

## INTRODUCTION

**T***he Collar* had its birth on a rainy autumn evening somewhere between Columbia University's main library and its journalism school. It was the direct product of a plea for vocations at Mass by a seminarian of the Archdiocese of New York and the indirect product of a profound conversion experience in my own life that had seen me move from curmudgeonly agnosticism to the Roman Catholic Church in the space of two years.

The question as I posed it to myself that evening was "Why would a man become a priest today?" As a single Catholic man, acutely aware of the shortage of priests, the question was both personal and universal. Could I imagine becoming a priest and embracing the rigors and sacrifice of religious life? What kind of man would? What was this "calling" that people spoke about? Was it even a question of a calling at all, or was it a conscious decision, even a sense of obligation, to make a commitment at a moment in history that seemed to demand it?

*The Collar* was born of such questions and never really departed from them. What began with musing and personal reflection soon tidied itself up into a viable journalistic exercise. The initial idea — one that promised a compelling nonfiction narrative with a strong dramatic backbone — was to follow two seminarians through a year

or two of seminary. One man would continue on to ordination; the other would not. Their stories would serve as a springboard that would enable me to describe seminary life and education in detail. There had been plenty of books — both liberal and conservative, published by the usual party organs — that dealt with the priesthood and seminaries, but none without a distinct agenda and some hypothesis to be inevitably proven in its pages. My premise was simply to write as clear a story as I could about two men who believed they had a calling and acted on it. Early on, I remember Father Benedict Groeschel, the cofounder of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, cautioning me to avoid mere anecdote. This is good advice in general but would have been more applicable if I had been conducting a study and attempting to capture every hill and divot of the American seminary system. That was never my aim.

Over time and many visits to seminaries and seminarians, the idea was refined into a richer concept. The cast of characters expanded, as did the scope, and many of my initial assumptions — both conscious and subconscious — were set aside.

One assumption in particular was not only set aside but firmly and painfully put down. I knew that there would be some reluctance on the part of institutions and individuals to be open to this kind of fly-on-the-wall observation. But I had naively hoped that my larger sense of purpose and commitment in telling what I believed — based on my extensive initial reportage — promised a positive and even inspiring story that Church officials, presumably interested in increasing the number of priests, would embrace. I was wrong.

The book took almost three years to research and report because of access extended and then revoked by two different dioceses. Such obstacles composed a neat parallel to the sexual abuse scandal that enveloped the Church halfway through this process. Each revocation seemed to encompass the same cowardice, lack of accountability, and mere stupidity that plagued the most offending parts of the Church hierarchy during this period. This version of the Church that I encountered (thankfully, not Roman Catholicism's only version)

was Church as risk-averse corporate monolith. I found it terribly sad and disillusioning. It was sad because I had met well-intentioned, intelligent men who wanted to share with others what they saw as their liberating and enlightened choice to pursue the priesthood.

The first setback occurred after only four months and was easier to accept than the second, which occurred after more than a year. By that time, I was much deeper into the stories and lives of the seminarians. Although the reasons for my losing access have never been entirely clear, they seem related to a coinciding change in leadership and the effects of the sexual abuse scandal, which began to claim priests within the diocese. I will never forget how, one by one, the seminarians dropped away. First it was phone calls that went unreturned, then visits that were planned but canceled at the last minute, and finally the honest admission by one man, visibly chafing at the restriction, that he had been told in no uncertain terms not to talk to me and advised by others that it was better not to risk saying anything until he was ordained.

While access eroded, I was getting the cheery “You’re certainly welcome in our diocese” treatment from the vocation director. Frustrated and sensing I had nothing to lose, I finally pushed the envelope of my supposed access, only to find myself being awkwardly asked to leave a dinner to which I had come with several seminarians. We’ll be speaking soon, I was told, as they showed me the door. A year or so before, a prominent Catholic writer had expressed interest in the book’s aspirations but doubt about whether it could ever be reported. Now it seemed that he was being proven right.

I did not want to write another book critical of the Church. There had been enough of those, even before the sexual abuse scandal. And although I did not pretend to be objective (if such a state exists among writers), I certainly could not set about fashioning a saccharine vocation story. I believe that a committed priest can do an extraordinary amount of good in the world. But I also know that a vocation, as is the case of all religious experience, is rooted in the reality of the human condition and often emerges from a jarring,

uneven road. Some of the stories I wanted to tell would have more in common with Saint Augustine and Thomas Merton, especially as witnessed by his *Seven Storey Mountain*, than the pabulum of the diocesan newsletter. The individual spiritual life also is a metaphor for the life of the Church, flailing at perfection, often well-intentioned, sometimes not. *The Collar* had to reflect these things, or it would be better left unwritten.

Yet two closed doors did not mean the end of the project. Fortunately, the Church is not ruled absolutely by “Vatican central.” Although the Vatican exerts a sort of federal power over the dioceses, canon law, the law of the Church, dictates that much power rests with each bishop. Moreover, religious orders, although they might be bound to a diocese and its bishop, typically are outside local authority. The Sacred Heart School of Theology, where I eventually ended up, trains priests for many dioceses but is run by a religious order called the Priests of the Sacred Heart.

I first learned about Sacred Heart one night while I was sitting in the bar of a French bistro in Manhattan’s theater district. I started talking with an actor who was finishing a plate of steak and *pommes frites*. I told him about the book, and he insisted that I speak with a priest friend of his who taught homiletics, the art of delivering homilies, at a Catholic seminary in the Midwest. He happened to be in town, and I reluctantly agreed to meet him. Father Andre Papineau was entertaining and insightful, but since his seminary was in Milwaukee, it seemed unlikely that we would meet again. At the time, I had no idea that I would lose my access to my second diocese.

A few months later, the unlikely became a reality. The moment I arrived at Sacred Heart, I had a strange and comforting sense of coming home. The contrast between the Byzantine pall that hung over many of the dioceses of the northeastern United States and the openness at Sacred Heart was dramatic. Fortunately, however, the question of vocation and the process of formation were roughly the same, the latter thanks to the uniformity imposed by the bishop-promulgated “process of priestly formation,” which sets the norms for the education of priests in the United States.

At our first meeting, the rector, Father James Brackin, grasped the aim and scope of the book immediately and gave me unprecedented access to every dimension of seminary life. He never wavered during the following year. In addition to having the run of the place, I was allowed to attend faculty and board meetings, and more than once I was alerted to unflattering issues and events that might have effectively been concealed. The access was so straightforward and generous that I would need twenty books to capture the seminary in its entirety.

*The Collar* is an attempt to tell a story of meaning about a seminary and several different men at different points in their priestly formation. The story is both specific to a particular time and place and universal. Sacred Heart is the largest seminary in the United States for second-career, or delayed, vocations. Many of its men have had other careers and families; all of them have lived radically different lives than the one they have currently chosen. Some of them are young, and others are old. *The Collar* follows them through a single year in which two men will leave the seminary, one by choice and the other not; two men will continue on to the next year; and one man will be ordained a priest. It tells the story of a supportive community that fosters the making of priests but also of the limits of this community in a very individual quest. It brings the reader into the classroom with the seminarians; wrestles with questions of theology, Scripture, and celibacy; and delves into the internal world of each man as he judges the meaning of his own calling against the external reality of daily life and what is being required of him in this new life. *The Collar* is a story of redemption and spiritual discovery in the context of both the exigencies of the Catholic Church and the often conflicting values of contemporary society.