

Living the Faith in Exile

As we grow older, we spend more time roaming the corridors of memory, for we grow less interested in acquiring new experiences and more intent upon assigning meaning and imparting order to the life we have lived. As I have been bumping about among my own recollections, the consciousness of how vastly different my early experience of the Church is from that of my children has possessed my thoughts of late. We older Catholics raised in happier times of family piety often forget that generations have now grown up in a cultural landscape we could not have imagined in our youth. How solid, how immense, how immaculate seemed that noble edifice of Catholicism in the 1950s. And how appealing it was to ponder the possibility of one's having a vocation. To enter that great City of God as one of His chosen ones was a thought that used to thrill and, in some measure, frighten us. The fright came from the terrible responsibility that such election brought with it; the thrill from the prospect of the spiritual romance. I never considered that I had a vocation to the secular priesthood, but I cherished the notion that I might be summoned to join one of the religious orders. It was these men in their ancient habits that we looked upon as spiritual heroes, God's athletes, knights pursuing the holy grail of perfection.

The corner of my boyhood room used to be stacked with pamphlets and letters describing the various religious orders. I used to clip the recruiting advertisements from the Sunday Visitor and mail them in; I passed many an evening poring over this literature, trying to discern whether I had a particular calling. I finally settled on the Carmelites and was accepted to a minor seminary; then relented, deciding to test my vocation by attending the local high school for a few years to see if my desire for the religious life endured. If it did, the religious orders did not, for those were the years of the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath. I entered high school in 1963; by the time of my graduation, in 1967, the Church had changed radically; the Latin Mass was no more; there had been numerous defections among the ranks of our priest-teachers; the religious orders were hemorrhaging.

But through it all I never lost my admiration for the ideal of the religious life, This has always been for me the highest form of romance, and by romance I mean a life lived in ardent pursuit of a noble goal; a life of moral and mystical adventure, of determination and self-sacrifice, endurance and bravery, a life dedicated to realizing and requiting the purest and most exquisite love of God.

As I have been pondering, in some perplexity, how to imbue my children with this sense of life as spiritual romance in our present circumstance, it occurred to me that the antithesis of the religious ideal of a fully integrated life is the modern tendency toward sentimentality, that is, a tendency to live amid a jumble of superficial and disconnected feelings rather than strive for a unified vision to which all feelings must be subordinated. This sentimentality, endemic to the media, has infected every part of our body politic. Most of us no longer think in logical sequences, we feel in disjointed episodes. And I am afraid the institutional Catholic Church has not been immune to this anti-intellectual virus, which makes our emotions the measure of all things, and thus lifts doctrine off its base of objective truth and drops it into the morass of subjective feeling. It seemed to me that the religious orders, with their comprehensive view of life and the ordering of all things to a supreme purpose, offer the perfect antidote to modern sentimentality. But, with the exception of a handful of "irregular" houses loyal to tradition, the religious orders have largely ceased to exist. I know that the major orders are still operating in some capacity, but their rules have changed, their numbers have shrunk, corruption is rampant and their condition can only be described as moribund. Barring a miracle, they will not long endure.

So I concluded that to present the ideal of the religious orders to my children in its erstwhile and pristine form could amount to little more than nostalgia. And there is no point in exciting a desire that cannot be fulfilled. If the professional baseball leagues ceased to exist, there would be no sense in trying to inspire

a young boy to aim at a major league career. So too, if a young man or woman wanted to be a Dominican or Carmelite in the classic manner, he or she might not find a place to exercise that vocation, for the religious houses that bear those venerable names no longer abide by those venerable Rules.

As I pondered the loss of the religious orders, I came to recognize that their demise constitutes an enormous part of the general dissolution of the institutional Church, which in its turn has led to the moral dissolution of Western culture. For the Church has always served as the moral compass of the Western World, and it has, until recently, always pointed due north, that is upward, in a vertical line that intersects time and joins it to eternity. The religious orders provided much of that vertical magnetism. The compass needle appears to have lost its magnetism and wobbles haphazardly; consequently, we have lost our way, both as a Church and as a civilization.

These are rather grand and sweeping statements, but they are also obvious truths to anyone still possessed of the sense of the Catholic faith, and they present an obvious problem. How might those of us who would live a Catholic life and, in some way, rescue that romance of the soul from modern sentimentality, achieve our purpose?

We must first admit that we are living the faith in exile. I will make what I hope is a warranted assumption that all of my readers have a clear idea of what the faith comprises, but the meaning of the term "exile" in our context might require definition.

Exile as a punishment for crimes against the state no longer finds a place in our penal codes. In the ancient world, when men esteemed their household gods, exile was a terrible punishment, reserved for the most serious offenses against the homeland. The ancients conceived of no greater suffering than for a man to be cut off from the consolations of the family hearth and the company of friends. Even death was in some way a lesser penalty, for in ceasing to be, there is at least an end to earthly suffering, but in exile, only an indefinite endurance.

As Americans, we generally have no great attachment to place. We are, the tumbleweeds of the cosmos; the flotsam and jetsam of the world washed onto these shores where we forever wander about looking for more ways to make money. Our place of birth is an inconsequential accident. This makes it somewhat difficult for us to appreciate the anguish of exile, and when we read the Divine Comedy, it is only with a considerable effort of imagination that we can empathize with Dante's abiding sorrow and bitterness over being exiled from Florence. Were I to be exiled from my native town, Philadelphia, I can't say that I would be much disturbed, for I never loved Philadelphia. I recall once talking to a Frenchman who told me that the trouble with Americans is that we move around too much; we have no sense of belonging to a particular patch of ground. If we would only stay still, he said, we might pull our lives together and make sense of them. I suppose he had gotten hold of some piece of the truth about us, but there is little I can do to remedy my rootlessness. Like that of my countrymen, my patriotism, such as it is, is rooted in ideas rather than in the soil. So for me to be exiled from my country comes down to my country's adopting ideas and practices to which I cannot subscribe. My exile can only be conceived as cultural, not geographical.

My greater patria is the Church. I have from earliest memory loved every part of Her: from what Cardinal Newman called "the smells and bells" to Her most sublime teachings. The Church is my home, even more than my country. But I, and those who share my feeling, have been dispossessed of that home. We are exiles in a double sense, secular and ecclesiastic: neither our country, nor the institutional Catholic Church any longer offer us a homeland.

The truth of our secular exile is plain to be seen. We have recently added to our national infamy of being a land of legalized abortion by including in the category of protected rights the practice of homosexual sodomy. We are now the land of the free and the gay. Homosexual marriage is the logical terminus of the direction the Supreme Court has taken. The response of our conservative, born-again president was the rather bland and guarded statement that the court had opted to respect diversity. It should be obvious

to any thinking Catholic that we have no representation in government, nor in the media. We are political pariahs, ideological untouchables, cultural exiles.

Concerning our position within the Church -- and when I say our position, I mean that of traditional Catholics -- we also find ourselves strangers in a strange land. I will go into this in more detail later, but my assertion is already proved by the fact that I have had to use the term "traditional Catholics" to distinguish those who believe what the Church has always taught from those who do not. The term Catholic can no longer be understood unequivocally, for we have two religions -- the traditional and the modernist -- both using the term. For those who still need to be convinced of this, there is ample statistical and documentary evidence available, but we all know that we cannot presently have any certainty about what a person believes when he says that he is a Catholic.

These are dark words, but I do not intend to revel in gloom. There are some wounded souls who, feeling betrayed by both Church and country, indulge in apocalyptic rhetoric. They will talk about an inevitable economic collapse, ensuing social chaos, war, famine, the great chastisement, and so on. I once attended a Traditional Mass Chapel where one poor fellow who found great pleasure in contemplating disasters would always sidle up to me in the hall after Mass and in a soft, foreboding tone say, "You got your blessed candles ready? It's coming." -- meaning the three days of darkness when the sun and the moon will go black and only blessed candles will light. I do not wish to deprive such people of the consolations they find in thinking of the end times, but it does little to help those of us trying to raise Catholic families. And if one is looking for the great chastisement, I say, 'Open your eyes.'

My principal concern is a practical one: What do we do to preserve the faith in our current state of secular and ecclesiastical exile?

To attempt an answer to this formidable question requires that I introduce that overworked and ill-defined term -- culture. Please don't be alarmed. The tendency when one hears this term is for the eyes to glaze over, for what follows its introduction generally has no relation to anything sensible. But I am not going to extol the glories of antiquity, or lampoon the pretensions of contemporary art, for none of that is really culture. I accept that culture comes from cult, that is, worship. It is the incarnation of religion; culture emanates from a consensus about the very purpose of life to which all things must be ordered. It is the common possession of a people that draws all of their activities together and gives their society coherence and identity. In short, culture is the air we breathe.

The culture of the United States has from its inception been Protestant. The presumed right of private judgment and not the revealed Truth of God as taught by the Catholic Church has been the formative principle of our society, the backdrop to our lives. But Protestantism only derives whatever good it possesses from the measure of Catholic truth it retains. There was a time, in the 18th and 19th and even into the early part of the 20th Century, when the inertial force of Catholic civilization still moved the nation. There persisted a moral consensus that in most areas of conduct approximated the teaching of the Church. Pornography was outlawed, as was homosexuality and abortion; divorce, though permitted, was frowned upon, and fornication was considered shameful. Decent language was enforced in film and television and in print by law and custom and social pressure. The Catholic hierarchy was once a cultural force to be reckoned with politically.

All this has changed.

Much of what was once outlawed now has the protection of law. A moral inversion has taken place and disapproval of sexual aberrations is denounced as hate-speech. Soon, I expect, the public expression of perennial Church teaching will become criminalized. The Catholic hierarchy now inspires contempt and distrust and has become the butt of late-night talk show jokes. When people see a Roman collar and pectoral cross now, they think of teenage boys abused by homosexual priests with the knowing wink of their bishop, who's just run over someone with his luxury car and is speeding back to his palace while his victim bleeds to death in the street. This is simply where we are and we must begin by recognizing

it.

What I have been describing is the condition of society at large, what is called our general culture, and its relation to our faith. We still have good Catholic families and good Catholic individuals. But it must be admitted that the faith as a constituent of our general culture has diminished to the vanishing point. And this diminution of Catholic influence seriously impairs the ability of those groups and individuals who are trying to maintain the faith in an increasingly inhospitable environment.

Compounding the difficulty is the fact that our nation does not now possess one distinctive culture that we can define as our opposition. Shifts in immigrant populations from Christian to non-Christian lands has also served to energize an already present animus against expressions of Catholic truth in the public sector. Society seeks to locate and promote areas of what might be called neutral culture, that is, activities in which religion appears irrelevant and all that is required is a general good will and civility.

It has been noted that after the Diaspora, when the Jews found themselves in Gentile lands, they instinctively sought to interact with their neighbors in such areas of neutral culture and, naturally, worked to expand these areas. Catholics and other believers have done something similar in America. This is why the United States is always breaking out in a rash of fraternal organizations that act as loci of neutral culture. The criteria for membership and the avowed purpose of such organizations are kept sufficiently broad and ingenuous as to encompass almost anyone. Nobody at the Moose Lodge cares if you are a Catholic or a Jew, so long as you are a good moose, which isn't terribly demanding.

The September 11 attacks provided a perfect opportunity for the expression of neutral culture, an apotheosis of modern sentimentality in an outpouring of donations and a frenzy of flag-waving. But the main engine driving us toward a neutral culture is not the odd national crisis but the general mania for sports and all manner of entertainment that eliminates religion as an integral part of life. Few characters in television or film or on the playing fields are depicted as having any particular faith. Should religion make a rare appearance in a sitcom or on the silver screen it is invariably vague and cloyingly saccharine; for the most part, it's entirely absent. One sees little of it on ESPN. So as we partake of the standard entertainments and pastimes of our age, we become accustomed to living in a spiritually sterile world.

As neutral cultures expand, religion contracts.

Faith becomes incidental to life. To insist that religion defines life is to be boorish. It's simply bad manners. The result is that we have a new class of Catholics: closet Catholics. And, as homosexuals once lived in fear of being outed, so do some of our closet Catholics, including bishops. They dread confrontation with a general culture hostile to their nominal beliefs, so they keep quiet, and since silence is consent, they lend mute support to the enemies of the Church. So our faith no longer has a place in our general culture, and to fly one's Catholic flag too boldly is considered to be in bad taste. It can invite ridicule, even hatred.

So much for our secular exile.

The larger question of our exile from the institutional Church must now be considered.

In some essays collected under the title, "Christianity and Culture," the late T.S. Eliot defines what he calls cultural disintegration. He prefaces his definition with the observation that general culture arises from the interaction of various groups and individuals who form separate strata within a society but are joined by a shared vision of the purpose of human life. Each strata contributes to the general culture through its specific area of competence. Thus, artists, statesmen, churchmen, merchants and tradespeople are all pieces in an integrated mosaic that presents a coherent picture. Cultural disintegration occurs when two or more of these strata so separate as to form distinct cultures. Decomposition ensues. The picture dissolves.

That cultural disintegration present within the Catholic Church is eminently evident.

A recent incident at Georgetown University offers a perfect illustration. Francis Cardinal Arinze, a curial Cardinal who spends most of his time in Rome, was invited as principal speaker to Georgetown's graduation. Cardinal Arinze, for a long time, headed Pope John Paul II's Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Now he's in charge of the liturgy and has announced that there will be no freeing of the Tridentine Mass as had been rumored. He can hardly be considered a defender of orthodoxy when for decades his principal job was to assure apostates and pagans that Rome rejoiced that they should enrich the world with their persistent errors. When the Hindus celebrated a feast day for one of their pagan gods, Arinze would send them a congratulatory message saying how pleased the Vatican was that they should be doing whatever it was that constituted their idolatrous ritual. He was, in effect, the Church's Mr. Congeniality, showering benevolent smiles on any and every sect that rejected Our Lord and the claims of His Holy Church.

Why Georgetown, an erstwhile Jesuit institution, settled upon Arinze as a commencement speaker, I cannot say. Perhaps because of his status as a preeminent ecumenist or as a potential candidate for the papacy. The Cardinal, I suspect, misread the invitation and thought he was at a Catholic university, so he decided it would be appropriate to say something genuinely Catholic. Putting to one side his syncretist persona, His Eminence delivered some fine remarks about the importance of strengthening the family and the need to combat those forces that undermine its strength. He abandoned the ambiguity characteristic of Romanita and even listed these forces: divorce, abortion, contraception, homosexuality, fornication.

I rather expect he was surprised by the reaction of his audience.

Some students and faculty walked out in protest during his speech, including a prominent member of the theology department; one priest later told a reporter he had sent an apology for the Cardinal's offensive remarks to everyone on his e-mail list, explaining that Arinze's views in no way corresponded to his own. About 70 faculty members signed a protest, denouncing the Cardinal's bigoted tirade. The secular press chronicled the debacle. When the Cardinal was again safely ensconced on Vatican Hill, he said he might have spoken differently had he been able to foresee the reaction.

The incident, of little practical consequence in itself, demonstrates that those strata that constitute Catholic culture have so separated as to form distinct cultures. For there are obviously among Georgetown's faculty -- some with licentiates in theology -- those who find the Church's moral teaching so offensive that they cannot bear to listen to it. They have taught generations of students Lord knows what. Certainly not the Catholic faith, the expression of whose tenets they deem a brutish act that demands an apology. Such people comprise the elite educators within American Catholic society. They are the sort who write for America, the prestigious Jesuit journal, and other equally dreary venues of heterodoxy. Yet, these people call themselves Catholic, and Georgetown is still regarded as a Catholic University. But neither the culture of the university nor that of its faculty are informed by the faith as it had been taught and practiced before the Second Vatican Council, that is, through virtually the entire 2,000 year history of the Church.

What does this mean?

It means that cultural disintegration is so advanced within the Church that when someone tells you he is Catholic the statement contains no more certainty about his creed than if he had told you he is a Unitarian.

A further example. The American Catholic bishops created a small stir in some circles last fall with a document by one of their committees that stated plainly that the Jews need not convert to the Catholic faith; that they have their own covenant with God, a kind of side deal in which they were grandfathered

in before the Incarnation., Cardinal Kasper, now the Pope's point man on relations with the Jews, was dispatched from Rome to deal with the mild controversy that arose. He confirmed the teaching contained in the bishops' document. Yes, His Eminence said in a speech at Boston University, the Jews have no need of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church in order to be saved.

This is a radical novelty contradicted by Scripture and Tradition, a heresy at the very least. In my opinion, it amounts to a denial of the central teaching of the Catholic Church and rises toward apostasy. But even if it is not apostasy, it would still illustrate the presence of cultural disintegration, for if I am Catholic and believe, as the Church has always taught, that all men must enter Her to be saved, then in what sense can Cardinal Kasper and I both be considered Catholic? Obviously, one of us is not Catholic.

Now, I have no interest in poor Walter Kasper as anything more than an illustration of how far this cultural disintegration within the Church has progressed, but I cannot pass over Kasper's. objective denial of Catholic dogma without noting that he is the Pope's point man on interfaith relations, elevated to the cardinalate by John Paul II and given the job of representing the Holy See in this matter. The Pope did not just pull his name out of a hat. I know there are sentimental Catholics who would like to cling to the belief that Kasper and his like-minded bishops represent renegade elements in the hierarchy opposed to the Pope. All the evidence is to the contrary. John Paul II never rebuked Kasper for his remarks; never contradicted him or reasserted the true Catholic doctrine. Kasper remains in favor in the Vatican and still heads the Pope's commission on relations with the Jews, which falls under Kasper's purview as secretary of the Pope's Commission for Promoting Christian Unity. We know from the entire direction of his pontificate that this office is of the highest importance to the Pope, as he has made ecumenism the driving force of his papacy. Kasper is the Pope's chosen policy instrument.

What must we conclude?

Returning for a moment to T.S. Eliot, he also observes that a religion can be so weakened as no longer possess the ability to assimilate different cultures but rather to become assimilated by them. We have arrived at a point at which the institutional Church, with the loss of its universal language and liturgy and doctrine, no longer has the strength to assimilate the cultures with which She comes into contact. Kasper's remarks are in perfect accord with agnostic humanism's principal tenet of tolerance. This is now the dominant force in Western culture, the touchstone of modern sentimentality. Kasper's remarks are diametrically opposed to the perennial teaching of the Church and to Her Divinely assigned mission of evangelization. But to whom can we appeal to correct Kasper's aberrations? To Rome?

He is Rome. To the Pope? He's the Pope's man. This lack of recourse demonstrates that the institutional Church has been assimilated by the secular culture.

Now, for the harder question: What do we do about it?

Catholic parents who would live the faith and hand it down intact are in a near impossible situation. All of the duties once entrusted to the religious orders who used to instruct our children and offer them the example of holiness now fall upon us. Our general culture and that of the institutional Church undermine us at every turn. The corrosive effect of unfaith is eating away at us from every direction. What can we do?

Is there a realistic possibility of reviving traditional Catholicism within the present Church? I think this is about as likely as reinstating the rule of British monarchy in America. And as any efforts in this direction appear to be for a lost cause, they tend to evoke ridicule. And so long as we try to remain Catholic within a structure that will not support the traditional faith, all we can hope for is to be regarded as an unwelcome and somewhat ludicrous element; at best, we will be tolerated as harmless eccentrics indulging in a bit of antiquarianism. I will say unequivocally that today's typical Catholic parish with its Protestantized liturgy and sentimentalized doctrine will not support traditional Catholicism; it will

dissolve it. So, we must ask ourselves: Is there any precedent that might help us to know how to proceed in such circumstances? Has there ever been a time when society was crumbling and the Church in disarray and those who would keep the faith found themselves in a like condition of secular and ecclesiastical exile?

Yes.

Historical parallels are always imperfect, as every age is unique, but I believe we can look to the early 6th Century as the epoch closest to our own in the problems it posed for, those determined to live a Catholic life.

Some brief history. About 1,500 years ago, Theodoric marched into Rome as the ruler of all Italy. He was a Goth who could neither read nor write, a barbarian and, inasmuch as he was Christian, an Arian heretic, as were all the Gothic overlords who were not still pagan. What remained of the Roman Army, a ragtag municipal guard, suffered the humiliation of having to assemble to greet him, as did the Roman Senate, an ineffectual body with no real power. The brutes were in charge, men who despised the high culture of antiquity, not that much of it remained. The Roman aristocracy had grown decadent and cared for little more than its creature comforts and security.

The Church, having emerged from persecution two centuries earlier, had paid for its official acceptance by sinking ever deeper into mediocrity and corruption. The hierarchy was no longer the province of Martyrs, but the preserve of those who sought power. Rival claims to the papacy and factional wars turned an already tepid faithful into cynics and scoffers. Many of the clergy led dissolute lives and the general level of morality had sunk so low that a popular movement grew to restore the pagan festival of Luper calia, an obscene public orgy of fertility rites that culminated in naked men chasing women through the streets. This was the state of the city in which lay the bones of Peter and Paul.

Into this city entered a young man from a provincial town whose father had sent him to Rome to study. He was of noble family, and he saw firsthand the decadence of the aristocracy as well as that of the mob. But he was a devout young man and one night, pondering his future, he walked through the streets of Rome; through crumbling corridors where the statues and monuments former glory were defaced and vandalized; he passed through crowds of drunkards and gamblers and prostitutes; past street corners where the talk was all of the games and the pornographic shows; he walked on lamenting the loss of nobility in public life; of holiness in the Church; he walked until he came to a hill -- the eighth hill of Rome -- called the Hill of Shards, for it was there that all broken pottery was thrown, along with other assorted refuse. And there, on the Hill of Shards, amid the ruins of his world, this young man threw himself onto the wreckage and cried to God to show him a way to live his faith in a faithless world.

The young man's name was Benedictus of Nursia. We know him as St. Benedict.

Young Benedict knew that Roman civilization was finished and the institutional Church corrupt. So he turned his back on the city and went into the wilderness, there to serve God as a holy hermit. But Providence had a grand plan called Christendom and Benedict was to be its chief architect. To counter the great cultural disintegration of Church and State, Benedict eventually created a world within a world; a group culture within the general culture: the Benedictine monastery. This is not the time to expatiate on the monumental nature of the Benedictine contribution to Western Civilization. Many abler minds have done so. My interest is in the strategy of St. Benedict as a possible help to us in our present circumstance, for we stand on our own Hill of Shards. The inertial force of Christendom has run out. Our world -- the Catholic world -- is finished. Western culture is finished. The barbarians are in charge - - everywhere. A new dark age is in the making; a world not only contemptuous of the Catholic faith, not only indifferent to the Catholic faith, but almost wholly ignorant of the Catholic faith.

We know, of course, that the Church, in some manner, will persist until the end of time; but we also know that Our Lord asked the haunting question, "When I come again, will I find any faith in the

world?" So the size of the Church, Her structure, the extent to which She will remain a notable presence in the world are made open questions by the very words of Her Founder.

What the Rule of St. Benedict accomplished was to create a community in which men could pursue spiritual perfection as their sole aim while fulfilling all of the duties incumbent upon them as creatures of flesh as well as spirit. That men of so other-worldly an orientation turned a barbarous continent into a Christian land represents one of those paradoxes that the ungodly always fail to understand, for it rests on the Divine counsel, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else will be added unto you."

Anyone who reads the Rule is struck first of all by the personality of St. Benedict: his gentleness, his fraternal charity, his prudence, his profound love of God. How attractive a man he must have been. Next, one notices the insistence on regularity and attention to detail as indispensable elements to a holy community life and individual spiritual progress.

Now, I am not suggesting that a Benedictine revival is the way to address our problems (though it certainly wouldn't hurt). The Rule was God's way of guiding His children through a crisis of civilization in the 6th Century. What Our Lord has in mind for us, only time will tell. The operations of grace are often undreamt of. But inasmuch as we can apply our natural reason to our problem, I think we should; and reason tells us that we are in a situation very similar to that of St. Benedict, with the addition that the Church is in a far worse condition. And reason tells us that we must find some means of doing what the Benedictines did; that is, we must remove ourselves culturally from the terrible disintegration that is having so corrosive an effect on us and our families and reconstitute Catholic culture in a way that allows it to be insulated from the world, yet remain in contact with the world. Something of the sort has already been under way, something of which we ought to take note. Those families wishing to live a Catholic life have been steadily separating themselves from the currents of popular culture and the influence of the institutional Church over the past three decades or so. There are isolated cells of genuine Catholicism here and there which maintain, or strive to maintain, a life ruled by the faith.

These Catholic cells, if I might call them such, are having a difficult time. I know. I head one of them. To my knowledge, my family is the only traditional Catholic family in my town; I believe in the entire county, and perhaps several counties. Once a week, we drive about 45 miles to a chapel to hear the Tridentine Mass. Sometimes, we stop for a cup of coffee in the hall after Mass and share a few hurried words with families in similar circumstances who have traveled some greater, some lesser distances than we have. Then, we all head home, back into enemy territory, so to speak, hoping the spiritual pit stop will keep us going for another week.

I have been thinking for some time that we have to do better than this. The darkness is growing at an alarming rate, pressing in, trying to swallow us and our children.

We in the Catholic cells need some fortification, something like a Benedictine Rule for the family. I don't propose myself as one either possessed of the competence or having received the call to compose and present such a rule; but I will venture a few practical suggestions.

First, we must be mindful of that most mysterious thing -- human personality. Every family, like every individual, has its personality, its particular group culture -- if you will. During the course of Her long history, the Church has given birth to a great variety of religious orders, each one with its distinct personality. Those qualities that make one a good Dominican preacher might be ill-suited to a Carmelite contemplative. The temperament of the Franciscan is not that of the Jesuit. Likewise the spiritual atmosphere of each household points in a decided direction. Some families are quiet and reclusive; others outgoing and sociable. The sort of spirituality that the head of the household should nurture must accord with the family temperament. We Catholics have the advantage of having a rich, heritage from which we can draw spiritual tools that can be adapted to our present circumstances. Many modes of spirituality have been explored and charted by the inspired genius of the sainted founders of religious orders. I think we have the option, one might say the obligation, of building on those foundations that

have been laid for us. The religious orders are dying because they have abandoned their rules, but the spirit of the orders, in general and in particular, ought to be preserved, and I can see no other way to accomplish this now than through these Catholic cells that the exigencies of our age have produced.

Now, this notion of Catholic families as spiritual cells imbued with the ideals of particular religious orders might be a charming idea, but how might it be implemented? There are obvious differences between families and religious orders and whatever there is in a Rule that has no application in family life must be discarded -- such as St. Benedict's elaborate instructions on how the hours must be chanted. Whatever the rule contains that appears well suited to our circumstance, we ought to try to incorporate into our family life.

For instance, St. Benedict details the duties of the abbot and the qualities he should manifest. There is little in this chapter that cannot be applied to the father of a household. In fact, St. Benedict reminds the abbot that he ought to regard himself as a father and his monks as his children.

The Rule's longest chapter is on humility, and its counsels can be adapted to every circumstance of life. St. Benedict details twelve steps through which one arrives at perfect humility, which is the foundation of all virtue.

Another chapter lists 72 "instruments of good works," each consisting of a phrase or short sentence that prescribes or proscribes some action or attitude. The chapter can be read in about five to ten minutes and a daily reading, perhaps with pauses for reflection, cannot fail to have a transforming effect in time.

The whole of the Rule is imbued with the spirit of what might be called radical conversion, a complete turning of the soul to God and away from the world. This sort of conversion is at the heart of the rule of every religious order; it is also at the heart of every genuinely Catholic life, whether one is a monk or member or a household. None of us is excused from the counsels of perfection.

Every household, like every religious order, must be primarily a place of prayer if it is to be genuinely Catholic. And this prayer must be regular. The genius of St. Benedict's Rule and its amazing success have largely to do with the element of regularity he introduced into monastic life. Before Benedict, monasticism was either the pursuit of solitary hermits, often given to grotesque excesses of asceticism, or of communities with practices too severe to be borne for long by ordinary men. St. Benedict devised a way of life by which any man of good intention whom God had called might exercise his vocation in a sane, safe and effective manner. Regularity was the key. And so must it be for us. A reasonable schedule of some sort must be made and adhered to, especially by the head of the household who stands in the position of abbot and must lead more by example than by word, as St. Benedict tells us.

But regular times set aside for prayer and study must be supplemented by periods of silence for meditation, for prayer without meditation can degenerate into unthinking routine, and study without meditation can turn into vain knowledge. There are many books one can read about meditation, but there is a short, practical guide called the Catechism of Mental Prayer that is well suited for beginners. There is also St. Teresa of Avila's meditation on the Our Father, called The Way of Perfection. An excellent introduction to a practice essential to growth in the spiritual life.

In all attempts to live some sort of regimen, however, rigor must always yield to common sense. In the Rule of St. Albert, which guides the Carmelites, the ancient patriarch concludes his counsels with the admonition that the bounds of common sense must never be exceeded as common sense is the "guide of the virtues."

I said earlier that I do not want to revel in gloom, but I do think it necessary that we periodically remind ourselves of the gravity of our situation: we live in a time when the institutional Church is in a state of advanced decomposition and many of Her prelates and priests can no longer be trusted to be Catholic. We must periodically look at this disaster that has stricken the Church lest we fall into complacency, or

worse, complicity, for our desire is always to seek our own comfort, to find some pretext for taking the path of least resistance, to play it safe. But to seek our own ease in the current crisis is to invite the punishment of spiritual blindness, which is now endemic to the hierarchy.

As we cling to the faith, we will be attacked, and the attack will come heaviest from those quarters where we should ordinarily find support. This will be painful and confusing, and I think we are much in the position of those lovers of Our Lord who found themselves standing on Calvary when His Precious Body was taken from the Cross and laid in His Mother's arms. Who standing there, looking at that mangled corpse, its former beauty now unrecognizable, gazing on the torn flesh, streaked with blood and dirt and sweat and spittle, could recognize their Lord? The heartbreak, the fear, the crushing sadness, the temptation to despair must have come near to overwhelming the holy women and St. John, had it not been for the grace of faith. And that grace doubtless shone brightest at that darkest hour in the Immaculate Heart of His Mother. She knew that the lifeless and dishonored Body She held belonged not only to Her Son, but to the Son of God. And She knew that He would rise again. So, mixed with Her unimaginable sorrow, was the surest faith that the world had not won, that Her Son would triumph and live again and live forever. So we, when we look at the mangled remains of what appears to be our Holy Church, we must seek in our faith the assurance that all is not lost; that Our Lord is with us, so long as we are with Him. And the Church, disfigured and dishonored, will somehow show Her true countenance again to those of Her children who have always kept it in their hearts and in their homes