A SURVIVOR'S TALE

By DAVID S. TOOLAN

I HAVE BEEN BLESSED A HUNDREDFOLD as a Jesuit priest. Rarely a dull moment. It has given me a unique way to participate in the drama of my time and to use my powers to the fullest as a kind of double agent, living in the borderland between the realms of sacred and secular, interpreting the one to the other. In succession, I have been college professor, anti-war and civil rights activist, religious seeker, research scholar, minor guru and (now) a journalist – all work worthy of a man. It has privileged me to enter into people's lives at their most intense moments – at birth, coming of age, family crisis and death. My life is filled with boon companions. When things have been going well (not necessarily without anguish), celibacy has been beside the point, more like one of those minor clauses that my landlord currently slips into the fine print of a lease renewal.

I do not know how to speak of celibacy except in terms of the current death–rebirth struggle of Catholic religious orders, my own in particular. We may have sighted light at the end of the tunnel, but whether we shall emerge as new-born at the end – or just anachronisms – is not clear. What I do know is that at a certain point in my own passage, the bottom dropped out and we went into free fall. Many of us then had to start over, as if from zero, to rediscover (and rejoin) God, the Church and the place of the Order in our hearts. I know younger Jesuits would like to declare an amnesty on this painful past; they are impatient or bored with these old war stories. Yet to recall them says a lot about why celibacy was – and perhaps remains – such a difficult path to take just at this time. Perhaps it tells us what keeps us going, or the charge we are still missing and have yet to find.

The Society of Jesus, like any religious order, is an outward-bound service agency, set up to 'save souls'. But before it can save anyone else, it must mother its own members by supplying three things: 1) a deep sense of meaning derivative from its historical mythos and present mission; 2) a sense of mastery or competence at what we do, and 3) not least, emotional support. In my case, the Jesuit course did a fair job on the first score, but it short-changed me on the second and very nearly, due to mass resignations, failed on the third. Thus, after the novitiate experience, I had a somewhat ungrounded sense of the first. I felt that I had been placed, as Ignatius had been, at the side of Jesus, his co-worker in a

task than which there was none greater – truly a man's work. Then the trouble began. It dawned on me that I had entered the avant-garde of a fortress Church that on the inside was a very rickety structure. It was like coming upon Humpty Dumpty, who had had a great fall – but did not know it.

My difficulties in remaining celibate, I am saying, stem from breakdowns of community, meaning and mastery. And nothing illustrates this linkage quite so well as the story of my early years in the Society. But let me start at the beginning.

1. Beginnings

A trifle flippantly, I attribute my vocation to spending too much time walking alone in alpine forests primeval. It was 1955–56. I was twenty years old and spending a year at the University of Vienna. About mid-year, having grown a little weary of carousing in beer halls, I took a few weekends in the mountainous lake region above Salzburg. Those meditative weekends must have tripped some hidden switch in my psychic system, opening a floodgate, and setting something going that has not stopped yet. At least that is how I put it to myself now. The explosion came during Holy Week of that year abroad. I was in Cannes, France, waiting for my parents to arrive by ship from the States – and to get out of the rain one day, I dropped into a beachfront church. I had no sooner knelt down when, metaphorically, the roof blew off and the skies opened. Dazzling inner light, fire. The message: being a priest will put you at the centre, where the action is. Unable to contain the joy – or the bewilderment – I bolted from the church and wandered the beach for hours to cool down.

I apologize if this sounds like something from a glitzy vocation ad. But it happened. I told no one. For two years, I resisted, argued with myself, tried to forget by going off to Columbia Law School for a year, wrote tortuous letters to my girlfriend in California – but in the end I had to find out. I knew I was not ready for marriage, and celibacy was no big deal. It was the way we mostly were in those days (the Pill did not come on the market till 1960). Choosing the Jesuits was a flip of the coin: the devil you know is better than the one you don't. Jesuits had been my teachers in prep school and college, and though I disliked many of them, I had to admit they were smart and a class act. It seemed a right fit if fit there would be. When I finally told my family that I had applied for admission to the Society of Jesus, my mother quietly wept with both joy and grief (she was certain she would never see me again, which, given the rules then and her early death, was nearly true). The rest of the

family just wept. My father was sorely disappointed, my older brother nonplussed, and my sister's only comment was 'What a waste!' After a very expensive education, this news, except to my mother, indicated downward mobility.

I had no idea what I was getting into. Who does? There were some seventy that entered the New York Province of the Jesuits that summer of 1958, so many that we were divided into two separate groups and I was sent to a house in upstate New York on the shores of Lake Champlain – just across from Vermont's Mt Mansfield where I had so often skied in previous years. Looking back, those two novitiate years bring a blur of conflicting emotions. It was boot camp: an austere, tightly regimented order that left not a moment of privacy or leisure. To comprehend such a regime, you have to think of it as a primitive male initiation rite, where boys are kidnapped from their mother's world, sequestered, introduced to the mythology of the tribe and subjected to severe trial to prove themselves 'a man'. The novitiate ethos was, as the Chinese would say, overwhelmingly *yang*.

We were closely surveilled by a hugely energetic Master of Novices, a brilliant rhetorician who created an atmosphere at once of excitement and utter emergency – as if the world were about to end the following day unless we intervened to save it. No time to lose – certainly no time to think of sex or a normal life; the project was too big and urgent. Our mentor was determined to reinvent our personalities from the bottom up. One's former self, our families, it seemed, were regarded as heathen. The intent was to midwife spiritual samurai – who in the image of the warrior St Ignatius would put eros, brain and muscle completely at the disposal of Christ's kingdom.

I had barely stepped inside the novitiate door than I was plunged into the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises – which I remember as a period of inspiring and harshly neurotic introspection and self-doubt. Led on by the image of a workaholic Jesus, I tried, with the main strength of a Sisyphus, to remake myself into a muscular Christian – and fortunately did not succeed. After that ordeal, things did lighten up a bit. The company, when allowed to speak, was splendid – bright, funny and bursting with imagination. We were, of course, duly warned about 'particular friendships'. (What other kind were there? Could you have a generic friend? Few took this admonition seriously.) In fact, I could scarcely conceive better companions in hardship. When we were not developing knobby calluses on our knees at prayer or waxing endless corridors of linoleum tile, we were out chopping trees or playing ferocious games of basketball. I learned a little French, and have fond

memories of skating around magical islands over transparent, glassy ice. But I cannot say I learned to pray. I needed more feminine *yin*, the mood of alert non-doing.

Despite the obsessive busyness (which collapsed soon after), I can testify that the isolation, the sensory deprivation and deep silence did heighten one's interior sense organs. The paradox was that in blotting out the sensory overload that I once knew, the simplest things – be it juicy orange at breakfast, a Bach cantata, or the sound of wind in fir trees at night – seemed at times charged with the glory of God. I knew where G. M. Hopkins' poetry came from. And yes, it was probably not a bad thing at all that early on I got a dose of futility from my very own (classically American and Pelagian) efforts to storm heaven, and did not care for the taste.

Nor was the atmosphere of emergency that my Master of Novices proclaimed, though overwrought, beside the mark. In retrospect, I am inclined to say that the charism of celibacy – not the legal mandate for all clergy (which I find an offence against nature and grace), but the gift of celibacy for those that are given it – is comprehensible only in the context of emergency. Only if the world is permanently at hazard and about to end – or begin again – here and now. Theologically, for those with the ears to hear it, this is undeniably the world's condition. And it requires lifers, still points in the storm, men and women wholly given to letting in Spirit. In a nation bewitched by the sexual revolution, or in a Church that has homogenized the call of Christ, that point is hard to get.

2. Revolt against the system

The charge, the great task that warranted the wholehearted commitment of poverty, chastity and obedience, was clear – to proclaim and incarnate the gospel in a new context: a post-immigrant Church composed of increasingly educated and affluent laity, and the larger, infinitely complex post-World War II American society. (Some of my peers would later thrive in the heroics of foreign mission work, but for me the crucial challenge to our inventiveness has always been what to do here at home, in this so-called secular society.) Jesuits had always prided themselves on practical know-how, on having the means and skills to deal with particular historical settings. In 1960, however, American Jesuit leaders failed to notice the ground shifting underneath us, and that we would have to renegotiate our role in this new world. Thanks to the very success of our educational institutions, our clientele no longer needed our expertise as they once had. The old ethnic neighbourhoods were dispersing into the suburban diaspora, and with that flight to a

shopping-mall culture went a good deal of the sachem status and emotional support that had once been given so worshipfully to 'Father'. No measures were taken to readjust until it was nearly too late – or until it became evident even to an older cohort that Jesuits were entering an insecure job market with no guarantees of prestige.

Somehow, too, few leaders noticed that all those young ethnics we had equipped to seize the American Dream would raise children (many of them like me, already in the Society) who would not be satisfied with the stock answers of the manual tradition of Roman philosophy, theology and canon law. On the eve of Vatican II, we assumed that we could continue as we were. A nearly lethal delusion. Little did I know it when I moved to the academic side of Jesuit training, but I was about to taste the results of the fifty-year crusade against Modernism – the ossification of American Catholic intellectual life.

The very best part of the Jesuit course in my province, taught by professors with degrees from Oxford and Harvard, consisted of studies in the humanities. Being a college graduate, however, I skipped that phase and advanced directly to philosophy studies in proximity to New York City. The giant new seminary that I now entered was run more or less like a benevolent police state – which most of my companions took as a challenge to their ingenuity, annoying but not beyond their resourcefulness. The building itself had all the warmth of a factory (and was later deemed suitable, with minimal renovation, as a state prison). I was convinced the architect had been an atheist. Liturgy was deadly. But it was good to get back to the open stacks of an excellent library and read at random. And it was much easier in this voluble setting of common adversity (men thrive on it!) to make real friends, men you willingly measured yourself against, competed with and would, in a crunch, gladly die for. (Plentiful numbers took care of the problem of those you would not die for.) Rich and deeply nurturing friendships in a shared task, I am happy to say, have been one of the great gifts of belonging to this 'least society'.

A large part of the male bonding that took place, as I say, rested on shared resistance to 'the system', both disciplinary and academic. To a degree, this had been true for generations, as a legacy of satirical student songs testified. Yet in our time the satire grew ugly. Not having been raised in the patriarchal families that had prepared previous entrants for the top-down Jesuit command structure, my cohort could not stomach the Order's strictly hierarchic and paternalistic mindset. It seemed positively un-American, an affront to the ideals of participatory democracy and a classless society that we naïvely took for granted. We were

also accustomed to the more expressive atmosphere of the postwar boom period – when increasingly, feeling and its articulation held equal honour with logical thought. Apparently, as the sequel would show, we had imbibed that expressiveness as a basic human right – and it sat ill with the more stoic ascetic ideal exhibited by many of our elders. To us, their emotional constraint and avoidance of intimacy seemed skewed, if not a neurotic (or gnostic) denial of human nature.

We refused to believe that you had to be misogynist and uptight to qualify as a true Jesuit. (In the novitiate I felt uptight a good deal of the time and thus out of sorts, not myself.) Did it make any sense, as the rule seemed to be, that every woman must be regarded as a threat to be kept at a distance? Even your own sister? My Master of Novices, in perusing my mail from home, had once found a photo, taken on a family visit, of my sister sitting on my lap. He was outraged by the 'indiscretion'. I was astounded, did not know whether to laugh or cry. Subsequently I was just angry. Well, much later, when I learned that even heroes of intellectual probity like John Courtney Murray rested male identity and the hierarchy of the church on the subjugation of women, I would find myself repulsed.[1]

What I found insupportable was the bankrupt curriculum, the ahistorical, dry-rot neo-scholasticism that was summoned to explain and justify Catholic belief and ethics. Supposedly an intellectual meal, it turned out to be an empty bill of fare. The first time I had been exposed to second-hand digests of the Angelic Doctor – in college – I had rather enjoyed all the high-altitude talk of 'being'; but on the second go-around, it dawned on me that dialoguing with the wider culture in this arcane code would be impossible. (I fled to the library, to devour as much sociology as I could get my hands on, and lots of novels.) Crisis of authority, yes – it began to appear that smoke and mirrors were all that stood behind a church power structure that no longer served social needs, certainly not ours. I cannot even say that we were being prepared to meet the challenges of the thirteenth century. Even in Aquinas's Paris, I believe, we would have felt ourselves incompetent, not up to the job.

Bottled up eros would turn poisonous. There we were, steaming with idealism, full of spit and energy – like so many thoroughbreds chomping at the bit for the racecourse, but confined to stalls on a starvation diet. To be sure, one or two professors threw us some intellectual alfalfa; but on the whole the main course amounted to straw. Rarely a mention in class, certainly, of the Church's social teaching. The Beatles were off to mystical Benares, civil rights battles were happening all around us, Michael Harrington's seminal *The other America* was about to appear –

and we were marooned, caged, out of it. And if the faculty (who were as locked in as we were) had their way, we would remain out of it. We would be the first generation of Jesuits in 400 years, perhaps, who would possess no mastery over the major communication technology of our time – film and television. Our 'eternal verities', we began to suspect, qualified us for nothing so much as the welfare rolls.

The situation provided a dress rehearsal for the larger crisis of meaning, competence and intimacy that would overtake the whole Order by the end of the decade. The usual methods of letting off steam – evasions of the rules, strenuous athletics and theatricals lampooning the faculty – no longer proved effective escape valves. The faculty grew desperate. A suddenly improvised MA programme at Fordham University in the city, to which we were able to commute once a week in my second year, provided temporary relief. But not enough. In 1965, three years after I moved on to teach at an upstate college and just when US Jesuit numbers peaked at eight thousand, seminarians were in open revolt – and good friends began to drop out in droves. I am still in (often unacknowledged) mourning for missing voices.

Nothing happens in vain. Ironically, the spirit of resistance we learned in the seminary proved eminently useful for those who stayed – in civil-rights marches, Alinsky community organizing, anti-war protests and draft-board raids. After all, we had apprenticed ourselves, however bereft of ideas, for a role in the counterculture. The tragedy was that a lack of early institutional Jesuit support for these activities led many of the activists, convinced of the moral bankruptcy of the Society, to premature burn-out and/or departure.

The problem at the seminary amounted to more than the usual conflict between top-down governance and an equally strong Jesuit tradition of adaptability, mobility and high spirits. That was to be expected. But it probably was not until the 'regency' period – that interim when we were sent out to teach, and thus mix with the wider culture again – that my confrères and I got a glimmer of the underlying issue at stake in our rebellion. Confronted by the real life demands of a fading Catholic culture upon our institutions, this mismatch between what we had been taught and what we needed to know became clearer then, and could not be dismissed, as it was, as due to our 'personal problems' or the complaint of 'mindless activists'. No, the basic compact of religious life had been violated. We had volunteered to renounce the goods of marital intimacy and progeny in order to do something great for the Lord. To hazard one's all on behalf of such impossible dreams of service, we knew in our testosterone, is the stuff of manhood. But the

contract called for adequate skills – the equivalent of Matteo Ricci's 'memory palace' or knowledge of clocks to wow the Chinese emperor in the seventeenth century. Instead, we were subjected to infantilizing rules and fed intellectual junk food. The protest challenged the very mythos of the Society and took such charged, visceral form because the operative system of 'formation' threatened our masculinity. We had not signed on to be emasculated.

Understandably, then, the issues of encompassing meaning and mastery devolved into questions of psychosexual identity and a search for intimacy and community. I knew no young Jesuit at this time who did not prefigure what many of our generation would later experience after the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr, after the conflicts over Vietnam and Watergate – that is, who was not disillusioned by institutions, whose whole sense of self was not an open sore, who was not picking himself up off the floor. Who was not, once or twice a week, thinking of leaving – whether he had loving arms to receive him or not. Loving, ego-salving arms we certainly needed.

To a degree, I had been shielded; after only two years at the madhouse, I had been sent off in 1962 to teach philosophy (i.e. existential phenomenology, I am glad to say) at an upstate college, where I spent two of the happiest years of my life in a Jesuit community that sallied forth confident it had a secure home to return to. (When I returned there after graduate studies in 1970, the wave of disillusion had reached them, too, and the community appeared stricken, at sea, and reduced to talking about the weather.) Outwardly stable, no one realized how brittle the institution was – that it could be shattered by a question, almost any question. Well, my age cohort had almost nothing but questions. Pope John XXIII's Vatican II and a vigorous new Jesuit General, Pedro Arrupe, arrived in the nick of time, bringing a new lease on life.

3. Rekindling the fire

I keep coming back to the above memories as one searching through the ashes of a nearly extinguished fire – that fire that once lit a young man's life and propelled it forward into the unknown. Is there an ember there – below my cynicism, beneath the anger, the live coal of a great vision that all but vanished once? As one Jesuit friend recently put it, for the last two decades, we have been seeking to 'rejoin the Society'.

Most of us who stayed know something of what it means to return from the dead. You do not do that alone. So let me say something about my sex life (though indirectly, I have been doing that all along). I love

men. I love women. Both genders have been known to 'turn me on'. Good. I shall always be grateful to one gay Jesuit brother (now dead) for the way his face lit up when I wearily walked into dinner at the end of each day. Daily, I knew I was loved.

Relations with women have been an equal grace, but more troubling. When I moved from the seminary to teach in 1962, the sexual revolution launched by the Pill was already heating up, and in that year Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique* had just hit the bookstores. Ever since, I have had to deal with the polymorphous sexuality of our culture, and with a rising feminist consciousness among my women friends.

As a new-minted priest in 1967, I was swept up in the anti-war movement, and quite the most quickening part of the New Catholic Left at the time was its free flow of hugs, open affection and dancing long into the night. (The Marxist New Left, being puritanical, did not party as we did.) The new sexual freedom, and the 'third way' – clerics with steady girlfriends – were also common in these circles. Many of us were acting out, defying our Jansenistic past, or simply groping to re-establish our manhood. For a year or so, I joined the trend. The relationship demystified sex for me. Women are peculiar: it is not performance that counts, but being held, listened to, respected, cherished. I could and did offer those things, but my deepest commitments, I discovered, lay elsewhere, with what I had begun. In my limited experience (it would fit on a postage stamp), sex has clarified where my heart lies, much as the fear of being hanged concentrates the mind.[2]

To be celibate, as I live it, is a kind of free-trade agreement between me and my public, between me and the people I promised to serve. Whenever I am tempted to renege, I remember their trust that I mean it, that I will stand by my promise, even as they must keep their promises. What's the trade? They get top service, whereas I receive, well, simply the emotional support to keep going. Is the support always there? No, it's not.

Once upon a time, most of my close women friends consented to the above compact. Good huggers, intense talkers – and usually old-time Catholics besides – they honoured the usually unspoken boundaries, the limits of my 'touchability'. In the last decade, matters have changed; I am no longer off-limits as a candidate for an affair or marriage. For one thing, to an increasing number of people, clerical celibacy appears to be a species of false transcendence. It looks like the ultimate male delusion – a bid to escape from the constraints of nature and the feminine. For a second, many see celibacy as a control mechanism, a way of keeping foot soldiers in line, wholly dependent on the ecclesiastical reward system for

status and prestige. Celibacy, in other words, has the witness value of a prisoner's stripes. What this means in the concrete is that I spend an inordinate amount of time these days saying no – to generous offers of liberation from my chains. Nice to be wanted, of course – but inwardly I'm saying to myself: Why can't a woman be more like a man, content with that closeness-in-distance that is the hallmark of fraternities like mine? (And why don't women ever have their money ready at the supermarket check-out?)

The road to the distinctions I want to draw is rocky. I have never been confident I would make a good husband. At this point I am probably over-attached as well to a bachelor's set habits of solitude and freedom. Yet I feel that my ability to stretch, to take risks, to tell the truth, to reach beyond myself, depends upon my feminine soulfulness, the memory of my mother's embrace, and the warmth and encouragement of the women currently in my life. I can't do without women, can't even be sanely celibate without them. (Yes, I depend on male friends equally, but in a different way.) But today, I sometimes find myself charged with 'using' a woman and 'giving mixed signals'. I want it both ways, I am told – to preserve my virginal status in the clerical club and to get a lot of emotional massage free of charge. Without either giving or receiving *fully*. That's the point. I am accused of setting limits that are seen as a denial of the embodied nature of love. (The issue gets theological!) And since it is always me that sets the limits, the relationship is not egalitarian, but subtly hierarchical. Still a power relation. Underneath such recrimination lies the demand: Be a mensch! The tacit judgement is that I have chosen, sadly, to remain a very incomplete sort of man.

So be it, I respond (feeling wronged). One can't have everything. I find I've chosen something whole and good – and aim to stand by it (even if it costs me this friend). The impasse, of course, is complicated by the perception that the hierarchical system of the Church and its reliance on an exclusively male clergy – of which I am a part – hinges on gender segregation and the subordination of women. This allegation could be put to rest if only the Holy See would appoint a few women cardinals! Or come up with a credible, non-sexist reason for not ordaining women.

In any case, the therapeutic norm has not triumphed with me. Human relationships are not everything. I have learned to pray. For even after Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* chartered new meaning for my life, and the Society took care of some of my competency problems by sending me off for an advanced degree, there were times of utter darkness that reduced me to my knees (never a bad thing for a Jesuit). In the early 1970s, I turned East and eventually to that smorgasbord of

spiritual technology, California. Buddhists taught me how to pray out of nothingness. Yogis taught me the importance of breathing. A Jewish psychologist got me to pray with my imagination. The result: in 1977, when I did the Spiritual Exercises for a second time, they turned out to be an intense delight – so much so that at the end of the First Week, I had to ask my director if having so much fun wasn't a sign that I was off track. He said not. I carry that wellspring of blessing with me to this day. The Holy Spirit is better than sex. (It is not, of course, a question of either/or, as I know well enough from the life my 'heathen' parents lived.)

Do I think for a minute that we Jesuits have resolved the crisis of confidence that first surfaced in the early 1960s, and are now meeting the challenge to the gospel in the First World? Not on your life. We have made real progress. The collision between the culture of *Romanitá* and the first wave of culturally assimilated Americans is a thing of the past. We have conferenced ourselves nearly to exhaustion; the number of white papers on the 'social context of our ministries' must stretch a mile high. Authority is not assumed but earned. We are at once more professional and more modest about what we do and, given the shrinking numbers, can do. We talk to each other (and across generations) with comparative ease these days. The company – Hopkins' Jacks, jokes, poor potsherds – is fine. I am probably as happy as any man has a right to be. The embers glow.

But it is far easier to see what 'a man for others' and 'faith that does justice' mean in Nairobi and San Salvador than in London and New York. Here at home, we are still defining the specific nature of the 'emergency' we are in, and groping for active roles to play in response. In short, the call of Christ in a US context still has the feel of an abstraction. So long as it does, I will remain uncertain that my erotic energy is well spent – and will probably give those mixed signals to women that I am inclined to deny.

NOTES

[1] See John Courtney Murray, 'The danger of the vows: an encounter with earth, woman, and spirit', *Woodstock Letters*, 96 (fall 1967), pp 421–7, esp. 424.

[2] Although sex and death are normally conceived of as opposites, they are not – in so far as both involve a letting go of ego-control as a condition for a rebirth into joy and/or glory.