

6. Ancestral Voices

Deacon John Corsair swung closed the heavy doors of Cardinal Donnelly's study, then walked across the oriental carpets that lead from the entrance to the Cardinal's oversized mahogany desk. The Cardinal was sitting back with his eyes closed, his hands seemed to be folded on his lap, and Corsair knew better than to disturb him. He might have appeared to have been asleep to a stranger happening into the room; but Corsair knew his master was deep in contemplation, perhaps in communion with the Almighty. Far from being annoyed over having to await the Cardinal's pleasure, Corsair was pleased to be present on such an occasion. He remembered Jesus' words to his disciples, in John, chapter 12, verse 8, reminding them of how brief was their opportunity to render him a service, "but me ye have not always"—meaning he would soon be taken from them. So Corsair stood, and waited. And as he waited, he thought.

Mary Magdalene, St. John related, had been rubbing Jesus' feet with ointment of spikenard. The ointment was, Corsair knew from his Bible studies, a pale yellow, viscous oil, pressed from a plant native to northern India and China, with a warm, misty, heavy aroma, used by wealthy Roman women in perfumes and beauty preparations. It was said to have rejuvenating and calmative effects. In St. John's story, Judas had rebuked her for not selling the ointment and giving the money to the poor! But Jesus had sprung to her defense. And, as it was not wrong for the Savior, so it was not wrong for the Messenger of God, as the Cardinal styled himself, to have his path eased by all the material comforts this life of suffering could afford. Corsair suddenly felt a burst of love for the Cardinal and pride in serving him. Let others, in the tradition of resentful Judas, whisper about the Cardinal's opulent life, his magnificent townhouse, his country estates, his private jets, his dining rooms that were furnished with Queen Anne sterling flatware and rare porcelain from the dynasties of China. Was it not a sign of God's grace that

His Eminence should be so favored? Was it not yet another testimony to the greatness of a man whose good works, including his numerous munificent charities, could only be blessed and admired?

Corsair, watching Donnelly lovingly, thought back to his first days in Donnelly's service, ten years before. Donnelly was a Bishop then, and, in addition to his reputation as brilliant scholar, was gaining fame as a firebrand, an activist, as a man clearly destined to become a rising star in the celestial hierarchy of the Church.

Corsair, who was just graduating from Princeton, having attended on a full scholarship, had walked beside Bishop Donnelly in Boston Commons, on a fine May morning, when the lawns and trees were green and the breezes were fresh and cool. Corsair and Donnelly strolled past the thickly planted banks of flowers and small statuaries of historic city notables, as Donnelly lead them to his favorite bench, by the duck pond, under a large overhanging willow tree.

"John, we all of us have times when we have to make choices," Donnelly had begun, getting right to the point, "choices that are going to shape our lives all the way down the line, from here on out." He had paused, bent down, picked up a pebble, and chucked it in the water, watching the concentric ripples expand and die away.

"I know you lost your parents, John," Donnelly had continued. "Right now, you're wondering what to do with your life. Am I right?"

"You're right, sir," answered Corsair. "I don't know what to do. My father wanted me to go into the military, like him. My mother, well, she was kinda religious, Bishop, you know that. And she never liked dad's profession."

“John,” said Donnelly, “your parents were both good people. Sometimes good people see things in different ways. There’s a lesson here. Because, when it comes to Salvation, we can’t afford to see things in different ways. We have to see the Truth, or we’re lost, doomed to Hellfire. That’s why we must embrace the one, true Church. There isn’t room in God’s plan for well-meaning, but divergent, approaches to Heaven. But, as I was saying, your parents, who were good parents, had certain differences of opinion—not about Salvation, they were honest, God-fearing Christians!—but about other things in life, as good people often do. But they had one thing in common. They both loved you, and they wanted the best for you. And they wanted you to have a life that you would be proud of and that you would find fulfilling. I know they wanted that for you.”

“Yes,” said John quietly, “I guess, yes, they wanted that....”

“I asked you to meet me here today because I want to offer you a job,” Donnelly said. “It’s more than a job, really. It’s a vocation, a way of life. I want you to come with me, to sign on with me to go with me on my path. I’ve seen your record at college and have followed your performance as an intern in our summer program last year. Your work is impressive. Your character is impressive. You’re a gifted, serious young man within the faith. I’ve meditated on this matter, and I’ve been inspired to give you the Call.”

“The ‘Call?’” said Corsair.

“When a man or woman is summoned by God to do His work,” explained Donnelly, “he is said to have received the Call.”

“But I’m not in the clergy, sir!” protested Corsair. “Are you saying I should enter the seminary and take the vows of a priest?”

“There are many ways to serve God,” said Donnelly. “I command an army of cowed soldiers for Christ. But in the years to come, God will require servants to do his work outside of the ministry. I’m asking you to become the Director of Executive Services for the Boston Diocese. It’s an important position. You’ll report directly to me and be responsible for administering all of the activities of the diocese outside of strictly religious observances. You’ll have an annual budget of over twenty-million dollars, to start with, and you’ll supervise a committee of seven people who are each in charge of various departments.” Donnelly paused to allow Corsair to take in the import of his words. “Well, John, what do you say? How does my proposition sound to you?”

Corsair was stunned. He had held jobs during summer breaks from college, including his most recent, an internship with The Hand of God Urban Outreach Program. But he had never supervised other people, much less administered a multi-million dollar budget!

“I, uh, don’t know what to say,” Corsair finally answered. “Are you sure you have the right man in mind? I mean, with all respect to you, sir, and not meaning to put myself down, either, but do I have the experience to handle a job like that?”

“Ha yad adonai tiktzar?” asked Donnelly. “‘Is the Hand of God short?’ That’s what God answers Moses when he questions the practicality of God’s choice of him as the man to lead the escape of the Hebrews from enslavement in Egypt. Do you understand my point? You’ve been chosen for this job. Should we doubt that God can enable you make a success of it?”

Donnelly stopped talking and looked around the park.

“You see all the living things growing in this park?” he asked Corsair. “Each began from a seed, or root, or bulb, and grew towards its final flowering, its telos, a word I know you know from your studies of ancient Greek. God has revealed your telos to me, to stand tall as a man of

great importance within the Church. You have only begun to unfold and to reveal your powers, but every sign suggests the truth to come. You have a pure heart, my boy, a powerful mind, and, most precious of all, you have the faith that can move mountains.”

“I, I still don’t know what to say!” said Corsair. “You’re talking about my faith. But, I have to be honest! I do have faith, Your Grace. But I have doubts as well. I’m sorry. But it’s true.”

“Again,” said Donnelly, “you only prove my words. You cannot help but speak the truth. We all live with doubts, from time to time. That is the fate of fallen man. It is the glory of our faith to triumph over them. If you take this job, I will always be with you, to help counsel you in your faith.” Donnelly paused again. “Think it over. You don’t have to decide today. And, yes, I didn’t mention the compensation. You’ll start at \$175,000 a year. Later, you can expect to earn considerably more.”

Had he heard correctly? \$175,000 a year, to start! Corsair didn’t need more time think about that offer!

“Sir,” he answered, “if you’re confident that I’m the right man for the job, then I’d like to accept right now. Just tell me when and where I report! And thanks for the best opportunity I’ve ever had in my life!”

“Don’t thank me,” said Donnelly, “thank God! You can report to the Diocese tomorrow morning at nine. Ask for my office.”

And that had been how it all began.

Corsair was still standing in his reverie, when he noticed Donnelly open his eyes.

“John!” Donnelly exclaimed. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long!”

“No, Your Eminence,” answered Corsair.

“Did you know there are sometimes quarrels in Heaven?” Donnelly asked, smiling a benign, benevolent smile. “Oh, they’re not like Earthly squabbles over possession of power or gold or women. They’re disputes about the interpretation of destiny. God doesn’t always show his face, even there.”

Donnelly paused and stretched.

“I listened to one of those quarrels just now,” he continued. “You’ll be interested to know, it concerned our plans.”

Corsair froze, paralyzed by the awesome fact that he was in the presence of a man who communed with the saints and angels above.

“But enough of that for now,” concluded Donnelly. “Please, give me your report.”

“Paradise is on schedule,” replied Corsair, snapping, in a heartbeat, from his posture as adoring acolyte, into his commonplace role as efficient administrator. “Dr. Voorhees promises to have the vectors ready for duplication within a week.”

Corsair did not know what the “vectors” were, much less what their duplication might signify. It was one of his gifts not to be curious. He trusted the Cardinal implicitly, and, therefore, took it for granted that he would be told whatever he needed to know whenever he needed to know it. Right now, he knew only that the Paradise Project was the most important undertaking Cardinal Donnelly had attempted in all his years in the Church.

Donnelly appeared to be thinking and said nothing.

“Call a meeting of the Manus Dei Council,” he finally said. “I want everyone here by tomorrow at noon. We’ll meet in my private chapel.”

“Very good, Your Eminence,” replied Corsair. “I’d better get the word out at once. Some of them will have to fly in from abroad, as you know.”

When Donnelly was alone again, he thought back over his recent visions. It was not only a quarrel in Heaven that he had seen, but also an apparition of a forbearer from the turn of the nineteenth century, Father Ambrose Thaddeus Donnelly, a third son of the Donnelly clan, who had also been slated to take the priestly vows.

“The time has come, Peter,” Father Ambrose, who had appeared elderly but hale, had told him. “Now, you shall strike a blow that shall be felt around the world! Be unafraid in your faith! For no Pope, no Prince, no army of this world, shall prevail against you!”

And then there was another, a shadowy vision, of a figure from a still more remote past, someone from a thousand years, or even two thousand years ago, that had not stepped into the light.

“I am your first true ancestor,” the tall shadow man said, “I was born to be a king. The time has come. You’ll wield the sword—are you not manus dei, the hand of God?”

Donnelly remembered Coleridge’s line, “Ancestral voices prophesying war!” He knew those voices prophesied for him. And he knew that he was ready.

