

the table. He nodded at me, and suddenly the actor in me emerged. I immediately felt guilty that I had missed my cue. I assumed that Declan's look was to tell me that the next move was mine, so I proceeded to recite aloud the grace before meals.

I sensed a general tremor of excitement as I started to speak – but not for long. I couldn't remember beyond the first line, after which I paused, blinking helplessly at Declan. One of the clerical figures came to my rescue and completed the prayer and we all sat down. It transpired that there were no verbal offerings of thanksgiving, that this was done in silence, and that I had created a rather unusual precedent – particularly in getting it wrong.

I stayed three days in all and it wasn't a success. Declan and I became involved in a brotherly brawl while playing basketball and I found generally that the restrictions, charmingly applied though they were, were unacceptable to my innate sense of individuality. We had to move in a group all the time – swim together, walk together, play together – not chat to the locals, and generally live the life of a community. So I returned to Dublin, not realising that it would be many years before I would see my beloved brother again.

In September, my mother received a letter from Declan informing her that he was now in Spain, in Salamanca, and he was going to try out the priesthood to see if it suited him. She was overjoyed. She had, by now, visited the Legion's headquarters in Leopardstown in County Dublin, just beside the racecourse, and had been treated like a visiting dignitary. She was incredibly impressed by the cleanliness of the students, by their charm, their good manners and the depth of their religious commitment. The Legion was to become a focal point in her life.

During the following couple of years, I had occasion to meet with the founder and head of the order, Father Maciel, who seemed quite taken with the prospect that I might consider joining. Where he got this idea from I don't know, because I had no interest from the very beginning. A brilliant man, then in his late fifties, he had founded the

order in his native Mexico and created a hugely successful, if right-wing, force in his own country, that had now expanded impressively into Europe. He asked me to join, even going so far as to offer me a lay job in his order's university in Mexico city where I could teach English. I declined with thanks.

Anyway, the Legion entered my family's life and we theirs. Within a couple of years, Catherine had decided that she, too, would like to experience life in the Legion, and so she became a lay missionary for them. This entailed moving, lock, stock, and barrel, into a house that the Legion was renting in the leafy suburb of Foxrock. Her function, and that of the other girls in the house, was to enter UCD and infiltrate the student ranks, enticing as many of them as possible to attend their house of prayer. She was not encouraged to have any communication with her family, except on Sundays when a two-hour visiting period was permitted.

My mother was in clover. Not alone was she now guaranteed a place of honour in this life as the 'mother of all religion', but she was also guaranteed at least a very good seat in the next life. Declan was continuing his studies in Salamanca and we received glowing reports of his progress. I remember there was even serious talk in our family of Declan becoming the first ever Irish Pope – and 'Pope Declan' did have a pretty impressive ring to it!

The icing on the cake was when John decided that he, too, would like to sample spiritual certainty and become a Legionary. Off he went to Spain, despite my protestations.

Neither my sister Pat nor I were as impressed as everyone else with the Legion. I found them too good to be true and I thought their philosophy was altogether too right-wing – bordering on Fascism. They based their aspirations, as far as I could see, on converting and consorting with the rich and, to that end, they taught their young men and women how to disport themselves in a genteel, sophisticated way, what wines to choose, how to sit, what books to read and, in general, how to become a confidante of the well-to-do. And it seemed to work. The upper classes

in Mexico and Spain had certainly succumbed to the blandishments of the Legion, and the Legion was benefiting in no uncertain terms. New houses were being established throughout Europe, and now the USA. Even my father was beginning to believe in the possibility of having to attend the installation of the first Irish Pope. As long as he didn't have to make a speech, I think it was fine by him.

I kept in touch, as best I could, with John. I had told him I thought the whole thing was 'for the birds' and, if he needed me to help him get away, just to make one phone call and I'd be there — wherever it was.

We had discovered that Declan had been involved in a major car crash in Spain and had received quite serious injuries, but we were not told until afterwards when he was well on the way to recovery.

Catherine's situation was ludicrous. If she saw any of her family in the street, she was instructed not to speak to, or acknowledge them. I considered all this utter nonsense and wasn't behind the door about saying so.

Ma, of course, was now a maternal icon for the Legionaries; she was actually known as 'Ma'. When she visited the college every Sunday and Thursday, she was fêted by young men with slicked down hair wearing exquisite black soutanes. Father Maciel himself even called her 'Ma'. She adored it all. She looked at Pat and myself and, I'm sure, wondered where had she got these two hard-edged cynics who refused to get carried along on the wave of religious euphoria. I used to wonder aloud how Vernon Grove would look when they built the cathedral where number six now stood and where the three Murphy saints were born. She didn't enjoy that kind of irreverent humour.

About a year later, after John had returned from Salamanca and was ensconced — all brushed up and well-washed — in the college at Leopardstown, I received a phone call. It was John, low-key as ever.

'Michael,' he said urgently into the telephone, 'Could you collect me? I want to get out.'

'Be standing at the hall door in half an hour and I'll be there,' I said. And that's how he left. He literally bolted, without even taking a bag.

I had a jacket for him, which he donned as soon as he had divested himself of his soutane, and I took him straight to Lamb Doyle's pub, where he enjoyed a nice creamy pint of Guinness and a sharp hard Jameson.

Catherine stayed in her vocation for another six months or so, but her leaving took a different form. While in Foxrock, she met and fell in love with one of the novitiates who was based in Leopardstown, a handsome young Spaniard called José Marie Huerta. How they ever managed to get together I'll never know, but a handsome couple they made. She, a dashing high-spirited redhead, and he, a swarthy handsome Spaniard. José's vocation had not been going too well either. Deeply religious though he was, he didn't seem to fit in at all well with the mores of the Legion of Christ, and so he either left, or was asked to leave, I don't know which. Catherine also left and, within a matter of a year or two, wedding bells followed. They lived first in Mexico and then in Spain, and my sister gave birth to four lovely children. Unfortunately, the marriage was not a happy one and they broke up just a couple of years ago.

John, in the meantime, made a name for himself at the time of their wedding by becoming altogether too familiar with one of the beautiful Spanish in-laws on the eve of the big occasion and, even worse, getting caught.

Declan moved to Rome and thence to Mexico, where he became the right-hand confidante of the founder. He was, it seemed, destined for great things. His ordination was delayed for over a year, however. We never heard the full story, but apparently he had become embroiled in a 'spot of bother' in Mexico. While he was preaching somewhere, one of the local community, many of whom were anti-Church, attacked him with a hoe or a shovel or some such thing. Declan, who is a fine big fellow – about six-foot-three – smartly punched the man and broke his jaw. This was not what was expected of a spokesman for the Lord. Declan was apparently forced to work to support this man's family for the course of the next year and his ordination was delayed.

We were to know none of this until we all finally met Declan the day before his ordination in Rome. I was married at this stage, but could not afford to bring Eileen with me, so I went alone for the two days.

Ma was having one of her bad spells and was wheeled to the plane in Dublin airport in a wheelchair. However, as we were flying on a crisp clear day over middle Europe, somebody murmured, 'There's the Alps, and lo and behold, the patient leapt to her feet and, brushing aside other passengers and sundry members of her own family, glued her nose to the porthole and gave thanks to the Lord for his magnitude. The family referred to it afterwards as 'the miracle of the Alps'. From then on she

was like a two-year-old.

It was my father, whose leg was giving him trouble, who became the laggard and for whom we had to wait as we wandered the streets of the Vatican. We met Declan and there was a wonderful reunion. He looked healthy and hadn't changed much. That night, I took Pat and Catherine on a pub crawl and the next morning we were, all three of us, dying of

hangovers.

I had been invited to read the lesson at the ordination, which was a group ordination. All the families of the Legion were gathered in the same convent as ourselves and we had to take a bus to the Vatican for the ceremony. The bus was forced to wait for me, as I was feeling quite ill.

When my mother, who was somewhat exasperated by my behaviour, saw me coming, she said loudly to everyone on the bus, 'God, would you look at him! You'd think he was walking on eggshells.'

In photographs of the occasion, my face looked a curious shade of green and apparently I could hardly be heard as I read the lesson. Many of the people present didn't know whether I was speaking Latin, Spanish, or English. But it was a joyous occasion, nonetheless.