

Burrowing in Harvest*

by Edward Riedinger

BRINGING THE surplice over his head, he saw a woman in the corner of the sacristy waiting for him to come by. He hurriedly put the linen vestment in the closet, was careful that its edges did not catch in the closing door, and brushed his hand over his white hair as he neared her.

He had noticed this woman often at the novena recently. Middle aged or more she was clutching a black rosary, its beads still round and shining.

"Will you please bless this, Father?"

"Of course, will you step over here by the holy water?"

As she followed him over to the tin basin in another corner, he felt her eyes on his black shoes and her gaze over the shadows and gothic contours of the room.

Being handed the beads, he held them in his left hand beginning an English formula. She folded her hands tightly and crossed herself with a small, quick motion at the blessing.

He smiled as he returned the rosary but she did not leave. She stood before him, her eyes becoming large and wild, struggling to say something to him. "Father . . ."

"Is there anything else?"

"Father, I'm going to have another baby and I can't. My husband tried not to; but oh Father, it's so hard; and you can never tell."

In a few seconds it was all out. She stopped crying and bent over, her fingers jabbing over her eyes. Fumbling into her purse she pulled out a knot of handkerchief. He let her cry and release the tension and lone fear.

He would take her up to his office and hear the long story, not just of this problem, but of the family, his and her parents, the past; she would relax and perhaps even laugh once. But in the end he knew nothing would be settled. There would be her plight and his principles.

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His principles, that he knew by rote but which he would emphasize by hauling down a thick, leather-bound volume from a shelf above his head. He would read to her: she would leave. As she went out the door he would still be telling her of the Church's love but of what God had ordered. Her hands would be gripping her purse tightly, her glance would look everywhere but his face.

What happened after they left his office he did not know. Most rebelled and repented in guilt or bitterness: some few were submissive. And for some of those few he had been called to hospitals for a kind of last unction.

"Would you like to come up to my office? We can talk there."

She had put the rosary in her purse keeping the wet handkerchief in her hand. Her moist, reddened eyes seemed tired now as she walked next to him.

When they arrived at his office he was startled to see his curate sitting there. He suddenly remembered that he had agreed to see Fr. Burn now about plans for renovating the deteriorated sanctuary in accord with more modern liturgical conventions.

Fr. Burn arose as they entered but gave an annoyed glance at the woman. He put out his cigarette on the desk ashtray.

"Fr. Burn, I was wondering if I might see you at some other time. This woman. . . ."

"Oh no. Father, I didn't know you had to talk to someone else." She bowed her head apologetically to Fr. Burn who had resumed his seat. "I can come another time. I won't bother you now."

"No, no! what Fr. Burn and I had to discuss wasn't that important. He can leave."

Fr. Burn remained seated, smoking another cigarette, annoyed at what he considered a tiresome conversation.

"Father, I can come back anytime. I'll be at next week's novena. I can see you then."

Perhaps she did want to leave. "Yes, of course." He went to open the door for her. Passing down the hall she was bent over stuffing her handkerchief back into the purse. "Don't forget to come back."

"One of the novena gang, eh?" said Fr. Burn with worn derisiveness. "What is it? The old man drinks and beats her; and 'Won't you please come and help me, Father?'"

Fr. Salter was just sitting down as Fr. Burn made his remark. He halted over his seat with a momentary, exploding glance. But he checked himself. When they quarreled they only became bitterly entrenched against one another. He quietly said that unless she had an abortion she was going to die.

Fr. Burn assumed a business attitude, defended himself by opening the rolls of blueprints on the desk. They had been laid out many times.

"I'm sorry I forgot our appointment. There isn't that much we talk about at lunch; I should have remembered this."

"It's all right. Now I think we can finance this remodeling by just a few more extra collections and cutting some of the sodality and league funds. Mr. Sullivan is willing to give us the one percent loan."

"Well, Sullivan came through. I was talking to him yesterday when I took the collection downtown. I didn't think I had convinced him, though."

"He called before lunch."

"I guess that makes the renovation certain then." Now that a loan had come through there was no use discussing changes anymore. The sanctuary was almost daily littered with plaster, the altars were chipped and worn, and the sanctuary floor was now cracked in three places. "I think it's all right if we turn the main altar around." He had granted that point some weeks ago. And it was true. With his back to the people and murmuring into a corner, God only knew what most of them thought he was doing.

"Yes, but if we're going to do this job right, the whole thing's got to be done. And we may as well do what I've thought of; those plans are already drawn up. The side altars, the statues, and all the vigil light stands must go. If we say Mass on those side altars, it's only for ourselves. Liturgy is a communal thing. As for removing the statues and candles, that'll get rid of a lot of the plaster-and-dime piety we have around here."

This was the beginning of an argument he had heard before. Fr. Salter thought of a woman he had once met during the early part of the war when he was first pastor here. She had lit two candles each Tuesday for more than a year before a statue of St. Anthony. But she had always removed the glasses from their holders and placed them at the statue's feet. The janitor had been annoyed at this and complained. Fr. Salter spoke to the woman and instructed her that the effect of the candles was just as certain when they were in the stand as out and that the former position was more convenient. He asked her if he might add his prayers to her intention. Very grateful, she explained that her husband had been killed in the first war, and that six months ago her oldest son had been reported lost in action.

"Well, the candles are some consolation; but mostly I suppose they're superstition. The sanctuary is going to look mighty bare without statues, isn't it?" Actually he didn't mind the new sanctuaries and church interiors with their plain lines and even simplicity. He found them very quieting. But he knew most of the people liked the heavy warmth and plaster poses in their traditional churches.

smash him, . . .

Their statues were the closest most of them came to the countenance of piety.

"Of course it will," he replied, a note of tired tolerance evident in his voice, "but simplicity is the haven of solitude and the joy of sanctity. It will end all the distractions and extraneous devotions during the Mass. Everyone will concentrate on what he's there to do."

There was no use arguing, Fr. Salter thought. He always had a reply. And what he said was mostly true. Mostly true, somewhat true. That's where the problem was. They were on opposite sides of a coin absolutely describing it. Certainly, after an initial shock and a few inveterates, Fr. Burn's sanctuary would be capable, as capable as anything else, in exalting a congregation to Christian living. But a sanctuary, a church, really, were such small parts of it all.

He hadn't been listening to Fr. Burn and he was suddenly startled from his thoughts by a vacant stare, the blueprints in a different arrangement, and an awkward silence the length of which he did not know. "You said the side altars would have to go too, didn't you?"

"Oh most definitely, the Masses we mutter away on those miniature gothics in dark corners are a mockery of sacrifice. The Mass is a sacrifice and public act of worship. As such it cannot be performed as some act of private devotion. We really should even concelebrate. . . ."

Whenever Fr. Salter had an early Mass, he usually said it on a side altar. He liked the close stillness of a chapel. There even seemed a security in the ceremony quite removed from the spiritual. In any season, the ritual and vestments seemed perfectly to fit with dawn. The sunlight or shadow of any morning always lay perfectly on the stone. The church at those times was quiet and fresh; and of the few silent faithful who attended always, all went to Communion. Yet there was something selfish in this good feeling. "Yes, the side altars will have to go."

"Of course."

They talked on about new arrangements and costs but Fr. Salter was not really listening and finally he said, "I realize, Fr. Burn, you regard me as old-fashioned, but I'm really not that much stuck on the old ways, the accepted ways. Anymore I wonder if one way isn't as good as the other. I don't think I really care how we remodel; it's just that the church must be fixed up. Changing the people is what matters—or no, not changing them so much as awakening them. And we mustn't think of it as a righteous operation upon them by us, but a deep transformation of ourselves also. Of course, I realize that this must come about within the environ-

ment of some sacred building. The atmosphere of the one we have now hasn't much succeeded." He saw parishioners' faces standing in the dark corners of the sacristy after Masses, novenas, and benedictions. "We may as well give your idea a chance."

"Fine, I'm glad you're in favor of the remodeling. Now I don't want you to think I'm rushing things, but the contractor for this job has to begin next Monday. If he doesn't start then, we'll have to wait another six months. He's the most reasonable and his estimate was the one you least disapproved. I'm sure Mr. Sullivan can rush the loan through for us; I'll have the contractor come by and see you tomorrow." He rolled up his blueprints and went to the door. "By the way, I've got to leave early tomorrow and see a stonecutter downstate. I know I have the early Masses this month; but if you say mine for me, I can get a monk from the priory to say the late one."

Sure, I'll say it for you. But where will you say yours?" But he was already through the door.

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II

The morning light lay still and warm on the dark oak panels of the sacristy. Nothing stirred, and being vested Fr. Salter stood motionless letting a bar of sunlight rest on the sleeve of his alb.

Since his Mass was to be said on a side altar in the chapel, only one server was required. But the boy had still not arrived. He thought of the many years ago when he had been an altar boy.

What always seemed to come back to him as representative of all that time were the few occasions when he had served alone at the earliest Masses of Easter Week. Those days never seemed to be overcast, and sunlight and the shadows of leaves played on the sanctuary pavement like absorbed children. The church was very small and usually empty except for the eight school nuns. There had only been a main altar. The windows in the sanctuary were open letting in a moist spring breeze and the faint and fading sound of crickets on the parish lawn. The altar's lilies were still fresh and fragrant, and the wavering candle flames made the faintest glow on the priest's gold vestments.

He was awakened from his reminiscence by the sacristy door suddenly opening and a tousled youngster flying past him. Looking at the clock he saw that Mass was already late. Nothing had been prepared; he hadn't even prepared himself. He had been dreaming and nothing was done.

I jest kinder . . .

He pulled a wick from a drawer to light the candles. Coming into the sanctuary he saw that there were only a couple of people in the church. Someone had put two small vases of flowers on the altar he was to use. His old pastor had always insisted on flowers. Fr. Salter would not be saying Mass in the chapel very many more times. He wanted to begin immediately.

But in lighting one of the candles, he glimpsed the main altar. It was dark, even cold; and the huge crucifix above it seemed like an immense piece of frozen wood. He blew out the candles he had just lit, walked up the wide and open steps of the main altar and lit two candles there. Walking back into the sacristy, he heard feet shuffling to pews on the main aisle.



stepped on 'im. . . .