

Young Enough to Leave

By Frank Green
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Having been in sudden death overtime territory for some years, I've wanted to come to terms with my time in the Redemptorist Congregation and the events that led to my decision to leave it. After a number of attempts to do so in writing, I admit that it is not an easy thing to do. But with the encouragement of a few ex-Redemptorist friends and resisting my strong aversion to controversy in my golden/twilight years, I'm going to take a stab at it. This story may be of interest to some former Redemptorists and relatives of ex-Redemptorists.

I'm a big fan of Robert Caro's four volume (and counting) biography of President Lyndon Johnson and of Caro's insistence that to understand the history of anything or anyone you have to start at the beginning and follow along in chronological order. So I will try to explain my experience in the only way I see possible, by tracing the story that led me into and then out of the Redemptorists. I am not a historian, but I think my memory is still reasonably good (except for names). I'm also well aware that, like the weather, the memories of different people can vary.

Most of the Redemptorist superiors from my time are no longer alive. It will become clear below that I strongly disagreed with some of their decisions. Although I bear no ill will to anyone, alive or dead, and am grateful for the many things I learned while with the Redemptorists, nevertheless I also believe that there's a story to be told.

Early Years

The youngest son of an Irish Catholic family in Maynooth, Ontario, I moved to Deep River at the age of six. My first two years there were in a public one room school being taught by my young cousin Peggy Gleason. Then I attended a newly established separate school until grade ten. Most of that time I was taught by the Sisters of Saint Joseph. I found these Sisters good, well organized teachers who required us to write a good deal. Sister St. Philip encouraged me to learn to type and although I never became a speedster, I did get fairly accurate and the skill came in handy when computers came along.

At some point in my first few years of school I came home from Sunday Mass and said, "I'm going to become a priest." The fact that my brother Jack who was ten years older was planning to enter the seminary may or may not have influenced my declaration; I don't remember. In the following few years if I was asked if this was still my intention, I was embarrassed and avoided the topic, perhaps wishing to avoid pressure to follow through.

Brockville

When I was in grade ten, the final year at that school, the parish priest, who frequently visited the school, suggested to me that I might want to go to St. Mary's College in Brockville, the minor seminary of the English speaking Canadian Redemptorist Congregation. I agreed with the idea, and although my father told me he thought I was too young to go away to school, in fact I did go to the college in September, 1955 to begin grade eleven. Fr. Ed Kennedy had come to interview me and gave me some sort of IQ test which apparently I managed to pass. (I should note that a similar minor seminary was built by the Redemptorists in Edmonton circa 1955. It was called Holy Redeemer College the same as the major seminary in Windsor.)

I liked the atmosphere at Brockville situated by the mighty St. Lawrence River with its big lake boats on the sparkling blue waters (as Fr. Meehan used to say on the radio). It was an eye opener for a small town lad like me to mingle with a hundred students from all over Canada. There was a competitive, but friendly and generous spirit among the students and a great mix of talents of every kind. For the first time I had a different Redemptorist priest to teach each subject. I thought most of them were good teachers.

In retrospect, from a practical point of view, by far the most valuable course was the one in public speaking. It continued in every year at Brockville and later in the major seminary. No doubt primacy was given to elocution due to the Redemptorists' reputation as preachers. Debating, speech contests with other schools, plays, skits, musicals, singing for special occasions served the same purpose of building confidence to perform in front of a crowd. Since they cried when I stood up to sing, I was often given the role of master of ceremonies.

There was a regular routine: up early to go to the chapel for morning prayers and Mass before a fairly sparse breakfast. Classes morning and afternoon, an hour and a half for exercise, an hour in the study hall before prayers and supper, recreation period after supper, a couple of hours back in the study hall before night prayers in the chapel and lights out in the dormitory. Various sports were played in all seasons. My favourites were softball and handball. Let's not talk about hockey; I was a great stick handler, but for some reason more skilled teammates considered my inability to skate a handicap.

Fr. Kennedy (usually referred to as The Chief) was in charge of the students all three years. As an English teacher he was a hard marker and a strict superior but encouraging at the same time. He always challenged us to do better and excel in all our activities. Most of us found that our history teacher, Fr. Joe McCormick, (Joe Sam) who had read very widely, broadened our horizons, lured us into more reading and helped us to get a hint of the skills needed for critical thinking.

During my third year at Brockville, we took courses from Assumption University in Windsor, since the Redemptorists had made an agreement with that institution for the Congregation's seminarians to enter degree programs.

Novitiate

In the summer of 1958 my brother Jack and brother in law Billie Owens drove me to Woodstock, to begin the year of Novitiate. This was intended to be roughly like basic training in the army, an initiation into living in a religious congregation. It was an emotional time for my parents and me, because the rules would not let me return home for the next seven years.

For the first six weeks the class ahead of mine was still present to help break us into the routines of the Novitiate. The building was quite old having been a Baptist College for many years and then the major seminary for for the Redemptorists for about thirty years. A new seminary, Holy Redeemer College, had opened in Windsor a year previous. A new novitiate building was scheduled to open in Keswick later in the Fall.

The rules of the Novitiate were severe: silence most of the time, recitation of the Latin Office in the chapel, three half hour periods of meditation, spiritual reading from dusty old books, a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, recitation of the rosary out loud in the chapel and at least one conference every day. There was an emphasis on following all the rules and public shaming for violations. Even self flagellation and wearing a painful wire contraption on the arm muscle or thigh a couple of times a week. Sports were allowed occasionally, but sometimes months would go by without any games allowed.

The Novice Master was in charge with an assistant, two older retired priests were available as confessors and a few Redemptorist brothers did the cooking, tailoring, maintenance and farm work. (Prayers were said aloud for the duration of the flagellation. We preferred it when the older retiree read them as his nick name was "Rocket" after his speedy celebration of Mass. The other man, while a kindly confessor, had had a brain operation and tended to lose his place and start over again.)

The Novice Master was, I believe, in his late fifties, an honorable and kind man who had spent most of his previous life working in Redemptorist parishes. He was strict about observance of the rules and, I think it fair to say, obsessed with one idea: perseverance. By this, I mean, staying the course, sticking to it, carrying on carrying on: in your vocation, in your work, in the state of grace. He was writing a book on the topic with endless quotations from scripture, Church Fathers and every other possible source in world literature. It entered into every talk he gave, often as the main theme. Near the end of the year we endured a fifteen day retreat, preached by this man with several sermons a day... on guess what topic?

(Many years later, I learned the probable root of our Novice Master's extreme preoccupation with the notion of perseverance. A long time before his father committed suicide. At the time suicide was considered by Catholics to be a mortal sin and there was a more limited understanding of mental illness. This tragedy had marked the poor man for life. In his old age, his confreres worried about him wandering by a river late in the evenings.)

In preparation for the move to Keswick, the Novice Master told me to pack up all the pious holy pictures and statues in the Woodstock building to be shipped to the new Novitiate. I found this kind of work a great break from the silence and usual routine. When we arrived in Keswick, the Redemptorist priest in charge of construction of the new building told my classmate Brian Tracey and another novice, to take all the precious artifacts I had packed to the dump in the half ton truck. He considered them too old fashioned for the new building. On the way the Novice Master intercepted them and told them to take the treasures back to the Novitiate. This tug of war continued all afternoon until finally the Building Master prevailed by riding shotgun to the dump. Brian remarked drily, "This afternoon made me appreciate the gospel axiom about the difficulty of serving two masters!"

(Incidentally, one afternoon when Brian and I were swimming in the basement pool at Woodstock, I swallowed water and began floundering wildly. Brian, an excellent swimmer, pulled me to safety.)

At Keswick, there was a large farm. For months the only break from the usual routine was physical work. I hated what was called regular order: silence and what seemed to me mindless recitation of Latin psalms and rosary. (One day I was leading the rosary aloud in the chapel when the novice next to me tapped me on the shoulder. "That's 16 Hail Marys," he said, "we usually stop at ten!")

It seems to me that the Novitiate routine led to an unhealthy attitude of perfectionism, excessive introspection and scrupulosity in many novices. I remember a student at Brockville, older than me, a natural leader, good in sports, a great singer and outgoing. When I got to know him again in Windsor a few years later, he was very introverted and extremely nervous. One of his classmates told me that the change had taken place during his year in the Novitiate. He never seemed to recapture his old verve.

Most of my class survived the year with three or four dropping out. We took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for three years. There were many families in attendance. A short time later we took the train to Windsor to begin life in the Major Seminary, Holy Redeemer College, September, 1959.

(The next year of a class of 28, only 8 completed the year of Novitiate. One of the survivors said, "It was so quiet at Keswick last year that you could hear a trunk snap shut in the dark at midnight.")

Holy Redeemer College, The Major Seminary in Windsor (HRC), September 1959

This building was larger than the Novitiate in Keswick but designed by the same architect and similar in style. There was a total of 70 students in three years of philosophy and four years of theology. The students in 4th theology had been ordained in June and went out on weekends to help out in Windsor and Detroit parishes. They were allowed to perform all priestly duties except hearing confessions. That was only allowed after they passed an oral exam on Moral Theology at the end of 4th Theology. The atmosphere was much lighter and freer than the Novitiate.

During our first three years we took most of our classes in Philosophy, English, History, Political Science, etc., at HRC taught by Redemptorist priests. We drove by bus a few miles down the street to Assumption University to take courses like Biology, Psychology, Sociology, Economics, etc. taught mostly by lay teachers. Everyone could spot us as seminarians since we wore our long black habits and 15 decade rosaries to the university. Some students were not allowed to take the university courses as their high school marks were not considered high enough by the Redemptorist powers that be. (Ironically, many of these same students later got undergraduate and graduate degrees, perhaps to prove that the powers that be sometimes be wrong.)

Probably the courses that enlarged and changed our outlook the most were Psychology with its emphasis on the important role of the subjective viewpoint and Sociology which explained group and social influences on the individual that were hitherto unsuspected.

The university had a broader and deeper influence than that absorbed in classes. For example, there was the Christian Culture Series organized by a Basilian priest Fr. Stan Murphy for more than 30 years. Each year the initial speaker was Bishop Fulton J. Sheen who competed for top TV ratings with comedian Milton Berle. The bishop's dramatic speeches were often on the theme of the communist menace. One year he spoke to a large audience in Detroit on the topic of "The Edge of the Abyss." But unfortunately Mayor Jerome Kavanaugh introduced him in this way, "And now Bishop Sheen will speak on "The Edge of the Abbess!" Even Uncle Miltie laughed.

The series was popular with HRC students, so much so that the year before I got to Windsor, the Student Prefect said, "You could fill that old blue bus every Sunday evening to go to Detroit to see a cow's ass!" But in fact the attraction was to hear speakers like philosopher Jacques Maritain, communication guru Marshall Macluhan, author of *Black Like Me* John Howard Griffin and social change organizer Saul Alinsky. A number of HRC students (including me) were in Detroit at a lecture by biblical scholar William Albright when the death of President Kennedy was announced. Mr. Albright was a hero of Fr. Ed Crowley who worked very hard to write excellent summary notes for us on the latest work of the best scripture scholars.

Another attraction at the university was the library which was bigger and broader than the more specialized one at HRC. I used to spend a lot of time browsing there when I had free time between classes. Most of the classes required us to write papers on various topics, thus improving our skills at library research and writing. At that time written exams were still more common than multiple choice ones, so we learned something about writing under time pressure. And of course the co-ed university provided a more interesting social environment.

A little pre-history - HRC faculty schism

For a few years before our class arrived at HRC in September, 1959, there had been a split in the Redemptorist Faculty. Two of the teachers, Tom Traynor, Philosophy and Edward Coghlan, Sacred Elocution, favoured a more liberal approach, stressing more emphasis on charity over the more traditional way which usually included some degree of religion based on fear. (Historically Redemptorist preachers had been known for a “Fire and Brimstone” tone to push sinners to the confessional.) The rest of the faculty opposed such a change. The conflict began to affect the students, with some on each side and some not knowing what to think.

The Provincial of the Toronto Province decided that the situation was so serious that he had to intervene. He did so by removing the two liberal minded teachers from teaching at HRC. Fr. Ryan explained that he arrived at this choice because he thought it impossible to remove the entire rest of the Faculty who were more conservatively inclined and still run a seminary.

As luck would have it, I got to know both of the dissident instructors. In my final year at Brockville (1957-58) Fr. Coghlan came to replace a teacher who became ill. I had the good fortune of having him teach my elocution class in his very positive and encouraging way. (More about Tom Traynor later.) A plausible question would be whether the ousting of the two liberally minded teachers later led other teachers at HRC to stick to a too conservative approach in the face of oncoming change.

Prefect # 1

The Student Prefect when I arrived at HRC was Fr. George O’Reilly, in his fifties, with a fatherly demeanor, experienced in Redemptorist missionary and parish work. He gave thoughtful, practical talks to us on most Sunday mornings. He also called each student in for a talk on a regular basis (as Fr. Kennedy had done in Brockville) to listen to our concerns and offer wise counsel on our progress. At times I found it difficult to keep up with academic demands and also fulfill all the spiritual exercises required by the Redemptorist Rule. I was reassured by the Prefect that I should not be discouraged but to do the best I could. (An indication that I was doing OK at HRC was that I won a scholarship at the university for overall marks in my second year.)

Prefect # 2

In the Spring of 1961 Fr. O'Reilly was named the new Provincial of the Toronto Province. The new Student Prefect was a Redemptorist in his fifties who had spent most of his time as a priest doing parish work in Western Canada. Shortly after we went to the summer camp near Peterborough he arrived to take charge. All summer he was very quiet, didn't give any talks and appeared quite easygoing

The first Sunday in September that we were back at HRC, the new Prefect gave his first full talk to the students and, in my opinion, destroyed his credibility with most of the student body at one fell crack. His message was simple and negative: "You're a bunch of crybabies. We have to go to university. Boo Hoo, Boo Hoo! It's hard to do that and meet the demands of the Redemptorist Rule. Boo Hoo, Boo Hoo!"

The weeks that followed revealed our new boss to be rigid and incapable of seeing that things had changed from when he was in the seminary. Not long after his tenure began the rate of departing students increased.

A few months later Fr. O'Reilly, the new Provincial, came to HRC for an official visit. I made an appointment with him and told him as graphically as I could about the problems with the new Prefect. The Provincial had a look of dismay on his face at my admittedly dire recital. He told me I should go to the new man and tell him all my concerns. I said I would do so.

When I told the Prefect my concerns, he did not seem to understand them and downplayed them. He also spent a lot of time reminiscing about the good old days. The only result of my visit that I could detect was that he began to distrust me and watch me more closely. He remained in his job for the next three years as a steady stream of students departed from HRC.

Somehow or other, I learned that a student could have a spiritual director other than the Prefect, so I asked one of the philosophy teachers if he would do this for me. When he agreed and I told the Prefect, his mistrust of me increased again. The most helpful counseling I received in all my time at HRC occurred when Fr. Bernard Haring, the famous Redemptorist Moral Theologian, came to give us a five day retreat in the Fall of 1963. He encouraged me to continue to the priesthood, saying, "The Church needs young men like you."

While Fr. O'Reilly left Prefect #2 in place for 3 years, he did send Fr. Gerald Grant who had a doctorate in Psychology to be his assistant. Many students found Fr. Grant to be a very kind man and a good counsellor,

Total Institution

Part of the time I was at HRC there was a Redemptorist Newsletter edited by Fr. Ed Kennedy. At some point, Fr. Mansell Blair who was 3 or 4 years ahead of me and studying sociology at Notre Dame University, wrote an article about Erving Goffman, a Canadian born sociologist now in Chicago. It was about his book, *Asylums*, which described what Goffman called total institutions: jails, mental hospitals, military organizations, monasteries and convents. In these institutions the staff, by the use of strict rules and punishments, exercised a great deal of control over the inmates, whether prisoners, patients, soldiers, monks or nuns. There was a great discrepancy between the power of the staff and the inmates. Typically each group stereotyped the other and there was little real communication between them. The two groups became so much at odds with each other that it is as if one is at the North Pole and the other at the South.

When I read the article and then the book, I thought it was a very accurate description of Holy Redeemer College at that time. The students welcomed the promised changes of the Second Vatican Council while the faculty, with very few exceptions, feared and resisted the changes. Student letters, to and from, were opened and read by the Student Prefect. Students who asked too many questions were regarded with suspicion. There was practically no genuine communication between the faculty and the students.

Mansell phrased his article diplomatically, “if there is any of these negative processes in our educational institutions, we should eliminate them.” But for me, there was no doubt that we were in a total institution, with the worst possible effects on communication.

Meanwhile, in spite of the problems at Holy Redeemer College, on a larger canvas, there were encouraging signs. On October 11, 1962 Pope John XXIII began the Second Vatican Council to open the windows of the Church and let in some fresh air. This was widely seen as an effort to bring the Church more in touch with the modern world and renew its energies by a return to the spirit of the gospels instead of mere adherence to rigid rules. And in the Toronto Province, Fr. O’Reilly was leading a series of progressive changes, e.g.: giving each student a copy of Fr. Haring’s text on moral theology (although the teacher continued to use the old Latin text). These two events encouraged the seminarians at HRC to be hopeful. “After all, things can’t get any worse around here,” was a frequently heard comment. That refrain was soon to be sidelined by a new one: **“THINGS CAN GET WORSE, IN FACT, THEY JUST DID!”**

Giant Step Backward - Spring 1964

In the Spring of 1964, contrary to wide expectation, George O’Reilly, the Provincial of the Toronto Province was not re-appointed to a second three year term by the Head of the Congregation in Rome. This caused a big shock since he was regarded as a good leader by most members of the Province, certainly the students. The new Provincial was a banker in his youth and the very efficient manager of finances for the Province for several years. In my opinion he did not seem suited to the art of personnel management, nor did he seem sympathetic to the changes in the Catholic Church. His two official advisors also seemed to be quite conservative.

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There was widespread speculation about what had caused this sea change in the life of the Toronto Province. Over time it became clear that someone in the province had convinced the man long in charge of the whole Congregation in Rome, an American named William Gaudreau, that George O'Reilly (an enthusiastic supporter of Pope John XXIII) was dangerously liberal and must be replaced. The last time I saw Ed Kennedy, about 2006 or 2007, he told me that, as I suspected, Wm. Murphy was the one who did the deed. And, indeed, Fr. Murphy did remain as advisor to the new boss. (When I was at the reunion of current and former Redemptorists at HRC in Windsor in 1993, I noticed a smiling 8 by 10 picture of Willy Murphy in a place of honour. When I pointed it out to Gibbie Golden he said, "The victors get to write the history!")

(Looking back almost 60 years, this change in leadership seems to have been a crucial turning point in the fortunes of English speaking Canadian Redemptorists. At that time there were two English speaking Provinces: Toronto and Edmonton as well as a French speaking and Ukrainian Province. ((Most of the time I was at HRC in Windsor, a dozen or so Ukrainian students joined us, mostly from Western Canada. This broadened our cultural perspectives and occasionally we had Mass in the Eastern Rite.)) Soon the numbers of priests, brothers and seminarians began to drop. Recently the reunited Edmonton-Toronto Province, Ste. Anne de Beaupre and Ukrainian Provinces were all folded into the single Canadian Province, reflecting the steep decline in numbers.)

In the summer of 1964 I went to Montreal for 6 weeks to take a course while I stayed at St. Anne's, the Redemptorist Parish in the part of the city known as Griffintown (where Darcy McGee had represented Irish Catholics in the Legislatures just before and after Confederation). All of the priests there were older, some retired and having various health problems. They gave me a warm welcome and I got along well with Brother Albert from Newfoundland, whom I knew from Brockville and Windsor. One evening on some special occasion we were in the common room for a drink. When the bottle of Canadian Club was empty, Brother Albert said, "Another dead soldier, Tank God he didn't die without the priest."

I was surprised to find that these older men were every bit as disappointed with the change in direction of the Toronto Province as we seminarians. One of them, Father John, whom I knew from my first year at Brockville to be a "lion in the pulpit and a lamb in the confessional" seemed particularly downcast by the change. He was an intelligent, shy man now semi retired due to heart problems. During the discussion about the new regime, he said, "Oh well, I suppose I could just have another big heart attack and die!"

A few weeks later I returned to the rectory at about 8:00 in the evening to find Fr. John answering the front door and phone. Everyone else was at some parish function. As soon as I came in he rubbed his chest and said, "I'm not feeling too good." When I offered to call a doctor or get him to the hospital, he said, "No, I'll be fine." The next morning when Brother Albert knocked on my door to wake me up he said, "Fr. John died last night." Some of the other priests had heard his distress and went to his room. When asked if he wanted to go to confession, he said, "No, I'm OK. I wouldn't mind having a few puffs on a cigar though." Which he proceeded to do before dying.

This event had a profound effect on me. It seemed to be a real life validation of Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he wrote to explain what he had learned in Nazi concentration camps. The basic lesson was that if you lost a reason to live, a meaning for your life, you would soon die. When this happened, some prisoners ran towards the wire fence, knowing it was electrified. Frankl observed that other prisoners would stop eating and trade their meager food ration for cigarettes. They would usually be dead within a couple of days.

For many prisoners the reason to live was the thought of their family; for others, the beauty of nature, work, art, music or religious faith. For Frankl it was love for his wife who was separated from him. After he learned that she was dead, his purpose to live became to write a book about all that he had learned in the camps.

Apparently, Fr. John's reason to live was intrinsically bound up with his place in the Redemptorist Congregation, or more exactly, that part of it where he lived, the Toronto Province. And its future!

“What If” Department # 1

During George O'Reilly's three year term as Provincial, his official advisers were Wm. Wylie and Wm. Murphy. Wylie was, like O'Reilly, a moderate progressive, having been for several years the Prefect of Students when the Redemptorist Major Seminary was in Woodstock and later Novice Master. O'Reilly and Wylie were stationed at St. Patrick's Parish in Toronto. Murphy was stationed at HRC in Windsor as the purchasing agent for food, services, etc. He seemed more conservative than the other two. (My guess would be that O'Reilly and Wylie would usually agree on decisions, perhaps often outvoting Murphy.)

I got to know Fr. Wylie a little when he asked me to do research for him on the obscure topic of the Petrine Privilege, a little used provision in canon law which allowed the Pope to dissolve a marriage between a baptized person and an unbaptized person. He was trying to help a couple to whom he thought the Privilege might apply.

Years later in 1993, at a reunion of current and former Redemptorists at Holy Redeemer College in Windsor (shortly before the Redemptorists sold the building; the Brockville, Keswick and HRC Edmonton properties having already been sold) I had a conversation with Fr. Wylie. He told me that when the news arrived from Rome that he and George O'Reilly were not being reappointed for another term, the two of them talked about what to do. Should they obey the order or somehow resist it? He said, “After some discussion George and I agreed that all we knew as Redemptorists was obedience, so we obeyed.”

What if they had refused to vacate their positions? Would the Toronto Province have become the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) breaking away from the American parent United Auto Workers?

Of course, they were two quite different situations. Bob White, the CAW leader, a good working man born in Northern Ireland, started his work life in Woodstock at the age of 15 and participated in a strike the first year. Far from being an acquiescent employee, Bob used to say, “I failed obedience school.”

One Man Anvil Chorus

Back in Windsor in the Fall of 1964 the new Provincial and his advisors had decided that what was needed at the seminary was a good old-fashioned retreat on the “virtue” of blind obedience. To deliver it they picked a large, severe man about sixty years of age and with a voice as loud and jarring as an off-key trumpet. (Pardon my mixed musical metaphors.) His unrelenting theme for the 5 day retreat was, **“ALL THAT’S NEEDED IS BLIND OBEDIENCE TO YOUR SUPERIOR; ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE BEATEN DOWN ON THE ANVIL OF OBEDIENCE.”** Blind obedience did not allow a question or any discussion when given an order. Just instant obedience. No consideration of “and the greatest of these is charity” as per the New Testament. No thought of St. Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on the duty to follow one’s conscience above all. Just the good old anvil.

I found the retreat very distressing. I felt that I was in the presence of evil, hearing a false message that would have terrible effects on the group. It almost made me physically ill. Later my friend George Glover said, “I didn’t know if you were going to pull through.”

Just before the retreat started I had sprained my ankle playing basketball. So one day during recitation of the office in the chapel, I went to my room on the first floor to change the tensor bandage on the ankle. When I was finished I was standing before the mirror in my room combing my hair before returning to the chapel. I happened to look out the window to my right. There, on the sidewalk close to my window, stood the preacher glaring angrily in at me. It struck me like the “hate stare” described in John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*.

My premonition of negative consequences soon proved accurate. Within a short time 18 of the brightest seminarians, including the two smartest and most talented in my class, decided that the anvil was not for them and went home.

In a sly display of black humour at Christmas, a few of the lads in the youngest class dragged a big anvil up from a basement workshop, wrapped a red ribbon around it and put a large painted sign on it: **THE ANVIL OF OBEDIENCE.** It looked good under the tree!

Prefect #3

Prefect #3 was known to me in three different roles before he became Prefect. First, he was the Rector during my first years at HRC. As such he led prayers, corrected mistakes in pronunciation during reading at table, decided if we would enjoy free to talk at table and generally presided in quite a definitive way. Occasionally he rang the bell to end a meal before some students were finished eating. Once a year he led the community in taking an oath against modernism.

Second he taught Dogmatic Theology. He seemed quite intelligent with a very good memory. His class notes were written on the back of a calendar from fifteen or so years previous. Quite often he quizzed us on assigned reading in a way that created a good deal of tension in the class. So much so that one of the more nervous students would sometimes race to a washroom to throw up after a class. Perhaps not the best learning environment!

Third he was a good handball player against students 20 years or more younger. His nicknames were Nails and Bear.

So when the former rector became the new Student Prefect, he was not an unknown quantity to the students. He seemed very zealous to ensure that every rule was obeyed to the letter.

During his first year as Prefect, my 14 year old nephew died in a tragic hunting accident. My father phoned to say that he would pay the bus fare for me to go to the funeral. "Your sister's family needs your support," he said. When I asked the Prefect for permission to go, he immediately said no, the rules didn't allow it. What offended me was not so much the negative decision, but the fact that he did not stop to consider the situation for as much as two seconds.

During 1964-65 my five classmates and I were preparing for ordination. The Prefect, who was supposed to be our spiritual director, never discussed this with me, never asked if I was ready for this big step. We were on our own. I decided to be ordained largely because of Fr. Haring's encouragement and hopes for change in the Church that the Second Vatican Council promised.

(After we were ordained, my class all signed a Brief to the Superior in Rome prepared by Fr. Edward Boyce, who was in charge of the Essex County General Mission. The Brief requested that Fr. Gaudreau intervene to ease the problems at Holy Redeemer College. Silence ensued from Rome.)

In the Fall of 1965 I held the position of Student Capo - being the intermediary between the Prefect and the student body, assigning chores to students on work days, etc. At that time great concern was raised among the students about the Prefect reading the students' mail, which they considered an unjustified invasion of privacy. I suggested to the Prefect that the problem would be easily resolved if he announced that he wasn't going to read student letters any more. He said he wouldn't and couldn't agree because that would break a rule. (It seemed to me that for the Prefect, every rule had the combined weight of the Ten Commandments, the Law and the Prophets.)

Around the same time, students began to suspect that the phones in the student wing of HRC had been tapped. (Indeed they had been. The faculty member who did the tapping later admitted it to Joe Crawford, a friend of mine in the class ahead of me. The tapping was also acknowledged in the book by Paul Laverdure, *Renewal and Redemption, The Redemptorists in English Canada 1834 - 1994*.) Add another checkmark in the Total Institution File!

(A little more about Newfoundlander Joe Crawford. Shortly after he was ordained in June, 1964 he had to undergo a major heart operation in Toronto. He was very well liked by the people he served. As his classmate George Glover said, "People either want to give Joe money or feed him." Not long after I moved to London in 1971, Joe came to one of the London hospitals to receive a heart transplant. When I went for a visit, Joe said, "I have to tell you Frank, I've had a change of heart!" Unfortunately he did not live very long after that operation.)

During the months of September, October and November, 1965, I watched closeup as the Prefect, who had been considered so tough, gradually fell apart. He was unable to make a decision. After night prayers I would see him leave the chapel, head for his office, stop halfway, head to the left, stop, head to the right, go back to the chapel, head for his office again...

It seemed to me that he had swallowed whole the saying, "Keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you." He was keeping all the rules but the students were still leaving in droves.

I felt sorry for him, but I wondered if perhaps the meaning of Yeats' words was beginning to dawn on him:

"All changed, changed utterly."

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold:
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

Official Visitation

The Superior of the Redemptorists in Rome, Fr. Wm. Gaudreau, had refused a number of invitations to come to Holy Redeemer College to assess the situation and offer some solutions. But he declined to do so, apparently believing that to do so would be to somehow reward the alleged disobedience of the students which he seemingly believed was the only problem. Instead, he sent Fr. Raymond Schmitt, the Head of the St. Louis Province, to visit HRC and report back. This visitation took place in the Fall of 1965.

A letter, unanimously approved by the student body, and listing the problems at HRC, was given to the Visitor. The copy I saw was unsigned, but I believe the author was probably Tom McNulty, a classmate of mine. Unfortunately Tom died many years ago, so it is not possible to check with him. (Some time before our class had prepared a petition to our Provincial, which was supported by all the Toronto Province students, and Tom had been the one who actually wrote the final version. No answer was received.)

Among the problems listed were: the breakdown of trust between the students and the faculty of HRC, the lack of leadership by the Rector, Prefect and Provincial Administration, the removal from HRC of Fr. Grant (the one man the students trusted), the lack of spiritual direction for students, the lack of confessors that the students had confidence in, the loss of 36% of the student body the previous year, the “anvil” retreat and the lack of response by the Provincial to our petition. The letter was well written and a good summary of the problems. As well it was respectful in tone and an earnest plea for help. (In retrospect, I can think of another problem, the unrecognized need for psychiatric care in the case of two students at that time. Both eventually left the seminary amid very distressed circumstances. In contrast, during the time George O’Reilly was Prefect, a student was allowed to travel to another city to see a psychiatrist on a regular basis.) This letter to the Visitor was not acknowledged, either by the Visitor or Fr. Gaudreau.

Diaspora

November 18, 1965 after Mass and a period of silent thanksgiving in the chapel of Holy Redeemer College, the Provincial said, “There will be a meeting in the common room at nine o’clock for all students.”

As I entered the common room Leo Feehan, assistant to the Prefect, said to me, “Look’s like snow today.” The significance of his comment didn’t hit me at the time, but back in the summer there had been a lot of speculation about the situation at HRC and Leo had said, “Something will happen before the snow flies.” It proved to be a frosty meeting indeed.

When the meeting assembled, the Provincial, flanked by his two advisors, sat at the front of the room, dour faced. In a harsh voice, he announced, ‘All of the students at HRC, except the first year class, will be going elsewhere immediately. Frs. Purschke, Green, Murphy and Tracey will go to Esopus, New York...’ He then droned on naming all the other students and their destinations in Quebec, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Luxembourg, Germany, England, Ireland.

No questions were allowed and there was no discussion.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the students were in various stages of shock. A few years ago I was talking for the first time since the sixties to a former student who had been sent to Germany. When I started to talk about that meeting, he didn’t remember any of it. Apparently the record was erased from his memory in the way that the victims of an accident are often left with no memory of the crash.

The fabric of trust in the Redemptorist vision had been built slowly over years; many of the seminarians had grown up in Redemptorist parishes and seen the priests lead the parishioners to better lives. Others were inspired by great preachers or kind confessors and counsellors. Still others were shaped by the creative leadership of Frs. Ed Kennedy and George O’Reilly and the positive group dynamics in the student bodies at St. Mary’s in Brockville and at Holy Redeemer College both in Edmonton and Windsor. But it did not take long to destroy that trust, even if all the consequences were not obvious for some years.

The next day at supper time, my three classmates and I boarded a train in Windsor for Esopus, sat up most of the night in nervous discussion of our future, crossed the border in darkness and arrived the next morning about eight o'clock at Mt. St. Alphonsus, Esopus, NY on the beautiful Hudson River across from Hyde Park, site of FDR's Presidential Library.

“What if” Department #2

The decision to disperse the students from Holy Redeemer College was made at a meeting in Chicago in the Fall, 1965 (I believe a few weeks before Nov. 18). Among those present were: Wm. Gaudreau the Superior General of the Congregation, the Provincial and Advisors of the Toronto Province and the Provincials of the Baltimore and Saint Louis Provinces.

Fr. Ed Kennedy told me around 2012 that after the Chicago meeting and before the decision was implemented, he and two Redemptorists from the Toronto Province met with the Toronto Provincial to try to convince him not to shut HRC down, predicting dire consequences if it was. Needless to say, their attempt failed.

Of course the closure of the major seminary of the English speaking Canadian Redemptorists sent the crystal clear message to Canadian Catholics that the English speaking Redemptorists did not believe that they had much of a future here. What other conclusion could a Catholic teenager contemplating joining up, or his parents, or his parish priest reach?

Esopus

Although it was obvious that the Rector at Esopus was watching us with zeal worthy of J. Edgar Hoover, the staff and 150 students at Esopus were welcoming. Only once do I recall a student making a disparaging remark about the “Windsor Rebels.” Nevertheless, we felt a culture shock even though, unlike many of the other Windsor refugees, we did not have to immediately learn another language. Most of the of the Esopus students, for example, accepted without question LBJ's commitment to the Viet Nam War and the atmosphere seemed far more conservative than we were used to in Windsor. There was a dearth of questioning by students.

(I think I would have found it impossible to learn another language at that time. In recent years I learned from two former students how difficult and discouraging it was to try to learn a new language after the shock of being shipped to another country. And at times being under the vigilant eyes of a suspicious local superior. Their accounts reminded me of the poignant opening lines of the song made popular in 1978 by singer Liz Mitchell of the group Boney M:

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down.
Yeah, yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion.”)

See Psalm 137.

Fortunately, at Esopus, due to scheduling problems, we only had to attend three classes: Scripture, Moral Theology and Liturgy. The Scripture teacher was enlightening and entertaining, beginning each class with an off colour joke to help us understand oral tradition in the bible. The Moral teacher went on at length, not about the need for true contrition, but about the absolute need to get the exact number of sins in confession. Upon questioning he conceded that an approximation might suffice, say, in the case of a prostitute coming to confession after 40 years. (“How many times a day? Never on a Sunday, you say?”) He had been dubbed with the acutely accurate nickname of “Bull.” The Liturgy teacher was an old man who seemed obsessed with a million minute rules related to the Mass and sacraments. The practical highlight of his class was the day he demonstrated the art of taking a pee on a fast moving train (thankfully, a dry run). My classmate Paul Murphy whispered, “It just doesn’t get any more relevant than this!”

We had a lot of time for reading and there was a good library. I read a large book on the history of Catholic teaching on contraception over the centuries. It came to the conclusion that there had never been an infallible declaration against it.

It seemed that **Student Prefect # 4**, a man in his thirties, judged things strictly by appearances. If a student was in trouble, for example for breaking the no smoking rule, he could redeem himself simply by staying in the chapel after night prayers and making the stations of the cross looking very sad. “He’s got his mind right!” the Prefect would say happily.

Given the conservative atmosphere at Esopus, I was surprised when the rector, an expert in anti communism, invited Dorothy Day, the Founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, to give an inspiring guest lecture. Her message of concern for the poor received a warm reception but her pacifism was no match for the domino theory of the LBJ crowd.

After a couple of weeks down in the dumps, we four struck on the idea of volunteering for all the weekend help in parishes possible. Already ordained, we spent every weekend in parishes in this beautiful New York State area. The food was better, the atmosphere freer than the seminary and we got a chance to work with people. We did such a great job, that the last day we were at Esopus the same Rector who had eyed us so suspiciously on our arrival, at lunch lauded our pastoral zeal. We did our best to look humble.

Memory Lane

A few years ago, coming back from visiting Steve and Françoise Kenny on the South shore of the broad St. Lawrence River opposite Baie-Comeau, birthplace of Brian Mulroney, I turned south at Montreal and headed down the Hudson River Valley to Esopus. Still owned by the Redemptorists, it was no longer a seminary but a retreat house. I went into the building with a bunch of men arriving for a weekend retreat, looked around the main floor and then went down to the lower floor dining room where a young man was setting the table for supper. I told him that I had been a student there in 1965-66 and asked if I could rent a room for the night. He took me outside to the elderly priest in charge who graciously welcomed me, saying there was no need to pay and had the young man take me up to a second floor room.

I joined a few Redemptorists for supper and baseball talk. (Did you know the Philadelphia team used to be called the Blue Jays?) Then, after touring the whole building including my old room, I went out to the cemetery to see if I could find the grave of any of my erstwhile teachers. But the only grave with a familiar name was that of Wm. Goudreau, the man who locked up HRC. I felt a strong impulse to salute his grave with a liquid tribute, but I thought better of it on the off chance of a hidden camera.

Return to Canada and First Assignment, April, 1966

Paul Murphy, Brian Tracey and I returned to Brockville where we made a retreat without benefit of a preacher (the anvil polisher being otherwise occupied), passed the oral test which enabled us to hear confessions and received our assignments. Brian went to the parish in Windsor, Paul to the one in Saint John's and I went to Saint Patrick's in Toronto to be chaplain at The Toronto General, Mount Sinai and The Hospital for Sick Children, working with one of my old HRC teachers, Fr. Ray (Chubby) Powers. (Incidentally, our classmate Doug Purschke had returned to the West before we left Esopus.)

Our assignments were interrupted in the summer when we were sent to Missouri for six weeks of short courses in theology. Among the lecturers was Father Haring who was greatly amused when we told him about our Esopus teacher Bull's zeal for mathematical precision in the confessional. "Why you'd need an abacus!" he said.

Back at St. Pat's, I found a large diverse group in the rectory: four retired gentlemen, one teacher and two students at the university and four priests in the German parish. The rector was my old Prefect #2, much mellowed out, who was in charge of the English speaking parish. He asked me to preach at the Perpetual Help devotions once a month. I was glad to do so except for the fact that I couldn't sing and was a disaster at leading the congregation in that department. I learned that the priests in the numerous confessionals around the church were lenient in assessing penance when I was on deck, considering that enduring the static from the front was punishment enough! The community was quite diverse with little to unify it. I was glad that George Glover (a student in philosophy at the university) and Bob Marino (in charge of the Portugese parish), both a year ahead of me in HRC, were there.

Fr. Powers was easy to work with and the duties at the hospital interesting. (Once I encountered a man who said he hadn't confessed since World War I. Happily he was able to do so that day. I also got to meet Leaf goalie Terry Sawchuk, in for a bad back during that Stanley Cup year.) But there were so many patients and they changed so often that I felt like Lucille Ball and her friend in the chocolate factory; it was hard to keep up! You didn't really get to know patients much before they were gone.

Chubby had a supply of slightly cynical Redemptorist-related jokes, e.g., when one member of a parish staff says to another, "Fr. Bill is running around outside with no clothes on." "Quick, bring him in," was the reply, "before they make him rector."

“How much money do you need for your vacation, Fr. Ray?” “Just whatever you take for yourself, Fr. Rector.”

Gibby Golden told this one: “A Redemptorist preacher proud of his powerful voice and handsome visage climbed up into the pulpit of a church he hadn’t been in before. When he saw the live microphone in front of him he placed it on the stool behind him certain he had no need of it. He launched into his all purpose “Sermon on God,” good for all occasions; weddings and funerals, Lent and the Christmas Season. About ten minutes later, just when he was reaching the dramatic climax, he let slip an audible fart. The mike strategically located at just the right height relayed it to the startled congregation as loud as a cannonading Boom Boom Geoffrion slap shot hitting the back boards at the Montreal Forum! The church exploded in laughter. The star preacher slunk down and out of sight back to the rectory.”)

I had a chance to take a very good short night course from Fr. Gregory Baum who had been a theologian at the Second Vatican Council and was very skilled at translating the Council’s documents into everyday language. Also I taught a few night classes to adults in the parish about the teachings of the Council. A highlight of the year was when I went to help on the General Mission in the Windsor area for two weeks working with Dick Grannan who may have been the best speaker in the Toronto Province at the time. I learned a lot from Dick in those two weeks.

In the summer I was invited by the Windsor Renewal Team to join them in preaching retreats and missions. I asked the Provincial for permission to do so and he reluctantly agreed.

Some Changes and The Malaise Speech

Sometime around this time (Spring or Summer, 1967, I cannot remember precisely when) Frs. Gerry Grant and Edward Boyce were appointed as advisors to the Provincial, Fr. Lockwood. In 1968, for the first time a new Provincial was elected by the members of the Toronto Province, not simply appointed by Rome. But these changes, no doubt intended to correct or compensate for Fr. O’Reilly’s ouster, the anvil retreat, the diaspora and other bad decisions, did not appear to lift the gloom for very long. Looking back from more than half a century, it seems that these well intentioned actions were too little, too late to correct past blunders. Controversy about the desirable amount of change continued, as did a stream of Redemptorists leaving the Congregation over the following years which became known as “**The Exodus.**”

At a meeting of most of the Redemptorists of the Toronto Province in the Spring of 1967, George Glover gave a speech in which he referred to a malaise that had come over the Province, a dark and pessimistic frame of mind and outlook. In my opinion George’s speech was the keynote speech of the meeting, accurately capturing the mood of that time in the Toronto Province. My short speech was in favour of concelebrated mass as opposed to several individual masses especially with no one but the celebrant in attendance. I thought the concelebrated mass was more in the spirit and symbolism of the Last Supper and more helpful to faith and the unity of the community.

Windsor Renewal Team

I joined Dick Grannon, his brother Jim and Gibby Golden in the Fall of 1967 at Holy Redeemer College in Windsor. Our objective was to bring the fresh approach of the Second Vatican Council to Catholic adults and high school students through missions and retreats, not only in the Windsor-Detroit area but in various other places in the USA and Canada as well. Sometimes we worked as a team of four, sometimes as a pair or singly. Through many discussions we worked out a unified, consistent approach and our message received an enthusiastic response.

Gibby and I wrote a 30 or 40 page pamphlet to explain the changes that were coming about in our understanding of matters of faith like the sacraments, sin, conscience, etc. We would distribute it at retreats and missions to interested people. (Gibby, who is a better record keeper than I am, sent me a copy of the pamphlet a few years ago. I couldn't remember which parts of it he wrote and which I did. Two of my friends still active in Church renewal thought it still read well.)

Later that summer (1968) the Renewal Team moved from Holy Redeemer College to St. Alphonsus Redemptorist Parish in downtown Windsor. (The reasons for the move escape my memory.) Our activities continued on without much change from the previous year. We gave a lot of retreats near Windsor and I taught a number of short courses about the teachings of the Council at a Catholic Adult Education Centre at the parish.

Heresy Trial, Spring, 1968

Dick Grannon and I were summoned to a meeting with the local bishop to explain what we had been teaching in retreats and missions. Before the meeting took place it became known in local Catholic circles as a "Heresy Trial" with the obvious suggestion that somehow our teachings offended Catholic orthodoxy.

I can't remember exactly when the meeting occurred, but it took place in Windsor. Present were: the bishop, the Provincial of the Toronto Province, Dick and I and Dick's brother Jim, who came along for moral support.

The beginning of the meeting was then taken up with the Provincial commenting enthusiastically about the bishop's many athletic abilities: whether swimming, tennis, etc. The comments seemed to me to verge on flattery and I thought they might insult the good bishop, but I need not have worried. He drank them in with exquisite pleasure like sips of the finest single malt, his face beaming brighter with each swallow.

Finally, we got to the business at hand. Dick and I had been accused of unorthodox teaching. Of course no accusers were identified. We spent more than an hour explaining what we had actually said in our sermons and talks. I don't remember it all, but a lot of it revolved around the topic of birth control. We explained that we followed the lead of a number of theologians who stressed the role of conscience.

Eventually the bishop seemed satisfied with our explanations, and agreed that we had not preached heresy. He then said, “Well, that’s done, let’s have a drink.” But Dick Grannan, wiser than me in these matters, said, “Look here Bishop, it is widely known among Catholics in the area that you have summoned us here on suspicion of teaching heresy. You have agreed that we didn’t do so. You have to clear our names and reputations.”

The bishop agreed to write a letter to clear our names. Then we had a drink. While sipping the drink, the Provincial said to me, “Frank, tell the bishop what you said about his quote in the paper.”

At that time there was a Synod going on in the London diocese. Some of the priests who belonged to the diocese had been seeking a raise in their meager pay. The bishop dismissed them with this quote in the local newspaper, “Why if any priest is in need he can come to me for help.”

So I repeated what I had said, “This sounds very paternalistic to me. Some of the slave owners were kind to their slaves, but they were still slaves.” The bishop hung his head and said, “Well I guess we all have to be careful about paternalism.”

Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, the bishop never cleared our names as he promised to do. (Perhaps he was unfamiliar with Robert Service’s line, “A promise made is a debt unpaid.”) As a result, complaints continued about us from some diocesan priests and some of our Redemptorist confreres as well. (“Why don’t you bastards just leave?” asked one anonymous letter.) Requests for the services of our Renewal Team declined.

Panic in Chicago

In the summer of 1968 I attended a theological workshop in Chicago where we listened to a number of theologians and scripture scholars. On July 25 Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, in which he indicated there would be no change in the Church’s doctrine on birth control. This caused a huge reaction around the world as many Catholics had expected a change in the teaching as recommended by a large study group of experts from theological, scientific and other fields.

That evening in Chicago, we were participating in an informal session with Fr. John MacKenzie, an older man famed as a Scripture scholar. Someone asked in a desperate voice, “What are we going to do with this Pope?”

The Jesuit, well known to have a wickedly dry sense of humour, said, “I’ve always thought that assassination was a much neglected means of social change.” A gasp went through the audience as many thought he was serious.

Fr. Haring and other theologians immediately stressed the proper role of conscience for parents in deciding how many children they could bring up and educate. September 27, 1968 the Canadian Catholic Bishops issued the Winnipeg Statement along the same lines. But I thought the encyclical was a major mistake and I agreed with those who said it weakened the trust many Catholics had in the Church and initiated a less honest era.

Windsor Renewal Team continued

One of the highlights of our work the next year was when Gibby Golden and I went to Newfoundland to conduct missions in three parishes on the Burin Peninsula. There were crowds of 800 or 900 most evenings and we always had a question and answer session. Given the traditionally large families in Newfoundland, birth control was a topic of some interest. Our presentation on the topic explained the role of conscience and quoted the Canadian Bishops' Statement.

At one such presentation the local pastor debated the topic with me in front of the crowd. But in the next parish, the local doctor, a Catholic, rushed up to me after the talk and said, "That's the first sensible explanation I've heard on this topic; I will start prescribing the birth control pill immediately."

To give the previously mentioned pastor his due, he helped us out another evening when a parishoner was upset that St. Christopher had been sidelined as the patron saint of travellers. The pastor said, "The Pope just had a cabinet shuffle, you know, like Joey Smallwood does so often. (Joey was Premier of Newfoundland at the time and I was jealous when Gibby met him and I missed the opportunity.)"

(I met a woman who said her father had been in Joey's cabinet for years but had to quit due to life threatening cancer. Joey took this opportunity to dump two other ministers as well, "for health reasons." When the two protested they were in perfectly good health, her father said, "I'm sick enough for all three!")

Gibby and I also gave a retreat to the Redemptoristine nuns at Keswick. The Superior, a grand lady, said to me, "You would make a good teacher." Hmm...

Another highlight was when Fr. Ed Kennedy asked me to join him in preaching a retreat to more than a hundred nuns from different Orders in Edmonton. It gave me a new respect for these women when I learned about the overwork and poor conditions they sometimes experienced, at times even being deprived of access to proper medical care. And of course I learned a lot from Fr. Ed, who among other things, had been elected to city council in Edmonton.

The Moncton Misunderstanding

At some point in time (I cannot remember exactly when) the Provincial phoned me in Windsor and told me that he had a request from the bishop of Moncton, NB for someone to establish a Catholic Adult Education Centre there to teach in French. He said that if I was interested in filling this position, I should call him back.

When I thought about it, since I could not speak French, I realized it would be a disaster both for me and the audience. So I did not phone back to the Provincial. I also wondered why he had not asked one of the priests in the Toronto Province who spoke French, e.g., Gibby Golden, a native of Quebec City and perfectly bilingual. He even looked like Pierre Trudeau. Or referred the bishop to the French speaking Redemptorist Province in Quebec.

Sometime later, the Provincial came to St. Alphonsus Parish in Windsor for an official visitation. In the meeting with the whole Redemptorist parish staff, to my surprise and embarrassment, he brought up the fact that I had not gotten back to him on the Moncton matter. (In retrospect, I can see that I should have made my reluctance for the job explicit.) But at the time I thought I was only to call back if I wanted to do the job. The way it was brought up in the meeting seemed like a return to the public shaming of Novitiate days. So, feeling under public attack, I said, “the days of blind obedience are over.” (I regret this misunderstanding for which I bear some of the responsibility.)

New Location and Breakup of Renewal Team

In the Fall of 1968 some members of St. Alphonsus parish staff returned to the rectory after a leave, so that there was no room in the rectory for the renewal team. We expected this since the rector, Fr. George O'Reilly, had told us they would be coming back. But at the same time we learned that we were not welcome to return to Holy Redeemer College in spite of the dozens of empty rooms there.

Around this time, Dick Grannan took a teaching position in the U.S. and Gibby Golden was teaching at a Jesuit University in Detroit. Jim Grannan and I joined a Redemptorist from the West to live in a house on Pine Street in Windsor. I began to take Psychology courses at the University of Windsor.

Before leaving St. Alphonsus rectory one evening I was having a drink there with one of the parish staff who had returned from a year of study. A man in his fifties, widely experienced, intelligent and thoughtful. After a lengthy discussion on the state of the Church and the Toronto Province of the Redemptorists, he said to me, **“You’re lucky, you’re young enough to leave.”** I thought these words revealed his true feelings both about the Toronto Province and his own situation. And in a friendly but forceful way his words spurred me on to the same kind of hard considerations.

March, 1970 ... Decision Time

Sometimes when I look back over the time I was with the Redemptorists with all the ups and downs, I feel that I was a slow learner (if not a masochist) compared to my classmates and friends who left the Congregation much sooner than I did, many from the seminary. It took a long time for me to absorb the full impact of the shift backward represented by the removal of George O'Reilly as Provincial, the demands for blind obedience, the exile of the students from HRC and the distrust of younger Redemptorists. Of course the problem was bigger than the Redemptorist Congregation. The Second Vatican Council's promise of change had not been fulfilled. It was quite clear to me by then that most of the power brokers in the Church had no intention of changing the way things were done.

I remember talking to George Glover about a year before this time. It was a serious and sad talk. Neither of us said it out loud, but I think we both were starting to realize that the dream we had for years at Brockville and Windsor was dying. Then we had thought we would spend a lifetime of working to help people as Redemptorists. By March of 1970 Bob Marino and George Glover had left the Congregation. And the reminder that I was "young enough to leave" was seldom far from my mind. (Several years later I learned that my classmates Paul Murphy and Brian Tracey had been going through much the same process in other parts of the country.)

While I tried to live up to the values learned from my parents, I had lost faith in many traditional Church dogmas and practices. It seemed dishonest to me to continue to be a priest when I no longer believed in many things that most Catholics assumed that a priest would believe.

I was enjoying my studies at the university and the people I was meeting there. The prospect of spending my life doing something useful like teaching without the hammer of blind obedience over my head held a lot of promise. And the memory of Fr. John in Montreal who appeared to have lost faith in the Redemptorists' future to the point of giving up on life was still fresh in my mind.

One night in March, after a night class at the university, I had trouble sleeping and finally about 3:00 in the morning I decided to leave the Redemptorists and the priesthood. It was not so much going over the options methodically until the scales tilted. It was that suddenly, somehow the courage to make the move was finally there when it hadn't been before.

When I got up in the morning there was no one else in the house and I had a few moments of doubt. But a strong coffee renewed my determination. I phoned Fr. Bedard, my old Geometry teacher and now a Provincial Advisor, and arranged an appointment for that afternoon in Toronto. When I told him that I wanted to leave, he did not seem surprised. He said, "First you have to ask for a six month leave of absence to consider your decision." So I wrote out a short note to that effect. But both he and I knew that I was not considering the decision. The decision had been made.

Afterwards I went to tell my family which I knew would be the hardest part. I drove to my brother Jack's place in the Ottawa Valley and stayed overnight. The next day I went on to tell my parents. When I got there my mother was out shopping with a neighbour. I had planned to tell both of my parents at the same time, but when I saw how nervous my father was, I told him immediately. He said, "who's responsible for that, the Provincial?" I said, "No, it was my decision."

When my mother returned, I told her and she was more upset about it than my Dad. (Later my brother Greg told me that Dad had told him that my leaving did not bother him. He also told me that my mother's main concern was that I wouldn't visit them out of embarrassment over my decision.) The next morning before I was up, Fr. Harrington, who had been an assistant pastor in our parish came to see me. He had heard about my decision from my sister and he was very understanding about it. When I saw my sister she said, "I know you wouldn't make the decision without a lot of thought." Jack kindly lent me money for tuition at the University. I felt I had the support of my brothers Gorman and Jerome too. A day later I headed back to Windsor to continue my classes. Just before I left, my Dad said, "Come home whenever you can."

Back in Windsor, after a night class I had a drink with a couple I had gotten to know. The wife asked me how I felt now that I had made the decision and set the process in motion. I said, "It's something like stopping beating your head against a brick wall (or an anvil). It feels good when you stop."

One of my main worries before making the decision to leave was about money. Would I be able to get a job? As it turned out, after a few weeks of looking in Windsor I was hired (by Bob Abbott, a former HRC student) to teach English and Sociology at The Adult Education Centre for three months in the summer. The students had come back to school to get the equivalent of a high school diploma. They were highly motivated and it was easy to teach them. And the pay was good.

For a week I needed a place to stay before I could move into the upper part of a small house that I was renting. The Christian Brothers kindly let me stay at their residence near the university free of charge. On Friday, they said, "Come on down to the living room this evening. We're having a party for Brother Joe. He's leaving the Order." In all my time in the Redemptorists, I never heard of such an event when someone left. There leaving was more often done under cover of darkness.

Six months after I had seen Fr. Bedard, who was now the Provincial, I called him to ask what the next step was. He said, "Write a letter to Pope Paul VI requesting a dispensation from the priesthood and Redemptorist vows. And send it to the local bishop, Gerald Emmet Carter."

Thanks, but No Thanks

Some time after I wrote the letter, I received a call from the bishop's secretary requesting that I come for an appointment with Bishop Carter. He said, "I saw your letter and I wanted to offer you safe harbour if your difficulties were just with the Redemptorists."

I replied, “No, I want to leave the priesthood as well as the Congregation.”

“Very well,” he said, looking a little relieved, I thought, that I hadn’t taken him up on his offer. “Do you have a girl friend?” he asked. “No,” I replied, “I’m from good solid Ottawa Valley Irish Catholic Jansenist stock. There’s been no hanky panky.”

“I wish I could say the same for some who are staying in,” he said. I thought his comment rather revealing.

Thus ended the interview.

A Matter of Conscience

A few weeks later, I received a summons to a meeting with two parish priests of the London Diocese, one of whom I knew. They were quite polite and diplomatic. The priest I knew asked me a series of questions from a form he was holding and wrote down my answers. It seemed to me that the intent of the questions was to establish that I wanted to leave the priesthood either because I suffered from mental illness or was a sex addict. Some combination of the two would also be acceptable.

I politely declined to agree with any of those alternatives.

At this point in the meeting, the second priest, who had remained mostly silent up to this point, said, “If we send the form to Rome as it stands now, they are going to say that your problems are with the Redemptorist Congregation and that is not a reason to leave the priesthood. They will refuse to dispense you from the priesthood.”

“Please give me the form,” I said. When I got the form I wrote on it, “I wish to leave the priesthood as well as the Redemptorists because my conscience tells me it is the right thing for me to do.” To this I added my signature.

With the formal meeting over, the priest I knew said, “Let’s have a drink.” So we did in a civilized way and then I went home. (Incidentally, both of these priests were made bishops a few years later and both had controversial terms of office.)

A few months later I got a phone call from the bishop’s secretary telling me that my dispensation had come through. I received a copy in the mail shortly after.

(A few years ago a friend of mine said, “Why did you bother going through all that legalistic rigamarole?” I replied that I did it for my parents’ sake. I wanted to be able to tell them that I had left legitimately.)

Full Time Employment

My school year of 1970-71 was busy. I had very few exams but many written assignments. Their due dates set my schedule. In January, 71, I began sending out job applications with my resume, eventually sending about a hundred. Over the next months I received many negative replies (7 in one day) and attended about 10-12 job interviews, improving my skills at that process through practice. I had two interviews in Toronto with administrators from Northern College in South Porcupine. In June I heard that they were sending me a contract in the mail to teach Psychology full time beginning in September.

Before the contract arrived, I received a letter from a W.T. Traynor at Fanshawe College in London, asking me to phone to arrange an interview. I was in London a few days later and when I entered Dr. Traynor's office he said, "Did you go to Holy Redeemer College in Windsor?" As soon as he said it I realized that he was the man I had heard about who taught Philosophy there until he was removed by the superior because his views were considered too liberal. He had left HRC in the Spring of 1959 just before I arrived in the Fall of that year.

After an interview with Dr. Traynor and a faculty member, Dr. Traynor told me he was going to send me a contract. When the contract arrived, the salary was a little higher than he had promised.

Reckoning that it would be easier to move from Windsor to London than to South Porcupine, I took the Fanshawe job, with Steve Kenny helping me move my worldly possessions to London.

For the rest of the summer I was busy teaching English and Algebra to shift workers at the Chrysler Plant for Saint Claire College in Windsor and finishing my M.A. in Psychology. I began teaching at Fanshawe College in September, 1971. Most of the members of the department, both support staff and teachers, would say that Tom Traynor was the best boss they ever had. We were sorry when he quit at Christmas due to friction with upper management. (Incidentally, the Anglican Church recognized Tom's ordination in the Catholic Church and he became active as an Anglican priest. He and his wife had three little girls, two of whom were twins who invented their own language. They only learned English when put in separate classes.)

When seeking work at Fanshawe College I had applied for both a teaching and counseling job and after teaching Psychology for 13 years to students in a wide variety of programs, I was transferred to the Counselling Department for the next 16. There I helped students and potential students to make career choices, to acquire good study habits (assisting students to overcome test anxiety was a specialty of mine using techniques I had learned in elocution class), dealing with personal problems and difficulties with the bureaucracy of the college. I wrote a 20 page booklet on study skills for 500 indigenous students in various colleges and universities across the country.

When I started work at Fanshawe College the only ones I knew in London were Brian Tracey who was teaching in the Separate School System and his parents who kindly invited me over for a meal frequently. Sometime later I was glad to learn that Gary Michalski, who had been a student at HRC, was the Co-ordinator of the Broadcast Journalism Program at the college, using his professional name of Warren Michaels. And the teachers and other staff were very friendly.

A few years later I became active on the faculty union executive and served a term on the provincial bargaining team. Later for nine years I was the elected faculty representative on the college's Board of Governors. (The last time I saw George Glover before he died, he said, "You were pretty angry the first years you were at Fanshawe. George was probably right. One of the reasons I became active in the union was that I didn't like it when I saw what I considered to be arbitrary management decisions.) I once ran for election as an MPP in London South but my mother's prayers were answered and I didn't win.

While it took me longer to leave the Redemptorists than some of my colleagues, one of the benefits of my slow approach was that from the time of my leaving to the present time, I have never doubted that I made the right decision.

Thank You, Ticker Whalen... Wherever You Are

Earlier in this account I suggested that, in spite of problems, during my fifteen years association with the Redemptorists I learned many things which helped me in my later work life. Here is another very good example of this.

Dave (Ticker) Whalen went to Saint Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. at the same time as former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and he graduated with a B.A in English. Then he went to the Redemptorist Novitiate in the class before me. When he arrived at HRC he went straight into First Theology. After graduating from HRC he was appointed to be the Toronto Province's Vocation Director. His job was to encourage boys and young men to join the Redemptorists.

But Ticker did something that no previous Vocation Director had done, he sent regular newsletters to everyone in the Province recounting his travels around Eastern Canada, the schools where he spoke and the promising prospects that he was finding. For the first time everyone knew exactly what the Vocation Director was doing and were eager to support him in every way they could.

In the Spring of 1976, I was elected as the Chief Steward of Local 110, OPSEU which represented some 450 faculty members at Fanshawe College. But as well as three campuses in London, there were satellite campuses in St. Thomas, Woodstock, Tillsonburg, Simcoe and Port Stanley. Barring some drastic crisis, union meetings were not well attended given the travel involved. How could I keep the members well informed and strengthen solidarity?

Fortunately, I remembered Ticker Whalen's method: a newsletter. So we started **FUNS** for Fanshawe Union Notices. They informed members of bargaining issues and situations where members were being ill treated. Then the London Free Press began to quote them. Solidarity grew to the point that after an eight month fight to restore the job of an unfairly laid off female music teacher, 500 people attended a Board of Governors meeting on her behalf. The Board restored her job with full back pay. Thanks again Ticker!

Life on the Outside

After some 15 years in the orbit of the all male Redemptorist World, I had a period of adjustment getting used to the real world that included those of the female persuasion. There was a lot to learn and not a few missteps. It was best described by a fellow teacher as a time of "delayed adolescence."

After some time I married a woman who had a son and daughter from a previous marriage. Although our marriage unfortunately broke up, I have remained close to my stepson Myles and his wife Cassie. Their teenage son Ian is my pride and joy (in the first weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he volunteered to pack boxes of food for the besieged country). My stepdaughter Hope and I have always been very close. I feel very lucky to be part of this family as well as of my family of origin. Also I'm lucky to have life long friends from my time in the Redemptorists both among those who left and those who remained in the Congregation. And, of course, among Fanshawe College employees.

Looking back more than fifty years, I'm very glad that I was young enough to leave.

AFTERWORDS

Minority Report

In the summer of 1993, there was a reunion of Canadian Redemptorists and former Redemptorists at Holy Redeemer College in Windsor with about 100 attending. Paul Laverdure, who had been hired by the Redemptorists to write the history of the English speaking Congregation in Canada, gave a presentation about his book which was due to be published soon. (Mr. Laverdure had a connection to the Congregation as two of his uncles were priests in the French Canadian Province.) I asked him what his source of information was for the problems at Holy Redeemer College and the period shortly after when many Redemptorist priests and brothers quit the Congregation. He replied that he had consulted Frs. George O'Reilly, John Lockwood, Wm. Murphy, John Harrington and Edward Boyce. I expressed my concern that since three of these had been Provincial and the other two Consultors, there was a pronounced danger of a "top down" administrative bias in his reporting.

After the presentation I heard my classmate Brian Tracey tell the author that I had a good memory and could be a another source of information for those days. However, Mr. Laverdure never sought my assistance.

I read the book when it was published and liked the early part of it which showed a steady growth in numbers of English speaking Canadian Redemptorists from 1834 to 1964 when George O'Reilly was removed as Provincial. However I concluded that my fears of a top down bias in later history were well founded. Thus, if Laverdure's book was the official Redemptorist history, this account might be considered by kindly readers to be a minority report on that particular era.

Differing opinions flourished back in the 1960s, a time of change and turmoil in the Catholic Church and throughout the world. Indeed, as I'm sure readers are well aware, clashing points of view abound until this very day.

Conclusions of this Minority Report

a. The disobedience by students at HRC Windsor was exaggerated by some superiors to the level of myth. After all, with perhaps one exception, the students obeyed the heavy-handed order to go to the various destinations dictated by the Diaspora. The real problem was the perversion of the virtue and vow of obedience into the deeply flawed concept of blind obedience. This led to many bad decisions and demeaned the dignity of those who received the orders. It provided decision makers with convenient cover for poor, harsh, lazy and/or purely arbitrary choices. It could also easily give rise to the handy "I was only following orders" defence.

I suspect, based on stories I've heard and some direct observations, that sometimes good men who submitted to blind obedience, in the long run became disillusioned and depressed, at times turning to alcohol for solace.

b. The supposed ornery nature of young Redemptorist priests was also exaggerated, e.g., by a derogative phrase like "the new breed." This is not to say that we were faultless. As Leonard Cohen wrote, "There is a crack, a crack in everything, That's how the light gets in."

c. Another major problem at that time was a lack of adequate leadership at a number of places in the Redemptorist Congregation. The Rector Major's decision to boot out George O'Reilly and Wm. Wylie from their effective leadership of the Toronto Province was a strategic mistake of epic proportions. And Fr. Gaudreau's refusal to answer many requests to come to HRC and instead to rely on second hand information led him to another disastrous mistake: dimming the lights in Holy Redeemer College and the future of the Congregation in Canada.

d. In the Toronto Province there was poor leadership at the Provincial Administration level immediately after the ouster of George O'Reilly. Those officials would not talk to the students. They would not answer written petitions. They would most certainly not listen to students. While it is true that there was much uncertainty and turmoil in the Church of the 1960s, is communication not an essential responsibility of every leader at any time?

e. Over a number of years before the Diaspora, there was lack of effective leadership at the Rector, Student Prefect and, in many ways, faculty levels at the major seminary. While students listened enthusiastically to reading at table from New Yorker articles by Redemptorist F.X. Murphy (Xavier Rynne) about the Vatican Council's proposed changes, most of the faculty opposed and feared those changes. (The rector who ordered this public reading left the Congregation in the summer of 1966.)

These several examples of poor leadership might suggest that the theory and practice of blind obedience, among other failings, did not help to develop an abundance of good leaders.

Band of Brothers.

The Redemptorist Brothers made life for students, novices and priests much better by performing a great variety of essential work. In fact, the Minor Seminary, Novitiate and Major Seminary could not have worked without the contribution of the Brothers.

Brother Martin, the big-hearted cook with the loud laugh at Brockville, also provided professional level hockey coaching for the all star team. (His brother played with Rocket Richard.) Brother Malachy quietly ran the physical plant at St. Mary's and washed a million dishes. Brother Albert, the friendly, good humoured man from Newfoundland that I later ran into in Montreal, performed many different tasks at Brockville where I first met him and later at HRC.

In the Novitiate, elderly and gregarious Scottish Brother David made habits for all the novices and expertly trained young brothers in the tailoring trade. Quiet, patient Brother Alphonsus was tireless in caring for the farm. Brother John fed us well and made us laugh with his sharp wit. I had the pleasure of working with Brother Kevin, a carpenter. at Keswick... two Valley lads. He hailed from Western Quebec just across the Ottawa River from Pembroke.

At HRC elderly Brother Anthony who had been a carpenter (sometimes overruled on construction decisions by uninformed superiors) became crippled and gave an excellent example of courage and patience. Brother Ed was a model of cheerfulness and generosity as he took care of the dining room.

I'm grateful that I got to know these men and many other fine Redemptorist Brothers.

That Old Gang of Mine

In June of 1965 six members of our class were ordained as Redemptorists priests. As I mentioned previously, I only saw Tom McNulty once after we left HRC in the Fall of 1965. He went to Northwestern University in the U.S. to study communication and was recognized there as the authority on Marshall McLuhan. Sadly he died at a very young age and had little time to realize his great potential as Fr. Matty Meehan's successor on radio and TV.

Don MacLellan graduated from St. Francis Xavier University with his cousin the famous writer Allistair McLeod. When I was going to take a trip to the Maritimes in the summer of 1972, Mac said, "Stop in to see my parents near Mabu on Cape Breton Island." "I don't know them Mac," I replied. "Bring a bottle of rum and you'll be welcome," he said. I did and I was. His sister Peggy drove my car around the Cabot Trail so that I could take in the spectacular scenery. I attended his very large funeral at St. Pat's in Toronto and saw his three sisters again.

The best thing about our time in Esopus was that I got to know Paul Murphy better and came to appreciate his uncanny ability to know everything that was going on around us. He would have been a great intelligence officer or diplomat. We took a trip to Europe together in 1973. His wife Sharon gave me the great privilege of delivering his obituary at his funeral in Copper Cliff in the same Polish church where they had been married almost 40 years before.

Brian Tracey was the first student that I met at St. Mary's, Brockville in September, 1955 and we remained friends for the rest of his life. At my birthday party three years ago he said, "I've been friends with you for a longer time than anyone else." Since he saved me from drowning, you can see why he was one of my favourite people. To their great joy, he and his wife Martha became grandparents twice shortly before Brian died January 24, 2021. I spoke to him on the phone shortly before his passing.

Doug Purschke, the oldest one in our class, remained a Redemptorist in Western Canada for almost 25 years. A few years ago when he and his wife Mary came from their home in Saskatoon to visit her son's family in Toronto, Doug, who has adopted the name Dane, came to London. He and I got together with Brian Tracey for a meal. It seemed to me that he was still in as good shape as the first time he stepped on the stage at St. Mary's College in the Fall of 1957 with his guitar and stole the show with this song.

Oh, the liquor was spilt on the barroom floor
,
And the bar was closed for the night
When a little mouse crept through a hole in the wall
And sat in the pale moonlight.

He licked up the liquor from the barroom floor
And back on his haunches he sat
And all night long you could hear him roar
Bring on that damn tomcat!

"It's an ill wind that blows no good!" Old Irish Saying

That was a nugget that Ross Rachar, my mentor in union matters, used to repeat to me often when we lost at an arbitration hearing or had some other disappointment. I came to appreciate its wisdom.

I think that when considering the difficulties that we experienced back in our Redemptorist days, we should not forget this little axiom. Although many former Redemptorists had transitional problems and a few even endured tragic events, it is also true that we learned a lot from our Redemptorist experience. Many have since done much good in their work life and in society. And how many wonderful families have they helped to create all across the country?

THE END

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Any remaining mistakes are my responsibility.

