumped out of bed quicker than a slice of hot bread from a pop-up toaster. There was no lingering under the covers for Tom. There was no leisurely considering the upcoming events of the day. The bell indicated that the sleep activity was over and to Tom, it carried the force of an eleventh commandment: “Thou shalt not tarry at the sound of the bell.” Though Tom was liked by all of us, he bore the brunt of some resentment for his perverse pleasure of leaping out of bed and turning on the dazzling lights each morning.

The morning ablutions took place in silence. Each of us occupied a white porcelain sink with a mirror over each. The sinks were arranged in long rows, one row along each perimeter wall and two face-to-face rows down the center of the wash room. The face washing, zit popping, beard shaving, tooth brushing, and hair combing activities were all done in a hurried

stupor as the morning chapel service began at 6:30 a.m. sharp. We donned our pink tinged underwear (courtesy of Mother's Laundry), white shirts, ties, pants and jackets and stumbled groggily down the worn slate steps to the chapel for morning Mass. Naturally, Tom was always the first one in the chapel and was in deep prayer before anyone else arrived.



*Chapel (from Dave Burkhardt)*

The main chapel held about one hundred-fifty persons. This accommodated the eighty to one hundred students, twelve priests, and twelve brothers. The nuns were not present for morning mass as they were busy preparing breakfast at that time. They must have had a small chapel in their convent because I don't remember ever seeing them in our chapel for any of our spiritual activities. We had our assigned places in the rows of smooth wooden pews. The kneelers were not padded, as they were in most Catholic churches. They were made of wood and had no padding at all. Each of us developed thick calluses on our knees from the hours of

kneeling on these tortuous devices for prayer and spiritual contemplation. I am certain this was a remnant from the days of self-flagellation, hair shirts and the belief that to suffer was to earn a higher place in heaven. The discomfort was a reminder that comfort could lead to spiritual complacency which could then provide an opening for the devil's sinister seduction. Due to my congenitally weak and painful knees, and with a note from my orthopedic surgeon, I was permitted a one-half inch thick foam pad upon which to kneel. It provided a modicum of relief that was more psychological than physical. It still allowed enough discomfort to remain to mostly keep the devil at bay.

When I served as an altar boy at Mass, it was inconvenient to carry the pad around with me. It was often necessary to kneel on the hard marble or tile floor. It was the price to pay for the honor and glory of serving God by serving his priests. The pain also provided an opportunity to help the poor suffering souls in purgatory. "Offering up the pain" was a notion that described a process of acceptance as well as a form of intercession on behalf of purgatorial inmates. As I understood it, when souls are in purgatory, they are unable to act on their own behalf. They must simply languish there until their sentence is completed, or benefit from the intercession of those who offer up prayers and suffering on their behalf. The one doing the offering up could specify a particular individual as the beneficiary. This was supposed to persuade God to decrease the sentence or even release that individual from purgatory. It was also possible to offer up prayers and suffering for the general purgatorial population and this would go towards those who have no one to intercede for them - sort of a public defender type of thing. Naturally, there was also the hope that someday, someone would do the same for us.

## **The Dead Come to Life**

In addition to the main chapel, there was a secondary chapel which held approximately twenty to thirty persons and was used only on small, special occasions. The occasion I remember most vividly was the wake of Brother Ignatius who had died at a ripe old age and was laid out in his coffin within the small chapel. For three days and nights we were each assigned in two-hour shifts. We were to keep watch over his body and pray for his soul. Naturally this meant another two hours of kneeling.

We were assigned in teams of two and this shift was scheduled from 2 to 4 a.m. If it weren't for the hard kneelers, I probably would have fallen asleep. As I knelt there gazing upon the body of Brother Ignatius, I realized that he was breathing! I thought that my mind must be playing tricks on me yet I couldn't deny that his chest was faintly moving up and down as in the act of very shallow breathing. My conscious, rational mind told me that this was an illusion and that it simply wasn't possible that he was breathing, yet I could not deny the evidence of my eyes which reported to me that his chest was rhythmically rising and falling! I had been to a few wakes before but this was the first time I had spent this amount of concentrated time with the body - and in the dead of night, pardon the pun. In addition, the chapel was illuminated with candles so it was quite gloomy in an eerie sort of way.

After several minutes of this tortuous observation and frantic, mental consideration, I whispered to my companion and asked him if he had noticed anything unusual. My attempt at keeping my observation as vague as possible, simply confused him. Finally, I said, "I think he's breathing." Naturally, he instantly dismissed my observation and said I was crazy. But the seed of suggestion had been planted. In a moment or two he whispered back to me in a panicked tone that yes, indeed, he *was* breathing and maybe we should do something! We both stared at poor

Brother Ignatius' body for another minute or two and confirmed each other's observations and did our best to keep our escalating panic in check. We whispered back and forth to each other, "No, he's not!" and, "Yes, he is!" until a sudden noise caused us to jump with terror! It was the sound of the chapel door opening as the two for the next shift came in for their two-hour vigil. The sound had broken the spell and suddenly, we both realized that we had worked ourselves into a state and that Brother Ignatius was indeed stone cold dead. We never mentioned our experience to the oncoming shift. We made a quick exit and were relieved to be out of the presence of the dead body and its mesmerizing influence. We decompressed by sneaking into the physics lab and smoking cigarettes for about an hour before heading up to the dorm to try to get an hour's sleep before the 6 a.m. bell.

Several years later in the early '70s when I was working as a young orderly in the busy emergency room at St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson, New Jersey, I was taking the body of a woman to the morgue. We in the Emergency Room had attempted to revive her with CPR and advanced life support (well, advanced for those days) but she resisted all efforts at resuscitation. Her EKG was flat. Her pupils were dilated and did not react to light. Both were considered definitive signs of death. She had been pronounced dead by the ER physician. I had fastened a tag to her big toe and wrapped her body in a plastic shroud. It was 3 a.m. on the graveyard shift (*an unfortunate adjective*), and the morgue was in the deserted basement (*naturally*). It was the perfect setting for a "B" horror movie. First, though, I had to go up to the first-floor information desk to obtain the morgue key. No one was working the information desk at that time of the morning, but the key was kept in an unlocked drawer of the desk. The morgue key was attached by a chain to a large piece of wood - too large to put in one's pocket. This was an attempt to prevent someone from inadvertently taking it home.

I returned to the Emergency Room and pushed the gurney with its enshrouded occupant to the elevator. I pressed "B" on the elevator panel. As I exited the elevator in the deserted and creepy basement and nervously wheeled the body-laden gurney down the long, gloomy corridor, I thought I began to see her chest move under the shroud. I had to calm myself by remembering my experience in the chapel when I thought I had seen Brother Ignatius breathing again. I assured myself that this, too, was simply an illusion and that I wouldn't be fooled twice!

I reached the morgue and unlocked the industrial, walk-in refrigerator door. It always smelled unpleasant in there. It was not uncommon to see other shrouded bodies chilling out, as well as an amputated arm or leg on one of the shelves. In addition, diseased internal organs - still diseased but no longer internal - awaited disposal. It was a very unpleasant, isolated, and scary place - particularly in the middle of the night when there was no one around!

As I wheeled the gurney into the refrigerator and turned to leave, I heard a moaning from beneath the shroud! At the same time the shroud was bulging as if the body beneath it was moving! I nearly ran out screaming in terror but somehow had the presence of mind to unwrap the shroud and discover that the woman was indeed still alive! Fortunately, she remained unconscious. I shoved the gurney out of the refrigerator and slammed the huge stainless steel door shut. In my haste, I left the key, attached to the large wooden handle, swinging in the lock. My footsteps echoed off the tiled walls as I raced down the empty corridor pushing the gurney with the once dead, but now resurrected woman. I frantically pushed the "up" button for the elevator and waited for what seemed like an eternity. The elevator finally arrived and ascended to the first floor. I whisked the gurney back to the ER where I breathlessly told the physician that the woman was alive. This was no easy task for an orderly who occupied the lowest position within the hospital caste system. The physician and rest of the ER staff assumed I was playing a

joke on them as such black humor is not uncommon in hospitals. When the woman was examined however, it was discovered that she was indeed alive. I rushed her to the intensive care unit where she was stabilized, only to expire three days later.

### **Daily Mass**

Each priest had an obligation to say Mass at least once a day, if possible. One priest was assigned to celebrate Mass at the main altar each morning at 6:30. This was the daily Mass for the brothers, nuns and seminarians. The other priests met their daily obligation by using the secondary chapel (*the location of Brother Ignatius' wake*) or one of the six small altars in the semicircular hallway behind the main altar. These Masses were not intended to have a congregation present. Though not necessary, most of priests preferred an altar boy to assist them with various tasks throughout the sacramental ceremony. Some of them had their favorite altar boy whom they would request. It wasn't unusual to have Mass going on at the main altar and several more going on simultaneously in the secondary chapel and at the mini-altars in the back.

We altar boys provided a variety of Mass-related services for the priests. We lit the two candles that are necessary for the celebration of Mass. We helped the priests get into their vestments which consisted of several garments, layered upon one another and each having a symbolic purpose or historic origin. Each of us served as a congregation of one to provide responses to the priest's prayers. This went on for most of the Mass with various Latin prayers and responses exchanged. In addition to this, we also assisted by pouring the water and the wine from each cruet into the chalice that was held by the priest. There should be a greater volume of wine to water and we learned through experience which priests preferred more wine and less water. This was communicated by each priest through verbal or various body language cues.

Most intriguing to me was the practice of ringing a hand-bell at critical points throughout the Mass. In the main chapel, the apparatus was heavy and consisted of three individual bells attached to a common handle. Each was of a different harmonizing note and they made a very piercing yet pleasing sound. I had served at Mass since I was ten years old and had always assumed that the bell ringing was to draw the attention of the congregation to that critical part of the Mass. Here, however, in the quiet alcove behind the main altar, we altar boys were still required to ring a small hand-bell at critical points even though there was no congregation. The role of ritual was an ever-present element in the celebration of the liturgy and it always held an appeal for me even though some of it was little understood.

### **Infallibility of the Pope**

The 1960s was the era of *power to the people*. Pope John XXIII, the so-called *people's pope* because of his affinity for the common people, opened the Second Vatican Council or what became known simply as "Vatican II." Despite Pope John's wisdom, he was despised by some, in that he recognized the Church must adapt to modern times. Apparently, he too was affected by the spirit of the '60s. It is said that when asked why he thought a Council was needed, he simply went over to a window and threw it open, letting a draught of fresh air blow through the room. It was his cryptic way of saying that the Church had become stagnant and was no longer relevant (*to use a popular '60s term*) to many of the faithful. He wished to bring about changes that would breathe new life into ecclesiastical matters. This was an extraordinary endeavor and not without detractors. The Council was opened in 1962 by Pope John XXIII. It was concluded after his death by Pope Paul VI in 1965.

There have been many Church Councils over the centuries. They have been a means for the ecclesiastical hierarchy to meet and discuss issues of the Church. Vatican II was a follow up to the First Vatican Council that was held in 1869-1870. The most significant outcome of that Council was defining the *infallibility* of the pope. Infallibility was said to be an article of faith which purports that when the pope speaks on matters of the faith or morals, he is speaking with the authority of God himself, and as such, is protected from erring. The pope is seen to be the direct successor to St. Peter who was said to have been given authority by Jesus to be the first pope and leader of the Church. This is referenced in the “Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church” passage in the New Testament (Matthew, 16:18).

Once the possibility of the Pope erring was eliminated, the unquestioned authority of the papacy was secured. For believers, this is the ultimate preventative for dissension and questioning. If the pope is the spiritual mouthpiece for God, Himself, what believer would dare question his pronouncements, especially if the penalty for questioning might be excommunication and an eternity in hell? For nearly two thousand years the Church fostered a fear of damnation and then exploited it to ensure unquestioning obedience to its authority. Though observed for centuries, the First Vatican Council defined and articulated the doctrine of the infallibility.

## **Latin**

One of the most evident changes brought about by the Council was approval of the use of the *vernacular* for the liturgy. This meant that the Mass would no longer be universally celebrated in Latin. Henceforth it would be conducted in the respective languages of the people. Latin text was translated into the world's many languages. For the first time, participants in the

celebration of the Mass would hear the priest praying in their own language. This was an extraordinary change and did indeed bring a breath of fresh air into the Church.

For centuries, faithful Catholics, mostly uneducated and unable to read their own language, let alone Latin, listened to and recited prayers in a language that was unknown to them and hence had no meaning. The priest celebrated Mass and administered the Sacraments in a language that was unintelligible to the people. Persons became dependent upon the clergy to tell them what the Latin texts meant and what they needed to do to attain salvation. This was not unintentional on the part of the Church hierarchy. Early efforts to translate the biblical text into the vernacular were dealt with harshly by the Church. That included burning the heretics alive at the stake.

As an altar boy since the age of nine, I was required to memorize Latin prayers and responses for use during the Mass and other liturgical services. I sang ancient Gregorian chant and read the musical notation with the four-line staff rather than the contemporary five-line musical staff. I felt the spirit of the monks who laboriously copied the notes by hand with quill pens, making square rather than the contemporary rounded or oval musical notes. I sang the Latin lyrics and correctly pronounced them, but I had little understanding of their meaning. Even after four years of Latin study, I was puzzled by much of it.

Latin was the first *foreign* language I had studied. Now with the benefit of hindsight I can see that my difficulties and mediocre grades from Father Ratermann were due to my failure to grasp many of the rules of grammar right from the start. For example, it wasn't until my fourth year that I finally realized the importance of and memorized the list of prepositions *ab, cum, de, ex, in, pro, sine, sub*, all of which required the ablative case. Once I knew the list (and I still do), matching up the correct preposition with the correct case was simple. This was directly related to

Father Ratermann's admonition that "You can't put a Ford bumper on a Chevy". As basic as that is, for some reason I didn't get it until my senior year with three years of frustration and near-failing Latin grades behind me. So, although I was awkward in conversing or writing in Latin, I was proficient enough to read it and understand what I was reading. I read the writings of Cicero, and Caesar's accounts of his wars of Roman conquest in the original Latin. I even read Homer's *Odyssey* in Latin, having been translated from the original Greek.

Despite the transition to the English vernacular, we in the seminary were still thoroughly immersed in Latin. We prayed in Latin. We sang in Latin. Many of our institutional terms were in Latin. For example, our annual musical production was called a *gaudeamus*, meaning "let us rejoice". The knowledge of Latin provided a firm foundation for my study and love of English, with many of its words originating in Latin. I was an enthusiastic advocate for change however. Even the change from Latin to English wasn't enough for me. For a while I stubbornly substituted *you* for *thee/thou*, and "who *is* in heaven" for "who *art* in heaven" in the "Lord's Prayer". I wanted to do everything I could to advance the cause of bringing the practice of religion back to the people. This was the 1960s after all and *Power to the People* was a compelling rallying cry.

Celebrating the Mass in English was only one of the changes brought about by Vatican II. The altar upon which the priest celebrated Mass was turned around so the priest now faced the people, rather than having his back towards them. Musical instruments, other than the time-honored organ, began to be heard and contemporary tunes accompanied by guitars were heard during so-called *folk Masses*. It was a time of tremendous change that made many very uncomfortable. On one hand, the changes were exciting and refreshing. On the other hand, there

was grieving for the loss of tradition. Though I had a love and respect for tradition, I never considered myself a conservative and I endorsed the changes enthusiastically.

## **Prayer**

Prayer, like Latin, was an ever-present part of our lives as seminarians. From the moment the lights were turned on by Tom at 6 a.m. to the moment they were turned off at 11 p.m. (*again by Tom – he loved to control those lights*), we were praying. As I already mentioned, we had Mass each morning. Then we assembled in the Chapel at noon for prayers and again in the evening before study hall. Prayers were recited before each meal. The first half of each meal was eaten in silence as we listened to readings from the New Testament. Each afternoon, we observed a period in which we walked in small groups along the paved pathways surrounding the building and ball fields, praying the rosary aloud. The murmuring of "Our Father", "Hail Mary" and "Glory Be to the Father" could be heard intermingling with the sounds of the birds in the trees. We prayed before basketball games in hopes of persuading God to help us vanquish the opposing team. We prayed before manual labor. We prayed before each class and study hall period. We prayed the Stations of the Cross each day during Lent. We prayed our penance after confessing our sins. We even engaged in *meta-prayer*, or praying that our prayers would be heard and answered.

*It's half-way through this memoir and I'm feeling a need to reiterate what I wrote in the Preface. My descriptions of Catholic practices and beliefs in no way reflect what may be accurate and true at this time or even at the time they occurred. What I write is an accurate and true recollection of my understanding of those practices and beliefs as an adolescent fifty years ago.*

## Indulgences

Indulgences were granted by the Church as a means for the faithful to deduct time from their likely future sentence in purgatory. Even with frequent Confession, there are many opportunities for venial sin and this can begin accumulating centuries of a Purgatorial sentence quite rapidly. Venial sins are less serious infractions such as lying, losing one's temper, or being lazy. If one dies with venial sins on the soul, immediate entry into heaven is delayed pending a period of time spent in this in-between place called purgatory. It isn't just a waiting room for heaven. It's punishment - and was said to be just as painful and tortuous as hell. The only difference is that it is temporary and not for eternity. There is some consolation in knowing that it is temporary - there would be an end to it eventually, though it could easily be for eons by earthly standards. The length of the purgatorial sentence is calculated on the number and seriousness of the venial sins committed since last Confession. Indulgences, accrued during life, deduct time from the length of your sentence upon death. It's like *Purgatorial Insurance*. Do you really want to die without it?

One way to accumulate indulgences is by using a formula established by the Church. Indulgences could be accrued by saying short prayers called *ejaculations* (*an unfortunate term when trying refrain from impure thoughts*) such as “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph”. If I remember correctly, that utterance deducted three-hundred days from one's prospective sentence in purgatory. And if you uttered it twice, that's 600 days, and so forth. As you can imagine, the Church's indulgence policy could lead to some obsessive-compulsive behavior to accrue as many days and years as possible. It was like saving for a rainy day.

There were other ways to gain indulgences as well. Here is a quote from the beginning of the *1961 Confraternity Version of the Bible*:

*The faithful who spend at least a quarter of an hour in reading the Holy Scripture with the reverence due to the Word of God and after the manner of spiritual reading, may gain: an indulgence of 3 years.*

*Those, however, who read at least a few verses of the Gospel and further kiss the book of the Gospels, devoutly reciting one of the following invocations:*

*Through the Gospel's words may our sins be blotted out;*

*May the reading of the Gospel be our health and protection;*

*May Christ, the Son of God, teach us the words of the Holy Gospel;*

*are granted: an indulgence of 500 days.*

The ideal, of course was to be ready at any moment to gain admittance into heaven. That way, in the event of a sudden and unexpected death, the threat of which we were reminded frequently, there would be no delay in passing through the pearly gates into heaven. That state of readiness could be achieved by going to Confession. The sacrament of Confession, through which one's sins could be forgiven by the power of the priest-confessor, would wipe the soul clean so a person could get a fresh start. We were taught however that we lead lives of sin. For most of us, a soul cleansed through the sacrament of Confession would only remain pure for a few moments, or a day at the most. All it took was a single impure thought or flash of anger and it was like an ink spot on an otherwise clean, white sheet of paper. Once that happens, it starts the meter running on your purgatorial sentence and each infraction jacks up the penalty you will have to pay - that is, until you get to Confession again.

This fleeting nature of heavenly readiness meant going to Confession often. Dying with a mortal sin on the soul (i.e., from grave acts such as murder, masturbation, or missing Mass on Sunday) would lead to an eternity in hell. Period. Any indulgences accrued prior to dying while not in a *state of grace* (i.e., having committed a mortal sin) would be forfeited, as they could not be applied toward eternal damnation. So, after committing a mortal sin it was imperative to get to confession immediately as unexpected death loomed closer with each beat of the heart. Sinners might live in fear of death and eternal damnation until they could confess to a priest who

had the power to forgive the sin and eliminate the associated punishment of purgatory or hell. Even the most serious offences could be immediately cleansed through Confession and a person could begin again with a clean slate.

As an historical note, at one time the Church was selling indulgences for money - a practice about which many disagreed at the time. It naturally favored the wealthy. This was one of the issues between Martin Luther and the Church and which led to the Reformation and Protestantism.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Much of our prayer behavior was based on a view of a God that could be begged and persuaded to bring about what we desired. Our prayers often took the form of beseeching. We wanted God to make things go our way or to give us what we lacked. We wanted God to help us win the basketball game. We wanted God to put an end to Communism. We wanted God to heal an illness. We wanted the poor suffering souls in purgatory to get an advance release. We wanted the pagans and non-Catholics of the world to renounce their misguided beliefs and accept ours, the only *true* belief. There was no end to the requests. We were taught that if we were deserving and prayed hard enough, God would bless us. If our requests were not granted, we were admonished to avoid feeling angry or disappointed. We were reminded that everything we pray for may not be in keeping with God's plan and furthermore we cannot understand the mysterious ways of God.

## Non-Catholics

Our prayers and hymns sometimes described ourselves as unworthy, wretched, weak, fallen, powerless, and sinful. Our lives were tainted by sin and guilt. Anything that was wrong in our lives was due to our sinful nature. Anything that was right was due to the blessings of God. As Catholics, we were taught that our Church – *the only true Church* - had God's stamp of approval which had been given to no other church. Baptism in the Church was the spiritual equivalent of the Underwriters' Laboratories Seal of Approval. We were to honor our membership in the one, true Church with prayerful gratitude. We had the guarantee of salvation. The pagans, those who had never been exposed to Christianity, and those who had been exposed but refused to accept the dogma, were said to have no chance of salvation whatsoever. The Church begrudgingly admitted that other Christian, but non-Catholic persons (i.e., Protestants – those who *protested* against the one, true Church), could possibly avoid hell if they lived good lives and followed the dictates of their Christian conscience. But it was like skating on thin ice and there was never a guarantee such as we Catholics had. We were taught that only the one, true and universal Catholic Church provided the means and assurance to avoid the fires of hell and attain the glories of heaven.

While Protestant churches had communion services, we were taught that these were impotent, symbolic rituals. Our Church's Holy Communion also called the Sacrament of the Eucharist was far more than symbolic. The Catholic Church holds that the bread and the wine become the *actual* body and blood of Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation which occurs during the celebration of the Mass. The word *transubstantiation* comes from Latin and refers to the act of changing the essence of matter. This means that what looks and tastes like bread is actually the Body of Christ. What looks and tastes like ordinary wine is actually the

Blood of Christ. Catholics believed that only we had the real deal and we looked with condescension upon the rest of the Christian world who were deluding themselves with empty, impotent, symbolic rituals.

In addition to considering Catholics and Christians, it is necessary to consider Catholics and Jews. Despite the Church's worldwide evangelical and missionary activities, there was little effort spent trying to convert those of the Jewish faith. The view seemed to be that they had their chance and they missed the boat. We acknowledged that the Catholic Church was built on a foundation of Judaism, but the coming of Jesus made a break with all of that. After all, there was the *Old Testament* and now there was the *New Testament*. Jesus brought a different way of seeing things and spoke of a God of love rather than a God of vengeance. Indeed, this was a substantial change. No wonder Jesus was executed! All that talk of love was too much for the prevailing attitude of fear and anger. It still is today. The Church held that it was the Jews who killed Jesus and despite Jesus' gospel of love, there had been animosity toward them for two thousand years. It was only recently that the Church deigned to formally forgive Jews for their part in the execution of Jesus.

The Church's historical actions regarding non-believers of the world is evident in the horrors of the Crusades and Inquisitions. Throughout much of history, the Catholic attitude was *believe – or else*. Now, though the Church's mandate to convert others to Catholicism is just as important, it is no longer pursued with violence.

### **The Hierarchy of Salvation**

This is my understanding of what I'll call the *Hierarchy of Salvation* from the Catholic point of view: **Baptized Catholics** have a guarantee of heaven, provided there is no mortal sin

on the soul at the time of death. There is the matter of meeting any purgatorial obligation before admittance to heaven however. **Baptized, Non-Catholic Christians** have less of a chance of getting into heaven, though it is possible if they have led extraordinarily virtuous, Christian lives. **Non-Baptized Christians** have no chance of getting into heaven. **Non-Christians**, such as Hindus, Muslims, atheists and pagans, have no chance of getting into heaven. **Non-Baptized infants and children** were said to be in a category of their own. As personally innocent, they cannot be sent to hell. However, as they are tainted by Original Sin, they cannot get into heaven. So, after death a non-Baptized infant or child, goes to a fourth eternal abode called limbo. There, these souls are denied the glories of heaven for all eternity, though they are said to be spared from any suffering.

What I've called the *Hierarchy of Salvation* never made any sense to me. Several times over my young years, I argued fruitlessly with the nuns and priests about the unjust and callous nature of the *Hierarchy*. In my youthful passion, I insisted that is just *couldn't* be this way. The doctrine, as I understood it, was contrived, self-serving, and lacking in love and inclusiveness. I could never accept it.

Furthermore, I was taught that ignorance of the Catholic God is no excuse when pleading your case to St. Peter at the pearly gates. The rule is firm: If you didn't get the invitation, you can't get into the party. The rationale, then, for missionary work was to get those invitations to the pagans and give them the opportunity to choose our God and our way of relating to God. That would best be done by living among them and helping them with socio-economic, health, and educational needs. These activities would hopefully lead to a curiosity regarding Christian/Catholic spiritual beliefs and practices. Conversion was no longer an assault. It was a seduction.

There seemed to be little understanding that pagan indigenous peoples have been living in harmony with Nature for millennia and had their own spiritual beliefs which served them since ancient times. The Catholic view was that these poor souls were ignorant and needed to be saved – and they needed to be saved by us. So, we prayed that they would forsake their pagan beliefs in a harmonious relationship with Nature, and instead become *God fearing* and believe as we did in our one, true God - an authoritarian, paternalistic deity.

The Catholic Church seemed blind to this fundamental point: *It is not the Church that is universal, it is God that is universal.* With all the complexity of human nature, a cosmology develops within the crucible of culture, ecology, geography, and other elements. What seemed to the Catholic Church as a profusion of *false gods* is really a manifestation of one of the teachings of the Church: that we are made in God's image and likeness. This obviously doesn't mean our physical self. This means among other abilities, we share God's ability to create. Each culture creates its cosmology, creation myth, and way of relating to God in its own unique way. The claim that the Roman Catholic Church is the only path to salvation simply cannot be valid if we also claim that God is a god of love. The image that comes to mind here is that of a single gem but with many facets. Or put another way, there are many roads that lead to Rome.

## Chapter 5: Manual Labor

The Venard housed about one hundred and fifty seminarians, priests, brothers, and nuns at the time I was there. The facility required a great deal of maintenance. The seminary was fashioned after the European monastic model and included a period of mandatory manual labor (Latin: *manus*, hand; *labor*, work, toil) each day of the week, except Sunday, the day of rest from unnecessary servile labor. As I recall, Manual Labor was always scheduled in the afternoon except on Saturday when it was in the morning so the remainder of the day could be free. It seems to me that each period was an hour and a-half though it might have been just an hour. There was a lot to do.

There was a wide variety of quarterly assignments and in general there was a rotation that included both inside and outside jobs. We often worked side-by-side with the brothers and nuns who supervised us. Much of the time, though, we were left to work alone or in teams of two to six depending on the job. Weather was no impediment to outside work and we toiled in the heat, rain and snow. Though we didn't always like our assignments, I don't recall anyone complaining or objecting significantly to the idea of doing the work. It just wasn't questioned. We knew it had to be done. We were all familiar with the monastic model upon which the seminary was organized and we knew this was the way it had been done for centuries.

The work assignments were broadly classified into indoor and outdoor jobs. The outdoor work consisted of keeping up the grounds, and managing the farm. I don't know the actual acreage but there seemed to be about two to three hundred acres of pasture and woodland, farm and orchard, paved walkways, lawn, athletic fields, a swimming pool and a lake. The outside jobs were numerous and varied. There were leaves to be raked and snow to be shoveled. There were trees to be pruned and nature's debris to be burned. It was a big job – too big to hire out.

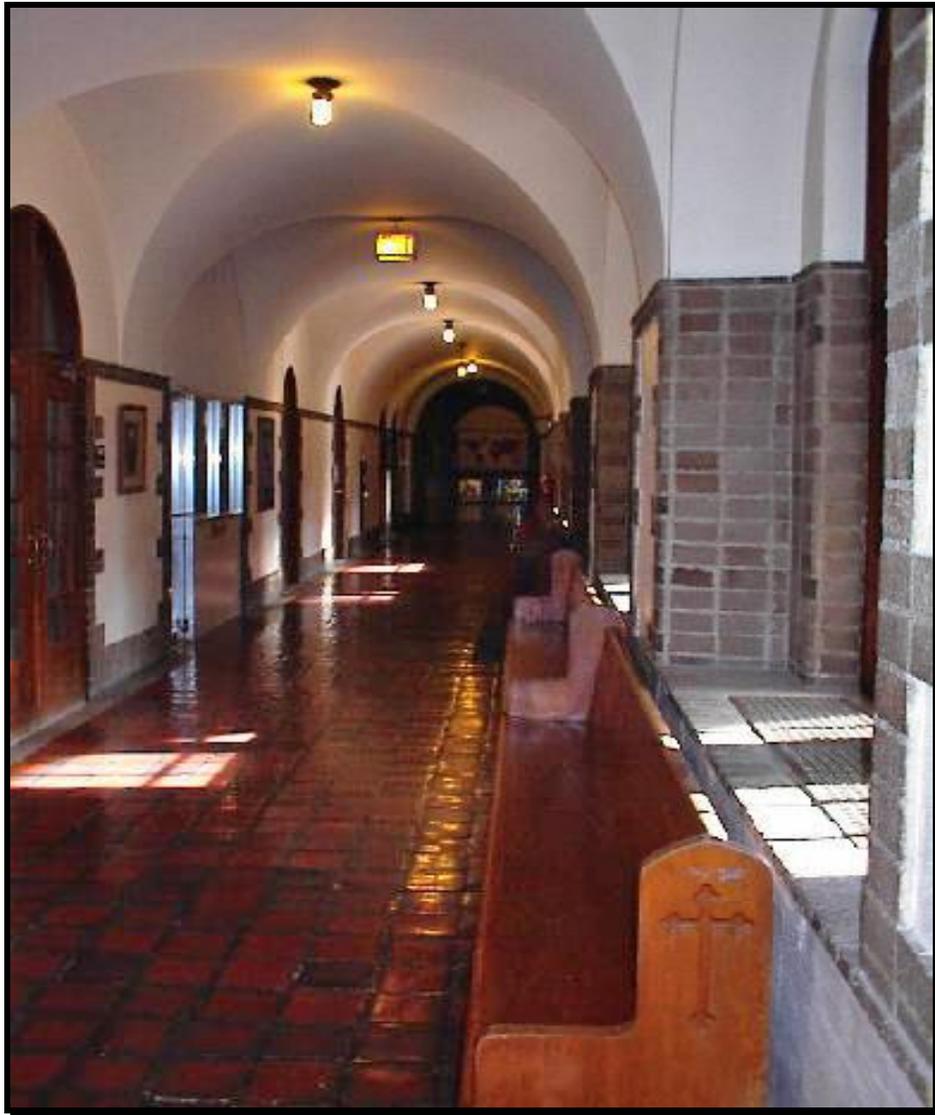
And why hire it out when there was a young and available work force at hand? All that was needed was some motivation and supervision, both of which were amply supplied by the priests, brothers and nuns.

The brothers supervised all the outdoor jobs. Brother Dave managed the farm and livestock. He was a tall and muscular man, with a ruddy complexion and a marine style flat-top haircut. He was well suited for the tasks of herding cattle and slaughtering the pigs and cows for our meat supply. His management style was characterized by machismo and in-your-face intimidation, though off-duty, he was friendly and easy going. Brother Fred lovingly looked after the apple orchard and grounds. He was a quiet man with a Thoreau-like demeanor and a personal relationship with the trees and plants. He worked us just as hard as Brother Dave but in a more quiet and gentle way.

The indoor jobs included work in the kitchen, the chapel, and doing routine building cleaning and maintenance. The nuns managed the kitchen and despite the language barrier, they had a knack for communicating exactly what needed to be done. They tended to be perfectionists in the kitchen and held high expectations for us to maintain the same degree of cleanliness and order. Though our relationship with them was informal, it was always respectful. We would use the opportunity of working together to practice our French speaking skills and they would in turn practice their English with us.

The priests supervised much of the indoor work, though they did not work along with us, as did the brothers and nuns. Instead, they checked up on us from time to time. Father Condon, for example oversaw the interior cleaning which included sweeping, mopping, waxing and buffing the floors, and cleaning the *jakes*, our term for the toilets. Most of the flooring on the first floor was terra-cotta tile, each about six to eight inches' square. The earth-tone tiles, the

brickwork, the dark woodwork, and the arched ceiling all worked together to create a visual warmth that fostered a hushed and soothing ambience. The floors were continually waxed and buffed to a high sheen - as were all the floors throughout this beautiful building.



*North Corridor looking towards Chapel (Ray Voith, 1999)*

## **The Floor Buffers**

Learning how to use the industrial floor buffers was a challenge for novices and I was no exception. Using a buffer for the first time is like riding a mechanical bull in a western-style bar. The buffer seemingly has a mind of its own and wildly goes everywhere except where you want it to go. All the muscular effort brought to bear will not tame the whirling dervish. Attempting to do so is exhausting. In a brief time however, I learned to stop fighting the machine. I learned to stop forcing it to go where I wanted it to go. I learned that simply tipping the handle up or down would direct the buffer to the left or the right very easily. It could practically be done with one finger! This was an important realization for me and it helped me in my later work as a nurse, counselor and therapist. Instead of working to get people to change direction in their lives by pushing or pulling them in the direction I think they should go, I found that the gentle, indirect approach is usually the better way. In this way, my clients actively choose their own direction and their own beginning steps. They are more likely to be successful because when change, and the means to implement change, come from within a person it is much more likely to stick.

## **The Window Squad**

Father Condon also supervised the jake squad which cleaned the many toilets, showers and sinks in the facility. In addition, he directed the window squad which was an indoor activity but with an outdoor element. The windows on the second and third floors were cleaned on the inside only. On the first floor, however, we were required to wash the inside and the outside to a sparkling clarity. This involved opening the window enough to climb out onto the ledge, closing the window while perched on the ledge, and cleaning the upper and lower exterior panes of glass. Now this wasn't your ordinary home. This was a brick and stone institutional structure and the

first-floor window ledges were a good fifteen feet from the ground. Always squeamish about heights, I remember clinging to the wooden window frame while washing and polishing the glass with my free hand - and praying the whole time that I wouldn't fall off!



*Out on the Ledge*

*(from Venard Archives courtesy of Jeff Broderick of the Baptist Bible College)*

### **The Faculty Lounge**

One of my favorite jobs was cleaning the Faculty Lounge. The lounge was absolutely off limits to students. The exception was for the carefully selected student-cleaner, and then only during the daily manual labor period. The priests refrained from using the lounge during this time. This meant that the cleaner was alone and unsupervised - and this was the inner sanctum. It was the place where the priests, off duty and free to relax, could set aside their clerical, teaching and authority roles and let it all hang out (*to use the '60s phrase*). The fact is, they couldn't really let it hang out too far, and they didn't, but it was their domain for relaxation. The

lounge was set up living room style. There was a wet-bar at one end of the rectangular room, and a large color TV at the other end. One of the benefits of working in the faculty lounge was that it was possible to turn on the color TV while working. The student television in the TV room was a black and white model. There was no time to leisurely sit and watch the color TV however as there were always ashtrays to empty, glasses to wash, the carpet to vacuum, and furniture to dust and polish.

Overall, it was an easy job though Father Condon demanded perfection. His scrutiny was not necessary though because if the job wasn't done well, the cleaner would hear about it directly from any of the priests. I never had a problem in this regard because I had already acquired a value for household cleanliness from my mother. We four boys all had to participate in household chores, all of which I was now doing in the Faculty Lounge. My mother would never leave the house for a vacation unless the house was spotless - in spite of the groaning displeasure of my brothers and me who were anxious to get on the road!

This Faculty Lounge manual labor assignment was unique in that it allowed some insight into the off-duty lives of our spiritual and academic mentors. I was particularly drawn to a set of books on the bookcase. There were about twenty volumes in the set. Upon examination, I discovered that these were reference books intended as a guide for priests who were dealing with thorny issues of morality and sin within the confessional. They were a distillation of philosophical writings and cannon law regarding issues of free will, intent, what is necessary for an act to be a sin, whether an infraction was considered a venial or a mortal sin, and where the line was between actions that engendered temporary incarceration in purgatory versus permanent damnation in hell.

The books included guidelines for penance and helped the confessors know when it was appropriate for the penitent to recite three *Our Fathers*, *Hail Marys* and *Glory Be to the Fathers* or whether a more severe penance was required. In addition, the volumes included advice that could be passed on to the penitent for dealing with vexing spiritual dilemmas and suggestions for avoiding sin and the near occasions of sin. As a teen, hungry for any information about sexuality, I found the sections on sexual conduct most informative and captivating. I was thrilled to study these tomes and I felt like I had insider information that came right from the Source.

## **Barbershop**

The monastic model of institutional living encouraged self-sufficiency. This extended to our haircutting needs as well. We had our own barbershop (Latin: *barba*, beard). Our barbershop resembled any you might see in a small town at the time. There were two antique barber chairs. Each was extraordinarily heavy and stood on a circular pedestal so the chair could be rotated (*or spun!*) 360 degrees. The footrests were metal and fashioned in an ornate grillwork. Each had a hand-operated, hydraulic lever which could be used to raise and lower the height of the chair. Each chair reclined as well! This feature was originally designed to facilitate shaving. The leather strops for sharpening straight razors were still attached to the chairs. Shaving was not a service we provided however. Each chair had burgundy leather padding on the seat and back. The arms were porcelain, yellowed and finely cracked with age.

In addition to the two exquisite chairs, there were other accoutrements associated with barbering. There were the tall, circular glass canisters filled with the blue, *Barbisol* liquid disinfectant for the combs and scissors. There were the drapes that fastened with stainless steel clips to prevent cut hair from falling on the customer's clothing or down the neck of his shirt.

There were the heavy electric shears with various attachments for cutting hair uniformly short. We used brushes with long, soft, blonde bristles for sweeping the cut hair from the face and neck. We sprinkled scented talcum powder on the upturned bristles of the brush and released a cloud of powder as we brushed away the cuttings. Though we called our patrons, *customers*, there was no payment for the haircuts. They were free - and they were short. Even though this was the '60s and the fashion was long hair, this was not permitted at the seminary and we cut hair in the fashion of previous decades.

I was the last in a fifty-year line of seminarian barbers at the Venard whose methods and techniques had been passed down from generations of upper classmen to lower classmen. We cut the hair of the priests, brothers and fellow seminarians. As with the Faculty Lounge job, this was one of the few jobs that was not open to anyone. For obvious reasons, it was assigned to those who had the interest and ability to give a decent haircut. Father Condon, our English and Literature teacher, made the assignments and he must have recognized some quality that suited me to the task. I did not seek the position. My name appeared under "Barbershop" on the manual labor job assignment sheet during my second year. I was given some rudimentary instructions by one of the seasoned barbers, an upper classman.

Before I could officially solo, so to speak, there was one requirement: I had to do my first haircut on Father Condon himself! It was terribly nerve-wracking as I clipped the snow-white hair of this crusty old Bostonian. When I finished, I used the brush with the soft, six inch bristles to sweep away the clipped hair and rotated the magnificent chair so he could see the results of my tonsorial ministrations. With an imperial grunt, he approved of my work and set me loose on the rest of the priests, brothers, and students. To be sure, my skills improved with practice. I enjoyed doing this work. It wasn't like cleaning the jakes or shoveling manure in the barn. This

was skilled work and there was a bit of status associated with it. I was even provided with a white barber jacket to wear. I was a little nervous at first, particularly when it came to cutting the hair of the rector and some of the other intimidating priests like Father Ratermann. I developed the attitude that all in my barber chair were equal in my eyes and I simply did the best I could for each, whether lower classman or rector. I never received any complaints and I had regulars who always asked for me.

### **Tool Shed**

My buddy, Tony, and I were assigned to work in the Tool Shed during the winter quarter of our sophomore year. It was located down by the barn. Tony was fond of boasting that he was a distant relative of Tex Ritter. We had all heard the name, of course, but had only a vague knowledge of him and his music – just enough to tease Tony. He and I got along well though. Both of us had an interest in hypnosis. We had gotten a few books and worked together on practicing various techniques on each other. I remember staring into a candle flame for what seemed like hours. We kept our investigations to ourselves and used one of the rooms up in the bell tower where we could work undisturbed. All the rooms there were locked and were devoted to various activities such as the Radio Club and the Yearbook. I had mastered the art of opening the locks with a flexible metal ruler so we had access to any of the rooms whenever we needed them.

Our job in the tool shed entailed distributing, collecting, storing, and maintaining the various hand tools that were used for the outside jobs. There were shovels and rakes, pruning sheers and hedge clippers, wheelbarrows, and enough snow shovels for an army! I liked working in the tool shed because once the tools were distributed at the beginning of the Manual Labor

period there was little to do until they were returned at the end of the work period. The shed was a ten-foot square, no frills plywood structure. There were no windows except for one at each end up in the loft. There was no insulation or heat and it had little in the way of comfort other than an electric fixture overhead with a bare light bulb for illumination.

Tony and I worked there in the dead of winter and we were as cold as the icicles hanging from the roof. Between the time tools were distributed and the time they were returned and stored away, we were expected to keep busy and were told that part of our job was to keep the shed clean. We cleaned the shed on our first day there. After that, there was nothing to do except smoke cigarettes - which we had to do cautiously because we never knew when Brother Dave might come around checking on us. Naturally, smoking cigarettes was forbidden during Manual Labor but we took our chances. We were cold and miserable and bored until one day we were the recipients of some very good fortune.

As we huddled inside the shed and attempted to keep warm, we heard a truck outside. We could tell by its sound that it wasn't one of the beat-up seminary trucks. As we peered through the slightly open door, we saw a pickup truck and it was backing up to the barn. We didn't recognize the truck or the driver. We did recognize what he began tossing from the bed of the pickup. He was discarding day-old bakery items that were to be fed to the pigs! It was a way for the bakery to dispose of unsold items while at the same time donate to the Church by fattening the seminary pigs. We watched with great anticipation. As soon as the charitable donor left, we hurried over to the precious pile of piggy pastries. It was an unbelievable sight! Right here beside the pig pen was a mountain of cinnamon rolls, raisin bread (*the kind with the white frosting that always cracks and falls off*), apple strudel, crumb buns, and coffee cakes with almonds, pecans,

and raisins galore. They were all individually wrapped or boxed. We were literally in hog heaven!

Without a second's hesitation, we ran back to the tool shed and each grabbed a wheelbarrow. We filled them with much of the booty and made a dash for the cover of the shed. We pushed the wheelbarrows into the shed and slammed the door behind us. I climbed up the ladder into the loft and Tony tossed the baked goods, one item at a time, up to me. There in the seclusion of the tool shed loft, by the light of the mid-winter afternoon light which filtered through the dusty loft windows, we began to enjoy our cache of pastries. They lasted the remainder of the quarter, thanks to the shed's preserving bitter cold. In that frigid winter quarter, each delicacy was frozen hard and dry, but to us, each was a magnificent treat. The pastries were our secret manna from heaven and they helped make each cold, bleak day in that shed a little more tolerable. The baker's donation did indeed go to fatten seminary pigs!

### **The Grounds Crew**

One of my favorite outside jobs was working on the Grounds Crew. Brother Fred oversaw the grounds and it was a big job. The campus was about two to three hundred acres in size and included wooded areas, open pasture, a lake, and an apple orchard. There were about six of us on the Grounds Crew. First, we would report to Brother Fred and find out what tools we would need for the day. Then we'd head to the Tool Shed and obtain whatever implements were needed. After harassing the guys in the Tool Shed we'd walk to the barn area where Brother Fred would be waiting for us in a battered 1940s era pickup. It was well used and its service included hauling garbage from the kitchen down to the barn for the hogs. Often there was a flat-bed trailer hitched to it. We'd toss our tools onto the flatbed trailer and then hop on, letting our legs dangle

over the side. I enjoyed the rides to and from the work area. Brother Fred never exceeded 15 mph when pulling us on the trailer. We'd sit on the trailer with our legs dangling over the side and talk and laugh or quietly bask in the beauty of the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania.

When we arrived at the work site, we would receive terse instructions from Brother Fred. He was a man of very few words. We'd cut, chop, mow, prune, rake, or gather our way through the duration of each manual labor period. All that debris was loaded onto the flatbed trailer and taken to the burn area. Our efforts yielded a mountain of leaves, limbs and burnable waste. In the late fall, we would distribute a half-dozen automobile tires among the pile and set them afire. The tires produced a thick, acrid, black smoke that, in my memory, I can smell to this day. I'm sure the tire smoke was toxic and polluting, but back then this wasn't part of people's awareness. The huge pile would take days to burn so for about a week we would spend our time at the burn pile helping the fire reduce the mountain of burnables to a molehill of ash.

### **Apple Orchard**

Northeastern Pennsylvania is an excellent apple growing area and we had a large orchard. In early spring, we would prune the trees. At harvest, we would haul the filled bushel baskets to the apple cellar. This was an underground, concrete cold storage area, like a root cellar, that stored and preserved the fruit for a full year till the next year's crop was ready. The aroma of that apple cellar left an indelible olfactory memory and to this day, when I am at the produce section of a market, a whiff of the apples will transport me right back to that cellar.

Each day at the end of the Manual Labor period, one of the grounds crew would retrieve a bushel of apples from the cellar and place it near the gym and locker room area for those of us who wished to have our apple-a-day. Nearly all of us did. Apples were a staple at the Venard.

The nuns would use them for making applesauce, pies, cobblers, turnovers, and cider. There was never a shortage and I have no recollection of ever getting tired of them.

## **Chapel**

One of the more interesting manual labor assignments was in the chapel. The sacristy (Latin: *sacrum*, a holy thing or place) was a room to the left of the main altar in the chapel. It was a combination liturgical dressing room and storeroom. The sacristy was the place that supported the traditional pageantry of liturgical ritual which had developed over the centuries. It stored the vestments that the priests wore during the celebration of Mass. It stored the liturgical paraphernalia such as chalices and related equipment. It stored the supply of Holy Water, candles, incense, wine, and unconsecrated hosts which were the communion wafers of unleavened bread used at Mass. All of this was managed by the two seminarians assigned to the chapel. It was a responsibility-laden and multi-faceted job.

As dictated by tradition and then by decree, only unleavened bread could be used for the ritual of the Eucharist. During the celebration of the Mass, the priest transforms the bread into what is believed to be the actual body of Christ, meaning Jesus Christ. This process is called *transubstantiation* because the essence of the bread, though not its physical properties, is no longer bread. Its essential substance is now believed to be the sacred body of Christ. The same is true for the wine which through transubstantiation is believed to be the blood of Christ.

The communion hosts weren't like any bread that I had ever seen. They were round wafers of unleavened bread. Each was about the size of a quarter and the thickness of a playing card. As younger kids in elementary school, we would cut out circular pieces of Wonder Bread and flatten them against the table with the palms of our hands. We would pretend these were

hosts and have make-believe communion. These official hosts were obtained from a special bakery somewhere. They were evidently made in a large sheet and then cut. Occasionally, they were cut off-center. As a stamp collector, I'd think about these things but I don't suppose that added any value nor detracted from their worthiness as a host for the body of Christ. Each host was pure white and usually had a circular ridge around the edge. In addition, there was usually a liturgical symbol embossed in the center. Sometimes it was the *Chi Rho* a symbol for Christ. Sometimes it was an ornate "IHS" which were Greek initials for the name of Jesus. Some, instead of letters, had an ornate cross. It wasn't until the changes of Vatican II that we saw the appearance of light tan colored hosts which I suppose was due to the addition of a bit of whole wheat flour for a more natural appearance.

The unconsecrated hosts were stored in the sacristy. We were permitted to handle them because at this stage, they were considered ordinary bread with no sacred significance. Once they were consecrated at a Mass, only the priest could touch them with his hands. The consecrated hosts were served to the congregation in the ritual of Holy Communion or simply, Communion. Those partaking would form a line and walk up to the communion rail where they would kneel. With eyes closed, they would stick out their tongues upon which the priest would place the consecrated host. This was not very sanitary by today's standards, but that's the way it was done. The altar boy positioned a metal plate that was attached to a six-inch-long handle under the chin of each communicant. The plate was somewhat like a ping-pong paddle in shape and size. The surface of the plate, though, was plated with gold because it had the potential for holding the sacred host if it should fall.

Now if the tongue of the person receiving communion was moist, there was usually no problem as the host would adhere to the tongue quite readily. It would soften, and then be easily

swallowed. But, if the tongue was dry, there could be trouble. This condition held the possibility of the host sliding off the tongue and onto clothing or even the floor. This was considered to be disrespectful to God. It was the altar boy's grave responsibility to prevent this sacrilegious catastrophe. I could rarely catch a baseball but I made a few good saves as an altar boy!

There was another situation that didn't involve the altar boy but is worth mentioning. If the conditions were right, the host might have the tendency to stick to the roof of the mouth and remain there. This would make it necessary for the person to attempt inconspicuous and comical lingual maneuvers to pry the dry, sacred wafer from the roof of the mouth - without touching it with the fingers - so it could be swallowed.

The prohibition against laypersons touching the host relaxed somewhat after Vatican II. Afterwards, the priest could place the consecrated host directly into a person's hand upon which the person placed the host in his or her own mouth. In addition, at certain services, the chalice was passed from person to person to allow each a sip of the consecrated wine.

## **Vestments**

The sacristy also served as the storage place for the liturgical vestments. The number of vestments stored in the sacristy was formidable as the priest customarily wore several liturgical garments over his basic black cassock. Each garment had its history, symbolism and function going back to the earliest years of the Church. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the liturgical vestments are “to be worn by the clergy in performing the ceremonies of the services of the Church, consequently, above all, at the celebration of the Mass, then in the administration of the sacraments, at blessings, the solemn recitation of the canonical hours, public services of prayer, processions, etc.”

The individual items of the vestments were called by arcane names such as amice, alb, cincture, maniple, stole, and chasuble. They were said to be derived from civilian clothing worn during the early centuries of the Church. They were immune to the evolution of clothing styles and, like Latin, remained in the style of ancient Rome. The undergarments were made of white linen. They were mostly unadorned though each item might sport a small cross, embroidered in red thread. Others might have a subtle embroidered symbol such as a cross or a lamb, or lettering such as IHS, done in white thread on the white linen, or perhaps decorative white lace along the edges of the sleeves and bottom of garment.

The outer garments were far more ornate and of colors which were determined by the Liturgical Calendar or the intent of that particular Mass. For example, white was symbolic of joy and was used at Christmas and Easter; green was for hope and was used during the season of Pentecost which was the time between Easter and the feast of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven; black was for mourning and was used at requiem or funeral Masses (after the changes of Vatican II, the black vestments were retired and white was used for funeral Masses); violet was for penitence and was used during Lent and Advent, the periods of time preceding Easter and Christmas. There were rose colored vestments which were used only twice a year during mid-Lent and mid-Advent. It must have been a way to boost the morale of the faithful, halfway through the long weeks of fasting and anticipation of Christmas and Easter. There was also a set of shimmering gold vestments that was used for ultra-special occasions. It's easy to see how much storage space was needed for all these vestments. In addition, there were several sets of each as there were sometimes special occasions in which two or three priests co-celebrated and each required a set of his own.

These colored vestments were often made of satiny material with beautiful moiré patterns and brocaded borders and decorative symbols such as the lamb, or the letters “IHS” a Greek monogram for the name Jesus Christ. The stole was an essential and versatile item with which many are familiar. It is a narrow strip of colored cloth which the priest places around his neck and which simply hangs down on either side of his chest extending downward to the waist. Worn under the outer vestments for Mass, it was the same color, according to the season or intent of the Mass. It was often worn in the color of violet or purple, over a white surplice, while hearing confessions or administering other sacraments. This might include administering the Last Rites or the sacrament of Extreme Unction (last anointing) in the hospital or even at the scene of an automobile accident or other trauma. It was customary for the priest to kiss the stole before placing it around his neck.

For the celebration of the Mass however, the stole was just one of several liturgical garments. The outer and most visible vestment was called the chasuble. Traditionally, it was a flat, stiff garment similar to the sandwich boards that were used for advertising (e.g., “Eat of Joe’s”). It was wider in the back and resembled the shell of a beetle. The 1960s brought about a change in style of this garment. We began to see the chasuble in the style of a robe or poncho with a more relaxed and flowing texture and appearance.

### **Sacred Vessels**

There was a locked closet in the sacristy for storing the sacred vessels. Among these were the ciboria (singular, *ciborium*) which were chalice-like containers, lined with gold, and used to distribute the Eucharistic host. There was also a two-foot-tall golden vessel called a monstrance or ostensorium. This was an ornate vessel that contained a round compartment for a priest-sized

consecrated host (about three inches in diameter) in the center and with golden rays radiating outwards. The compartment was gilt along the edges that the Host touched. It was faced with glass, not in contact with the host, so the faithful could view the white wafer within. The monstrance would be held aloft by the priest so the congregation could revere it as the body of Christ.

The chalice was the most commonly used sacred vessel. The chalice was an ornate goblet made of silver or gold and sometimes encrusted with gems. The interior of the cup was always lined with pure gold out of respect for the body and blood of Christ that it held. During the celebration of the Mass, the chalice was used in concert with several other items. There was a white linen napkin which was folded into a three by ten-inch rectangle and was draped over the chalice. It was topped by the paten, a gold plate that rested on top of the chalice. The paten served as a plate or means for catching any crumbs of the host as it was broken after consecration. It also served as a means for keeping foreign objects out of the chalice. It did not always prevent accidents however. A visiting missionary once recounted an incident in which a fly had gotten into the consecrated wine and was alive but trapped in the sacred liquid. The fly was covered with droplets of the consecrated wine and so neither the wine nor the fly could be discarded. They could only be consumed by the priest. Much to our horrified delight, he told us that is exactly what he did.

There was a five or six-inch square of stiff, white linen which was placed on top of the paten. The chalice and accompanying items were then covered with a square of cloth of the same color and style of the vestments. This cover was draped over all the items and hung down to the base of the chalice.

The 1960s brought about a change in the style of chalices. Prior to that time, they were generally of a Gothic style, tall and slender, ornate, and encrusted with precious gems. Now we began to see a shorter, wider, Roman style of chalice with far less ornamentation and perhaps a polished, semi-precious stone at the grip on the stem. Many of the younger priests chose this style of chalice and I remember spending hours making sketches of what my chalice would be like in the distant future. Choosing a chalice was not unlike choosing a wedding band. It was highly traditional, made of precious metals, and it made a statement about you. I naturally favored the newer, less ornate models of chalices just as I favored the newer style of vestments.

## **Candles**

Candles have a prominent place in Catholic ceremonies. The sacristy contained a large supply of candles and it was our job to replace them and clean the candlesticks of accumulated wax. It was prescribed that all altar candles be made of pure beeswax. There was quite an assortment of sizes.

Considering the number of candles used in the various ceremonies, no sacristy would be complete without the long-handled candle-lighter and snuffer. Having been an altar boy since I was nine, I was well acquainted with this implement and spent much time on the altar reaching up high to light or extinguish candles for liturgical ceremonies. There were rules for the number of candles needed for the type of ceremony. Ordinary Mass required two lit candles whereas a High Mass required six. Solemn High Masses and some other ceremonies required even more.

The more common candle lighters were dual purpose. They both lighted and extinguished candles. The tool was about six feet long because it had to extend to the upper levels of the altar. There was a hollow channel along one side of the pole-like device through which we would

tediously thread a wax-coated string that eventually emerged at the top or business end. This taper was for lighting the candles. As it burned down, more was made available through a mechanism that manually advanced the waxed string. For extinguishing the flame, inexpensive models simply had a cone at the end of the pole which would snuff out the candle. The deluxe models had a circular ring about three inches in diameter. It contained many tiny holes on the inner surface. The ring was connected to a rubber bulb that was located at the lower end of the handle. When the ring was placed around the flame and the bulb was forcefully compressed from below, tiny jets of air would be directed inward toward the flame to extinguish it. Fancy, huh?

There were other ceremonial candles in use as well. The Sanctuary Lamp was usually suspended from the ceiling by a long chain. It consisted of a fat, long-burning candle within an ornate housing with a red glass lens. It signified the presence of God in the form of consecrated hosts which were stored in a locked, vault-like enclosure on the altar. These hosts had been consecrated but were more than were needed for the anticipated number of communicants. They were stored and used at subsequent Masses. They were also held in reserve for the purpose of being taken to the sick or dying. If they became stale, they were consumed by the priest himself. Sometimes this was an undertaking. The job was like cleaning the community refrigerator. Some priests would put it off, or let someone else do it. Eventually the supply of stored, consecrated hosts would become excessive and one of the priests would step up to the task. There could be quite an accumulation of the consecrated, dry wafers.

In addition to the routine candles, there was an ornate Paschal Candle, usually about four feet long and about two to three inches in diameter, that was used at Easter. Additionally, a pair of crossed candles were used to bless the throats of the faithful on the feast of St. Blaise which occurs on February 3. St. Blaise is said to be helpful in healing throat ailments, and in particular

for conditions in which objects like fish bones have become lodged in the throat. Small liturgical candles were often included in portable kits which would be used to administer the sacraments of Extreme Unction or the Eucharist outside of the church walls.

And of course, there were the ever-present racks of votive candles found near the statues of Jesus and Mary. By convention, statues of Jesus always had candles in a red lens while statues of Mary were illuminated with candles in a blue lens. These votive candles were about two inches tall and about one and a-half inches in diameter. In most Catholic churches, a person wishing to light a candle was expected to place a monetary offering through a slot in a cash box before proceeding. It was on the honor system. The offering and the lighting of the candle were a means for fortifying or enhancing prayers for a particular purpose. In a nod toward fire safety, I understand that the venerable votive candle has been replaced by a tiny electric light bulb or LED that illuminates when the offering is placed in the slot. Somehow, it just doesn't seem the same.

## **Incense**

The aroma of frankincense enhanced many of the liturgical ceremonies. As part of the sacristy manual labor assignment, the incense granules needed to be resupplied and the censor needed to be cleaned of creosote-like residue. The censor was a complicated gold colored metal device with a base and perforated lid. Chains were used to raise and lower the lid. We'd place a disc of charcoal in the base and light it in advance as one would light charcoal briquettes for a barbecue. The black charcoal disks must have had a similar substance to that contained within 4th of July sparklers. When first lit, they emitted a quiet crackling sound and flashes of small sparks. During the ceremony, a tiny spoon was used to place grains of incense on the glowing

charcoal. The lid would be closed and the fragrant smoke would waft through its many vents. While holding the end of the chains in the left hand, the right hand would swing the censor three times. If you were skilled at this and held the apparatus in just the right way, you could create the characteristic *chinka, chinka, chinka* sound as the censor struck the chains. This was a hallmark of an accomplished altar boy.

I have always liked candles and the aroma of incense and I trace it to these experiences which formed such an important part of my youth. In fact, I really got into all the aspects of the liturgical ceremonies. Each item had a symbolic or historic meaning which was considered important by those who cared about these things. I did. I liked the symbolism, the tradition, the being in the know. Knowledge of all the liturgical minutiae placed a person on the inside and it felt special. Those not involved in the production, for it clearly is liturgical theater, were impressed with the overall presentation but usually had little idea of the details. And it was the details that made the production a mystifying experience for the congregation. I reveled in the Gregorian chant and liturgical organ music, the candles, the incense, the vestments, the stained-glass windows, the gold, the jewels, and the Latin prayers. I loved the choreography of the endless standing, kneeling and genuflecting, the repetition of the sign of the cross, the hand of the priest extended in blessing, the penitential beating of the chest to each *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* (through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault), the arms of the priest extended in the invocation *Oremus* (let us pray), the genuflecting to the bishop and the kissing of his bejeweled ring, the elevating of the host and the chalice during the consecration and the accompanying ringing of the bells. I cherished it all.

Knowing the details and symbolic meanings was like having membership in an elite club. I felt pride in my ability to understand the Latin prayers which elevated ordinary words to a

mystical level. I was enamored by it for years until I began to realize the distancing effect of that elitism. It created a barrier between the clergy and the laity. The liturgical production seemed more important than the intent. The means became more important than the end. I gradually endorsed the movement to simplify: to change the Latin to the vernacular, to underplay the use of gold and jewels, and to replace *thee* and *thy* with *you* and *your* in the prayers. These and so many more of the changes reflected the *open the windows and let in fresh air* policies of Vatican II. It was a time of momentous change in the Church and it was exciting. For me, it was more important than clinging to the traditions of centuries.

## Chapter 6: Recreation

Each day after Manual Labor, there was a period of Recreation (from Latin *recreo*, *recreare*: to restore, refresh, invigorate, revive). This wasn't simply free time but a time set aside mostly for team sports such as baseball, basketball, touch football, and other organized athletic activities. I never excelled in team sports...and that is an understatement. The best of my limited abilities was in volleyball. For this, the rules were simple: hit the ball over the net without sending it out of bounds. So, I'd stand there, pay attention, and pray the ball wouldn't come to me. If my prayers were ineffective, and the ball was heading towards me, I'd make a lunge for it and try to hit it over the net as best as I could. Sometimes, I was successful!

The Athletic Director organized track and field events throughout the year, ending with an all-day intra-mural competition in the spring. It was mandatory that each person participate in at least one event. Since I had had orthopedic issues with my knees that rendered them unsuitable for running, I chose discus throwing as my event. There were only three of us in the school who selected the discus so it worked out well for me. One of the three was a tall upperclassman. He was all muscle and he excelled in the discus, javelin and shot put. He was unbeatable and that was lucky for me because it took the pressure off. There was no way Harry, the other discus thrower, or I could ever beat him. So, I just did my best and hadn't the slightest anxiety about how I would place or if I would win. Since there were only three of us, the upperclassman would certainly take first place, and Harry and I would take second and third respectively. It was the perfect solution for me. I was participating yet I could never let my team down because I would always be a winner!



*Discus Practice (author 2nd from left) (from author)*

I was told that Harry, my fellow discus thrower, was the first in our graduating class of seventeen to die. I learned of this through the grapevine at the time of our 30<sup>th</sup> and only class reunion to date. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend due to business obligations so I never learned any details or even verified the fact. I've wondered if it was in Viet Nam or perhaps a car wreck or perhaps he succumbed to an illness. It gave me a taste of what Dad experienced when he attended his reunions of WWII veterans. He reported that at each reunion there were fewer and fewer veterans present. They were dying off. He told me once that he had decided to forgo attending any more reunions because there were none of his buddies who were either alive or able to attend. Now he's gone as well.

We seminarians certainly didn't experience anything near the camaraderie forged in combat. Our four years of close, community living however allowed for deep relationships to develop. I did some grieving for Harry, my fellow discus thrower and classmate. Hearing of his

death contributed to a greater awareness of my own mortality. Someday, none of the seventeen - and that includes me - will be left. It is that which in part prompted me to record my memories of this seminary experience. I wished to document, in a personal way, my memories of a way of life that is no more.

I was never fond of team sports. I liked the idea of games but found that my classmates took winning far too seriously. I was up for having fun but was not interested in the vicious rivalry and competition that seemed so important to them. The *winning is everything* attitude was at odds with my notion of having fun. If I missed the fly ball hit to me in the outfield, there was some natural disappointment on my part. My teammates however vehemently expressed their anger at me as if I had let them down in a deliberate and personal way. Obviously, it wasn't very much fun. I always felt uncoordinated and was the classic *last picked for the team*. Interestingly though, it's been my informal observation that if you ask any group of people who was a *last picked for the team* person, most of the persons in the room will raise their hand! What happened to all those jocks who were always picked first or who were doing the picking? The ones who thought that winning was more important than people? It wasn't too long before I avoided the team sport thing entirely and only engaged in team sports when it was mandatory and with no way of avoiding it.

### **Knee Surgeries**

At the root of my athletic ineptitude was a congenital condition in my knees that caused pain and weakness. My legs would sometimes collapse while running. Even going up a flight of stairs became uncomfortable as bone rubbed upon bone in a gradual grinding destruction of the knee joints. Once the condition was diagnosed, I felt some relief because now I had an excuse,

medically sanctioned, to refrain from playing baseball, football, basketball and all the other team sports at which I never excelled, and whose rules and strategies seemed so mysterious to me. I had surgery on my right knee during the summer between sophomore and junior years and the left knee was done the following summer. It was a painful and miserable ordeal.

The surgeries were done at St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson, New Jersey. Summer on the seventh floor of the old, brick hospital in the middle of the city was very unpleasant. There was no air conditioning and it was miserably hot and humid. The nurses opened the windows but it did little good. There was no air movement. It was stifling and could be described by words such as sultry, muggy (*one of my mother's favorites*), or oppressive. This sweaty environment seemed to intensify post-operative surgical pain and associated discomforts.

I met a person in the hospital who had an enormous influence on my life. His name was Al and he worked the evening shift as an orderly. He was an older guy, by my standards as a teen, maybe in his 30s or 40s and he rarely spoke. He simply went about his work focusing entirely on the matter at hand. He was a godsend because he would make a point of making our beds with fresh sheets each evening. This was important because the sheets were saturated with perspiration brought about by the ninety-something degree heat and humidity, not to mention the pain of surgery. He came in each evening and in an efficient and methodical way changed my sheets and gave me a back rub with Dermassage lotion, the pleasant aroma of which I can mentally smell today. He followed this with a light dusting of powder to my back and to the sheets. Then he'd go on to the next patient and was equally caring and methodical.

After Al completed these evening ministrations, he brought around a wheeled, stainless steel cart filled with a variety of cold, canned fruit juices - and ice! My favorite juice was

pineapple, even though the canned juice always had a metallic taste to me. The pleasure of clean, dry, wrinkle-free sheets and a cold drink of pineapple juice made the evenings far more bearable.

I didn't know it at the time, but Al served as a model of caring which I incorporated in my practice of nursing. I realized that all the technical aspects of nursing which were performed by the nurses (i.e., the developing of care plans, the measuring and assessing of vital signs, the coordinating of services among the other hospital departments, etc.), though important, didn't measure up to what Al did to help me feel better. His expressions of caring via the tasks of changing my damp sheets, giving me a back rub and some cold pineapple juice each evening - those are the things I most remember about my hospital experiences. On Al's evenings off, I languished in the damp bed and looked forward to his return. His replacement did only enough to make it through the shift without getting fired - an unfortunate but common situation in many care settings.

I left the hospital with a heavy, plaster cylinder cast on the operative leg. It remained on for about six weeks, after which I had several weeks of painful physical therapy and strengthening exercises. I was left with a twelve-inch scar on each knee, visible proof to all that I was exempt from the arena of contact sports and running.

The Venard had tennis and handball courts though I didn't use them. I enjoyed using the swimming pool during the late spring and very early fall. I suppose it sounds a bit like a country club and in some respects, it was. Winter provided plenty of opportunity for recreational activities as well. The hills of eastern Pennsylvania were covered with deep snow in which we had many planned and spontaneous snowball fights. The wooded areas around the building provided good cover for skirmishes and there were times when we fought in the open, using snow banks for cover.

## **Tobogganing**

Once a year, Brother Dave would take the tractor up the hill on the other side of the road. It was the same hill upon which the school for wayward girls was located. Other than the large, fortress-like, brick and stone school, the hill was covered with grassy pasture for the cows. It had a perfect slope for sledding. It was about a quarter of a mile long from top to bottom, and with no trees. In the winter when it was covered with deep snow, Brother Dave would plow a serpentine track from the top to the bottom with three to five foot banks on each side. This was our toboggan run and it provided the most exquisite, exhilarating, and scary ride. While it was strenuous climbing to the top, the effort was well worth the ride for the five of us clinging to the long toboggan and to each other as we shot through the winding track to the bottom. Our finish line was marked by the barbed wire fence along the road. Not all runs made it that far but when they did, we all had to flatten ourselves down so we could shoot under the wire and into the ditch on the other side.

It was always a thrilling ride and of course, there was the additional thrill of being near the building that housed those mysterious and elusive wayward girls. We never saw them outside and they never used the toboggan run that Brother Dave had carved out on their hillside. We had absolutely no interaction with them. Nevertheless, they fueled our adolescent imaginations and desires. The presence of the toboggan run was the only time in which we were allowed to be on the other side of the road which marked the border between the territory of saintly seminarians and of those seductive sirens on the hill. More on the wayward girls later.

## Nuns' Day

Each year one day was set aside for nuns from all over the Scranton area to have some recreation and relaxation at the Venard. They would enjoy the beauty of the grounds and use the swimming pool, the tennis and handball courts, the baseball fields and the rowboat on the lake. We were sternly warned to remain out of sight and allow them their privacy and uninhibited play. Well, so much for that! We couldn't resist a peek!



*Nuns' Day Softball (from author)*

The sight of nuns playing softball in their habits was astonishing to all of us. As I mentioned, nuns occupied a quasi-human place in our perception to begin with. Despite this, I would have expected to see them change into more suitable attire for sports recreation. We were accustomed to this with the priests, seeing them in work clothes and recreational wear instead of their black cassocks with white collars. The nuns however lived up to our image of them as

rather alien beings, born with habits which they seemingly wore all the time – including while playing softball!

### **Basketball Team**

Like most high schools, we had our own basketball team that competed against other schools in the area. The exception was our arch rival, a Franciscan seminary in Calicoon, New York. It was a two to three-hour bus ride away. The two rival seminaries only competed once a year and the venue alternated each year. It was a big deal. As it came to pass, two of my cousins, brothers to each other, were studying for the priesthood at that Franciscan seminary. The younger of the two was a year older than me. He was on the Franciscan team and the annual game provided an opportunity for me to see him, albeit briefly. I felt special to have a visitor from out of state when it wasn't even visiting Sunday. I was once allowed to accompany the team on the bus trip to Calicoon. It felt strange to be leaving the seminary and travel to what seemed like a distant world, a foreign country - *the Land of the Franciscans*. With their brown, hooded robes fastened with a rope around the waist, they resembled versions of Friar Tuck from Robin Hood films.

Our coach was a man from the local secular community. It was very unusual to have someone from the *outside* come in and provide this type of service. Mr. O'Dey was the coach for my four years there and he was loved and respected by everyone in the school. With only one eighty or so students in the entire school, there wasn't a large pool of athletes from which to select but what we lacked in skill, we made up in spirit. Due to my limited athletic prowess, I wasn't on the team but like almost every student in the school, I always turned out for the games when they were at the Venard. While the games were exciting and allowed us to show off our

school spirit, they were a bit disappointing in that the visiting teams' cheerleaders were not permitted to accompany their teams to the seminary. Once again there was the pull and tug of our preparation for a life of celibacy against our clamoring social-sexual drives which were simply intensified by unnatural isolation from those of the feminine gender.

I frankly don't remember how we fared as a team. My most vivid recollection occurred at one of the games in which I was sitting at half-court. The ball went out of bounds and came directly to me. Amazingly, I caught it. This was by reflex, not intention or skill. I was about to throw it back onto the court when someone started chanting, "Sink it! Sink it!" My athletic ineptitude was well known and it was more of a tease than anything else. Soon though, others joined in. Then those from the opposing team were chanting as well. What could I do? Holding the ball in my hands, I slowly stepped out onto the floor at half-court. The chanting diminished and then turned to a hush. I focused on the basket and it seemed like it was at the other end of a football field! In my mind, I brought it closer and casually tossed the ball toward the basket. The ball sailed through the air as if it was in slow motion. It was one of those instances in which time seemed to stop. The gym was as silent as a tomb. Everybody's eyes were riveted on the airborne sphere as it approached the basket and then dropped through the net without even touching the backboard or the rim! Everyone, including myself, stood there in stunned, disbelieving silence for a second and then a tremendous roar went up from every person in the gym as I took a bow and calmly returned to my seat. I've never forgotten the thrill of that moment! In my later years, I've seen it as an example of getting out of the way and allowing myself to be guided and moved by my inner self. That's the part of me, the part in all of us, that refuses to engage in self-limiting thoughts such as, "I can't do this, I'm lousy at basketball." When we move with confidence and

inner tranquility, and free ourselves from doubts and fears, we can often accomplish the seemingly impossible.

## Chapter 7: Activities



*Making pizza for an Italian themed Class Dinner (author on far right) (from author)*

### **Trips to the Big City**

The coal industry had made Scranton a thriving city. After the second World War, the use of coal began to decline. When I was there in the 1960s, the city appeared to be dirty, depressed, and deteriorating. Still, for us living out of town in a rural area, Scranton was perceived as the *big city*. We'd go to the city at least one Saturday a month. Occasionally we'd catch a ride with one of the priests or brothers if he happened to be headed into the city on his own business. This was never a sure thing. They weren't available or willing to simply provide us with transportation to and from Scranton - understandably, as Saturday was considered their day off as well. So, if we couldn't get a ride in this manner we'd walk to Clarks Summit and then hitchhike into Scranton.

We always longed to go to the city but in truth, once we got there the question always arose: *what do we do now?* We'd eventually find something to make the trip worthwhile. Sometimes we'd just hang out at a diner and drink coffee and smoke cigarettes. The book stores

were always of interest to us. Sometimes we'd see a movie. I saw the film *Alfie* there when it was first released. There was a shop that sold Catholic paraphernalia such as crucifixes, statues, and rosary beads. We would stop there and maybe get something new to place on our beds. We had this practice of placing a cross, crucifix or laminated picture of Jesus, Mary, or one of the saints on our neatly made beds in the dormitories. We were always on the lookout for something new and religiously chic.

Sometimes we'd go to the city for musical performances. I recall the rapturous experience of hearing a live symphony for the first time. The latest advances in hi-fi recordings had in no way prepared me for what I experienced in that concert house. We would sometimes go to the college in Scranton and attend lectures and presentations of various sorts. I have a newspaper photograph of myself and others from our class attending a speech by James Farmer, a well-known speaker and activist for civil rights at the time. These were not official school trips. Many of us were personally motivated to get informed and involved in the civil rights struggle of the day.

We'd sometimes spend the entire day in Scranton and would hitchhike back to the seminary in the late afternoon. We rarely took the bus. Though there was a bus station in the city, it was right in keeping with the stereotype. It was dark, filthy, uncomfortable, and frequented by grizzly men who hung out in the bathroom or slept on the benches - and who would bother you for money or more personal services. It was very cold in there during the winter. We had to use the bus station mostly when we took the bus to New York for vacations. It may have been that the infrequent Scranton-Clarks Summit run didn't work for our schedule, or we didn't want to pay the fare. Instead, for our day trips to Scranton, we almost always hitchhiked and never had difficulty getting rides.

## **The Radio Room**

I had heard about the Radio Club at the Venard even before I arrived there. I learned the Morse code in the Boy Scouts but wasn't proficient enough to use it conversationally. I began to diligently review the code in preparation for obtaining a radio license. When I arrived at the Venard I discovered that the Radio Room was one of the rooms in the bell tower and it housed a large black transceiver and plenty of other radio gear salvaged from World War II. The small room became stiflingly hot due to the heat produced by the vacuum tubes and other gear. The Venard's call letters were K3KSQ. With a Novice ham license, which I obtained in freshman year, I could transmit and receive messages, in Morse code, on the east coast from Nova Scotia to Florida. To this day, I remember the thrill of being hunched over the telegraph key and sending the message "CQ, CQ", an invitation to others scanning the band to respond to my broadcast. These letters were purportedly from the words "(I) seek you" though I can't say for sure about that.

When contact was made and reception was good, a decent conversation in the *dits* and *dahs* of Morse code was possible. The best quality of reception was rated as 5x5 as in, "I'm reading you 5x5". This meant that both the strength and the clarity of the transmission were at its best, a variation on the familiar "I'm reading you loud and clear". I could contact other ham radio operators and it was a way to travel beyond the confines of the seminary. I spent innumerable hours in that hot, cramped room which was crammed with radio equipment. Nevertheless, I loved it and had a substantial collection of QRS Cards. These were customized postcards that operators would exchange via mail after radio contact was made. Many of them

were glossy and of an unusual or humorous design and each had the call letters and location of the station from which it was sent.

### **The Blackout of '64**

One afternoon in the winter of 1964, I was working in the radio room. At the time, I was not transmitting or receiving but constructing an oscillator which, when used with a telegraph key, would produce an audible tone for practicing Morse code. I was always seeking to improve the speed and accuracy of sending and receiving the *dits* and *dahs* to reduce frustration for myself and the more experienced ham radio operators with whom I would converse on the air.

I had just soldered the final connections and plugged the unit into the electrical socket. I turned it on but could hear nothing. I lowered my ear to the small speaker to hear if the unit was producing any sound at all. As I bent closer, I accidentally touched one of the exposed electrical wires with my ear and received a small electric shock. At that very instant, the power went out and the room was cast into gloom as only a small amount of light was coming in through the small tower window. The electric shock was startling though not painful. I figured I had blown a fuse and I would have to replace it. I found a flashlight and went to the fuse box where I found that all the fuses were intact. There wasn't a blown fuse after all. This was puzzling so I went down to the recreation room and learned from others that the power to the entire building was out. I started to get a little nervous, as I believed that when I shocked my ear, I somehow affected the electrical system in the entire building. I kept my mouth shut.

I hurried over to the brothers' residence to get some help, and further discovered that the power was out over there as well! Now my nervousness escalated and I was starting to get scared. I couldn't say anything about my being the one responsible for the power outage! Brother

Paul found a battery-powered radio and we discovered, to my silent and increasing horror, that not only was the electrical power out at the seminary, but it was out on a sizable portion of the entire northeast! There was a huge blackout affecting millions of people. Now I was *really* scared! I felt responsible for causing the power to fail on the eastern seaboard and my still tingling ear clearly incriminated me, at least in my own mind. I couldn't tell anyone. I felt as if a physical force was pressing down upon me and I fully understood the meaning of the phrase *weight of responsibility*. Power throughout the whole northeast was out - and I did it!

It turned out that at the very moment my ear touched the hot wire in the radio room, there was a failure in a transformer somewhere when a bird struck a wire and caused a short. That caused a local failure which then caused the northeast coast grid to fail in a domino-like manner. I hadn't done it at all! I can't describe the relief that I felt. I thought I was really in big trouble. It was just a coincidence that I shocked myself at the exact moment the grid failed. I was so relieved when I realized that I hadn't caused the *Blackout of '64* after all.

Since that time, I have always been intrigued by the synchronicity of events. That is, seemingly unrelated events that occur simultaneously and about which we make a connection. Another example might be the time I gingerly, and foolishly, stepped out on the frozen lake. Brother Dave hadn't done his testing yet so I wasn't sure the ice was safe. It could have been weak ice. At the very moment I ventured out on the ice, a jet flying overhead broke the sound barrier and created a sonic boom. Of course, I reflexively assumed that it was the ice breaking beneath me! I realize now that there is a relationship between these events though not a causal relationship. I've noticed this phenomenon many times in my life and I'm always amazed and delighted by it.

## **The Automotive Chicken Coop**

The Mechanics Club was in an old, unused chicken coop down by the barn. Roosting there, a coupe within a coop, was a '30s or '40s vintage Chevy. It hadn't been on the road in years. Instead, that old Chevy was the object of all manner of dismantling and reassembly, adjusting and readjusting, and examining and experimenting. Its carcass, not unlike a donated cadaver at a medical school, provided us with an opportunity to learn about automotive anatomy and physiology. We changed the sparkplugs, adjusted the carburetor, and performed other feats of unneeded maintenance. We banged our fingers, scraped our knuckles, and got grease under our fingernails. It was guy stuff. None of us had licenses to drive yet, and this broken-down wreck wasn't about to go anyplace. It was a vehicle of our imaginations, the car of our dreams taking us down the highway to adventures unknown. To this day, the odor of gasoline on my hands instantly takes me back to the automotive chicken coop in eastern Pennsylvania.

## **The Abandoned Railroad Tunnel**

Once a year in the spring, we would do our customary several mile walk to a long-abandoned railroad tunnel. It had been blasted clear through a mountain about a hundred years earlier. It was always an adventure and it included the alluring elements of exploration and danger. The last half-mile of the hike to the tunnel was along the old, no-longer-used railroad tracks. The area was overgrown with brush so we would walk on the ties that were half-buried and half-sticking out of the ground. This was always awkward because the distance between the ties made for a gait that was either unnaturally long or unnaturally short. The long unused rail bed led us into the maw of a tunnel that had been blasted through a half-mile of solid rock.

As I see myself standing in front of the entrance, I remember weighing two opposing feelings. First, was the overwhelming excitement of exploring the dark and mysterious unknown. It was very seductive. Second, was the more sensible feeling of fear about entering the dark and admittedly dangerous passageway through the mountain of rock. Our adolescent spirit of adventure always won out and with a flourish of bravado, we entered the tunnel.

It was noticeably cold in there compared to the warm, spring air on the outside. The brilliant light from the entrance faded and soon the opening became a mere speck far behind us. A little farther on and that speck of light became obscured by a curve in the passageway. It was as dark as could be. Light could not be seen from either end. The solid rock walls intensified the sound of icy water dripping through cracks in the roof above us. As this was a tunnel meant for the use of trains, the roof was high and we didn't have to stoop as we made our way. With the aid of flashlights, we carefully picked our way around and over huge boulders and slabs of rock that had fallen over the years from above. We all had the same thought and yet for a long time no one would say it. Then, finally, one timid voice could be heard saying something like, "Hey, Guys, maybe this isn't such a good idea." Uncharacteristically, we never made fun of the person who expressed the doubt. Instead, we quickly murmured in agreement. Once the heretofore unspoken fear had been articulated, there was a release of tension and it felt a little better. But....when half-way through, you just can't stay there. So, we soldiered on - just as we did every year.

We endeavored to proceed as quietly as possible, fearing that a loud noise might release loosened rock from above. As we walked around or clambered over them, our flashlights would cast monstrous shadows on the irregular rock walls. I experienced the interior of the tunnel as a dense, oppressive heaviness as if I could feel the weight of millions of tons of mountain pressing down upon me. I could hear the dripping of water from all around as it trickled through cracks in

the rock. Naturally the notion of cracks in the rock ceiling didn't impart a high degree of comfort. I began to imagine the screaming headlines:

## **TUNNEL CAVE-IN TRAGEDY**

### **Seminarians Squashed like Bugs**

I kept those thoughts to myself.

As if this wasn't enough, the floor and surfaces of the tunnel were covered with a layer of ice which was covered with a thin layer of the constantly dripping water. This made the passage slippery and treacherous. Second thoughts about the wisdom of this adventure led to third and even fourth thoughts. *Should we turn back or press on? What happens if the flashlight goes out? What happens if a part of the rock ceiling breaks off and off and squashes or blocks us in?* Those of us who had made the journey before bolstered the flagging courage of those who had not.

Then, finally, someone would spot a pinpoint of light far ahead. Our hearts and our pace would quicken as we followed that beacon. I totally understood the full meaning of the proverbial *light at the end of the tunnel*. The pinpoint gradually enlarged as we progressed toward the tunnel opening. We finally stepped out of the darkness into the safe, warm sunshine. It was like being born into a bright, warm world! It was a high unlike any I've ever experienced.

The adventure within the mountain could easily be seen as a rite of passage. It was an opportunity to intentionally place ourselves under conditions of subterranean darkness, danger, coldness, wetness, and fear. Why? To go through the dark experience and come out the other side into the light. The benefits were not only experienced at that moment but became part of the fabric of who we are as individuals. Now. As a rite of passage, the benefits contributed to our sense of developing manhood by expressing courage in the face of danger. It also captured the

practice of self-reliance, leadership, and the older generation teaching and guiding the younger. These are all essential elements in the rite of passage rituals in primitive cultures. Now we have little to mark the transition between boyhood and manhood. Some say that explains why we have so many men in our society behaving like children.

The passage through the tunnel provided a challenge, a test, an ordeal that we intuitively knew we needed as part of our development. Yes, it was stupidly dangerous. I would never allow my children to do such a dangerous thing. But, once again, it was a different time. At this time, for public safety, the abandoned railroad tunnel must surely be closed off with fencing or concrete or some other tamper-proof barrier. And that's the way it should be (*this is the responsible adult speaking*). Nevertheless, I'm glad we did it. We survived it, and like going to a scary movie, we loved it. It was a birthing of sorts, passing through the dark tunnel into the light. It felt good to be alive!

## **Movie Night**

Once a month we would gather in the auditorium for a movie. Ron and I were the projectionists. One of our responsibilities was to set up the auditorium before the show. This included lowering the huge screen with a rope that would allow a cylinder, on which the screen was rolled, to descend. When not in use, it would be rolled up again and out of sight. The movies were selected by the priests. Naturally, all the selections were wholesome. They consisted of westerns, musicals, and religiously themed films such as *The Song of Bernadette*, *Lilies of the Fields*, *Spartacus*, and *Ben Hurr*. Ron and I set up the projector with the large reels of film, carefully threaded the film strip so that the sprockets engaged the holes on both sides, flipped the switch, and hoped for the best.

We hoped for the best because it wasn't unusual for the film to break or come off the track, or for a projector bulb to burn out. Sometimes a collection of dust would cause a large, twitching black shadow on the screen. At those times, we would have to turn off the projector and turn on the overhead lights. This invariably elicited a chorus of groans and boos from the audience (*as if it was our fault!*). When this happened, Ron and I worked as an efficient team, willing ourselves to be oblivious to the taunting of the crowd. It reminded me of the controlled frenzy of a pit stop at the racetrack. We solved and corrected the problem while tuning out the sounds of derision from the annoyed audience. When we thought we had taken care of the problem, we'd turn off the lights, cross our fingers, and turn on the projector. It was always a relief when we could correct the problem on the first try. Sometimes we would have to repeat the procedure, however. We tried to work as quickly and efficiently as possible despite the escalating agitation of the audience. It was a good opportunity to learn the skill of tuning out distractions and focusing on a complex problem, correcting it with skill and precision. This experience came in handy years later when I worked on the Paterson Fire Department ambulance in New Jersey. Arriving at the chaotic scene of an accident, it was important to get the overall picture and skillfully assess and tend to the injured or dying while tuning out the distractions of the inevitable crowds of onlookers and kibitzers.

### **Midnight at the Graveyard**

One Saturday in the early fall, while hiking through the woods about three miles from the seminary grounds, several of us came upon an old stone wall. It was the type of wall that farmers would build with the abundant harvest of stones from a plowed field. There was no farmer's field in sight however. This stone wall was in the middle of the woods, far from any other sign of

human habitation. There was a deep layer of dried and crackling leaves underfoot. At first glance, the pile of stones didn't even look like a wall. It had tumbled down in so many places that it took some exploration to discover it was a rectangular enclosure in bad repair. Huge trees, just as large as those growing outside the walled area grew within. There was no sign that anyone had been here in many, many years. There was no remnant of a road. There was no trash or disturbance to the area. The walled enclosure could easily have been overlooked and probably had been for a very long time. We just happened to stumble upon it.

As we ventured within the walled area, we discovered gravestones. It dawned on us that this was an old, community cemetery, long forgotten in the middle of the woods. Nearly all the headstones had toppled over and were badly eroded. Many were covered with lichens and many years' accumulation of leaves. It was difficult to read the weathered inscriptions on many. We could decipher enough to discover that the dates went back to the early 1800s. This was an exciting discovery for us! I remember noting that the life spans of the graves' adult occupants were very short by the standards of one hundred and fifty years later. We were unable to find any stones of a man or woman over the age of fifty. Some of the markers had a cause of death chiseled into them. Some succumbed to fire, some to fever, several women died in childbirth. There were many small markers with the names of infants and children. Life spans were shorter for them too and many infants and children died at a heartbreakingly early age. There were several of the interred who shared last names, family members, long ago buried near their kin.

I can't say whether it was psychological or metaphysical, but the space within the crumbling wall had a feeling to it that was different from what we felt outside the wall. We all spoke in hushed tones as if we didn't want to disturb the dead whose bones lay beneath the tumbled headstones, perhaps the only lingering sign of their brief lives on earth. It was hollowed

ground and it made its impact on us. We agreed to experience this place during the full moon near the end of the month. Coincidentally, that would have been around All Souls Day and Halloween

We successfully kept the news of our discovery a secret. We made our plans. About three weeks later, on the night of the full moon, six of us quietly gathered our clothes while the others in the dormitory slept. Each of us arranged extra clothing under the bed's blankets to create the impression of a sleeper. We crept down to the first floor and changed into our clothes. Then, with the essentials: flashlights and cigarettes, we ventured out into the moonlit landscape. It was nearly midnight. In the open, the flashlights weren't needed as the moon provided plenty of cold, ghostly illumination. It is amazing to me that sunlight is reflected off the dust and rocks of the moon's surface yet provides such a degree of illumination at such a distance! It has always amazed me, particularly when you consider that rocks and craters don't provide much of a reflective surface. Anyway, when we entered the woods, the lights were needed to prevent tripping over rocks and the roots of towering trees. There was no path, but we had a general idea of where we were headed. There was plenty of nervous laughter and teasing as we made our way through the woods, walking the two or three miles to our eerie destination.

The moonlit night altered recognizable landmarks. We lost our way in the woods and the trek took longer than it should have. We finally stumbled upon the site around 2 a.m. We became very quiet. This is what we had waited for during the past three weeks. It was indeed very spooky - even more than we had imagined. The moonlight shone through the branches of the trees and illuminated some of the bone-white gravestones. It made them appear to glow faintly. The illumination was like the ghostly glow-in-the-dark numerals on a watch. We had the feeling that we were not only surrounded by the dead, but that the unique circumstances of being in the

dark graveyard during the full moon, at midnight, on All Souls Night, might very well summon the long dead from their peaceful slumber. We were terrified, but this was what we wanted - to put ourselves in a position of being frightened and exhilarated at the same time.

We drew strength from our number. I could not ever imagine being there alone under those circumstances. So, here we were, all six of us nervously hovering in the throes of ambivalence. On one hand, we wanted to see some supernatural or paranormal phenomenon but at the same time, we were desperately praying that we would encounter nothing of the sort! In our collective bravado, we agreed to enter the walled area, remain there for sixty minutes - not a minute less - and then leave. We couldn't bring ourselves to venture into the interior of the graveyard, so we all found spots on the crumbled wall and sat there and waited. We chain-smoked cigarettes and made nervous comments to each other. We waited. The noises of the night took on immense proportions and ominous overtones. We waited. The autumn breeze caressed the skin of our faces as if we were experiencing the cold, ethereal kisses of the dead. We still waited. Someone would make a comment and we'd all nervously laugh. The aroma of layer upon layer of damp, rotting leaves on the forest floor wafted to our nostrils, assailing us with images of rotting flesh falling off the bones of those buried beneath our feet. Still, we waited.

The hands of our wristwatches seemed to indicate that we were in some sort of temporal black hole. Time itself seemed to be swallowed up in the darkness. The agreed upon hour stretched out to what seemed like several. Finally, at precisely sixty minutes, not a minute before, and certainly not a minute after, we clambered off the wall and left as quickly as we could. We hadn't really seen anything supernatural but the relief we felt at leaving the place was palpable. As we hurried away, the abandoned cemetery seemed to have us in its grip. The leafless branches of the trees seemed to beckon us to return and even to hold us back. The roots

seemed to emerge from the earth and trip us as if no matter how hard we tried and how quickly we ran, we couldn't get away. Finally, we left the woods and entered the safety of the open fields. The moonlit seminary in the distance was a welcome sight. After smoking a few more cigarettes, we all made our way back up to the dormitory. Our absence had not been discovered. It was 5 a.m. As I climbed into bed, my heart seemed to be beating loud enough to wake the other sleepers in the dorm. I couldn't sleep at all and was still wide awake at the ringing of the 6 a.m. bell.

### **The Orphanage**

Many of my Sunday afternoons during junior and senior years were spent volunteering at Our Lady of Fatima Orphanage about fifteen miles from the seminary. I routinely hitchhiked there in all kinds of weather and fortunately never had much of a wait before getting a ride. We, of course, had been repeatedly warned about the dangers of hitchhiking. If we were headed to Scranton, we could walk to Clarks Summit and get a bus, though we usually opted to hitchhike instead. For local destinations other than Scranton, there was no other option but to rely on our thumbs.

I had only one instance of hitchhiking trouble in what could have been a disaster. After thumbing for about twenty minutes, four guys picked me up. They were in their early twenties, were unshaven and wore leather jackets. One sported a bandana around his stringy, long hair. They were drinking beer, lots of it judging by the empty bottles rattling around on the floor of the car. They offered me one and I declined, telling them that I was from the seminary. I thought it might help. It didn't. They took delight in teasing this clean cut, naive seminarian. I knew this could turn into a dangerous situation. I had heard about it. I had been warned about it. Yet, here I

was, smack in the middle of it. In my mind's eye, I could visualize the glaring newspaper headline:

**HITCHHIKING SEMINARIAN FOUND DEAD**  
**Photos too Gruesome to Print**  
*Knew He Shouldn't - But Hitchhiked Anyway*

The car sped along, veering sometimes this way, sometimes that. I kept my cool. I good-naturedly went along with their teasing about not getting laid and about all the fun I was missing. I made myself as friendly and likable as possible and was very assertive about where I had to be let off. They did indeed pull off to the side of the road. They let me out after a few final insults and brays of laughter. They went on their way, weaving off into the distance. Other than this one instance (*and no harm came of it*), I never had a problem hitchhiking. I enjoyed meeting people who were on the move, going to and from places to which I had never been. Most folks were intrigued that I was a seminarian and they were very curious and respectful. I always spoke highly of my seminary experience because that's the way I genuinely felt about it.

When I was hitchhiking to the orphanage, I would direct the driver to let me off along the side of the highway at a place I knew. It wasn't a natural stopping place but it was the shortest walking distance to my destination. I then had to cross over both lanes of the highway, climb over the guardrail, and then make my way over some rough terrain to reach the road that led to the orphanage. St. Joseph's was an imposing brick building on top of a nearly treeless hill. In this respect, it bore a strong resemblance to the school for wayward girls, our neighbor and object of fascination and fantasy. The orphanage, like the school, was run by nuns. They had called the Venard seeking seminarians who might volunteer and serve in a *big brother* capacity. I volunteered and it became a regular routine for many of my Sunday afternoons.

I felt comfortable right from the start. I'd take up to a dozen kids from eight to ten years old for short hikes or tobogganing. Sometimes I'd bring my guitar and we'd do a sing-a-long. I developed an affection for those kids that was fueled by the passion of adolescence. I was particularly close to three brothers. The oldest brother was ten. He had two younger brothers who were identical twins and eight years old. They weren't technically orphans, i.e., without a father and mother. Their mother had died. Their father was in the Merchant Marines and was out at sea much of the time. That's how they, and their two older sisters, came to be at St. Joseph's. This was a wonderful time of my life. It was a time in which I experienced a caring which nourished the kids and myself as well. It was good. It was wholesome. Their father remarried soon after I graduated. The kids had moved in with their new step-mom at the Jersey shore. I visited there once. Their new mom seemed wonderful and as far as I know, the story had a happy ending. I still picture those kids at the age I knew them. Of course, now they would be in their fifties!

In thinking back about my experience with these kids, I realized it exemplified a universal phenomenon. Throughout our lives most persons we meet engage with us for a while, and they move on - or we do. Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances;". On this stage, many actors enter from stage-left or stage-right. Most are minor characters with whom we have only brief or superficial contact. They either move off-stage shortly or remain in the background. Some may touch us only briefly, and yet touch us deeply. But then, they are gone, never to be seen again on this earthly stage. Who among us has not been touched in this temporary but powerful way? Teachers, childhood friends, lovers, neighbors long moved away, may touch us deeply. Then they are gone. The evidence of their existence reduced to impermanent photographs or unreliable memories.

The influence of these fleeting relationships changes us somehow and always remains a part of who we are. We are who we are due in large part to the other travelers we've met along the journey. This notion has allowed me to bring some comfort to the many dying patients I've worked with in hospitals, nursing homes, or in the homes of hospice patients in which I was providing care. Many, weary of the devastating effects of illness on themselves and their families, have said to me, "Why am I still alive? Why can't I die and be at peace?" My reply to them has always been the same: "I can't say why you haven't moved on. I can say however, that in our meeting, my life has been touched by you, and changed by knowing you. If for no other reason, your life has meaning because my life has been affected for the better by you. For this, I am grateful."

### **Arkon**

Even within the monastic confines of the seminary, a spirit of entrepreneurship and free enterprise expressed itself. Bill, my classmate, and I saw a need and attempted to fill it. The details of the endeavor were mostly developed by Bill who seemingly had a knack for business. He had the ability to see the angles and to wheel and deal. If I see a need, I find joy in filling it for its own sake. Whereas Bill had the ability to see the need, find someone else to fill it, and make a profit. You can probably imagine how this turned out: he did the thinking, and I did the work.

We saw the need to provide a service that would, for a price, produce typed copies of term papers, theatrical programs, and other school related publications. We called our business **Arkon**. It had no meaning but it sounded corporate and innovative. Our biggest job was a

booklet that we produced for Father Knipe, our French and Music Appreciation teacher. It was a collection of short biographies of composers and was used for his Music Appreciation class.

This was the age of the mimeograph, the magic machine that could produce a near infinite number of identical copies from a master template. This was before the invention of the photocopier and computer. The original or master was typed on a dark blue sheet that had a white paper backing. The typewriter ribbon had to be moved out of the way and as a key was sharply depressed and released, it would punch out the letter in the blue sheet. This would allow the white background to show through so the text could be read.

When an error was made (*and I made plenty with my hunt and peck style of typing*) it could only be corrected with the application of a liquid which came in a small bottle that resembled a bottle of fingernail polish. The small brush would apply some of the fluid over the error. The fluid had a strong odor and would probably satisfy a glue sniffer very well. It would fill in the letter-shaped gap that had been punched out of the master. After taking a minute to dry, the correct letters and text could be typed over the newly repaired surface. This was a far cry from hitting the Delete or Backspace keys on a computer keyboard. In this technology, each error needed to be painstakingly identified and then filled in and re-typed. The corrections never had the same quality as the uncorrected type. The characteristic pale blue letters on the finished copies would often reveal the corrected letters or text as thicker, or darker, or crooked, or smudged, or vertically or horizontally misaligned.

After the master copy was completed, it was separated from the white paper background and the blue sheet was fastened to the drum on the mimeograph machine that was kept in the Printing Room. It was no more than a large closet and was filled with **A.B. Dick** cartons containing reams of paper and jugs of printing medium. Many mimeograph machines had a hand

crank which would slide a piece of paper from a tray where it would come in contact with the drum as it rolled over the paper, leaving an impression of blue ink which oozed through the letter-shaped holes in the blue master. The machine I used was electrically powered. As with any printing procedure, the process was plagued with complications such as paper jams or running out of printing fluid. It was also a challenge completing the job without being overcome by the chemical fumes!

While 90% of our printing jobs on the mimeograph machine used the standard blue colored ink, there was the opportunity to use red or green inks for special publications that warranted the addition of the visually appealing colored inks. This was a discouragingly labor intensive process, however. The change to an alternate color necessitated a thorough cleaning of the machine to remove all trace of the previously used and now unwanted color. Then another master needed to be typed containing only those words that would appear in the red or green. These isolated words had to be perfectly positioned so they would appear in exactly the right place within the blue text. This was not an effortless process. In the initial run of the blue copies, there were blank spaces where the colored words needed to be. After removing the first master template, cleaning the machine, affixing the second template, and filling it with the colored fluid, the pile of papers would be run through the machine again, this time printing the red or green colored words in the correct place. The process needed to be repeated if both red and green were being used in the document.

As you can see, this printing took a great deal of time and I spent many Saturdays inhaling fumes in the cramped Printing Room. I became discouraged about my loss of free time. The final blow came when I proudly presented the copies of the Music Appreciation booklets to Father Knipe, only to have him criticize an error which he immediately spotted. I had

alphabetically listed composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov as *Korsakov*, *Rimsky*. We never used his first name and he was always referred to simply as Rimsky-Korsakov. I mistakenly thought Rimsky was the composer's first name. Maybe it wasn't such a big deal but I took the imperfect product as a personal failure. I enjoyed every aspect of the technical process from beginning to end but perhaps it's like the old story of turning a hobby into a business. Much of the joy is taken away. And I was simply trying to do too much! I put an end to it.

I learned a few things through this endeavor. For example, I learned about the printing process and principles of layout design. I learned that I didn't like being involved in a joint enterprise where I was the only one doing the work! I learned that my tendency towards perfectionism, though admirable in some respects, induced me to spend my Saturdays working long hours while I could have been down at the café doing important stuff like drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes! Thus, **Arkon** faded into corporate history and I began to enjoy my free time again.

### **Hike to Bell Mountain**

Our spring hike was always to the abandoned railroad tunnel. In the fall, we made a hike across the valley to Bell Mountain directly east from the Venard. Now that I've lived in Alaska and Washington, I would never consider it a mountain. I suppose they were foothills of the Pocono Mountains. We made the annual trek in the fall because the ground was dry and firm after the hot summer. In the spring, there was too much of a problem with a stream, soft ground, and mud in the valley floor. And since it was early October, the leaves on the trees were at their peak of color. It was gorgeous!

The area there was either forested or very rural so we didn't run into many people. There was no road or direct route so the hike involved crossing steams and farmers' fences. When we did run into other people, we would always mention that we were from the seminary. They would often remark that they could hear the pealing of the bell from our tower at various times throughout the day. They said the clarity of the distant sound of the bell was very much affected by the wind and weather. Each person always mentioned how pleasant it was to hear the bell ringing across the valley. I always thought of that when I had the honor of pulling on that long rope attached to the clapper way up in the bell tower above. Sometimes I pulled a little harder in an effort to project the sound of the huge bell to those we met on our hikes across the valley.

The climb up the mountain on the opposite side of the valley was steep and rocky. We might have turned back if not for the tradition of maintaining the ten-foot cross at the top. It had originally been planted there by Venard seminarians in years past. It could just barely be seen across the valley from the seminary itself. It had become an annual tradition to hike across the valley and up the opposite side in order to maintain the cross. We would straighten it if it was sagging, or perhaps retie the rope that lashed the horizontal beam to the upright post. Naturally, from that vantage we could see the Venard on the other side of the valley. It was a beautiful sight seeing the building, our home, nestled among the fields and forest on the other side.

### **Annual Trip to the Poconos**

Once a year, in the late spring, we would pile into rented buses and travel to a resort area in the Pocono Mountains. It was one of the high points of the year and a wonderful way to welcome the warm weather and end the school year. The trip there, lasting about two hours, was upbeat and filled with anticipation and tortuous choruses of "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the

Wall". The trip back was always much more subdued. This was due to pure exhaustion and to the severe sunburns we had each sustained. This was the first all day outing of the year and we were all *white as apple pie* as the saying goes. Much of the day was spent on the lake, either swimming, or in canoes, or both. Sunscreen was not in use then and the rays of the sun would strike us directly as well as indirectly by reflecting off the water. This subjected us to a high dose of damaging radiation. Who knew the long-term effects of this damage to the skin then? For us, the sunburn was simply a rite of passage into summer. Each of us knew that the painfully burned skin would be miserable for two or three days, and then simply irritatingly itchy after that. The painful burn, the itching and then the peeling sheets of skin were necessary steps in being able to spend even longer time in the sun for the duration of the summer. Of course, now we know more about the cumulative damage done to the skin by the sun. But then, it was a more innocent time. On this first spring outing, we swam, paddled, splashed, hiked, and picnicked our way out of the cold winter and into the hot days of summer.

My sophomore year's Pocono trip was particularly memorable as it was then that I purchased a *Whoopee Cushion*. The bus stopped at a novelty shop near the resort and my sophomoric nature wouldn't allow me to resist the purchase. The cushion provoked both profane invectives and gales of laughter for the remainder of the school year. During summer vacation, my family was also subjected to the flatulent sounds emanating from beneath their seat cushions as they sat in various chairs around the house. I diligently experimented with the proper placement and inflation to achieve the maximum effect. Oh, what a joker I was! Armed with my *Whoopee Cushion* and my plastic vomit, I was a riot.

## Chapter 8: Sexuality

Well, finally! This is where I get to tell you about all the scandalous sexual practices within the seminary! Some of you may have even turned to this chapter first (*it's OK, we're all curious about sex*) in hopes of reading tales of adolescent boys engaged in lusty sexual experimentation with each other and with the priests, brothers - and even the nuns!!..... Well, forget about it! The truth is, during my four years at the Venard, I was not aware of any sexual activity like that. Did it occur? Possibly, human nature being what it is. But if so, it was not openly discussed and I never had any knowledge of it myself. There was one instance involving a student and one of the brothers in which there were snickers and looks of *we know what they're up to* - as if everybody knew what they were up to. I didn't know anybody who actually knew what they *were* up to, if anything. That's all there was to it and I never heard anything more about it.

The nature of community life made it difficult to keep secrets. We all lived so close together twenty-four hours a day. There was little privacy, yet as we know, imagination is the only limitation to finding a secluded place for a tryst. So, I can see where something could have happened - but not often. It would soon be discovered by others. Call me naive or out of the loop but I just don't think much sexual activity like that went on. The expression of sexuality with others was either a non-issue, or a well-hidden secret. But after all, we *are* sexual beings and that drive continuously seeks to be expressed in imaginative ways. So, that said, let me see what tidbits I can serve up.

## The Wayward Girls

Even though we were mostly surrounded by fields and woods, there was another institution directly across the road from the seminary. It was on an adjacent hill, and the distance from our building to theirs was about a quarter of a mile. It was a large brick and stone building clearly visible due to the absence of trees near the building. The institution was called Lourdesmont but was known informally as *the school for wayward girls*.



*From the tower looking north: Lourdesmont (top), Venard convent and barn (foreground)*  
(Photo by Tony Kaliton, 1959)

Now, I'm pretty sure many of us had only a hazy notion of what a wayward girl was - but we knew enough. It was something naughty, disobedient, sexual, and something very enticing. During my four years at the Venard, we would sometimes imagine how it might be possible to sneak up there and maybe find a way to meet a wayward girl. In truth, I never knew anyone who did go up there illicitly. I vaguely recall hearing about specially selected seminarians who were

directed to accompany one of our priests who would go there to say Mass. The seminarian was there in the roll of altar boy. I can tell you I was never selected for this duty, and those who had, kept mum about it for some reason.

Lourdesmont seemed as inaccessible as a castle on a hill. It was as if there was an invisible force field or maybe an alligator-infested moat around the place to keep us away. For us seminarians (*and let's not forget - we were also adolescent boys*), the allure was very strong but it was too high a price to pay. If caught, it meant instant dismissal from the seminary. It also meant facing the wrath of the Lourdesmont nuns who secured the place like the Swiss Guard protecting the Pope!

One glorious spring day, I was trimming grass near the entrance to the seminary. This was directly across the road from the driveway that led up to the girls' school, about a quarter of a mile away at the very top of the hill. I tried to look busy, but I was actually observing a car coming down the driveway toward the road where I was working. There was a driver and a passenger, both nuns, in the front. Of course, any vehicle from the mysterious girls' school on the hill was an object of scrutiny by the seminarians. As the car was coming down the driveway toward me, I couldn't be sure if there were any passengers in the back. The car slowed down as it approached the bottom of the hill where it would then make a right turn onto Venard Road, the road to Clarks Summit. As the vehicle approached the road, I could see two teenage girls sitting in the back seat. I knew immediately that I was having my first, and most likely *only* glimpse of two, live wayward girls! The vehicle came to a full stop at the bottom of the driveway. As it did, I realized that the two nuns were glaring at me - as only nuns can. And I thought I was being so cool as I was scrutinizing the interior of their vehicle while trying to look like I was really focused on my grass clipping.

As the vehicle started to move again and slowly make that right turn onto the road, I could see the two wayward girls more clearly. For a moment, I thought they might be looking back at me. Not only that, but I thought they were smiling at me! Yes, I thought they must be checking me out! Then at the apex of this fleeting encounter, they waved to me!..... At least I *think* they did. You see, they had to do this furtively so as not to alert the nuns in the front seat.....Well, yes, I'm sure they waved to me! Of course, I was a little bit in shock. I very nearly cut my finger off with the grass clippers! A sighting of this kind was very, very rare. Even though the two schools were across the road from each other, each was on its own hilltop. They could have been castles of neighboring fiefdoms, each isolated and without commerce or interaction of any sort. Despite my shock however, I clearly remember those wayward girls looking out the window and smiling at me!..... Yes, I'm sure of it..... Both of them,,,,,,I think they were.....Yes, they could have been.....Yes, they were!

Well, even if they weren't smiling at me, the sighting of not only one, but a pair of wayward girls was a rare occurrence. As soon as the manual labor period was over I regaled my friends with all the details I could muster - and then some. Truly, there was little need for embellishment as the incident, as it occurred, didn't require any. I enjoyed celebrity status for a few days - and rightly so! I mean, I was almost.... nearly..... just about..... in the back seat of a car with two wayward girls! If it only wasn't for those darn nuns. Well, other than that one glimpse through the window of the moving car, I had no other contact with any wayward girls other than that which occurred in my fantasies.

Our interest in the wayward girls was fueled by our developing sexuality. And that development was being ignored. Our teachers did not openly discuss sexual issues. The reproductive system, male and female, were curiously omitted from any discussion of the human

body in hygiene class. Sex was almost always touched upon obliquely and discussed in association with sinfulness and shame. Sexual activity was viewed as a necessary evil designed exclusively to procreate so there would be future generations to worship and glorify God.

I once asked Father Ratermann in Latin class about the origin of our English word “sex”. I sincerely reasoned that *sex* is the Latin word for the number six and since the Sixth Commandment dealt with adultery, perhaps that might be the origin of our word "sex". Well you would have thought I was asking for the combination to the lock on the Vatican Treasury vault! He didn't answer the question and it was imperiously dismissed. I don't blame Fr. Ratermann. The seminary culture was one in which issues of sexuality were simply not discussed.

The efforts to suppress and ignore issues of sexuality by the faculty at the seminary created an unnatural environment for developing adolescents. Sexuality was confused with sexual activity and they certainly didn't want any of *that* going on. After all, in addition to all the weird ideas we as a culture have about sexuality, you can imagine what it was like in a monastic environment where celibacy was a cherished value.

The priests never talked about sex or sexuality. Perhaps it was a case of *if we simply ignore it, we won't have to deal with it*. Somewhat like the thinking behind “Don't ask, don't tell,” there is a curious notion that if we simply don't talk about something, it somehow is not an issue - or it doesn't even exist!

Now I found it curious that the nuns at St. Anthony's would frequently warn about impure thoughts. The priests on the other hand rarely mentioned them. I recall only one sermon which touched upon the topic of sexuality. The topic was avoiding sin. Father Trettle, our spiritual director, said that we must not only avoid sin, but we must avoid the *near occasion* of sin. Well Fr. Trettle said that we must continually be on guard because temptation can be found

everywhere. As an example, he explained that, "even the crotch of a tree could serve as a temptation for impure thoughts" .....Well, I never looked at a tree in the same way again!

Through innuendo and taboos, we were inculcated with a view that sexual desire in all its manifestations was evil, sinful, and an indicator of weak moral fiber. Unless, of course, one was attempting to procreate within the sanctity of marriage.

### **French Ticklers**

On the very rare occasions when sexual issues were discussed by the priests, it was in obscure ways. By this I mean they'd make a few vague remarks by way of some dos and don'ts, and assume (*or hope*) that we understood. Students were sure not to ask any questions and more than likely, the priests were grateful they didn't.

At one mandatory student body meeting, Father Casey, the rector, imposed a ban on patronizing one of the two local diners. He refused to divulge the reason behind the ban. He simply threatened that any student found patronizing the diner would be subject to disciplinary action. There was no more information forthcoming. We were simply told that the restaurant was *off limits*. There was a vague reference in the grapevine about something dirty, which we interpreted as restaurant staff not washing their hands before preparing food, or perhaps messy toilets in the men's room. We just didn't know.

At that meeting in which we were informed the diner was off limits, none of us posed any questions. I'm sure the rector was grateful for that. We weren't trying to spare him. We were trying to be cool. Asking a question meant becoming the center of attention in front of the entire student body. The ramifications might last for years in terms of a new nickname or becoming the

butt of practical jokes. There was no further discussion of the matter from the rector or the other priests.

Naturally the ban produced a great deal of curiosity. Many of us had never been to this diner. It was not the closer of the two local diners. Furthermore, it was on a busy highway with no place to safely walk. We preferred the relaxed ambiance of the small, local diner in Clarks Summit. But now however we had to check this place out! To us, the ban was like an invitation. We naturally defied the prohibition.

The gusts from the speeding eighteen-wheelers buffeted us as we walked the considerable distance to the diner. We arrived and went in. The aroma of coffee, for which we had recently acquired a taste, greeted us and we began to feel comfortable in this new place. We took a booth that accommodated all six of us and we had our usual: coffee and pie, with plenty of cigarettes on the side. We casually looked around and everything looked normal. Nothing seemed amiss. That didn't surprise us though since we had already suspected the issue was probably in the men's room.

We tried to be cool drinking our coffee and eating our pie. The men's room was like a beacon towards which we were being inexorably drawn. We had agreed that when the time came, we would all go in together. We watched and waited for a time when the men's room was empty. That wasn't too difficult as it was the middle of the afternoon, past the lunch hour and before the dinner hour. Finally, trying to avoid being obvious, all six of us went into the rather small restroom. Not too obvious, huh? There wasn't much space in there, with six of us and all. We looked around. It appeared clean enough. We zeroed in on what surely had to be the reason for the ban against patronizing this diner. Above the two urinals, affixed to the wall, were two

condom dispensing machines. We knew immediately that this had to be the reason for the seminary boycotting this restaurant.

I suppose the rationale for the boycott was that the use of condoms, for any reason, was wrong and sinful. Their use was considered a means for fornication and sexual pleasure as well as a barrier to procreation - the only morally acceptable reason for sexual intercourse. I suppose there was a recognition that condoms played a role in preventing the transmission of venereal diseases such as syphilis and the like. AIDS did not exist at the time. However, if you were having sex with someone other than your wife (with whom you could only have sex if you were attempting to conceive), then the venereal disease issue was moot. The use of condoms, in all cases, was sinful.

So, we're in the men's room examining the coin operated condom dispensing machine. We couldn't bring ourselves to buy any, but we gazed at the machine and its lewd promises. It was incredibly tacky and I must say that even fifty years later, machines such as these haven't really changed much. On this machine, there were several selections possible. Each was dispensed after inserting a quarter and pulling a knob. This allowed the selection to fall into a tray where it could be picked up. There was a selection that offered a variety of random colors. There were selections for lubricated and non-lubricated varieties. There was a selection for "Large." Just above its lever, I noticed that there was a small sign saying "Out". I didn't have enough life experience or knowledge of male psychology to understand the reason for the supply of large condoms being depleted while there seemed to be plenty of the other varieties.

Finally, there was a selection labeled *French Ticklers*. When we read *French Ticklers*, we all chuckled knowingly as if we knew what *that* was all about. Well, I wasn't exactly sure, and it's a safe bet that the others weren't exactly sure either – though none would admit that.

What we did know was that since it was something sexual, it was something forbidden - and at the same time alluring. It was also something about which we desperately needed to conceal our ignorance - an ignorance which had been nurtured in the sexual vacuum of Catholic seminary culture and secured by serious guilt and fear of hell.

## **Homophobia**

The morning bell jolted us awake in the freshman dorm. I rubbed my eyes and looked across the aisle toward the windows where the sun was coming up. One of the guys across the aisle had gotten out of bed with an obvious morning erection. I was naturally curious, as I had never seen someone else's erection before. Despite my curiosity, I knew I could only cast a discreet glance. I knew I could not be seen seeing. Yet in the open dorm with no privacy at all, surely others may have seen also. Almost certainly some did - but they couldn't dare to be seen seeing either. The risk of being thought *queer* and the ensuing harassment would be too great.

There was a strong and socially acceptable cultural homophobia at the time. In my experience, homosexuality was never discussed in churches or schools. I remember however, even in elementary school, the use by classmates of the term *queer*, along with its hateful, unspoken connotations. The nuns and priests never talked about sexual activity, and certainly not about homosexual activity. Many guys, even in elementary school, spoke disdainfully about *queers* (and many still do) as if they were the lowest form of life imaginable. The vitriol was striking to me and yet they were simply reflecting what they had been taught.

These days, psychologists speak of these homophobic attitudes as part of the process of fear, ignorance, denial and projection. They say that sexual curiosity, interest, and even desire for teens of the same sex is not abnormal. The seminary culture intermingled normal sexuality with

sin. From a psycho-social-sexual developmental perspective, it created a stifling milieu in which it was difficult for developing teens to express normal curiosity and desires without it being considered sinful or aberrant. Consider though that in the junior seminary environment, adolescent boys lived in close quarters twenty-four hours a day, **and** in the total absence of contact with the opposite sex, **and** in a period of sexual development when hormones and drives were running rampant **and** with a paucity of helpful information! Yikes! And God help you if you were even *suspected* of any so-called *abnormal* sexual inclination.

One incident comes to mind. A student was thought by some to be *queer* – for no reason other than he demonstrated mannerisms some would consider effeminate. I don't know if he was gay or not, though *gay* was not a term used at the time. The usual terms were *queer*, *fag*, *homo*, or *pervert*. One day for some reason, some of the guys in the showers (those from whom you would expect this sort of thing) started chanting "*queer, queer, queer*". I presumed he may have developed an erection in the shower – but I really don't know - and perhaps this was noticed by one of the others. In any case, the chanters chased him, naked as he was, out of the locker room, through the outside doors and out into the snow. The *bully-in-chief* ordered the doors to be locked and guarded from the inside to ensure the *homo* was left outside as long as possible. His minions not only prevented the unfortunate from getting in from the cold, but deterred others from coming to his aid.

After that I showered with the fear that I might develop an erection under the running water. It was a burden which could be shared with no one even though others may have had a similar fear. I don't know, because it was never discussed. I do know that it was like the kiss of death to be identified as *queer* – whether it was true or not. It must be acknowledged that the Right Guard saturated locker room was filled with eighty naked teenage boys in the bloom of

their sexual development and with no acceptable outlet for sexual expression. Any man will tell you that during adolescence, the penis has a mind of its own and is ready to report for action at any time, for the flimsiest of reasons, and sometimes for no reason at all! When showering I carefully focused my attention on the suffering of Jesus on the cross whenever I felt any stirrings in those nether regions. I noticed that most of us preferred to choose a shower stall that had a plastic curtain across the front, as not all of them did.

There was intense fear of being branded *queer*. The resulting psychological suffering was considerable and could have been relieved with an open attitude about sexuality as a normal part of life. A teenager's erection in the communal shower is not an indicator of homosexuality. I suspect that most of us experienced these anxieties to some degree just as I did. We all kept these anxieties to ourselves as we were too embarrassed or intimidated to talk about it with each other - or with anyone.

The religious, cultural and institutional fostering of silence about sexuality was successful in maintaining the silence and denial of that which we were all experiencing in our development. This was reinforced by the *fear of the queer*. The threat of the label had a chilling effect. Labels have power. It reminds me of the time in which those who had questions about the justifications for an Iraq war were labeled *unpatriotic* as an attempt to intimidate and silence their rational and lawful questioning. This kind of bullying intimidation may achieve an appearance of control through a suppression of questioning, honest discussion, and exploration of the truth. However, it is wrong on so many levels. I believe it weakens any institution, religious or secular, that attempts to promote silence and ignorance for its own self-serving and short-sighted reasons.

## **Masturbation**

For several months, I had been experiencing nocturnal emissions or so-called *wet dreams*. I shamefully enjoyed the intense orgasms brought about by the vivid dream images of naked teenage girls. I eagerly anticipated the event which would occur about every two to three weeks, and over which I had no control. The nature of dreams being beyond one's conscious control relieved the sinfulness and guilt. After all, a person could control impure thoughts, but not impure dreams! (*although the anticipation of the wet dream is probably considered sinful*)

At that time, I had not yet discovered that I could experience orgasmic pleasure at will. One night in sophomore year however I reached that milestone. Through sinful self-exploration, under the blanket, at night, in the dormitory, I quietly discovered the pleasure of masturbation. The pleasure of orgasmic release however, was *immediately* replaced by fear of eternal damnation. Wet dreams were not under my control, so I felt I was blameless and hence, sinless. But this! This was a choice, a willful, sinful act. Masturbation was considered a mortal sin which meant that if I should die before I had a chance to confess and repent, my soul would be forever lost in the fiery pits of hell! That seemed like a big price to pay for a few moments of pleasure. Not big enough to deter me - just big enough to terrify me.

Considering the universality of masturbation, others at the seminary must have surely experienced a similar burden of guilt but it was never talked about among us. It's like we all went around with this weight of fear, shame and guilt hanging over us, yet no one ever got real and talked about it with others. I observed that during morning Mass, some would join the line for confession. The next day, some of the same guys would be there again - the same ones - day after day or perhaps two or three times a week - silently waiting on line for confession while

scrupulously avoiding eye contact with each other. Surely, like myself, they were there to confess to the sins of impure thoughts and masturbation. At that age, what else was there?

Confession and forgiveness felt to me like selecting the “Get out of jail” card in the game of *Monopoly*. It instantly lifted the terrible weight of damnation from my shoulders - until later in the day, or perhaps after a few days, I'd inevitably masturbate again. Then once again I'd live in fear of damnation until the next morning's opportunity to confess my sin of the flesh. Thinking about it now, it was like a sexually induced bi-polar disorder alternating between the mutually exclusive states of salvation and damnation. What a stressful way to live!

After my observation about the morning confession line, I knew I wasn't unique. I wonder what it was like for the priests to hear these sins of impure thoughts and masturbation day after day after day. Didn't they think there was something unhealthy about adolescent boys burdened by so much guilt and fear of damnation because of something so natural? Did they ever think to say something comforting that would remove the terrible burden of guilt that we stoically and silently shouldered? In my experience, I was never counselled that it was perfectly normal for teenage boys to have sexual fantasies. I was never told that masturbation did indeed feel good - and that it was harmless. Indeed, it was the shame and guilt that did the harm! In my experience, the priests never offered a positive perspective on this issue. I suppose they didn't because they couldn't. This would have been contrary to the teaching of the Church. Expressing that degree of empathetic understanding would have been in conflict with the priest's function to forgive sin – and of course, this behavior was considered a sin by the Church. As to whether the priests struggled with this conflict - who knows? It was simply not discussed - neither in nor out of the confessional.

Attitudes and teachings like this contributed to my leaving the seminary and eventually leaving the Church itself. I recognized even then in my youth and immaturity that the Church had some very strange ideas which it enforced with the presumed authority of God. In my heart, I knew I was a good person and I couldn't fully accept the notion that I would be sent to eternal hell for masturbation. And furthermore, if this was such a big deal, why weren't they helping us with the issue instead of ignoring it? These thoughts were not articulated by anyone I knew, and I wasn't willing to take the terrible risk of my bringing it up to anyone. To make matters worse, after that sermon on avoiding the near occasion of sin, I'd fear getting impure thoughts when looking at the crotch of a tree! So, I continued to get on line for morning confession with the other sinners.

### **Celibacy**

It's a normal thing for teenage boys to tell inane dirty jokes, and to brag about their real or imagined sexual conquests. At the seminary, we told the jokes, but there was little to discuss by way of conquests. There was one exception and it occurred on a cold January day while we were smoking in one of the seasonal structures erected outside each entrance. The wood structures were installed in the fall to prevent the loss of heat from the building when the door was opened. We'd smoke in there as the shed-like structures provided some privacy and prevented conversation from being overheard. Within this *dome of silence*, one of our classmates revealed having had sexual intercourse with a girl. This reportedly had occurred during summer vacation between junior and senior year. I think the rest of us didn't quite know what to do with this information. I know I experienced, and I suspect others may have felt an odd blend of envy

and anger. The envy was easy to understand. He did what we all had only dreamed and fantasized about.

The anger about the reported sexual adventure was a little more difficult to understand. We were all endeavoring to abstain from sexual activity as demanded by our chosen life of celibacy. It was not an easy thing to do as evidenced by the line at the confessional each morning. Even masturbation was a violation of the celibate lifestyle, but having actual sexual intercourse with a girl was on a different level! We were trying to pursue a celibate life. I think there was an unspoken understanding that we, as a group, would somehow manage to do it, to tough it out, and accept sexual abstinence as a necessary aspect of the priesthood. Once one of our number had broken ranks, there was a sense that our collective dike of celibacy had been breached. It's like a group that is on a hunger strike when one of the group breaks the fast. Once one weakens, it can have a demoralizing effect on the others and the energy dissipates, allowing the strike to crumble. Up to that point, we shared the unspoken doubt about our ability and resolve to remain celibate for life. Now one of our own had succumbed. This had an unsettling effect on me. Of course, since we didn't explore these issues with each other, maybe the guys I hung around with didn't feel this way at all. Maybe it was just me.....but I doubt it.

The monastic model of preparing adolescent seminarians for the priesthood was not natural. The intentions were good, but the total restriction of interaction with those of similar age and of the opposite sex clearly was unnatural. Social interaction with the opposite sex during adolescent years is an important aspect of maturing in a balanced manner. Something is missed in psycho-social development by never having dated or spent time with teens of the opposite sex. I'm not necessarily speaking about sexual activity. I'm talking about basic communication and socialization. I'm certain that this gender-isolation issue was a significant reason - though not the

only reason - for the failure and disappearance of high school seminaries. During and after the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the high school, monastic model seminary had no place in society. While it might have done well in the 1300s, it was no longer a healthy way to prepare priests who need the critical developmental skills acquired through normal activities and interaction with the opposite sex during the formative years.

Sexual abstinence is viewed in some cultures as a discipline for spiritual development. In ancient Chinese culture, sexual abstinence was suggested as a means of preventing the loss of one's vital energy or *ch'i*. The practice was recommended as an aid for spiritual development. It was not a requirement mandated by an external authority. It was taken on *individually* and *voluntarily* and usually not for life, but for a limited time until a spiritual breakthrough had been achieved. This is quite different from the Church's view of celibacy and sexual abstinence which is intertwined with notions of authority, obedience, shame and sin.

Undoubtedly the issue of celibacy within the Catholic priesthood will become more contentious as the years go by. For me, it is an example of the ever-fascinating effort to *resist inevitable change*. Whether one considers slavery, women's suffrage, equal rights, capital punishment, personal use of marijuana, same-sex marriage, or mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests - and even the prohibition of women priests - they all have, or will yield to the innate desire for personal freedom and individual rights. This is part of what is meant by being made in the image and likeness of God. It's not our physical bodies. The likeness is expressed in our creativity, our loving and compassion, and our freedom.

But the quest for freedom is never a smooth process. That always mystifies me - it seems so obvious that responsible freedom is a human birthright. This is the direction toward which society should be evolving. And it is, but alas, there are those in positions of power who resist

inevitable change for their own misguided or self-serving reasons. This will never prevent evolution but it makes it difficult and tests the mettle of those striving for freedom. There will always be the pursuit of freedom since it is our natural state. The struggle will always be followed by inevitable success. Freedom cannot be stifled indefinitely because it is an aspect of our God-like nature.

In my opinion, celibacy should be a vow taken voluntarily by those who wish to express their love and commitment to God *in that way*. To impose a blanket rule of sexual abstinence on priests limits the number of worthy candidates for the ministry and is a sure thing to foster sexual weirdness and abuse of the vulnerable. At this time, Catholic parishes all over the country are selling property and taking up collections from parishioners to pay legal awards to those sexually abused as children by hundreds of priests. The awards, though substantial, cannot heal the wounds of abuse however because the Church has not yet fully admitted its culpability and continues with the old game of silence and cover up. The Church's traditional method of dealing with issues of sexuality continues even now: *deny it and we won't have to deal with it*.

The role of celibacy in the Catholic Church, as well as the prohibition of women priests, is not ordained by God. These are man-made, organizational traditions that are bound to be overturned eventually were it not for those resisting inevitable change. Jesus never instructed us to abstain from eating meat on Fridays. This was a man-made Church rule that once was considered a sin if violated. Now it's a memory and the term *fish eaters*, once used to refer to Catholics, has little meaning. So, change does occur and freedom does express itself eventually. Our secular history, as in the prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s and the ongoing demonization of marijuana, should teach us that when the natural desire for personal expression is forbidden, people lose respect for the imposing authority and ignore the restriction. The authority must then

expend enormous resources to enforce control. When will those in power learn that in the long run, *the suppression of freedom is always and eventually a losing battle?*

Though it is no longer of interest to me, the Church would do well to release its stranglehold on the anachronisms of mandatory celibacy and an all-male priesthood. These changes would infuse the Church with energy that here-to-for has been suppressed. The energy now used to enforce prohibitions and pay court settlements could be expended on serving the needs of the people. The Church, Government and other secular institutions, in their never-ending efforts to maintain and exercise ever increasing power and control over others, have the tendency to lose track of the needs of the people they are meant to serve. Somehow service devolves into control, and then limited, precious resources are spent on maintaining the control. It's wasteful and counterproductive.

## Chapter 9: Substances

In his courageous 1972 book, *The Natural Mind*, Dr. Andrew Weil offered an explanation for the ubiquitous desire of persons to alter their consciousness. Children universally spin around in the playgrounds to stimulate dizziness. Adolescents and adults may use sex, exercise, food, gambling, meditation, shopping, alcohol, drugs, and many other means to change the way they think and feel. This chapter is about three chemical substances - all considered legal - with which we seminarians would indulge: coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol. The use of marijuana, so widespread in the 60s, was not an issue at the seminary. To my knowledge, it was never used there nor do I recall anyone mentioning that it had been used while home on vacations.

### Coffee

Saturday and Sunday afternoons were mostly reserved as free time and many of us would head to town. Before we could leave the campus however, we had to stop at a small office just outside the library. There was a desk there upon which lay the Sign-Out Book. Each person leaving the grounds was required to record the time of departure, destination, and estimated time of return. Upon returning, it was necessary to sign back in. Our destination was often the small diner in Clarks Summit. There was another diner in the area, a little farther down the hill on Route 80, but we hardly ever went there. For one thing, it was on the highway and difficult to get to. It was frequented by out-of-town patrons - people passing through on the interstate. It didn't have the small-town ambiance which we were seeking. Finally, this highway diner was the

establishment that was made OFF LIMITS to seminarians because of the wicked condom dispensing machine.

So, we avoided the *Sodom and Gomorrah Diner*. Instead, the wholesome Clarks Summit Diner was our place to get away from the scrutiny of the priests, brothers, and nuns. For as many times as I patronized the place, I have no recollection of eating a meal there. I do recall having an occasional slice of pie with my coffee. Other than that, it was usually just coffee - all the time. Well, coffee and cigarettes, one after another. There was never any need for the waitress to hurry us along because there was hardly anyone else there. Also, the status of *seminarian* commanded some respect in the area. We were never hassled. And of course, we were always well-mannered priests in the making.

We'd have our 15-cent cup of coffee with free, unlimited refills and we'd spend hours there in adolescent conversation. Now I don't remember exactly what we talked about. It certainly wasn't girls and cars. We had no hope of either. Despite that, there was never any shortage of conversation. We talked about séances and ghosts, the exploding *British Invasion* in music, our teachers and classes, sports, and stuff like that. We drank a lot of coffee. We weren't drinking for the buzz. We were drinking for the fellowship. It was caffeinated communion.

Our pursuit of the brew wasn't limited to our walks to the diner. Since the little red packets of Maxwell House instant coffee were readily available with our meals in the refectory, it was an easy task to smuggle a few out each day. With this essential ingredient, I started a *coffee house* in one of the empty rooms in the bell tower. It could uncomfortably accommodate about four to six of us at a time. This was, of course, unknown to the priests. Our coffee house was equipped with cups and spoons, packets of sugar and powdered creamer, all smuggled out of the refectory or kitchen. I had obtained an immersion heater which made this illicit activity

possible. This was an amazing little device that could heat a cup of water to boiling in one or two minutes. The humble coffee house became rather popular among several of us. It wasn't so much the idea of imbibing coffee. The coffee was simply an excuse for a place of our own where we could congregate on our own terms. It was like our clubhouse. We spent quite a bit of time there making and drinking coffee. Meanwhile we discussed the serious and not-so-serious things discussed by all teens, seminarians and non-seminarians alike.

## **Alcohol**

Teens are attracted to alcohol by a natural inquisitiveness that is typical and common during an age of discovery and budding independence. Teen-age seminarians were no exception. Not that we had keggers down in the apple cellar or anything like that. We had our ways however.

The first and most obvious access to alcohol was in the form of altar wine. Wine is an essential ingredient in the celebration of the Catholic Mass. The belief is that through the miracle of transubstantiation, the wine is changed into the blood of Christ and is then consumed by the priest, and occasionally by those in the congregation. It was an essential element of faith that when the priest uttered the mystical words at the apogee of his priestly powers, the wine was transformed at a fundamental, metaphysical level. Catholic dogma held that the consecrated wine was not simply a symbolic representation of the blood of Christ, but the *actual* blood of Christ. This was always taught with a condescending nod toward the Protestants who were portrayed as misguided doubters who had *protested* (the origin of the word *protestant*) and rejected the teachings of the one, true Church. We were taught that in contrast to our sacrament of the Eucharist, the Protestant communion ceremony was merely a symbolic ritual. It was

characterized as something like *shooting a gun filled with blanks* – it makes a bang, but it's impotent. At a Catholic Mass, the wine is believed to become the *actual* blood of Christ, just as the bread is believed to become the *actual* body of Christ. This belief is of a different quality than opinion, as in “I *believe* it's going to rain today.” This belief is at the level of deep, spiritual faith. It looks like wine. It tastes like wine. In contrast to what the senses perceive however, the wine is purportedly and miraculously changed into the blood of Christ. You just have to believe it.

Before the wine was consecrated at the Mass, it was simply red or white table wine. It could be handled by non-priests and despite its potential, was not considered sacred in any way. The wines were stored in gallon-sized glass jugs in the sacristy. This was a room off to the side of the chapel. The sacristy served as a combination storage place and liturgical dressing room. It was the place where the vestments and chalices and other liturgical paraphernalia were kept, including the wine. Working in the sacristy and altar area was a manual labor job, and it allowed unsupervised access to the area. In addition, we would all take turns serving as altar boys at Mass and would be in the sacristy to don our cassocks and surplices.

So, access to the fruit of the vine was not a problem. It was not too difficult to manage a quick swig right there in the sacristy but that didn't amount to much, it seemed crass, and it wasn't very satisfying. The greater challenge was to smuggle some out of the sacristy so that it could be enjoyed in greater quantity, at leisure, and with others. Taking wine from the sacristy and sharing it with others entitled one to significant bragging rights. Fortunately, there was a doorway in the rear of the sacristy which led to a staircase which descended to the TV room below. This made getting it out of the sacristy easier as the route of egress was favorable. The problem was managing the size of the jug. It was difficult to hide. If those other than our

immediate friends should see it, it would develop into a war for possession in addition to the increased possibility of an informant ratting us out. Sometimes we'd resort to pouring off some of the contents into a smaller container in the sacristy and inconspicuously slip it out. Despite the difficulties - and the danger - we managed to pull it off. Of course, we had to be judicious in how often we could do this. The absence of an entire jug or a significant amount of the liquid might be noticed. The need to order wine sooner than expected was sure to raise the suspicions of Father Condon, who managed the sacristy.

Interestingly, we never pilfered wine from the jug in the sacristy and replaced it with water. We had a respect for the sacred ceremony of the Mass and we did not want to interfere with the miraculous alchemy by having the priest use less than 100% wine - even though it gets slightly diluted with water as part of the sacred ritual. During the ceremony of the Mass, the priest would take the empty chalice and turn toward the altar boy. The altar boy would fill the chalice with wine from a glass cruet. Each priest had his own preference for how much wine he used during the ceremony. We got to know the inclinations of the priests as we served Mass for them. Visiting priests with whom we were unfamiliar would indicate, usually nonverbally, that more should be poured or that the altar boy should stop pouring. After the wine is poured, the altar boy takes another cruet, this one filled with ordinary water, and pours a small amount into the chalice, diluting the wine slightly. Some priests preferred a full chalice of wine with only two or three drops of water. Others were more temperate and preferred a more dilute mixture. I'm not sure about the origin and meaning of this mixing of water with wine during the Mass. Perhaps it is a nod to the first recorded miracle of Jesus. John 2: 1-11 tells the story of when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding ceremony which he was attending with his mother. Some are of the opinion that the wine represents the divine nature of Jesus, while the water

represents his human nature. Others still, feel that this is a reference to *blood and water* which flowed from the spear wound at the crucifixion. In any case, it is a longstanding part of the ritual and we didn't want to mess with it.

Though none of us was ever caught, the penalty for stealing altar wine was sure to be severe. Thankfully we never had to experience how severe. The little bit we could get out was only enough to wet our whistles and not enough to get even a little tipsy. The intoxication came from the thrill of the forbidden, not from the physiological effects of the small amount of alcohol.

Our quest for the forbidden led us down a path to our own apple orchard. Our orchard produced an abundance of apples that were harvested in the fall, stored in the apple cellar, and used throughout the year until the following fall. They were eaten whole after manual labor. They were used by the nuns for making apple pies, cobblers, and applesauce. They were also made into gallons and gallons of sweet cider. We all enjoyed the cider, served at meals in gallon-sized, aluminum pitchers. There was frequently a small amount of cider left over in the pitcher or in the glasses at each table. The crew who worked in the kitchen and refectory would carefully gather those leftovers into some sort of container, whatever could be found. While avoiding the watchful eyes of the nuns, the cider would be smuggled out of the refectory and added to a gallon jug that had been stolen from the kitchen or the sacristy and hidden in someone's locker.

When the jug was about three-quarters full of cider, it was taken out to the woods and hidden. It was important to hide it well because other students would make it their business to seek out the jugs and claim them as their own. We sometimes had caches of cider hidden in several locations throughout the woods. They were rarely found, unless we were followed, and that happened from time to time. The cider in the jug would simply be left in its hiding place and

allowed to ferment naturally. After a month or two it would produce a slightly foamy head and have a tang that was very satisfying to our unsophisticated palates. None of us ever got inebriated, as there was never enough to go around for that. There was plenty, however, to experience the intoxication of the forbidden and the thrill of the clandestine. We would toast our wicked cleverness and enjoy the spreading warmth of the mild brew in our bellies. Years later, while working with criminally insane at one of the two Washington State Psychiatric facilities, I saw the patients/inmates make *pruno*, a mild alcoholic concoction made from a mixture of fruit, bread, and water. They would smuggle the bread and fruit from the dining room and mix it with water in a container. They'd hide the container and allow the yeast in the bread to convert the sugar in the fruit into alcohol. It had a horrid smell - and looked even worse! I can't imagine the taste. Even though the process is simple, we in the seminary were (*thankfully*), not aware of this method of alcohol production at the time, or else we might have tried it!

Finally, there was a third way of obtaining alcohol. The drinking age in Pennsylvania was twenty-one so we never even tried accessing a bar in the Scranton area. We could never pass for twenty-one. We could, with a stretch, pass for eighteen, the drinking age in New York. We made use of that opportunity. During the school year, there were week-long vacations for Christmas and Easter. Many of us lived in the New York City area. A charter bus took us from the dimly lit and scroungy Scranton bus station to the glaring and sterile New York City Port Authority Terminal. From the City, we would go our own ways to our homes in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. We generally caught our busses and headed directly home as we were expected there at a definite time. Sometimes we would have lunch in the City before catching a bus home. I myself lived in northern New Jersey which was only about twenty-five miles, as the crow flies, from the City. It was customary to return to the City sometime during the week or weeks of

vacation and meet with some of our classmates. We would visit some of the museums, art galleries, and theaters on Broadway. Some of my favorite stops were the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, and the fabulous Museum of Natural History. It was at this time that I saw the Broadway musical *Sweet Charity* with Gwen Verdin.

Part of the allure of the City was being able to openly drink beer, the only commercial alcohol we were interested in at the time. We were not looking to get drunk. In fact, I can't remember any of us ever getting inebriated. We wanted to experience the pleasure of drinking a cold mug of brew with our pastrami on rye. That was part of the complete New York experience. The fact that we were underage was an impediment to obtaining beer, of course, but we circumvented that in two ways. Through trial and error, we quickly discovered establishments that didn't bother to check our IDs. The dark, depressing bars held little appeal for us though so we usually frequented restaurants or delicatessens that served beer. We'd have lunch or dinner and order beers with the meal.

If we were pressed for identification, we relied on the insurance that we each carried. It came in the form of counterfeit draft cards. This was during the Viet Nam travesty and all boys/men over the age of eighteen were obligated to carry the cards (*if they hadn't yet been burned in protest*). I honestly have no recollection from where we obtained the cards but I do remember opening my wallet and confidently presenting mine. The bogus cards were never questioned. I was too young to appreciate that I was using a card that represented the enforced conscription of our country's youth in an undeclared war, simply to obtain a drink of beer. I can tell you that when I was eighteen and old enough to have a legal draft card of my own, I wasn't nearly as pleased to possess it.

## **Tobacco**

The Surgeon General's warning about the dangers of smoking cigarettes had just been made public in the early 1960s. Father O'Donnell, our Biology and Hygiene teacher did his best to get the word out in hopes of discouraging students from the habit. He had spent years in China and was imprisoned and tortured by the *Red Communists*. Like many men of the era, my father included, war and other traumatic experiences were rarely discussed. Father O'Donnell never spoke to us about his ordeal despite our inquiries. We spoke about it among ourselves, imagining what it would be like to suffer imprisonment and torture for the Faith. On one hand, it was terrifying to us - but on the other, it held a fascination which only adolescents in their heroic invincibility could imagine. Father O'Donnell wore special shoes so we surmised that the soles of his feet must have been beaten and damaged. We really didn't know however, and he wouldn't talk about it. It was our opinion that Father O'Donnell and some of the other priests who had had similar experiences were assigned teaching duties at the seminary because they were too fragile, physically or otherwise, to continue working in the missions. This matter was never discussed with students so conjecture abounded.

When Father O'Donnell spoke in the classroom or the pulpit, he would hold his hand out in front of him in a loose fist and rotate it in a circular motion as if he was cranking the engine of an old automobile. That mannerism and his peculiar restrained yet sing-song voice was ideally suited for imitation by all the students. His anti-smoking efforts were fruitless however. I'm a little hazy on who did and who did not smoke. It seemed that nearly everyone smoked. The only person in my class who I can remember for sure did not smoke, was Tom. There probably were others though. Tom didn't smoke and made no apologies for it. He was true to his highest ideals at all times. At the first noxious *brrrrng* of the morning bell, Tom would be the one to leap out of

bed and snap on the glaring florescent lights. Tom would never break even the tiniest of rules. He was a straight A student and a straight arrow. He was as brilliant as he was rigid and fervent in his personal and spiritual life. He never smoked cigarettes. Many of us did.

I started smoking a pipe before escalating to cigarettes. I enjoyed the aroma of many pipe tobaccos but was not successful in finding one that tasted as pleasant. It was also inconvenient and required paraphernalia such as the pipe itself, bowl sweetener, pipe cleaners, a combination tool consisting of a tamper and small spoon for emptying ashes from the bowl, a special lighter that directed the flame downward into the bowl, bowl scrapers, and a tobacco pouch with a humidification system to keep the tobacco from drying out. I'd use a small piece of apple to humidify my tobacco. Pipe smoking looked cool but was inconvenient. From there, the shift to cigarettes was soon to follow.

Smoking cigarettes was not viewed as a sinful or moral issue. The seminary rules did not prohibit seminarians from smoking. Indeed, some of the priests and brothers smoked, though seldom while students were present. I can't even imagine any of the nuns smoking - but who knows? Students who wanted to smoke were required to have written permission from a parent. There was the threat of disciplinary action for students who were smoking without parental permission. That was never enforced however.

Smoking became an important part of our daily routine. The first opportunity was after breakfast and just before our first class at 9 a.m. In nice weather, we would gather outside. On cold or rainy days, we would smoke in the recreation room. We'd smoke while we played pool on the two heavy, slate billiard tables while listening to the latest rock and roll hits on the local WARM Scranton radio station. There were opportunities to smoke after each of the other meals and during free time as well.

In addition to taking advantage of the designated times when smoking was allowed, we were always on the lookout for *any* chance to smoke. On many nights after lights-out we'd climb out a dormitory window, weather permitting. We'd sit on the flat roof of the study hall. There was never a crowd. Just two or three guys, sitting, talking, looking at the stars, and, of course, smoking. When the weather didn't allow for this, we snuck down into the biology/physics classroom. We started and continued to smoke despite the mounting medical evidence of the damage from cigarette smoke.

Years later as a practicing clinical hypnotherapist helping clients in their efforts to stop smoking, I realized that the nicotine addiction and withdrawal is but part of the issue. Withdrawal from nicotine is short lived and amenable to several interventions. After a few days when the chemical withdrawal abates, the *real* challenge comes. It comes in the form of dealing with the habitual behaviors, psychological issues, and the social aspects of smoking. For us seminarians, the appeal of smoking went far beyond the nicotine fix. Smoking met our need to bond with each other, as well as our need to reject authority. It was part of a social ritual. It was a shared experience in which we felt closer to each other. It was a rejection of the clean-cut seminarian image. It became an ingrained habit that took me years to finally break. Even as a clinical hypnotherapist who developed a successful smoking cessation program - including a fifty-page booklet - I continued to smoke myself! Finally, I used my own methods and quit once and for all. I wonder sometimes how my seminary classmates fared. Are they still smoking? Are they showing signs of emphysema, heart disease and cancer? Father O'Donnell and the Surgeon General warned us of those dire consequences, yet we ignored them. We were at an age in which we couldn't really imagine our own deaths.

## Chapter 10: Music

### Liturgical Music

Seminary life was filled with music. At least twice a day, everyday - sometimes more - every gathering in the chapel was an opportunity to crank up the organ and sing. I realized there is a special energy that is generated by singing together with a group. I loved it. Father Knipe conducted choir practice in the chapel once a week. Organ accompaniment was provided by Jim, the chapel organist and member of the Sabres, our rock-and-roll band. All one-hundred or so seminarians had to sit in the wooden pews and practice the standard hymns and then learn a few new ones. Seminarians or not, you can imagine the time Father Knipe had getting a group of teenage boys with adolescent attitudes and thickening vocal chords to sing like the heavenly hosts. He did his best though and only occasionally allowed his temper to flare up. When it did however, it really did!

### Gregorian Chant

The oldest musical tradition that we sang was the often-somber Gregorian Chant. The Latin text and melodies had been passed down from the middle ages to the present. The musical notation is different from that to which we are accustomed. Instead of a five-line staff, Gregorian chant notation is inscribed on a four-line staff. The notes don't have the flags that we are used to seeing. Instead of the modern oval shaped notes, they are square because they were made with quill pens. Though some of it could be lively, much of the chant was repetitive and near monotone. The only relief was the opportunity to include some harmony. Fans of "A Prairie Home Companion" may be familiar with Garrison Keihlor's *Mournful Oatmeal* routine whose

faux radio ads are done in Gregorian Chant-like fashion with all male voices. That's the way we sounded. The mixture of male voices, both pubescent and mature, made a powerfully moving sound that filled the chapel with somber yet beautiful melodies which had been passed on through the centuries. Whenever I hear Gregorian Chant, I always have a feeling of being home.

We always endured the seemingly endless *Litany of the Saints*. It was a roll call of the sanctified. After the name of each saint was chanted by the priest, the congregation would chant *Ora pro nobis* (pray for us) in response. It seems there are even more saints than lawyers and the chanting seemed interminable as the ranks of saints and martyrs were implored to intercede to God on our behalf. Occasionally the response would shift to *Orate pro nobis* (really pray for us!) in order to pack a bigger prayerful punch and, I suppose, to break up the monotony of the long litany.

## **Hymns**

We sang a lot of hymns. These were songs in Latin or English that were filled with the traditional perspectives of being lost, needing saving, and being weak and sinful in the face of the omnipotent God. Some of the hymns extolled the martyrs who endured tortuous deaths by fire and sword. Others sang lofty praises to the triune Godhead that we were said to adore. My favorite Latin hymn was "*Panis Angelicus*" not so much for the words but for the melody that could spark a mood of sublime reverence. In honor of the spirit of ecumenism, we sang "Onward Christian Soldiers" with a vigor that might rival the fervor found at any revival. The march lacked the hand clapping and body moving rhythms that I associate with such revivals, but I remember singing it with the same zeal as if we were actually going into battle for righteousness.

During the 1960s, in keeping with the spirit of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, there was a movement to update and popularize liturgical music. Originally, liturgical music was sung *a cappella*, that is without any musical accompaniment. Then the organ found its place in churches and had been well accepted for centuries. Now, other musical instruments began to make an appearance. One of the biggest thrills in my life was playing the trumpet during an Easter Mass ceremony. Another student and I played harmonizing trumpet parts to organ accompaniment. We played from the organ loft and the sounds of the trumpets were projected out over the congregation below. We played a rousing rendition of the regal “King of Kings.” It was such a break with tradition. It was exhilarating! The memory of that powerful performance still moves me after all these years.

### **Liturgical Folk Music**

Liturgical folk music sounds like an oxymoron. As Latin was giving way to the vernacular, folk songs and guitars were beginning to be heard in the sanctuaries. Naturally, this was much to the horror of the traditionalists. Progressives though had a yearning, not only for the music of centuries past, but also for the music of the people who are living now. Even In the 1960s however, rock-and-roll was not acceptable in church. That pretty much left the genres of folk music and blues.

Some of the tunes that we sung were secular melodies in which spiritually oriented lyrics were substituted for the original words. “*Kumbaya*” and “Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore” are examples. Second, there were songs taken from popular movies such as Sidney Poitier’s “Amen” from the movie *Lilies of the Field*. Third, there were the traditional Negro (*the term in use at the time*) spiritual-blues type tunes like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Rock My Soul in the

Bosom of Abraham” that were sung with their original words or with newly written words sung to the old popular melodies. Finally, there were the new songs written just for this purpose. One that comes to mind, although I didn’t care for the sing-songy quality, was entitled “They’ll Know we are Christians by our Love”. It was difficult to get into the spirit of that considering the atrocities of the Crusades and Inquisition. We knew Jesus taught love but we also knew that the Church has used political intrigue, wars, torture and death to force populations into salvation. Anyway, most of these new, folk hymns were not so good. They were corny, syrupy, artificially joyful, and too hip. They were tough to get used to. It’s like trying to get used to a new Christmas song, it takes a while for it to grow on you and sometimes it never does.

### **Folk Masses**

I began playing guitar in church for what became known as Folk Masses. The songs, which couldn't properly be called hymns, were folksy, I suppose, but bland and uninspiring. They went over well in the seminary but my attempts at generating enthusiasm with the congregation of St. Anthony's at home were disappointing. Let’s be honest here. Catholics aren’t known for their singing ability. I’m not talking about the quality of their voices, as many can carry a tune (*my dear father excepted*). What I’m saying is that, as a rule, Catholics don’t know how to sing with gusto! In contrast, some congregations express their faith in a very physical way with hand clapping, toe tapping, and heart pounding. Catholic congregations, on the other hand, tend to plod along in whiney, sing-songy voices that could put a martyr to sleep even while being roasted on a spit over hot coals!

Though I cherished the Church traditions, I also supported the introduction of practices which would eventually add to a new body of tradition. Even as I write this, I shudder at the

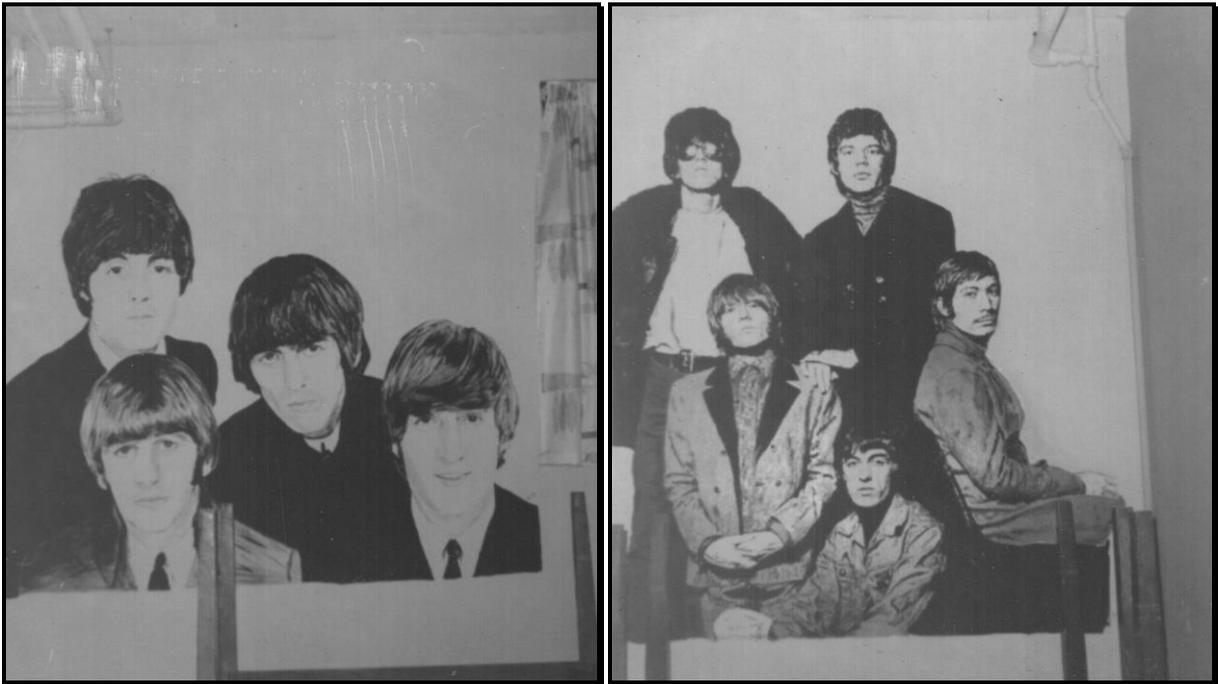
notion of including the pedestrian “Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore” in a collection of liturgical music which includes the sublime “*Panis Angelicus*.” Nevertheless, I continued playing and singing at Folk Masses for two or three years after I left the seminary. It never really caught on in the church at St. Anthony's. They began to have separate Masses in the school auditorium and called them "Youth Masses" a euphemism for "Folk Masses" I suppose. It was also an acknowledgement that the older members of the congregation (*the old farts*) clearly preferred the music to which they were accustomed. Now that I'm an *old fart*, I fully get that. I don't think I'd care for a *Rap Mass* - if there is such a thing.

The liturgical music at the seminary reflected a straddling of the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary, the sacred and the hip. The music in the seminary and progressive churches in the 60s projected a yearning for a loving God who was a benign presence in the Universe, and a Force uniting us all into one brotherhood. This was in contrast to the traditional themes of guilt and powerlessness. For the most part, the contemporary music felt good. The nuns used to say that "singing was twice praying." While I was never one to get caught up in quantifying such spiritual matters, I would agree that there is power in group singing and that it is unlike any other human experience.

## **POPULAR MUSIC**

In 1963, the British Music Invasion was just beginning. It was an exciting time, even in the seminary, for we were normal teens in most respects. We grooved to the latest music and sang all the popular tunes. Many were filled with sexually oriented lyrics, some more than others, and we sang them all with feeling even though we were practicing a life of sexual celibacy.

In my freshman year, our class was sponsoring some sort of event and we needed a prize for one of the games. It was my task to walk to the store down on the highway and buy a record album of the Beatles. Beatles? I hadn't heard of them and I thought it was such an odd name for a musical group. They hadn't yet appeared on the "Ed Sullivan Show" or visited the United States. I couldn't believe there was a musical group with such a weird name. When I saw their haircuts on the album cover, and then heard their music, I was hooked.



*Murals of the Beatles and Rolling Stones on wall of the Music Room (from author)*

The small Music Room was always thick with cigarette and pipe smoke. A small air purifier was hopelessly inadequate for the job. The nicotine stained walls of the room vibrated with the sound of "She loves you, yea, yea, yea" by the Beatles and "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones. About a year later, Keith painted murals of the Beatles and the Stones on those same jaundiced walls. We played all the other performers of the 60s as well:

Simon and Garfunkle; Peter, Paul, and Mary; Bob Dylan; and many others. Naturally, we were also fond of the French Singing Nuns who popularized “*Dominique*.”

Within our group of 100 or so students, there was a great deal of musical talent. Each year we would put on a musical production complete with sets and costumes. One year we did a production of a musical that we wrote ourselves. We integrated tunes from other well known musicals. I sang a solo rendition of “Some Enchanted Evening.” I also developed some harmony parts and some choreography for the vocal chorale. These productions were in conjunction with Visiting Sundays and there were sometimes up to two hundred students, parents and siblings there. I know now that it was small potatoes but at the time it was a big deal for us. It provided an avenue for showcasing the considerable talent within our small school.



*The Venard Orchestra - (I'm on the left in the back row) (from author)*

## Homegrown Music

Once or twice a year we would have a more informal musical production just for ourselves. It was called a *gaudeamus* which is Latin for *let us rejoice*. You might say it was like an Open Mic where anyone could get up and do his thing. There were skits, piano solos, comedy routines, and other musical acts. Sometimes, even the priests and brothers would participate. I recall a piano duet, performed on an upright, by Harry and Bob. They were both excellent pianists and the remarkable thing was the manner in which they played. At first, they sat side by side on the bench. Then one of them turned around with his back on the bench and his hands extended over his head on the keys. While he continued playing the other went around to the back of the piano and while standing on a chair, leaned over the case, extending his hands downward to the keys. They played a fast and complex piece and never missed a beat throughout their pianistic contortions. Can you imagine what the brain must do to accomplish that? It was incredible and I've never seen or heard anything like it since.

### **The Sabres**

Matt, Ed, Harry, Keith and I formed a band called the Sabres. If we weren't living in an institution we might have been called a garage band. It was pretty basic. We each had our instruments in addition to one or two insubstantial amplifiers for the instruments and microphones. Harry, of the piano duet fame, played keyboard. At that time though, the keyboard was really a portable electric organ that sounded like a cheap accordion. Harry made it work however. Keith played drums. His sense of rhythm was astounding. Ed had a gorgeous voice but no instrumental talent so he sang lead and played tambourine. Matt played clarinet and I played guitar. The last I heard, Matt, had taken up the bass, had gotten a Ph.D. in music, and was teaching at a university (*and he got his start with the Sabres!*). We did tunes such as "Moon

River” and the like and it sounded good. Once, we sang *a cappella* on live Scranton radio. We squeezed into the studio and sang the “Mickey Mouse Club Theme” in three-part harmony. We also did a lovely French tune entitled “*Ce Soir la Lune est Belle.*”

We felt emboldened by our radio performance and branched out into some of the devil’s own music with tunes like “Love Potion Number Nine,” “Come, Little Angel,” and “We Gotta Get Out of this Place.” For a group of seminarians with rudimentary equipment, we didn’t sound too bad.



*The Sabres (author in center with guitar) (from author)*

### **"The Rat" and the Electric Guitar**

In playing with the Sabres, I had initially used an acoustic guitar with an after-market pickup to amplify the sound. That worked well at first but the Beatles would never do it that way. I had a burning desire within me for an electric guitar. I also had a burning desire, as we all did,

to perform before an audience made up of others besides our fellow seminarians. We wanted to play for other teens, boys *and* girls.

Well, it came to pass in 1966 that the Scranton area high school debating society was going to hold its annual awards ceremony at the Venard. This was due in no small measure to Ed, our lead singer in the Sabres. He was involved in the Debate Club and was a talented and persuasive speaker. He apparently used all his skills to prevail upon Father Ratermann the Venard Debate Club moderator, to host the event. This was a bold step and was heretofore unheard of in our cloistered environment. After all, there were *girls* in the Debating Society! In fact, *most* of them were teenage girls and they were going to be present within our sanctified walls. The significance of the situation did not escape us. I mean we weren't just talking about somebody's sister who would be here on Visiting Sunday. We were talking about real teenage girls from the *outside*. It boggled our minds that Father Ratermann would consider this but Ed convinced him that it would be good for public relations within the community. Amazingly, Father Ratermann agreed.

The next step involved procuring permission for the Sabres to perform at the event. That was brought about by all of us in the group imploring Father Ratermann that entertainment was a *must* at this event. *Wasn't it fortunate that we had a group right here that could provide it at no cost?* He objected strenuously at first. It was bad enough that girls would be here, but for us to play that hedonistic, sexually oriented music was going too far. We wore him down and he finally agreed. He reserved the right to preview our performance however and after listening to our three tunes, he shook his head, grunted, and walked out of the auditorium. We knew we were in!



*Sabres' Publicity Photo (author on left) (from author)*

The third step was more personal for me. Shortly after our preview for Father Ratermann, we all left for Easter vacation. Knowing we had this gig scheduled I had traded in my acoustic guitar for a new, shiny, awesome electric guitar. It was a beauty and I was pumped about our impending secular debut. Father Ratermann had a different idea however. He had heard through the grapevine that Morel had an electric guitar. For him, this was the last straw. I had apparently crossed some invisible line between morality and immorality, between chastity and lasciviousness, between good and evil. I had crossed a line beyond which he would no longer yield. He imperiously mandated that I would not use my electric guitar in the performance. For him, this was simply too much. After all, this was an *electric* guitar! For him, it might have been a symbol for all the turmoil and hedonism of the 1960s. In any case, he put his foot down.

I was angry and devastated. Showing marvelous restraint, I took two days to cool down. Then I set up an appointment to see Father Ratermann during the after-dinner free-time period. We were to meet in his room. As I walked down the gloomy, dimly lit hall with dark wooden doors on the left and on the right, I felt like I was walking the last mile to the death chamber. His room was one of several faculty rooms along the corridor leading to the Faculty Lounge. It was not unusual for me to be there as students were assigned to make the priests' beds and tidy up their rooms. I had taken my turn at that duty. I recall one of the priests had very particular specifications about how his bed should be made. For example, the open end of the pillow case had to face away from the door. In addition, the hem of the upper sheet had to be on top so it wouldn't be against his skin. Anyway, cleaning the faculty lounge and making the priests' beds for manual labor was different. At those times, the areas were vacated by the priests. Now however, at this time of the early evening, I had an overwhelming feeling that I was an interloper on forbidden turf, despite Fr. Rattermann's directive to come to his room after dinner. As I boldly advanced I could hear muffled voices and laughter behind the lounge doors at the end of the dark corridor. I felt as a spy must feel behind enemy lines.

Walking the center of the polished, terra-cotta-tiled hallway, I stood as tall as I could. I thought that would help because Father Ratermann was quite a tall and intimidating figure. He was called "the Rat" because of his name, of course. But there was another more compelling and ironic reason: in our adolescent way of seeing things, he looked like a rat! He resembled a bigger-than-life, anthropomorphic rat, not unlike a Disney cartoon character or the Mouse King in the *Nutcracker*. He was tall and thin. He had a long, narrow nose and, being a Latin scholar, would undoubtedly refer to it as a Roman nose. His wire-framed reading glasses were usually

perched halfway down the considerable nasal slope. I could *almost* see long rat whiskers twitching as he peered over those glasses at me - and he did so frequently.

As if this weren't enough, Father Ratermann also had an unusual voice. He spoke with the voice that boys use when they imitate the *eh, eh, eh*, sound of machine gun fire. His voice had a restrained, ratcheting quality that provided plenty of opportunity for mimicry by even the least talented impersonator among us. And...as they say on the late-night TV infomercials: "But wait! There's more!" Father Ratermann accentuated his speech with his hands. He held them in a pistol-like manner as if he was holding a six-shooter in each hand. The index finger-barrel and the thumb-hammer, cocked and ready to fire, were moved and aimed with each point of emphasis. This would be done with both hands simultaneously unless he was holding a Latin text in his left hand.

Father Ratermann, *aka* "the Rat", was our dreaded Latin teacher. His nickname was not our invention. It had been passed down from previous generations of students. He rarely smiled, and then never with students. On occasion, we might observe him smiling at the head table in the refectory as he was dining with the other priests. In the classroom, he would allow himself just the hint of a sly, rat-like smile, just a slight curling of the lip really, when expounding on a particularly bold and cunning military tactic in which Caesar had turned the tide of battle and defeated the Galls or the Barbarians. He recounted the events as if he had actually been there, as if they were memories of *his* life in that ancient time and place.

Father Ratermann had a deep appreciation for Roman language and culture and did his best to convey that to us. The rules of Latin grammar, so mysterious to me, were second nature to him. In pointing out an incorrect Latin grammatical juxtaposition, he would peer down at the offending pupil over the wire-framed glasses perched on his rat-like nose and say "**Hey**, you

can't put a **Ford** bumper on a **Chevy.**", accentuating the words *Hey*, *Ford*, and *Chevy* with emphatic, pistol-like gestures.



*Fr. George Ratermann (right) with rector, Fr. Louis Wolken  
(from Wolken collection)*

Meanwhile back in the gloomy corridor, I knocked on Father Ratermann's door and nearly jumped as the knock echoed in the deserted hallway. It sounded far louder than I intended. I nervously waited in the ominous gloom. It was as if the gloom itself had substance. Breathing it

was like breathing in a heavy, murky sludge. The darkly stained doors and woodwork contributed to an ambience of impending doom. It was one of those situations when time becomes meaningless and each second is drawn out into an impossible length.

There was no answer at the door. I knocked again, a little more softly this time, and waited. There was still no answer. All of a sudden I had to pee really bad and I put that need aside as a sign of my nervousness. I realized that I would have to go and knock on the door of the Faculty Lounge as *the Rat* was probably there. I hated this and I wanted to turn back but the determination to use my electric guitar, now my only guitar, was driving me onward. I turned from Father Ratermann's door and walked past several other doors and finally reached the Faculty Lounge at the end of the impossibly long hallway. I knocked on the lounge doors. After a moment, Father Vittengl opened it a crack through which I could see nothing but his face, framed in a haze of cigarette smoke. The sound of voices and light conversation was louder now through the open door. "Excuse me, Father, I'm supposed to meet with Father Ratermann. Is he here?" He simply grunted. The door closed and I was left standing there. I felt a million miles away from the other guys who were smoking and playing pool two floors below in the safety and comfort of the rec room - *our* turf. Here I was, alone - an intruder and an outsider, standing on the threshold of this alien world in which I was an interloper. I did not feel welcomed. I felt like the priests didn't want me there and that I certainly didn't want to be there as well. I waited.

Once again, the door opened and I craned my neck to look up into the hairy nostrils of *the Rat* as he peered over his glasses at me. He offered no explanation for being absent at the agreed upon time and place of our appointment. This I now know is a tactic for keeping a subordinate reminded of his inferior position. Maybe he learned this from Caesar. In any case, I followed him to his room and he closed the door behind us.

The interior of Father Ratermann's small room was nearly as dark and shadowy as the hallway. The only light was furnished by the rays of the setting sun illuminating the cracked and yellowed window shade. The shade was pulled all the way down and it cast a warm, golden glow within the room. He sat in the only chair. I stood. I honestly have no recollection of what I said during that meeting. It seemed as if I was in that room for a very, very long time. It reminded me of dreams I've had. Not outright nightmares, but dreams of twilight places in which movements are restricted as in walking through a viscous liquid, and in which time moves very slowly. Well somehow, I pleaded my case and when we were finished, I left his room on shaking legs.

I don't remember pleading my case. I don't remember what I said. It took a few moments for the realization to strike home that at some point Father Ratermann had changed his mind and was allowing me to use my electric guitar during the banquet performance! I felt like the walls of Jericho had tumbled down and I was the one who blew the trumpet. It was exhilarating. It served as an example for myself in the future that if I kept my cool and was earnest, I could have more power and control over my life. I liked the feeling! I ran down the steps to the rec room and told my tale. I was a hero in the school for a few days. I had ventured into the nest of *the Rat*, stared into his beady eyes, and lived to tell the tale.

The banquet was a tremendous success and our performance went spectacularly well. There was little opportunity for us to mingle with the girls but that was OK. We each realized we had accomplished a breakthrough. The Sabres got to perform for a group which included high school girls. I got to play my electric guitar. The walls of the seminary did not crumble and Father Ratermann, in his role as host for the event, was reportedly seen beaming with pride!

## Hootenannies

I come from a large extended family. At the time, we all lived within a half-hour drive of each other. Our family frequently got together at our grandmother's summer bungalow on the Passaic River. There were seventeen grandchildren in the family. We often had celebrations of birthdays, anniversaries, First Communions, Confirmations, and Christmas and Easter holidays *up at the river*. The 1960s brought about the popularization of folk music in our culture. Groups like Peter, Paul and Mary, and the Kingston Trio made their impact on society and clearly made their presence known. Several of my older cousins who were all in their teens at the time played instruments and sang. This included two cousins who were studying for the priesthood at the Franciscan seminary. Johnny played guitar and Dick played banjo. Two other cousins, Mike and Jack, who were brothers to each other, also played guitars. After 1960, our family gatherings would invariably lead to impromptu musical happenings - hootenannies. Hearing them play ignited a spark within me and I felt the desire to play the guitar myself. I wanted to join my cousins in the limelight. I began playing in 1961 and continue to play, sing, write songs, and perform at open mics to this day.

In the 60s we played tunes like "500 Miles," the "Ballad of Tom Dooley," "Mariah," "Charlie on the MTA," (*why Charlie's wife never put a nickel in with that sandwich I'll never know*), "Rock My Soul," "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore," and others. The parents, aunts and uncles, and my grandmother (*she always requested her favorite, "Danny Boy"*) would make their requests. Then they'd groan in exasperation at the inordinate time it took to get the instruments in tune. The younger cousins would be giggling or fighting with each other and causing a ruckus. Eventually we'd get it together and play respectable renditions of tunes that were the stuff of hootenannies.

The practice of getting together to make music with others continued through my seminary years. We had our own hootenannies, the least formal of our musical gatherings. Sometimes indoors and sometimes outside by a bonfire, we would often have a half dozen or so guys with guitars playing the same songs that I played with my cousins and my brother, Dave at home. As the years went by, we learned additional tunes. When the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, we would sing “If I Had a Hammer” and “We Shall Overcome” as if *we* were the Oppressed. We were very much in tune and sympathetic with the Civil Rights movement. For some reason, the Viet Nam war did not affect us as deeply at that time. Perhaps it was because it was still early in the conflict and the issues weren’t as well known to us and the public in general. We were not yet quite aware of the magnitude of the tragic folly.

Music occupied and filled an important and near constant presence within our small community. Not simply listening to music, but the making of music. Whether for prayer or entertainment, music served an important function in seminary life. In a way, it was like a glue that kept us together.

## Chapter 11: Reflections

The following is an excerpt from the back page of a program for a Venard musical production. We called it *If That's What You Want* and it was written and produced by students at the Venard in 1966:

High school seminaries have been questioned from many sides in recent years. Is an eighth-grade boy just thirteen mature enough to choose the priesthood as his life's vocation? During his adolescent years doesn't a boy need the constant guidance and support of his parents? Isn't it asking too much of a young boy to enter a boarding seminary many miles away from his home when he can get a good education in a local high school? How can an adolescent boy mature properly in the exclusively male atmosphere of the seminary?

Taking these questions as its theme, *If That's What You Want* provides some answers. The script for the show was written by Venard students with assistance from Father Edward Whelan. The writers are convinced that high school seminaries and the Venard in particular, contribute positively to the formation of good priests. Their aim is to communicate this conviction in an artistically pleasing show.

We were certainly whistling past the graveyard when writing those words. My graduating class in 1967 was the Venard's 50th and final graduating class. After our graduation, the Venard ceased functioning as a seminary. Throughout the country, junior seminaries succumbed to the steadily decreasing numbers of those wanting to become priests. In addition, there was a general, but unspoken, consensus that adolescent children simply needed a range of normal life experiences before they could commit to such an all-encompassing vocation, career and lifestyle. Fewer and fewer teen boys were choosing the junior seminary and enrollments fell. Traditional hopes and expectations of having a priest in the Catholic family relaxed. I suppose parishes' financial allocations for high school seminary support yielded to more fruitful endeavors. To my

knowledge, none of the twenty or so from my class at the Venard became priests. As a means for producing priests, the high school or junior seminary model had become ineffective and obsolete.

High school or junior level seminaries have continued to close all over the country for years. Not all have closed due to declining vocations however. The era of silence regarding the activities of pedophile clergy was coming to an end. The following is an excerpt from the Summer, 2002 edition of *Tower Topics*, a publication of Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri. The news article is entitled: **Seminary Closing a "great, great loss"**

"The seminary has been an important part of the diocese," Bishop John Gaydos wrote in an April 19 letter to priests of the diocese. "But we cannot ignore the impact of recent headlines will have on future enrollment, which has been in decline for some years. With only 27 students this year, the school was already economically unsustainable. The events of the past six weeks have only *hurried the inevitable.*"

Recently the school became the focus of nationwide publicity when it was revealed that *former faculty members had sexually abused students at the school.*

"There are no allegations of abusive behavior by any current members of the school's faculty," Bishop Gaydos said. "But, in the current environment, we do not believe it will be possible to build enrollment to the level the school needs."

St. Thomas' enrollment of 27 students was down from 96 in 1967. Bishop Gaydos said the decline has come as young people increasingly postpone selection of a vocation until after high school. "This is not an issue unique to our diocese," he said. *There are only two Roman Catholic high school seminaries still operating in the United States.* (all italics are mine)

On March 12, 2004, the *Catholic News Service* wrote:

Up to the 1960s, when high school seminaries were at their peak - nearly 16,000 students nationwide in 1967-68, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate - students were forbidden to date girls. The recently released report of the Bishops' National Review Board on Clergy Sexual Abuse of Minors says *the delayed psychosocial development of some seminarians from that era may have contributed to the sex abuse crisis, as priests in*

*their late 20s emerged from 12 years of seminary with the psychosocial maturity of teenagers. (italics mine)*

“In its 150 year history, St. Lawrence Seminary has had about 1500 alumni who have become priests,” Father Druggan said. He estimated that “among alumni who have reached ordination age in the last seven years, about 3 to 5% became priests.”

So, as a means for preparing priests, the high school seminaries had become ineffective and fell out of fashion. Personally, as a means of providing an excellent education and a wholesome experience of community living, the high school seminary was a total success for which I am very grateful.

### **College Seminary**

After graduation, I took my first train trip from Newark, New Jersey to Akron, Ohio and spent some of the summer with Ron's family in Akron, Ohio. I secured my first job there as a busboy/dishwasher. In the fall, Ron and I and joined our fellow graduates and entered the Maryknoll college seminary at Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Our classmates included graduates from the two other Maryknoll Junior Seminaries, as well as others who were graduates of secular high schools.

During the first few weeks there I read *A Modern Priest Looks at his Outdated Church* by Father James Kavanaugh, the progressive priest and poet. He articulated what I had been thinking myself but which I had been unable to adequately express in words. As I recall, he wrote about Church hierarchy, married priests, the ordination of women, and all that which threaten traditionalists, though *none* of these traditions has *anything* to do with what Jesus taught. He wrote how the Church fails to keep up with the natural and wonderful evolution of humankind and continues to cling to institutional policies of the past.

The doubts I had been experiencing about my vocation and about the Church itself came to a head and I decided to leave the seminary. I acknowledged I had a vocation but I doubted it was to be expressed through the priesthood. I left with some sadness but without bitterness or a sense of failure. I felt that I was choosing a different path, though at that time, my vision of the future was without clarity. I knew that my direction was in the realm of service - and I thought that it might be in elementary education. I had read John Holt's *How Children Fail*, and had some strong views about implementing ways of teaching that were more kind and affirming. The trip home to New Jersey was my first air flight and I experienced a curious blend of emotions which included excitement, anxiety and grief. I had cut myself off from my identity and all-important social support structure of more than four years and was on my own.

### **After the Seminary**

I immediately enrolled at Seton Hall College in Paterson, New Jersey and selected an elementary education major. During the second year, I began student teaching. On my first day, I observed students were lined up and checked for weapons. The environment was very chaotic. I realized immediately that there wasn't much teaching or learning going on there and I was quite disillusioned. Though I've always considered myself a teacher, I knew I would be disappointed and frustrated within the educational system.

During my first two years in college I had two part-time jobs. The first was at a small, dusty store in Paterson, New Jersey. The store sold musical instruments, accessories, and sheet music. Music lessons were provided there as well. No one hardly ever came in. Nothing seemed to have been changed in thirty years and the store was languishing. It was very depressing there. My second job was as a shoe salesman in the old Meyer Brothers' department store in Paterson. I

was there about a year and though I was earning some money, the work was not very satisfying to me. I reasoned that if I had to work - and I did if I wanted to stay in college - I might as well do something that was more to my liking. I didn't realize it at the time but I was heeding that inner voice that some refer to as a calling or a vocation.

I found a job at St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson. I began working as an orderly in the emergency room on the 3-11 shift. That was very exciting work! In addition, I was working on Metzler's Ambulance service, a private company which had a contract to provide ambulance services for the city of Paterson. All I needed was a basic First Aid card to qualify for the job. I drove one of those big Cadillac ambulances like the one in *Ghostbusters*. Two years later Metzler's contract ran out and the city emergency ambulance service was shifted to the Paterson Fire Department. I worked there as an Emergency Medical Technician on the graveyard shift for several years while I continued working swing shift at the hospital. I had experiences working in the inner city in the late '60s and early '70s that showed me, in a sustained and intimate way, some of the wretched living conditions that exist within our country.

In my third year of college, I entered New Jersey's William Paterson College with a double major in Nursing and Biology. In addition to earning a B.A. in Nursing and a B.S. in Biology, while in the Air Force I earned an M.A. in Communication with emphasis on Human Relations. Besides my forty-year career as a registered nurse, I was a captain in the Air Force, and an adjunct college faculty member for six years at Alaska Pacific University and Spokane Community College. I taught classes in Communication, Public Speaking and other related subjects. In keeping with my interest in hypnosis, I became certified as a Clinical Hypnotherapist and had a part-time private practice for years. After two marriages, I am now living by myself in rural northeast Washington, close to both the Idaho and Canadian borders. I'm a grandfather, and

blissfully retired from employment. I've recently registered copyright on twenty-five of my original songs and continue writing songs and playing music with my band, Skookum Creek Music Company.

### **Vocation**

My vocation had not been lost when I left the seminary. I simply had to find the way to express it. I followed that calling by doing caring work which made use of my talents, capabilities, and interests. I now see that our true calling or vocation involves doing the work we love, and doing the work that expresses our love. This need not be a profession or occupation. It is simply living. We know we are following our vocational path when we feel good about ourselves and others around us. When we follow that path, we benefit personally and we contribute to the world. We each find our path by looking within, because the kingdom of God is within.

### **Catholicism**

I am no longer active in the Catholic Church. The Church taught me that faith was a *gift* from God. I simply couldn't believe that. I questioned, *what kind of gift would be offered by a loving God who would damn you for not accepting it?* and *How could God be so capricious as to offer the gift of faith to some but not to others? Aren't we all God's children?* If faith was a gift, I felt that I had missed out.

I was advised by priests that the remedy for my doubts was simply to believe what the Church taught me. Though I tried mightily, I couldn't do that. It took years for me to come to peace with this issue. I prayed fervently that I would be relieved of the spiritual distress and

simply be given the gift of faith of which I had apparently been denied. My spiritual integrity wouldn't allow me to simply go through the motions and yet still be at peace within myself. To me, faith carried the notion of deep, core conviction. I didn't have that conviction – and it couldn't be faked. I didn't have that degree of faith, yet there was the expectation that my faith would be strong enough to be sharing it with others as a Catholic priest. This issue, among others, had a significant part in my leaving the seminary and eventually leaving the Church.

My parents never expressed disappointment at my leaving the seminary. My mother however, prayed until the day she died that I would return to the Church (*and save myself from hell, the existence of which was very real to her*). Though I have not returned to the Church, I am at peace and have found solace and spiritual insight from a variety of sources - and most importantly, from within. My spirituality is no longer fear driven and I have a personal and healthy relationship with God. Concerns of sin and guilt have been replaced by concerns of love and forgiveness.

It took years of exploration and soul searching to resolve my spiritual distress. The spiritual conflict resolved when I was able to tease apart the distinct entities of God and Church. I realized my difficulty had to do with faith in the Church, not faith in God. In my life experience, they were so entwined that I interpreted my shaky faith as a global crisis of faith. Once I realized this distinction my dark night of the soul yielded to dawn and to a healthy and satisfying relationship with God. I do not feel the need to express my spirituality through organized religion. I do not feel a need to go to a house of worship. Besides, I don't think God wants to be worshipped. I think God wants us to be about His business - the business of love and forgiveness. At this, well, I'm a work in progress.

## **Conclusion**

When I was at the Venard fifty years ago I sometimes observed former seminarians who visited as adults. After many years they visited, often with their wives and children, and reconnected with the place that played such a significant role in their lives. These nostalgic visitors were not infrequent. They were as eager to revisit the seminary as they were to share it with their families. They were from among the ranks of those who previously attended the Venard - sometimes many years previously. They had abandoned their quests for the priesthood, something at the time I could never imagine myself doing. They married and they had children. A part of them always felt a longing however. They were still connected in some intangible way.

These men would stop along one of the paths on campus and introduce themselves and talk about their memories from when they were there. They would look off with unfocused gazes as they remembered themselves and their buddies raking leaves, throwing snowballs, pulling on the long bell rope, driving the old pickup truck to the barn, attending Mass in the chapel - all the things that we ourselves were now doing.

A few years ago, I myself answered that same call. I made that pilgrimage to the Venard - and I took my three children along and shared it with them - to the extent that is possible. In many ways, it is much the same. Yet there were fundamental changes. It is no longer a Catholic seminary. It had been sold and converted into a Baptist seminary, though not at the high school level. The old, red and white, hexagonal barn with its high cupola had been torn down. The nuns, brothers and priests are gone. I don't know what happened to the wayward girls across the road.

## **Our Father's Business**

So, we all have a calling or vocation. It's from that inner voice gently and persistently urging us to do our Father's business, the business of love and forgiveness. Whether we are so-called believers or not, each of us is on a journey, a quest, a path. We have the choice to respond to that inner calling and allow ourselves to be guided inexorably forward. The voice within, that consciousness that we share with God, is present in every one of us and will help us along our path - if we are open to it. Vocation, then, isn't limited to the religious life. Each of us has a calling to do the work of love and forgiveness. That's why it feels so good when we are doing that work in a way that is natural to us. We really do receive when we give.

Jesus, as a boy, was in the temple talking with the learned elders. After a frantic search His parents finally found him. He explained that they needn't have worried as he was about his Father's business - the same business that we are about. Ultimately, we all, Jesus included, have the *same* vocation. It is to realize our perfection and interconnectedness with God and each other, to choose love rather than fear, and to help each other along the way.

***Pax vobiscum***

*(Peace be with you)*

*Oh, and never try to put a Ford bumper on a Chevy.*