Laws of Heaven

Books by Michael Gallagher

Bombs and Ginko Leaves
Laws of Heaven

Books Translated by Michael Gallagher

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LAWS *of* HEAVEN

Catholic Activists Today

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Laws of Heaven
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To Rosemary, Maureen, Julie, and Kevin

You will remember what things I suffer and at
what men's hands because I would not
transgress the laws of heaven.
— *Antigone's final words*

We must obey God rather than men.
— *Acts of the Apostles 5:13*

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Laws of Heaven

Would Jesus Run for Congress?

Christians like to think that Christianity has civilized politics, whatever that might mean. If it has, the price has been a heavy one. For politics, in its turn, from the days of Constantine to the days of George Bush, has taken its toll of Christianity. Politicians, secular and ecclesiastic, have tried their best to diminish Christianity to a creed that knows its place, to a piety that never, never gets in the way.

Unfortunately for politicians, however, the real thing seems to be still at large, dangerous and unpredictable, ready to strike without warning to the discomfiture of many in high places, Rome included.

Oddly enough, outrageously enough, people still believe. They believe even though faith is a terribly troublesome thing. Faith, real faith, is something quite different from an allegiance to a church or party. The latter is all too often a once-for-all commitment that relieves you forever after of the need to think for yourself and act on your own — no matter how far your church or party strays from its professed ideals, no matter how willing it becomes to go along in order to get along. Faith, on the contrary, spares the believer nothing, and wherever it appears — and it appears in the most unexpected places — it presents a clear and present danger to the status quo. Even a touch of real faith makes difficult, perhaps impossible, what we persist in calling normal life. So it was when Jesus nodded to James and John on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and they got up and left their father and his hired men to finish mending the net. And so is it now. Not least of all here in the United States in the past decade, the focus of my story.

On December 2, 1980, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan, four American churchwomen who had been working with

selfless dedication for the poor and oppressed peasants of war-ravaged El Salvador, were sexually assaulted and murdered by soldiers of the National Guard, and their bodies were thrown into a single unmarked grave beside a lonely road. Salvadoran soil was already soaked with innocent blood, but this time there was a difference. This was innocent North American blood.

In May of 1983, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter on modern war, "The Challenge of Peace," a document that, despite its waffling in the end, expressed grave misgivings about the morality of nuclear deterrence, the cornerstone of American defense policy.

Two quite diverse events. But together with two others no less diverse of the decade previous — the Vietnam War and the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision striking down anti-abortion laws — they have had a profound effect on the Catholic Church in the United States, giving rise to a transformation, however halting and incomplete, that might yet leave its mark on a secular history that would prefer to ignore the role of faith.

All four of these events were signs of contradiction, something that has but intensified their impact. For those who had eyes to see, everything was changed, utterly changed, and if a terrible beauty wasn't born, it was, I think, conceived.

The relatives of the El Salvador victims were shocked and appalled by the brusque lack of concern shown by most American officials, including fellow Catholics. Secretary of State Alexander Haig, a Catholic who would later be elevated to the dignity of a Papal Knight of Malta, declared in the course of some exceptionally convoluted testimony before a congressional committee that the women may have tried to run a roadblock and died in an "exchange of fire" — this after Haig had in hand FBI evidence that showed that each woman had been shot through the head at close range.

Nor did the words of our ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, sit well with those who mourned. Although she was a member of the faculty of a renowned university that not only was Catholic but, exquisite irony, was run by a Jesuit order that had recently lost three priests to savage repression in Latin America — one in El Salvador itself, two after prolonged torture and mutilation — Madame Ambassador nonetheless insisted in her precise, meant-to-daunt fashion that one should bear in mind that the victims were not really missionaries but "political activists."

Her arrogance miscarried. Bereaved mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers don't take kindly to the insinuation that their beloved dead were outside agitators who deserved what they got, whether it comes from the mouth of a semiliterate Klansman or a lady with impeccable academic credentials.

The peace pastoral, for its part, drove onto the rocks the perfect marriage between Cross and Flag over whose consummation churchmen such as Francis Cardinal Spellman had presided with such pious glee — the kind of patriotism caught in purest form by an unforgettable news photo from Vietnam showing the cardinal seated behind a machine gun, his pudgy hands on the stock, as he declared, "My country right or wrong," a theological opinion derived not from Aquinas or Augustine but from Stephen Decatur, the hero of one of our first small wars.

Many American Catholics, strongly affected by one or more of these signs of contradiction, began to realize that they couldn't be uncritical patriots and true to the demands of their faith. This book tells the stories of some of them. Politics figures prominently in it, but it's not really about politics per se. It's about faith. I happen to find the latter even more fascinating than the former.

Finally — this is fair warning — the book is also about me in a sense. My admiration for the people I'm writing about is not a detached admiration. What they represent, each in his or her own way, challenges me. Telling their stories in this manner represents my attempt to come to grips with a question that has troubled me most of my life, a disturbing question that leads to a host of other questions.

What does it mean to be a Christian in the United States of America in the latter part of the twentieth century? How do you live an essentially simple faith in an essentially complex society that is part of a still more complex world? How, especially, when a variety of evils of unprecedented dimension threatens both society and world? How, especially, when not only outright unbelievers but even many of those who retain some attachment to Christianity reject, however wistfully, its supernatural claims?

Each of those whom I write about — from shy, soft-spoken Joan Andrews, who spent three years in solitary confinement rather than acknowledge the state of Florida's right to imprison her for anti-abortion activism, to born leader of men Charles Liteky, who laid down his Medal of Honor before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and went on a water-only fast of forty-nine days to protest aid to the Contras — represents an intensely personal answer to these questions.

Each, finally, as I have good reason to know, is quite formidable in his or her own way. As the Duke of Wellington said of his soldiers: "I don't know what they do to the enemy, but they terrify me."

The Rebel Priest

Bob Begin

It was a hot and humid August afternoon, the kind that the climate of Cleveland lavishly affords. I got out of my station wagon with its New Jersey plates and began to walk along Clinton Street, a street of old frame houses. It was narrow and lined on both sides with parked cars, many of them the ancient gas guzzlers that allow the poor to make a major contribution to our economy. There was still a touch of grace to Clinton Street, however. It was lined with trees as well as cars, large, leafy trees, not the scrawny, doomed saplings of most inner-city neighborhoods.

I had an appointment with a priest named Bob Begin at the West Side Ecumenical Ministry, which occupied one of Clinton Street's frame houses.

It was an odd sensation to be walking along Clinton Street, odd but somehow reassuring. I had in my time been a harvest hand in South Dakota, a paratrooper in Korea, a Jesuit high school teacher in Cincinnati, a day laborer in Osaka, an instructor in English at Tokyo University, a translator of Japanese novels, a movie critic, and, most recently, a moral theologian of sorts. Now this afternoon, rather late in life this time, I was again starting something new. But since I was beginning with Begin, I was starting on a street whose name was so familiar to me that I couldn't remember when I first heard it.

Two or three generations earlier, Clinton Street had been a middle-class Irish neighborhood. The children of the impoverished refugees from the Potato Famine who had settled in the Flats and on the slopes overlooking the Cuyahoga River three miles to the east aspired to Clinton Street and, if they prospered, often moved here. The transition was from St. Malachi's

Parish to St. Patrick's on Bridge, from shanty Irish to lace curtain.

My grandfather and namesake was one of those who made it. Despite being but a generation removed from the Great Hunger and the peat bogs of Mayo, he became a coal company executive and a Republican, and, at the turn of the century, he built a good-sized house on Clinton Street for his wife and four children. And though he hadn't gone to high school, he used to close the door of his study at night, according to family lore, and recite Shakespeare.

In 1900, my father at ten was the oldest of my grandfather's children. Aunt Helen, who became an Ursuline nun, was the youngest, and all her life she would remember being remembered as the new baby in the new house in the new century. A fifth child, Stewart, named for the Protestant president of the coal company, was born on Clinton Street in 1901. Prosperity turned out to be fleeting, however. Panics were frequent when laissez-faire was in flower, but, whatever the cause, by the time my father disgraced the family in 1917 by joining the Cleveland Fire Department, my grandfather was dead and the money and the house were gone. Four years later, the brilliant Stewart, who might have restored the family's fortunes, drowned in the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. He was visiting his brother Jim, a Jesuit seminarian who, to his lifelong regret, persuaded Stewart, tired from the long train ride from Cleveland, to go for a swim.

Begin's father was also a fireman, and we had some other things in common, though the size of our families wasn't one of them. I had been an only child. Bob Begin, born in 1938, eight years after me, was one of twelve children. He grew up on the far western edge of Cleveland in St. Patrick's Parish, called St. Patrick's West Park to distinguish it from the other St. Patrick's, several miles to the east. West Park was and still is a pleasant residential neighborhood of single houses with almost nothing in the way of commercial buildings or apartments, more like a suburb than a part of the city.

I remembered it fondly. My mother and father rented a house on Elsienna, which was just a few blocks from Larchwood, Begin's street. It had a big front porch, and I sat out on it on sunny days one Depression-era spring while recuperating from diphtheria.

My stay in West Park and Bob Begin's overlapped by only a year. In the fateful month of August 1939, when I was going into fourth grade and he was just a year old, my family moved to East Cleveland.

Begin's path and mine wouldn't cross for more than thirty years, but when, home on a visit to my parents in January of 1969, I picked up *The Plain Dealer* one morning to see a picture of two young priests being

arrested for staging an antiwar Mass at St. John's Cathedral, the story was of special interest because one of the priests was named Begin. Begin being so uncommon a name, I concluded at once that the young priest must be Chief Begin's son.

When Begin and I did meet in 1972 at the home of a close friend who taught at John Carroll, the local Jesuit university, we didn't hit it off famously. Begin, very much the rebel priest, was full of hotly expressed idealism, and I, on the brink of middle age, found his certainty and self-righteousness grating. But Bob Begin had mellowed over the years, my brother and sister-in-law had assured me, moderating his indignation enough to become a consultant to the Junior League.

My grandfather's house still stood this sultry August afternoon a few blocks east of the West Side Ecumenical Ministry, but once genteel Clinton Street was now part of the inner city, an ominous designation born of our era, and it was home to Hispanics, blacks, Appalachian whites, Palestinians, Gypsies, and Cambodians. New and more turbulent sorrows had come to displace the old, and Bob Begin lived in the midst of them.

He shook my hand warmly, congratulating me once again, as he had on the phone, on Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen's having quoted extensively from an article of mine on nuclear deterrence in his speech at the Pax Christi convention in Chicago the previous week. Begin's photo had just appeared on the front page of an alternative paper below a headline reading, inevitably, THE REBEL PRIEST. The photo had shown a weathered face quite different from that of the man I had met twenty years before, and the likeness was an accurate one. I had remembered his expression as petulant, but now he looked like a more rugged Van Heflin, and the smile, warm but tinged with what could be irony, hardly recalled the humorless zealot who had rubbed me the wrong way. When I mentioned Philip Berrigan in passing, I saw I had been right in detecting irony in Begin's cover photo smile. "Phil gives me a call once in a while," he said, with a laugh, "and wants to know when I'm going to stop spinning my wheels here."

Despite the mordant irony, despite the self-mockery, his intensity seemed as strong as ever. His frequent laugh was loud, and it had a harsh edge. "Hickey," said Begin, referring to His Eminence Cardinal James Hickey of Washington, who as bishop of Cleveland had reinstated him in the diocese after he had been suspended from the priesthood, "is about as liberal as an ambitious man can be. Saul Alinsky once met with some priests who said that they wanted to organize. He told them that all he wanted at the second

meeting were those who didn't want to become bishops." Another loud laugh. "There was no second meeting."

Our experiences at St. Patrick's grade school turned out to have had a significant difference. I had had the Ursuline nuns as teachers, Aunt Helen's order. The brutal rape and murder of Sister Dorothy Kazel in El Salvador, an epochal event, was far in the future. Like Begin, Dorothy Kazel was only a baby in 1939, the delight of her parents, no doubt, in a Lithuanian neighborhood on the near East Side. So despite the martyrdom of their patron, St. Ursula, at the hands of the Goths — according to pious legend no less than ten thousand other virgins perished with her — there was no air of danger and risk about the Ursulines I knew. No one dreamed, it seemed, that what had happened long ages past could happen again. Even on a more modest scale, not with ten thousand companions but just three.

The Ursulines were gone by the time Bob Begin entered St. Patrick's at the end of World War II, and in their place were the Incarnate Word nuns, an Irish order thrown out of Mexico. Being Irish-Irish, with a sense of history shared at best only imperfectly by Irish-Americans, and refugees from government-directed persecution, the Incarnate Word sisters had considerably less trust in Caesar than had the Ursulines. They were willing to render him his due, but they weren't inclined to give him an unlimited line of credit.

"One of them," said Begin, "had actually saved the Host from the tabernacle during an anticlerical outbreak." How astonished, I thought, would Begin's detractors be, conservative Catholics that they were, to hear him relate with such enthusiasm the kind of story that had stirred hearts long ago in parochial school classrooms all over America. Begin's corollary, however, would have confirmed their worst fears: "Living in Mexico, they knew all about civil disobedience, though nobody called it that at the time. I remember distinctly my third grade teacher, Sr. Fidelis. You know what she said? Do what you should do no matter what the law says. I asked her about it years later. She said: 'Yes, I probably did teach you that because that's how I looked on rules.' "

Nuns, even in those days, harbored disturbing thoughts, it seemed, thanks perhaps to their being in intimate contact with a messy and unruly world. Vatican officials, on the other hand, the rule makers, were rarely called upon to save the Host from desecration — or to move fast under any circumstances for that matter.

When Begin was in the seventh grade, two Maryknoll priests came to St. Patrick's to talk about vocations. Maryknoll's image in the early fifties was

quite different from what it would be twenty years later. The marriage of Cross and Flag was still a loving, untroubled union. With cold war in Europe and hot war in Korea, Rome and Washington had a common enemy: atheism in arms under the crimson banner of international communism. The Maryknollers, more so than other American religious orders, had suffered much at the hands of Red tyranny. Their many martyrs in China and Korea included two bishops (one of whom, Francis X. Ford, was a cousin of Ita Ford, who would die with Dorothy Kazel on the road to San Pedro Nonualco a generation later), and they had a living martyr in Bishop James Walsh, imprisoned for life in Shanghai for alleged crimes against the people. What could be more inspiring to a red-blooded American Catholic boy?

"The Maryknoll recruiters hooked me good," said Begin. "I was all set to go." There was no need for him to explain his enthusiasm to me. I had felt it too. At twenty-four, however, my feelings had been more complex than Begin's at twelve. Serving Christ as had Paul and Francis Xavier in faraway places, braving dangers by sea and by land, not only represented a far more thrilling challenge than a quiet life in a rectory or school but had struck me as the best way to keep my mind off sex.

Begin's parents weren't enthusiastic about his wanting to join Maryknoll. Having a son a priest was one thing. Having a son a missionary was another. In the first case, you gave up grandchildren. In the second, you gave up your son as well, though, God knows, Begin's parents, unlike my own mother and father, had sons to spare.

His uncle, Floyd Begin, then a monsignor of the diocese of Cleveland and later the bishop of Oakland, felt the same way. More so in fact. He wasn't at all eager to see the diocese lose so promising a candidate, especially one who was his nephew. The joint decision of parents and uncle was that young Robert should enter the diocesan minor seminary and then think again about Maryknoll when he was more mature.

So it was that he entered St. Francis Borromeo Seminary at thirteen, a decision that he characterized as "a real bad mistake." He did not find the seminary curriculum very challenging, either then or later. To escape the prevailing boredom, he turned to literature, making his way through all of O'Neill, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. When he reread many of these works as an adult, he confessed, he came upon ideas that he had thought were of his own creation, a humbling experience. Seven years later, when he was about to begin the four years of theology that led to ordination, he still felt that he had a vocation to the missions, and he wrote a letter to the Maryknoll superior. The response was that Maryknoll would be happy to

accept him but first he had to produce a letter of recommendation from his uncle. "I called them and said: 'Do you ask for a letter of recommendation from everybody's uncle?' 'No,' they said, 'but we want one from yours.' "

The Jesuits wouldn't have shown anything like so tender a regard for the feelings of the local hierarchy, but a small order, even one with Maryknoll's laurels, had to be prudent in dealing with bishops.

Floyd Begin was an auxiliary bishop by that time and the pastor of St. Agnes's Parish on the East Side. Its church was an enormous domed structure that stood on Euclid Avenue at the edge of downtown Cleveland. Since no mortal act is free of some trace of pride and self-interest, churches, whatever the pretense, are never built to honor God alone. Thus St. Agnes's, as late as the forties when I used to ride by it on the streetcar on the way to St. Ignatius High School, stood as the proud symbol of a thriving Catholic community. In the decade following World War II, however, it lost most of its congregation and all of its prosperity. Only its slender bell tower would survive a disastrous fire in the seventies, and today, like Shelley's Ozymandias, it stands as a symbol of quite another sort. The vanity of human endeavor.

When Bishop Begin invited his nephew over for a visit in the late fifties, his parish included one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Cleveland, Hough (as in rough and tough), which would lend its name to one of the major riots of the mid-sixties.

The bishop took the seminarian for a little walk. He let him see the poverty and squalor all around and the boarded-up storefronts. They went into two or three bars. Then when they got back, he said to his nephew: "I'm not going to write your damn letter. What do you want to go to China for? There's plenty of work for a priest right here, right here in Cleveland." Then he said to Begin, reflecting the pride of the era that had formed him: "If we do it right here, everybody will do it right because everybody wants to be like us." It was 1959, some years before the painful realization began to penetrate the American awareness that perhaps we had something to learn, whether from Vietnamese generals, Japanese industrialists, or Latin American theologians.

Begin wrote back to Maryknoll explaining his problem, and they relented to some extent, telling him that they might agree to his joining even without his uncle's letter. He had had enough temporizing by then, however, and he told Maryknoll to forget it. He began his theological studies at the local major seminary, and in 1962 he became a priest of the diocese of Cleveland. Though it hardly seemed so at the time, becoming a diocesan priest rather than a Maryknoller was a fateful decision. Before the end of the decade,

radical priests would become so common among the Maryknollers that even the pious faithful would become used to them. Not so with radical diocesan priests. They would retain a greater power to shock, especially since bishops as a class tend to prize tranquillity and good order above all else.

Begin was assigned to St. Gregory's Parish in South Euclid, an eastern suburb, whose parishioners ranged from blue collar to upper middle class. It was to some extent a white-flight suburb since it bordered on Cleveland Heights and East Cleveland, into which blacks were moving at a rapid rate. My old neighborhood, East Cleveland, in particular, a blue-collar suburb almost surrounded by Cleveland and filled with older and inexpensive single-family houses, was well on its way to becoming entirely black and would one day gain the unfortunate distinction of having the highest poverty rate in Ohio. The climate of South Euclid, then, was not congenial to liberal ideas.

For the first two years at St. Gregory's, Begin was a model priest, doing exactly what was expected of him. But then a classmate of his from the seminary, Len Ferrante, joined the staff of St. Gregory's. Begin had great respect for Ferrante and thought he was very talented. After Ferrante had been at St. Gregory's for about six months, he came to Begin's room one night after midnight and said to him: "I just have to tell you that you're going to grow up and be just like this asshole who's the pastor. You're beginning to be just like him. Treating everybody equally. Not being passionate, not allowing yourself to fall in love with anybody, loving people generically. . . ."

The wisdom of Ferrante's speech, as recounted, impressed me somewhat less than it had Begin. I had been as he had wanted Begin to be, and that's why I was no longer a Jesuit. I asked who the pastor was, and when Begin told me his name, I felt a small stab of pain. I had known the man, a simple, good-natured Irish-American of my father's generation. I had once served his Mass, and he had tried to make conversation afterward in a bluff, awkward way. Somehow he saw fit to convey to his thirteen-year-old altar boy that what he thought about most was bills.

Next a parishioner named Bill Corrigan told Begin that what the parish needed was a discussion group dealing with the documents of the Vatican Council. Begin had read them, Corrigan had read them, but hardly anybody else had.

Begin put Corrigan off, telling him that he would think about it. But then Corrigan came up to him one day and said: "Okay, we're going to have our first meeting. Nine o'clock Friday night." Thus was born the St. Gregory's Discussion Group. They began with five or six couples and

before long Begin, contrary to parish policy, was going out every night.

The group was ecumenical. Begin promised not to try to convert spouses, and everyone enjoyed getting together and exchanging ideas in a relaxed atmosphere. Some of the participants started thinking in terms of how to teach religion to children, and so Sunday school teachers began to come to meetings. A community of about 150 people formed. They went so far as to propose a reorganization of the parish based on Vatican II, but the pastor turned it down.

Then after three or four years, some of the boys Begin had taught in his religion classes began to return from Vietnam. One in particular had come home an emotional and mental wreck. He had been a helicopter gunner; after a napalm attack on a grove of trees or other shelter, the helicopter would swoop down, and it was this boy's job to shoot whoever came out.

Bill Corrigan, who had taken a German bullet in the Battle of the Bulge, asked Begin when he was going to talk about the war in his sermons. "I told him next Sunday. So I did, and he came up to me afterward and said that that was a nice talk about war and how bad it was, but how about the Vietnam War? When was I going to talk about that?" Soon after, Begin did talk about the Vietnam War, but that still wasn't good enough for Corrigan. It wasn't a bad sermon, he told Begin, but when was he going to talk about the Vietnam War and call it the Vietnam War?

Bill Corrigan didn't favor the Pius XII school of circumlocution. In the forties, the *Universe Bulletin,* Cleveland's Catholic paper, had tirelessly hailed Pius XII as the Pope of Peace, but even I, a simple Catholic schoolboy, had my doubts. Why, I wondered, couldn't the pope get down to brass tacks? He was always deploring war, but it was never too clear that he had anything against World War II in particular.

Goaded by Corrigan, Begin did get specific the next Sunday, and people started walking out of church. The Rebel Priest was on his way and discovering, it seemed, that he enjoyed this sort of thing. "One Sunday we had a Mass devoted to forgiveness. During the petitions, I sang out" — he sang — " 'For Ho Chi Min who is seriously ill, let us pray to the Lord,' and instead of the response 'Lord hear us,' a big gasp filled the church." He laughed a harsh, raucous laugh.

Begin also began to preach against racism, a theme that was, if possible, even more volatile, given the racial circumstances of South Euclid. Begin's community formed a committee on suburban human relations. They trained people on how to become active by getting five couples together and showing them movies and giving them tapes to take home. They invited guest speakers such as Philip Berrigan and George Mischi of the Catonsville

Nine, who were able to tell them what those with like concerns were doing elsewhere.

It was an exciting time, said Begin. People would stand up at meetings and make statements. Members of the community that they had formed, which never had a name, went to the draft file-burning trials of both the Catonsville Nine and the Milwaukee Fourteen. Bernie Meyer, a curate in a black parish, started what he was rash enough to call the Catholic Peace Movement and so incurred the displeasure of the bishop of Cleveland, Clarence Issenman. "Issenman was pissed about the 'Catholic' in the name and told him to take it out," said Begin. Peace wasn't an official apostolate of the diocese, said Issenman sternly, betraying no sense of incongruity despite his presumed familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount.

It was 1968, and everybody agreed that something had to be done in Cleveland too. Begin and Meyer intended at first to make a statement at the Christmas midnight Mass at St. John's Cathedral, but since there wasn't enough time to plan it properly, they put their action off a month, selecting one of the midnight Masses held at the Cathedral every Saturday, the so-called printers' Mass. And instead of merely making a statement, they decided to have a Mass of their own, preempting the scheduled one by beginning ten minutes earlier.

Begin and Meyer weren't at all secretive about their intentions, and word soon got around that something was up. When Bishop William Cosgrove, an auxiliary bishop of Cleveland, called Begin and asked him about his plans, Begin answered quite frankly that they were going to have a Mass and read a statement condemning the war and calling for action on racial and social justice issues.

Cosgrove asked Begin not to do it. He was about to get Bishop Issenman to approve a new organization dedicated to social concerns, he said — the Commission on Catholic Community Action. "He told me," said Begin, "that he thought we were going to screw everything up." Begin replied that he didn't think so. In fact, he told him, he and Meyer might give Cosgrove some leverage. Harassed by restive clerics and lay people like Begin and Meyer and their friends, Issenman should be able to see the advantage of being able to hold up the commission as an example of how the diocese of Cleveland really was concerned about social issues and was getting seriously involved.

Cosgrove remained unconvinced. Familiar as he was with the hierarchical mind, he probably knew all too well that bold logic like this was beyond men like Issenman. Holding the line was all they knew. But he told Begin to go ahead and do what he thought he had to do and hung up.

Begin paused in his account, reflecting on what had happened twenty years before. Cosgrove, he said, was probably too much of an Irish Catholic to think of using the Mass in the way that Begin and Meyer intended. "You know, it's a real problem, the balance between compassion and anger. Cosgrove was full of compassion, but he wasn't angry enough to go against the system."

Bishop William Cosgrove, in his mid-fifties at the time, was an intellectual with a deep sense of social concern who was firmly committed to racial justice. He was loved and admired by clergy and laity alike. Rome would pass over him again and again, and when he finally received a see of his own, it would be that of Belleville, Illinois, best known as an affluent suburb of tragic East St. Louis. The bishop of Cleveland in 1969, Clarence Issenman, was an affable, kindly man, but, as was the case with so many of his fellow shepherds, myopic when it came to reading the signs of the times.

On Saturday night, January 25, ten minutes before the midnight printers' Mass was to begin, Begin and Bernie Meyer, in full vestments, entered St. John's Cathedral at East 9th and Superior through its massive front door and walked up the center aisle in procession with a dozen or so of their supporters. More were in the congregation. The conspirators were confident they would be able to carry out their plan without any major confrontation. True, they had seen several police cars on their way to the cathedral, but they thought that once they had started the Mass, no one would dare interrupt them.

About five minutes after they had begun, however, a priest from the cathedral parish climbed into the pulpit and announced to the startled faithful — whether printers or romantic youths intent on sleeping in on Sunday after late dates — that the supposed celebrants weren't real priests. He asked the congregation to leave at once, and then, after telling an outright lie in the house of God, he flaunted the legalism so dear to the clerical heart by informing them that he was forthwith dispensing them from their Sunday Mass obligation. Some of the congregation left, but most stayed, perhaps just to see what was going to happen.

What followed, played out on the stage of St. John's sanctuary, combined elements of farce, tragedy, and melodrama — a moral play, in other words. The marriage of Cross and Flag may have been breaking up, but the Church and the theater, lovers centuries estranged, were reaching out to each other once again.

A second priest came up to the altar and told Begin and Meyer that they were suspended and that they should cease and desist. Begin countered by informing him that canon law required a priest to continue a Mass once

begun. After the Gospel, Begin read a statement that expressed the sentiments of the St. Gregory's group. No one thought to save a copy of the statement, but, though its focus was the Vietnam War, Begin recalled that it also addressed the responsibility that all Christians share with regard to poverty and racism.

The back of the church had begun to fill up with police, about fifty of them, but Begin and Meyer had heard one of the cathedral priests tell the police to arrest them once they left the altar, and they felt that they had nothing to worry about until the Mass was over. When Begin came down to distribute Communion, however, two policemen grabbed him and a general struggle ensued, with the priests from the cathedral and some of the St. Gregory contingent joining the fray. Never had liturgical renewal gone quite so far, at least in Cleveland.

"One of the women in our group," said Begin, "knelt down and started to pick up some hosts that had fallen to the floor, and one of the priests, Jim Griffin, who's now the bishop of Columbus, yelled at her not to touch them. One cop still had hold of me by the arm. I said I wasn't leaving until I got the hosts back into the tabernacle, and a Dominican nun in our group grabbed my other arm and yelled at the cop to let me do it. Bernie Meyer, who had had nonviolence training, just sat down when it all started. I said to Griffin: 'Jim, these hosts are going to spill, and it will be your responsibility,' and he finally told the cops to let us finish the Mass. So we finished the Mass, and then we all sat down, and the police came up and carried us out."

The other demonstrators were released, but Begin and Meyer were charged with "disturbing a church service," an ironic accusation in the light of events. Whoever had alerted the police had gotten it wrong, and the police had framed the charges accordingly.

The police told them that the diocese was willing to drop the charges if they would meet with the bishop. The diocese, in fact, had little choice but to back down, given the inaccuracy of the charges, but getting Issenman's full attention had been one of Begin and Meyer's objectives, and so they readily agreed. The next day they met with a distraught Bishop Issenman.

"He told us that we'd been disobedient. He forgave us, though, and then he said: 'Kneel down, and I'll give you my blessing.' "

The two wayward clerics, both over thirty, knelt down like naughty schoolboys who had been reprieved, and the bishop of Cleveland gave them his blessing. After they had walked out of his office, the episcopal benefaction flush upon them, they were greeted by representatives of Cleveland's finest, who rearrested them on the new charge of trespassing. It took several

motions and $900 in legal fees before the diocese finally relented and dropped the charges.

The memory still rankled for Begin. "What they did was totally out of line," he said. "Once a deal is made, you don't back down on it like that."

Years later Cosgrove came back to Cleveland to receive the annual award of the Commission on Catholic Community Action. Begin belonged to the organization by then and was in the audience. Reminiscing in his acceptance speech about the events surrounding the founding of the commission, Cosgrove acknowledged the contribution made by Begin and Meyer and their supporters — "the activists," as he called them. Their statement, he said, had in fact well expressed the ideals of the commission. Then, confiding to an audience he knew was sympathetic, he went on to say that the last thing Bishop Issenman said to him before he died was that if he had been able to handle things himself, Begin and Meyer wouldn't have been treated as they had.

Issenman, a good and decent man, had yielded to the hard-liners as American bishops invariably did. It was the kind of sad little tragedy that has been enacted again and again in the history of the Church: a splendid opportunity to speak truth to power thrown away because of timidity — a fearful reaction in the name of a political expediency that took no account of the demands of faith. The abiding irony, little noted nor long remembered, was that the course of events usually showed that the faith-inspired action would have been politically sound as well and the politically motivated action, or failure to act, had in fact been ill considered and disastrous in its consequences. So it was with the French Church's ardent embrace of the Bourbons, the enthusiastic support of Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, the de facto primate of the American Church, for the United States' entry into World War I, the failure of the American Church to denounce slavery in the nineteenth century, its tardiness in speaking out for civil rights in the twentieth, and, the issue here, its vacillation on the Vietnam War. In due time, I think, Pius XII's failure to condemn the Holocaust, the American Church's silence on U.S. involvement in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf, and its mere hand-wringing on nuclear weapons and on American policy in Latin America will also emerge from the heat and smoke of controversy as not only moral lapses but political lapses as well. As Chesterton observed, Christianity hasn't failed; it's never really been tried.

Most of Begin and Meyer's fellow priests sided with the chancery. They were shocked. "How could you do something like this to your mothers?" they asked.

"The funny thing," said Begin, "is that priests in the missions are much more likely to do radical things than priests at home. And parents who'd be happy about things their sons might do on the other side of an ocean are horrified when they do them in their own backyard." John Groppi, he said, had once given a talk in Cleveland on this very theme. Groppi, a Milwaukee priest who eventually left the priesthood, had come out strongly against racial injustice in the early sixties and accused the Church of what amounted to criminal neglect. In his talk, he said that the Church counts on the families of young priests to keep them in line because they'll hesitate to do anything that might disgrace their mothers.

Actually, Begin's mother took her son's situation quite well. It was his father, the fire chief, who took it to heart. "My father was really pissed. He was ready to kill me. He went so far as to take out and shine up an old .22 that he used to shoot rats in the chicken coop, this time with me in mind. 'I'll shoot that son of a bitch if he comes around here,' he said. My sister called me" — Begin raised his pitch — " 'Don't come home. Daddy's going to shoot you.' " He laughed. "He knew all the policemen who arrested me. They hated my guts for making them arrest a priest, and many still do. Given the racism of the police at the time, our singing 'We Shall Overcome' as they carried us out didn't help matters. My father was an officer of the fire department union, and he had to work with them, and he was also the chief's secretary. He had to go to work the next Monday and face everybody."

My father, I said, had never had a good word for the police.

"Oh, my father didn't either," replied Begin. "He said they were a bunch of thieves." He imitated his father's strident tone: " 'Don't leave anything out when the police are around. They'll steal the tablecloth off your table.' But even so, my father was a man who believed that you had to work within organizations, and so when I opted out, it not only upset him emotionally, it was also something that he disagreed with intellectually. It wasn't the way to operate, he thought. But it almost killed him sometimes to do it his way. Whenever he had to go down to Columbus to lobby for a bill for both police and firemen, he'd be sick about it ahead of time."

As spectacular as his father's rage was, it didn't last long. "I hitchhiked out to California while the charges were still pending," said Begin, "and I talked with my uncle, the bishop, and I also visited an aunt who was a Notre Dame nun. I think she called my father. Anyway, when I came back, he was a changed man. He came to see that the diocese had gone too far."

When Begin's father lay dying in the hospital ten years later, a close friend

of Begin's later told me, he kept telling his nurse how proud he was of him, but he never told his son.

Begin and Meyer, so sure that right reason was on their side in the face of the manifest wrong of the Vietnam War, had not expected their protest to provoke so intense and hostile a reaction. To make matters worse, said Begin, they found themselves the men of the hour for "every kook who ever had any kind of problem with the Church." Despite the problems their action engendered, however, some good came of it. Paul Hritz, a highly respected priest of the diocese, spoke out in favor of Begin and Meyer, and he and some others finally persuaded the Priests Council, a post–Vatican II innovation, to ask the bishop to drop the charges. The council set up a committee for priests concerned about social justice, which functioned effectively for a short time. But then when everybody began to join it just to find out what was going on in the diocese, its focus became blurred and the group lost sight of the Vietnam War, among other things.

It was at that juncture, in March 1969, that Bernie Meyer called up Phil Berrigan and told him how things stood. The brothers Berrigan, Dan the Jesuit and Phil the Josephite priest, were in the forefront of the antiwar movement, heroes not only to the so-called Catholic left but to secular activists as well, including members of the radical and irreligious Students for a Democratic Society, who endorsed the use of violence, something the Berrigans would have no part of. Phil Berrigan advised a retreat, and so Meyer and Begin went on a retreat with Bill Corrigan and his wife, Judy. The setting was a farmhouse on the outskirts of Milwaukee, and Phil Berrigan came by for a day to talk with them.

Making a retreat, a withdrawal from everyday life for an extended period of prayer and reflection on the course of one's life, was a practice that at the time was almost exclusively a Catholic one, though it has since become popular in other denominations and, *mutatis mutandis,* even among secular organizations. It was a staple of the pre–Vatican II Church that not only survived the council's traumatic aftermath but flourished. In the sixties, the Berrigans' secular admirers might have wondered at the efficacy of something so suggestive of navel gazing in times that demanded radical action, but making retreats was something that came naturally to Catholic peace activists, even though they seemed to be at odds with their Church in so many other respects. The world might not have understood this, but it was

"was that being in need is something that really isolates people, and the skills for coming out of isolation don't even exist. So we try to help them to develop these skills." The people in the groups began to babysit for one another and to give one another rides. With the help of the ministry, they also try to find piecework that they can do at home and earn money for their treasury.

Another strategy is to partner an inner-city group with a suburban group. A group from Gesu Parish in University Heights, for example, is the partner of the West Side Women's Center. Members of the suburban group and the inner-city group attend each other's meetings. The participation of the suburban group helps give a sense of esteem and importance to the inner-city group. Their presence shows that they have confidence in and respect for what the inner-city group is doing. The suburban group also matches any sum the inner-city group puts into its treasury.

Begin went on recounting the details. He had an easy command of facts and figures. There had been a 40 percent cut in federal grants the year before. In 1970 there had been seven thousand people in prison in Ohio. In 1988 there were twenty-four thousand. By 1990 there would probably be thirty thousand, he said, and, as it turned out, he was right on the mark. The rate of recidivism among young offenders was 80 percent. More impressive yet were his insights. Because there were no extracurricular activities in inner-city schools, young adults knew nothing about cooperation. Just competition.

Despite Begin's mastery of his subject, his account did not make for easy listening. It was at once unsettling and tedious. He was describing a national disaster of frightening proportions, but unlike most disasters it wasn't exciting. There wasn't the frisson that comes of reading about a plane crash, the surge of pity and distress provoked by an account of a cyclone in Bangladesh. There was a drabness and dailiness to the tragedy he recounted. It wasn't over and done with. It just kept going on. Nor did there seem to be much hope.

The Democratic programs of the sixties were not perfect, Begin said, but now they were gone; what used to be emergency measures, like soup kitchens and shelters, had become institutionalized. Five years ago, the people the ministry was helping were just entering into poverty, but now they had become part of a whole subclass. The recovery, if indeed there ever were one, would take a long time. Begin realized that the big problems were beyond him. All he could do was try to help some people help themselves through the programs that the ministry had developed, noting what worked and what didn't work and hoping that the ministry's successes might be

emulated elsewhere if the government ever again started to show some concern for the poor.

The Rebel Priest had, it seemed, immersed himself in noncontroversial good works, which included the founding of Templum House, a shelter for battered women, the project that had led to his relationship with the Junior League as a consultant on inner-city matters. But despite Begin's ability to make himself useful and even agreeable when it suited him, his conversation turned easily from the need to cope and make do to assessments calculated to set pious Catholic teeth on edge.

"There are two tendencies in the world," he said. "One is to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer people. The other is to try and give every man, woman, and child his or her just share. I see the Church lining up with the wrong process. From their statements, the pope and the bishops seem to be on the side of the people, but by what they're doing and not doing they're definitely lining up on the other side."

For Begin St. Patrick's Parish was a microcosm. What was writ small in its neighborhoods was writ large in the world. To understand what was going on in the near West Side was to begin to understand what was going on in the Third World. Though St. Patrick's was the focus of his work, his concerns extended much farther, particularly to Central America.

He had been there once before, and now he was preparing to go again. He would fly to Mexico City, get a bus to Guatemala City, and then, after a stay there, get another bus to San Salvador. In El Salvador, he would link up with the Cleveland mission team in La Libertad, to which the two martyrs Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel had belonged.

An organization called Peace Brigades International ran an escort service for the leaders of a Salvadoran group that documented the atrocities of the death squads, publicizing the names of the victims and the circumstances of their deaths or disappearance. The organization's first leader, a young man, was found beaten to death. The second was a young woman. She was very careful and never went out alone, but she too was found beaten to death and raped as well, with her two-year-old son lying dead beside her. Peace Brigades provided Europeans or North Americans to stay with families who had reason to feel threatened.

There was really nothing much to it, Begin said. You just sat there and nobody paid much attention to you, though the people you stayed with were obviously grateful for your presence. It was nerve-wracking at first, he confessed. You tensed up every time a car passed, afraid that it might stop and a death squad would get out.

His trips to Central America were, he thought, his way of trying to deal

with living in a superpower. The people in Guatemala and El Salvador were essentially the same as the people on the near West Side, but there were differences as well. "You have to find some way of identifying with the victims," said Begin. "You have to get to know them." The West Side Ecumenical Ministry got to know the prisoners it worked with by obtaining bail bonds for them. Begin had been drawn into the antiwar movement because he knew the boys from St. Gregory's who had come home traumatized. It was the same with the poor, he said. You have to find some means of identifying with them before they would trust you to struggle with them. "I wanted to identify with people who were the victims of our foreign policy. I could say all I wanted about Central America, but unless I've been there, I'm not speaking from my own hurts."

He had not always thought this way, he said. Begin was a man altogether open to experience, a rare characteristic in any case and one quite foreign to the clerical mind, and his thinking had evolved accordingly over the years. He had disagreed with Bill and Judy Corrigan in the sixties when they and others in the group at St. Gregory's decided to move to St. Patrick's Parish and start a Catholic Worker community.

"I thought they were crazy, and I said as much. You have to change society by being in the middle of society, I told them. If you move into the city, your energy will be taken up with surviving and helping others survive."

The Corrigans answered that they had to start practicing what they preached. Instead of doing for the poor, they said, they had to start doing *with* the poor. Their best argument, though, one that eventually persuaded Begin, was that they had tried to move society from the middle of society, and society hadn't budged. Their fellow parishioners at St. Gregory's had written them off as kooks.

The Corrigans and their friends differed from the average Catholic in that they saw the struggle for social justice as a constitutive part of Christianity. By the sixties, many Catholics had advanced to the stage where they felt an obligation to contribute money to help promote justice throughout the world, but the Corrigans' thinking had gone far beyond that. They believed that you had to become personally involved and that you had to challenge those who had conspired to institutionalize injustice, whether they were in government, in business, or in the Church itself. This, Begin said, was the crime that they had crucified Jesus for. They didn't mind his feeding the poor.

Most of the Catholics whom Begin depended on for support, however, didn't live in St. Patrick's on the near West Side but far away, in St.

Gregory's in South Euclid and Gesu in University Heights. They were as success-oriented as their fellow Americans of the same social class, but now they felt an obligation to do something about the critical state of American society. The winner-loser gap had widened to proportions that no reasonably intelligent person could ignore. Nor were they altogether disinterested in their yearning to do something constructive. They were confronting the unpleasant truth that their children stood a good chance of being less well off than they were. They wanted to do something, but they weren't keen on challenging authority, and they hadn't the least inclination to move in next to the Corrigans on Clinton Street.

This made for a certain amount of tension. "It's hard," said Begin, "when you're sitting in somebody's living room in University Heights to make even the most matter-of-fact and commonsense statement without it seeming to be a personal attack — even to say that America should join the ranks of civilized nations and establish a comprehensive system of national health care, because there'll probably be a doctor or two in the group."

Perhaps it was easier to lay down one's life than one's lifestyle for another. And maybe the tension was a good thing. In sensing, however unwillingly, how great a threat the demands of faith posed to a pleasant and well-ordered existence, these Catholics were, after all, far ahead of their coreligionists. Too many of the latter were like the wealthy businessman Begin had an exchange with at a wedding. He told the man that the United States spent so much on armaments because we wanted them to defend our economic interests in the Third World, and the man agreed wholeheartedly. That was exactly why he was willing to pay his taxes, he said.

What about the Church? I asked. It was a question I had asked many times and would continue to ask — David Copperfield's friend Mr. Dick had his King Charles's head and I had my Church — and each time I asked it, the question would grow more plaintive.

Begin felt that it was naive to expect the Church to call Catholics like the businessman to task, just as it would have been naive in the Middle Ages to expect the Church to confront the social inequities of the time. A new Church had to emerge, and that's what came about, however imperfectly, through St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic and the founding of the mendicant orders. Unlike monks, Franciscan and Dominican friars traveled about preaching the Gospel, wholly dependent on charity for their living, not bound to a particular monastery whose abbot, like any secular prince, was the master of vast lands worked by serfs.

There was, in fact, a historical parallel for the actions of Begin and other disturbers of the peace within the Catholic Church. The various popular