A half century after Beaumont, where I was every day in the company of priests, I would see it for myself, the transfigurative rite I had in my boyhood imagined, with my teacher/priests as young men and central figures. I had observed at St. John's the role of the two

them into priests. It was, of course, ordination, the sacrament of holy orders.

Fifty-one relatives and friends traveled to Solesmes, 175 miles west of Paris, for the ceremony. A succession of memoranda had gone out from my sister Trish, the mother of the monk who would be ordained a priest in the reclusive Benedictine order. I remember the one memo whose detail brought home the force of the occasion. It was a reference to "the party"—the big party, hosted by the father and mother of Brother Michael—scheduled for the night before the great event. The memo from Trish was to the effect that Michael would not himself be present at the party.

That was hard to take. Yet the instant Trish explained it to us, in her distinctive way—calm, resolute, graceful—it became understandable, and we quickly understood: we were face-to-face with the singularity of Michael's vocation.

He would be required to forgo even the once-in-a-lifetime pleasure of a party in his honor attended by his parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and lifetime friends, assembled from mainland America, from Hawaii, from Munich, from Strasbourg, and from Paris. When you are ordained a priest in the strictly contemplative division of the Benedictine order you are variously reminded what it is you have elected to do with your life; reminded, in this case, by getting the word that social engagements sponsored other than by your abbot are not appropriate. (The Benedictines would act as most agreeable hosts at a high tea in the afternoon at a guesthouse at the monastery after the ordination.) In search of a retailable explanation for the benefit of guests who wanted to know why Michael would not be present at his own party, I played once or twice with the idea of the fast that precedes the banquet (that is, being ordained a priest); but there aren't, really, any satisfactory secular analogues. The presence of the bride is essential to the wedding party, the guest of honor is necessarily there at any dinner given in his honor. But this party, given on Halloween Eve in the little town of St. Denys for Michael Bozell *without* Brother Michael Bozell, served as a kind of manifesto of the honoree's august decision formally and irrevocably to pursue a life so detached from the other

life—our lives—that, in a paradoxical way, his absence from the party became, however inexpressly, the sustaining high moment of the evening.

As expected, it was a boisterous gathering. This was so even as we are unsurprised when we find ourselves participating in, or reading about, an exuberant wake. Many in the company are people you see infrequently, and so you are generating, or at least emitting, greater ergs than usual of social energy, designed—as in the case of the Christian wake—to make agitated obeisance to the dogma that the deceased has gone on to a better life, thereby mitigating melancholy.

It was so at the eleventh-century Roi René restaurant, as the guests filed into the large reception hall and waiters passed by with trays of table wine. I tasted it. It was so awful, I sought out the eyes of my sister Priscilla. Working intimately together in the same office for thirty-five years, we knew each other's body language. She nodded her head in the hubbub, acknowledging that if only on our own account, we simply had to do something about it, but we'd need for diplomacy's sake to circumvent our hosts; besides, neither Trish nor her late husband, Brent, drink. We could hardly protest publicly—my siblings and I are tactful almost to the point of impotence, so I walked discreetly to the maître d'hôtel and whispered my sister's and my desire for a different wine.

"What kind?" he asked.

"Any kind," I smiled.

He poured for Priscilla and me wine from another bottle. It was only a shade less awful. I reflected on a disastrous canal trip fifteen years earlier: the two worst wines I ever drank were served to me in France.

We went into the dining room, in which we had been carefully preseated by Trish. The master of ceremonies was Christopher Bozell, the oldest of Michael's siblings. He is, like his nine brothers and sisters, like his mother and his father, redheaded. Christopher is a businessman. He took immediate charge, launching gracefully and robustly the postprandial proceedings. He introduced his father.

Big Brent, as we had sometimes to designate him, Little Brent

"The Ordination of Michael Bozell" • William F. Buckley (*Nearer My God*, 1997)

Bozell having become something of a journalistic omnipresence, with his columns and broadsides at Hollywood and the wayward press, rose from his wheelchair, his lameness temporary but another in a series of afflictions from which he suffered up until his death in May, 1997. Brent was a manic-depressive, and in one serious bout several years earlier was hit by a car, his powers of sustained concentration irreversibly affected. He had most painstakingly written out a "letter" to his son, which he rose to read with solemn affection.

I first met Brent at Yale. He arrived on campus after service in the navy. His father had died a year or so earlier at an early age, having launched in Omaha a business (Bozell & Jacobs) that would become enormously successful. As bad luck would have it, his estate was modest, Mr. Bozell having died so young. At age twenty, Brent was an enthusiast for world federalism and was soon elected president of the Student World Federalist Association, huge at Yale in the early postwar years. We were drawn together politically by our adamant commitment to the anti-Communist cause. And he became my closest friend.

He was a formidable orator. His tuition at Yale was paid by the G.I. Bill of Rights but also with the substantial prize money awarded him as winner of the national American Legion prize as the foremost high school orator in the nation in 1943.

This skill had proved useful when, in our sophomore year, he attended a meeting of the Progressive Citizens of America to listen to a visiting speaker plead the cause of Henry Wallace for President. During the question period, Brent had held his hand high, seeking recognition by the chairman, the head of Students for Wallace, who had invited the speaker. The persistent refusal to recognize Brent's tall figure and his upraised hand had become provocatively obvious by the end of the question period, students with hands up having been recognized on his right, on his left, immediately behind and in front of him. When the chairman announced an end to the evening, Brent rose and said in a solemn, arresting voice that the chairman was exhibiting the manners of the movement he and the speaker were furthering, namely

the cause of the Communist Party. The effect was electric on the two or three hundred students in the auditorium.

That period—it was the early spring of 1948—was the high-water mark of the American Communist movement in the United States. By the end of summer, most of the leadership of American liberals had renounced the Wallace movement, designating it, however painfully, for what it was: a Communist-run enterprise. Spokesmen for the Progressive Citizens of America, which with the launching of the presidential campaign had become the Progressive Party, had predicted 5 million votes for candidate Wallace. He ended with just over 1 million.

After Brent made his challenge, he was roundly denounced by the presiding chairman, the head of the Yale Law School branch of the Progressive Citizens of America, and booed by the young Progressives. A public debate was presently negotiated on the question whether the Progressive movement was de facto a Communist enterprise.

A few weeks earlier, Stalin had effected his coup in Czechoslovakia, extending the Iron Curtain around the forlorn country ten years after the Nazis had done the equivalent. President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson denounced the Soviet move but the Wallaceites dug in. Political tensions at political Yale (a distinguished law school professor would run for governor of Connecticut on the Wallace ticket) were high, and an overflowing house turned out to hear a debate at which Brent's forensic eloquence and his mastery of the relevant data overwhelmed his opponent, deeply disturbing those among the young Progressives who had joined the Wallace movement in the beguiled pursuit of peace, and presumably also those who, however few in number, were following the Communist Party line because they were Communists or Communist sympathizers (Brent's challenger, a dozen years later, was revealed to have been a member of the party). The anti-Communists were elated. It was the highest political moment of our four years together at Yale and it was about that time that I discovered that Brent was a Catholic convert.

It has here and there been said and written that I converted him,

which isn't the case. Late in the war, Brent's naval ship put in at San Francisco for one night and Brent's father was there to visit with his son. In a hotel room, Leo Bozell confided to Brent that he intended to become a Catholic. Brent surprised his father by telling him that that also was his own intention. His father said that he would postpone joining the Church until he could persuade the entire family—his wife, his other son, and a daughter—to join with him. His sudden death interrupted whatever strategy Mr. Bozell had designed, but Brent moved quietly into the Church. He had been a student at a Catholic preparatory school in Omaha and was much influenced by the Jesuit priest who, three years later, would marry Brent and my sister Trish. We did not talk very much, in college years, about the Church or about its special characteristics. But our common faith strengthened a bond which, many years later, would be tested very nearly to the breaking point, when Brent went further than I would do in pressing the demands of our Church in the secular realm.

During law school days Brent and Trish lived in Hamden, Connecticut, a suburb of New Haven. My wife Pat and I lived close by. I was writing my book on Yale and teaching Spanish to undergraduates. Toward the end of that year the Korean War was raging and I had accepted the job with the CIA. When my wife and I returned from my CIA stint in Mexico, Brent was beginning his third year in law school. We resolved to write jointly a study of Senator Joseph McCarthy, a long article for general circulation. We effected an introduction to him and before the end of the summer, having done extensive research, decided that the material we had accumulated was book-length.

McCarthy and His Enemies was published in February 1954, only a few weeks before the beginning of the Army-McCarthy hearings. Brent and his family had moved to San Francisco but came to New York for a week of book promotion. At the book party/press conference, Joe McCarthy appeared as he had promised to do. He was besieged by what seemed the whole press world, the lethal Senate hearings imminent. He greatly amused Brent and me with the careful

words he spoke, the television cameras whirring, when asked directly for his opinion of the Buckley-Bozell book, which, although it defended the senator and his movement, criticized him on a number of points. "It is the first book about McCarthy not written by an enemy or by McCarthy."

Five months later, Edward Bennett Williams undertook the defense of McCarthy against censure by the Senate. Williams studied closely our book and, on learning that Brent had done the primary research on the hearings that would figure prominently in the Senate proceedings (the Tydings hearings), persuaded Brent to take a long leave of absence from his law firm to help in the defense of McCarthy. The defense failed, but McCarthy had taken a strong liking to Brent, greatly admiring his prose style. He talked him into leaving California. Brent would work a substantial part of the week for McCarthy, writing all his speeches. In the time left over, Brent would complete a book of his own, something he had started several years before, an inquiry into the judicial philosophy of the Warren Court.

By then there were four Bozells, all of whom stayed with Joe and Jean McCarthy in their house near the Capitol until they got lodgings of their own. Clarence Manion, sometime dean of the law school at Notre Dame, was a conservative activist. He recommended Brent to Senator Barry Goldwater and a profoundly important liaison was effected. Admiring McCarthy's speeches, Goldwater asked Brent for help with a speech or two of his own and as McCarthy's health declined and his activities lessened, Goldwater leaned more and more heavily on Brent. Manion conceived the idea of a book-length statement by Goldwater and suggested Brent as aide in this enterprise. What grew out of it was a small book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*. It became a historic best-seller, significantly responsible for the nomination of Goldwater as presidential candidate of the Republican Party in 1964.

We were in the sixties and it wasn't only antinomian flower children who were attracted to formulations *à outrance*. Brent took his family to Spain and by the late sixties found himself attracted to a movement in the triumphalist tradition of the Catholic Church. He

would found *Triumph* magazine. He was not a merely sedentary critic: at one point he tried to bar entry into an abortion clinic in Washington; and Trish, the mother now of ten Bozells and the sweetest-tempered woman alive when her fiery temper is not aroused, would one day slap feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson on the face in rebuke for her ribald attack on the Mother of Jesus at a lecture at Catholic University.

With the gradual stabilization after the turn of the decade, *Triumph* ceased publication. Brent's disability would loom larger and larger in life, while Trish fought alcoholism, finally defeating it. Brent was now substantially incapacitated, and every few years suffered another seizure, devoting what weeks and months he successfully commandeered—from time to time the mania took over—to doing church work for nearby monasteries. He had profoundly attached himself to Catholic Christianity, written brilliantly on the subject, but had now to live a life largely passive. Trish continued to work as a free-lance editor, and serves as chief editor for Regnery-Gateway publishers.

Brent could still compose, but only a sentence or two at a time. He had worked for many days on his "letter" to Michael, which he read out now in a room completely still.

His father spoke of Michael's new "way of life," which would now be "extended into eternity." ". . . this short letter is to be collected by you along with the other souvenirs of this triumphant occasion and studied for the love for you they carry."

It was brief, a few hundred words: "I know a side of Michael Bozell that covers him all over. He is a fool for suffering, of which he has had much, and which he has managed—for his suffering and that of others—to transform into joy. For himself, Michael has never acknowledged that the joy of helping Christ is his way of dealing with suffering. But I know it is."

He spoke very briefly about Michael's future as a priest. And then closed: "You will note, my son, that I have had difficulty in this letter

in distinguishing words to you and about you. That is because you are the largest public glory of my life."

That close made it less than easy for speakers who followed. I was not able to conclude whatever it was that I was feeling my way to saying. My brother James succeeded me. He had been (1971–76) the "sainted junior senator from New York," as I persistently and matter-of-factly referred to him from time to time in my column, and now was a judge on the court of appeals. He had similar, if less pronounced difficulties. At the close of the evening I told Jim it was a lucky thing he had never been elected Pope, as I'd have had a hell of a time controlling my sentiments at his installation.

In the year 2010 the monastery at Solesmes will celebrate its one thousandth anniversary. The monastery, along with all other monasteries and nunneries, was closed down during the French Revolution. Following fifteen years of persecution beginning in 1790, there had been a vigorous renewal of religious life. Yet many antireligious measures are still technically in force. French law, for instance, "recognizes" only the secular clergy, pronouncing monks and nuns "useless"—a bizarre animadversion on people who, many of them, give over their lives to teaching, caring for the poor, and ministering to the sick.

In 1833 a young priest felt an afflatus. Dom Prosper Guéranger spotted a notice in the paper announcing that an ancient Benedictine property, only three miles from Sablé where he was raised, would be auctioned as a stone quarry. He went to the Vatican (the Benedictine order reports directly to the Vatican, skirting the bishop), asked for and received permission to reestablish the Order of St. Benedict on the ancient site.

Solesmes is now internationally recognized as the inspired and scholarly center of the repristination of the Gregorian chant (it had been dreadfully mauled by time and inattention), but that was not the immediate concern of Dom Guéranger. He sought primarily to bring to life the "pure traditions" of the Church, notably the centrality of

the Holy See; of the Pope. He was an ultra-Montanist, defender of the doctrine that absolute authority rests, in the Church, with the Pope. Dom Guéranger had a personal hand in the formulation of the doctrine of infallibility (1870) and before that of the Immaculate Conception (1854). Three times, after Napoleon, the government of France sought to close the monastery down; but the Benedictines survived, and now nearly a hundred of us were kneeling in the long old stone chapel where the monks convene to chant and pray several times every day, and where we would be present at the ordination of Michael Bozell.

There was an unmistakable feel and aroma of age and piety and indomitability. The nave is very long, I'd guess 150 feet. The windows are of stained glass and in the choir the monks and priests sit facing each other—as in the little chapel at St. John's, Beaumont—on long pews, fenced off from the pews available to parishioners by an ornate baroque iron chancel rail. I had recently acquired a camcorder, intending to record at least the crowning moments of the ceremony, to which end I had sent off a letter to Brother Michael asking for his cooperation.

I had known him, so to speak, forever, a shy boy with large inquisitive eyes framed in red hair, shrewd, a little sleepy, maybe self-indulgent. He was an indifferent student (he went to Providence College), though in languages and in writing he excelled. After college he performed tasks of various kinds, working here and there, sometimes at home helping out his mother and younger sisters and brothers. He had an unmistakable flair for language. Much of his boyhood he had spent in Spain, speaking in English only to his parents, at home. At Solesmes, during the years before his ordination, he flourished in his academic work. At the monastery the languages are French and Latin. I cannot judge his Latin, but occasionally, as now when I wrote to ask if I'd be permitted to tape any part of the ceremony, I would experience his French. He wrote, "J'ai fait tout ce que je pouvais à propos de ton projet pour filmer; c'était dur, même très dur, mais voilà le

peu que j'ai pu obtenir. . . ." (He had done all that he could apropos my desire to record. *It would be hard, even very hard, but here was the little he was able to accomplish.)*

The rules, he wrote, are firm against photography, still or cinematic. Perhaps I might bury myself in the organ loft, up high at the narthex of the church. That would be one approach, effective if my camera was equipped with a telescopic lens. But, Michael continued, perched in the organ loft I'd find myself "about twenty kilometers, if my guess is correct," from the action at the altar. Never mind. Michael would arrange to conscript the cooperation of Iain Simcock, the renowned young organist from Westminster Cathedral, who had volunteered to play at his friend Michael's ordination. Maybe from there I might shoot "quelques instants *avant la messe* pour prendre quelques seconds de prise de la haut—de l'église elle-même." (From there maybe *before the Mass begins* I could from up high get a few seconds of useful shots of the church itself.) And, closing, "That's as much as I was able to do, to repeat myself, and you must really do everything you can to keep the monks—and, for that matter, the congregation—from seeing what you are up to. You'll have to satisfy yourself with a minute or two of the ceremony."

It was understandable to be thus deferential. I have never experienced such preliminary awe as one felt—as I felt—on entering the church, fifteen minutes before the ceremony was to begin. I suppose it must be that way fifteen minutes before a coronation, whether of a King or a Pope. But in those ceremonies there inheres in the principal—one must suppose—the climactic sense of glory achieved while the spectator experiences, empathically, the thrill of exaltation. Here and there are Kings who have abdicated their thrones, but not many—on the whole they seem to find it a fulfilling life. But it is a life incandescently the opposite of the life of a man stepping forward to bind himself forever to the anonymity of life in a reclusive order. Granted, Michael was already a monk and had already taken vows in perpetuity. To become now a priest was an elevation of sorts; yet the ceremony, as we would soon see, reinforced every contrast between the life he would lead and the life of the high and the mighty, for

whom the crowds roar and the bands play, courtiers and servants surrounding them to gratify the least velleity, historians on their toes to record their wispiest thought. Michael was rather on the scale of Thoreau, who prided himself that every day he set out to make do with less than he had the day before. All that Fr. Michael would have was God.

The service lasted almost two hours. Before it began, Michael's friend Fr. Gregory opened with his key the door that led up the tower staircase to the organ loft. Fr. Gregory followed me up, sat down at the organ, and began to play some intricate Bach church music. Iain Simcock would arrive any minute now.

I turned to look down at the altar. It seemed impossibly remote. The little Sharp camcorder fitted easily in one hand, yet when I zoomed out as far as the lens would transport me, I had a startlingly clear view of the altar, much clearer than when using the naked eye. I wouldn't know until later whether there was light enough to impress the image on tape. Surely not, inasmuch as the inside of the long church was lit only by candles and here and there by the little shafts of daylight that darted their way through the stained-glass windows. In fact the tape proved marvelous and I filmed on, following the text in the manual that had been given out at the church door.

The ceremony began with an Introit *(Salve sancta parens),* Hail, O Holy Mother. It was followed by "Terce" (we did not know until much later that the little booklets telling of the ceremony had been translated from the French by Michael)—the office of Terce. The Romans computed the hour of the day by their distance from sunrise; thus "tertia" was the third hour of daylight. It is one of the seven offices of the day during which the monks gather at the church to sing the praises of God. Here (i.e., in that day's ceremony) it was reduced to an absolute minimum, with three Psalms preceded and followed by an antiphon sung in honor of Our Lady.

The Psalm sung was 122, which closes, "Pray for the peace of

Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure. . . . For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity."

And then the Kyrie Eleison (Lord, Have Mercy), the Gloria, the Collect, the Epistle (Letter to the Hebrews 5:1–10), and the Gospel.

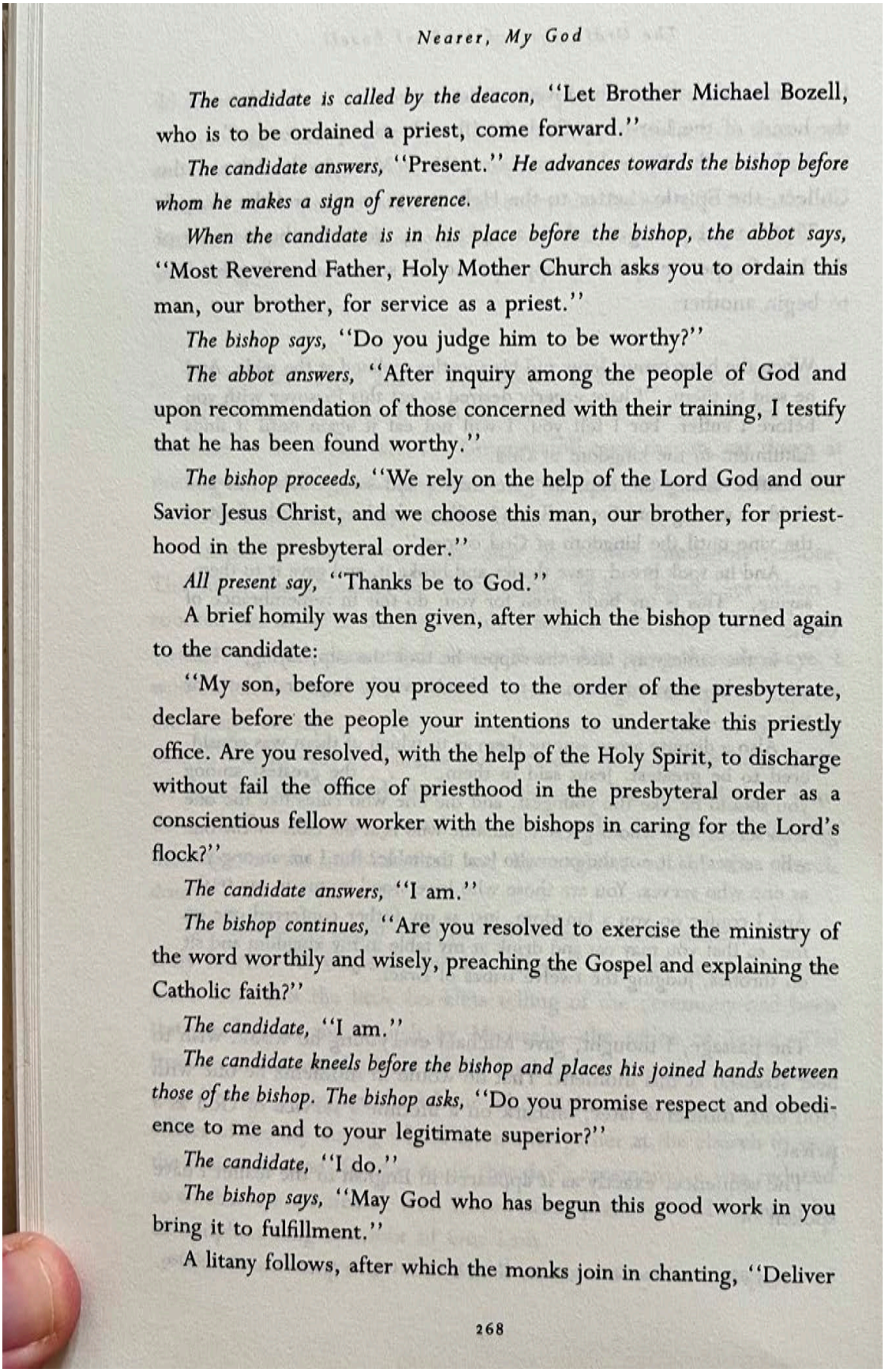
The Gospel passage (Luke 22:14–20, 24–30) was the account of the Last Supper, exquisitely appropriate for someone ending his life, to begin another:

> When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."
>
> After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."
>
> And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."
>
> In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. . . ."
>
> Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ". . . the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."*

The passage, I thought, gave Michael everything he would wish to hear stressed at this moment. That he would in moments be one with God and, moments later, embark on a lifetime's service of God as a priest.

The sequence, exactly as it appeared in English in the leaflet I have spoken of:

"The Ordination of Michael Bozell" • William F. Buckley (*Nearer My God*, 1997)



The candidate is called by the deacon, "Let Brother Michael Bozell, who is to be ordained a priest, come forward."

The candidate answers, "Present." *He advances towards the bishop before whom he makes a sign of reverence.*

When the candidate is in his place before the bishop, the abbot says, "Most Reverend Father, Holy Mother Church asks you to ordain this man, our brother, for service as a priest."

The bishop says, "Do you judge him to be worthy?"

The abbot answers, "After inquiry among the people of God and upon recommendation of those concerned with their training, I testify that he has been found worthy."

The bishop proceeds, "We rely on the help of the Lord God and our Savior Jesus Christ, and we choose this man, our brother, for priesthood in the presbyteral order."

All present say, "Thanks be to God."

A brief homily was then given, after which the bishop turned again to the candidate:

"My son, before you proceed to the order of the presbyterate, declare before the people your intentions to undertake this priestly office. Are you resolved, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to discharge without fail the office of priesthood in the presbyteral order as a conscientious fellow worker with the bishops in caring for the Lord's flock?"

The candidate answers, "I am."

The bishop continues, "Are you resolved to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith?"

The candidate, "I am."

The candidate kneels before the bishop and places his joined hands between those of the bishop. The bishop asks, "Do you promise respect and obedience to me and to your legitimate superior?"

The candidate, "I do."

The bishop says, "May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment."

A litany follows, after which the monks join in chanting, "Deliver

"The Ordination of Michael Bozell" • William F. Buckley (*Nearer My God*, 1997)

us, O Lord!" *(Libera nos Domine)*. The cantors sing, "Be favorable. From all evil. From every sin. From eternal damnation. By your incarnation. By your death and resurrection. By the gift of the Holy Spirit." The monks repeat the phrase, "We beg you, listen to us!" *(Te rogamus, audi nos)*, and the cantors sing, "We who are sinners. Govern and keep our holy Church. Keep the pope, the bishops, priests, and deacons holy in your service. Bless and sanctify and consecrate those whom you have called. Give peace and true concord to all peoples. Pour forth your mercy on those steeped in tribulation. Comfort and keep those who are consecrated to your holy service. Jesus, Son of the living God. Christ, hear us. Christ, listen to our prayers."

At the end the bishop alone stands and sings, "Hear us, Lord our God, and pour out from these servants of yours both the blessing of the Holy Spirit and the grace and power of the priesthood. In your sight we offer this man for ordination; support him with your unfailing love. We ask this through Christ our Lord."

And the deacon sings, "Let us stand."

Theologians specify, the text explains, that each sacrament, at its core, consists of a certain gesture, and certain words which constitute the sacrament; these are the "matter" and the "form" by which a simple human act becomes the conveyer of a supernatural reality. For the sacrament of Holy Orders, the crucial gesture is the laying on of hands by the bishop, and the words—those which are given below in small capital letters. As of that moment, the candidate has become a priest.

The bishop lays his hands on the candidate kneeling before him. Every priest in the congregation subsequently repeats the same act of laying on of hands.

The prayer of consecration concludes with the sacramental words:

"ALMIGHTY FATHER, GRANT TO THIS SERVANT OF YOURS THE DIGNITY OF THE PRIESTHOOD. RENEW WITHIN HIM THE SPIRIT OF HOLINESS."

Michael was now a priest.

After the Eucharist, the ceremony is concluded. The priest and the monks file down the aisle and turn into the sacristy. Iain Simcock played Bach's demanding Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor.

• • •

After the ceremony we dithered anxiously in the courtyard waiting for *Father* Michael to emerge. Everyone, it seemed, kissed and embraced the beaming parents. I poked anxiously the control buttons on my camcorder, and lo! the ceremony began to unfurl before my very eyes on the four-inch-by-four-inch screen, a perfect reproduction. Everyone crowded around to look. Suddenly the reverend bishop materialized, side by side with the abbot. Impulsively I thrust up the camcorder to his face so that he, too, could see our secular miracle! I could almost feel Trish wincing, Fr. Michael decomposing; but the bishop and the abbot both stared at themselves on tape and were visibly astonished and delighted. No doubt it was later that they focused on the formal infraction. Yes, and later—not that much later—everyone in the Bozell party had an edited videotape of a great event in our lives.

The male members of Michael's party had been invited to lunch in the refectory, from which women are excluded. During lunch, one monk read from the Bible (I falsely supposed—he read in rapid French [in *recto tonal,* I would be advised]) and nobody laughed. At the last half of the meal there was conversation. I remember making small talk in schoolboy French to a priest of great urbanity, and to a monk (I thought him a monk, but could not tell: there is no difference in the habits they wear). The meal was over in a half hour, after which we went to an old marble factory, recently donated to the monastery for conferences and large gatherings, where a reception had been prepared for Fr. Michael and his guests. Wine was served and cakes and biscuits and cheese and the conversation was animated. I saw Big Brent standing, but he could do so only for a few minutes, soon retreating to a chair. He looked pale but his eyes and the tremor in his voice relayed his feelings.

At night we went, still high from the event of that morning, to

tables set for five at the hotel dining room. My brother Jim, sisters Priscilla and Carol, and Kevin Lynch sat together.

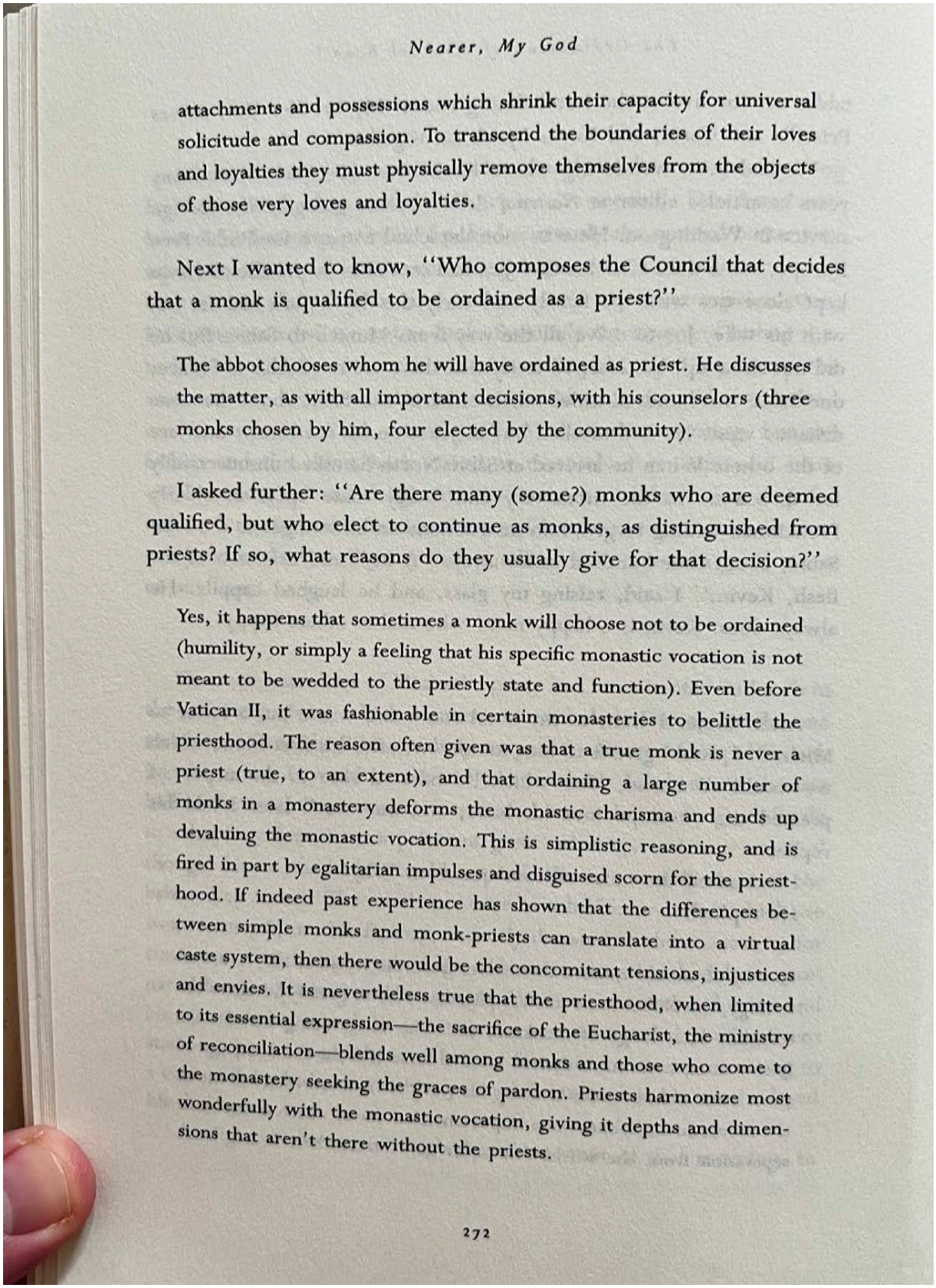
We had been wondering where Kevin was. He worked for many years as articles editor at *National Review* before going to the foreign service in Washington. He was soon detached to work for Radio Free Europe, some time after brother Jim had served as its president. Kevin kept close ties with the family and early the day before had set out with his wife, Jo, to drive all the way from Munich to Sablé. But he did not show up. We learned today that there are *two* Sablés in France, one Sablé two hundred miles north of Paris, our Sablé about the same distance west. He had marked out the first on his road map, unaware of the other. When he arrived at Sablé-North he asked unsuccessfully for directions to the monastery and finally came upon an elderly Frenchman willing to give him instructions on how to get to the *other* Sablé, about four hundred miles away. "A little mortification of the flesh, Kevin," I said, raising my glass, and he laughed happily. He always does. Kevin is a happy man, who makes others happy.

After dinner I went to my hotel room and wrote out a letter to Michael. I would give it to him tomorrow, after his first Mass, which we would all attend, after which I'd have to race to the airport. I pressed the envelope into his hand, and one week later I had his replies.

I had asked the most obvious question. Why?

He replied:

> So why do monks remove themselves from the world at all? To use an analogy, the Nobel Prize nuclear physicist who so greatly advances the scientific knowledge of mankind, and who in so doing benefits his fellow men, must nevertheless remove himself from the company of those same men in order to bring his work to fruition. Men submit to the monastic discipline—one important element of which is this rude separation from the world—in order to liberate their hearts from



attachments and possessions which shrink their capacity for universal solicitude and compassion. To transcend the boundaries of their loves and loyalties they must physically remove themselves from the objects of those very loves and loyalties.

Next I wanted to know, "Who composes the Council that decides that a monk is qualified to be ordained as a priest?"

The abbot chooses whom he will have ordained as priest. He discusses the matter, as with all important decisions, with his counselors (three monks chosen by him, four elected by the community).

I asked further: "Are there many (some?) monks who are deemed qualified, but who elect to continue as monks, as distinguished from priests? If so, what reasons do they usually give for that decision?"

Yes, it happens that sometimes a monk will choose not to be ordained (humility, or simply a feeling that his specific monastic vocation is not meant to be wedded to the priestly state and function). Even before Vatican II, it was fashionable in certain monasteries to belittle the priesthood. The reason often given was that a true monk is never a priest (true, to an extent), and that ordaining a large number of monks in a monastery deforms the monastic charisma and ends up devaluing the monastic vocation. This is simplistic reasoning, and is fired in part by egalitarian impulses and disguised scorn for the priesthood. If indeed past experience has shown that the differences between simple monks and monk-priests can translate into a virtual caste system, then there would be the concomitant tensions, injustices and envies. It is nevertheless true that the priesthood, when limited to its essential expression—the sacrifice of the Eucharist, the ministry of reconciliation—blends well among monks and those who come to the monastery seeking the graces of pardon. Priests harmonize most wonderfully with the monastic vocation, giving it depths and dimensions that aren't there without the priests.

I asked, "Is it accepted that once settled in a particular monastery, a Benedictine priest will remain there? Or is it your obligation to be entirely docile in respect of where you are sent? Can you turn down pastoral duty, or is it in the nature of your order that such duties are never assigned to you?"

The classic monastic vows are: poverty, chastity, obedience. St. Benedict's vows: the transformation of one's life (chastity and poverty are implied here), obedience, and stability. Benedict had nothing but scorn for monks who might have "TGV'd" [traveled by a Train à Grande Vitesse, the super-rapid French train] their way from monastery to lovely monastery. We make [our] profession for a particular community, promising to abide in it for good. Still, the abbot can send a monk here, a monk there, for different reasons (a chaplain for a community of nuns; a monk or priest to a smaller monastery in need of reinforcements; to a new Benedictine foundation).

This leads to another important point. There is a basic divide in Benedictine monasticism. There are those establishments that are wholly contemplative, having no other activity than their lives of liturgical prayer, study and work, and there are others (the English Benedictine Congregation for instance) that have important schools attached to them, at which many of the monks teach, and who service parishes round about the monastery. Solesmes resembles Cistercians and even Carthusians (much more strict, semi-hermetical orders) more than, say, Ampleforth in England. I personally would not have dreamed of entering anything but a contemplative establishment, where the "quest for God" (St. Benedict's Rule) is conceived in terms of overwhelming silence and solitude. The irony here is that given specific personal talents [Michael is trilingual] and aptitudes [op. cit.] I have now been appointed to the guest house where I am in the daily business of receiving and speaking with people from literally all over the world who descend on our little hill above the river seeking solace, moorings, peace, guidance, beauty and spiritual refreshment.

Was there a point, I wanted to know, a particular day, moment, "when it struck you that you had found what you were looking for?"

> The day I arrived at the monastery with the intention never to leave again, I discovered welling up within me a happiness I had searched for throughout my years as an adolescent and a young man. That unalloyed joy is always there, a spring refusing to dry, even when those long periods of acedia descend, or during the rare moments when things are frankly going very badly.

I wanted to hear from him something about the manifest tediousness of some of the monk's duties. "Do you in fact every three hours go to the chapel to worship? Is this duty something the human body comes quickly to accommodate, even as shipboard crew accommodate to watch duty? Or is it a perpetual reminder of the need to mortify the flesh?"

> Our stints in choir occur, if my computing is right, at a rate of less than once every three (waking) hours. The hardship here is not so much corporal as psychological and spiritual. It is amazing how one becomes accustomed to sitting in wooden choir stalls for so many hours a day (or, for that matter, eating at table on benches without backs, when we are allowed to sit—breakfast is taken standing up). What is difficult about choir and its frequency is that with time you become very close to insensibility to the beauty and the mystery, and all you are likely to notice is your neighbor chanting ever so slightly off-key. It is to die. And then more deeply, a monk will be hit by periods during which the entire project seems so self-evidently wasted time. These are moments when his faith (in God, in his way of life, in himself) must wage war on creeping despair.

And, finally, "Is the sacrifice of contending ways of life once-and-for-all transcended, or are you warned, and do you expect it, that temptations of a secular nature will always be there: seductive, to be resisted at the cost of great spiritual agony? Is the saint singularly

spared such agonies, or is it that he/she experiences them but overcomes them by a vivid mobilization of spiritual energy?"

Agonia means "combat" in Greek. The man whose monastic experience has ceased to be a daily combat is greatly to be pitied. And why a combat? Why a fight? Because we experience ourselves to be torn between two often opposite longings: the natural (and to a certain extent healthy) pining of our appetites, and the spiritual imperative to transcend everything from legitimate impulses of natural self-fulfillment to the vile designs and egotistic desires which ceaselessly worm themselves into our hearts, however disguised they may be. Men who are drawn to be monks are radicals by temperament; there are other ways to "put on Christ." The monk feels a huge tug to go it the whole way, to climb to the very summit, and to dedicate his life to that and that alone. It is not for all Christians, and most of those who do take their call to sanctity seriously (we are all called to be saints) do so in less drastic modes. The monastic mode carries with it certain inbuilt demands and goals which make it easier to ascend to the summit, and more dangerous. One of the dangers is that in denying yourself even legitimate pleasures, pastimes, fulfillments, etc., you open yourself up to strange forms of revenge. Another is that in the most unobtrusive and surreptitious ways, a man can capitulate to the thousand little desires he thought he'd banished from his heart so as to leave room for the Lord God and without even knowing what has happened to him, find himself altogether off his proposed track.

I like to think of the metaphor of a road winding its way up a mountain, encircling it as it rises. The man on that road is conscious mostly of a never-ending series of obstacles and difficulties, which change but little in nature. Yet from time to time he can gaze out on the expanse below him and judge, with the thrill that comes only from sustaining long austerity in view of a reward, the distance he has traveled. The monk's life is a continuous striving, a daily battle, and the prize, the summit of the mountain, is Christ. Christ experienced from the inside, Christ fully known and possessed and imitated and loved. It is the highest realization of self, because it is perfect love.

At dinner I had remarked something a little different in the timbre of talk and laughter. More like what one might expect after a wake than after, say, a wedding; in part, I suppose, because we are no longer quite certain that wedding vows are final, irreparable. Yes, there are priests who are laicized, priests also who apostasize. But that is rare, and when it happens—whomever it happened to, or whenever—he is always spoken of, when the slightest suggestion of a biographical fix is called for, as "the ex-priest." People do not think of a divorced person as an ex-husband. And then, too, wakes are absolutely conclusive: that night everyone in our company knew Michael, whether as parent, sibling, nephew, friend; and knowing him, we knew that the vow he had taken would be everlasting. For that reason and because of the profound implications of life in a monastery, the solemnity of the occasion was with us, and that night in my snuggery in the hotel I thought of Michael in his cell, rising at midnight to sing his orisons, and I reflected that almost certainly he was the happiest of us all, and that only God can dispense such a needle as that.