

MASTER
of
CEREMONIES

DONALD COZZENS

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by Donald Cozzens

Edited by Michael Coyne

Cover design, interior design, and typesetting by Patricia A. Lynch

Photo of Donald Cozzens by Paul Tepley

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Published by In Extenso Press

Distributed exclusively by ACTA Publications, 4848 N. Clark Street,
Chicago, IL 60640, (800) 397-2282, actapublications.com

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2014953552

ISBN: 978-0-87946-993-1 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-87946-992-4 (hardcover)

Printed in the United States of America by Total Printing Systems

Year 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14

Printing 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 First

 Text printed on 30% post-consumer recycled paper

To
Marie and Tim Glasow
and in memory of
Tom Cozzens

*No grand betrayals
We lacked the impudent will
We died of small treasons.*

—Kilian McDonnell

1

Kirkuk, Iraq, 2005

Like a monk in prayer, Sergeant Mark Anderlee hadn't moved in an hour. His lean body, flat against the dry dusty soil, felt weightless, suspended like a feather in effortless stillness. Trained to wait, he would wait without complaint, silently coaxing his target into the crosshairs of the Leupold scope mounted on his M24 sniper rifle. His target was a bomb specialist recruited by al-Qaeda's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a top lieutenant to Osama bin Laden. The target's real name, his briefing officer had said, was unknown. "He's called al-Zahidi, the one from Zahid." The name was irrelevant. It was a name adopted by at least one other al-Qaeda insurgent.

Anderlee had to admit the Army had changed him, and mostly for the better. He was disciplined now and able to control the anger that had soured his soul for decades. His sniper training, moreover, had taught him patience—a virtue well beyond his grasp when he was a schoolboy in Baltimore.

He checked again the distance to target: three hundred and eighty meters—well within the 800 meter range of the M24 resting steady on its bipod. Anderlee's eyes moved from the one floor, flat-roofed building where al-Zahidi and six other insurgents were meeting to the fuel tanks fifty meters behind the windowless structure, then on to the three trucks parked square in the middle of the baked clay road, their beds covered with canvas

tarps. The sun, both friend and enemy, hung slightly behind him now. Anderlee ignored its choking heat. He judged his escape route problematic at best. Still, he told himself, his chances were good—especially since he was working without a spotter. Spotters had bungled his escapes more than once.

It might take another hour, he knew, before al-Zahidi gave him a clear and stationary target. “Come on you guys, meeting’s over,” he whispered. “Come on out. Come...on...out.” Anderlee willed himself to stay focused, always the hardest part—now made more difficult by the creeping realization that he was waiting for more than an insurgent bomb specialist. Mark Anderlee, at his deepest core, was waiting to take revenge, waiting for the instant when his abuser, now a retired archbishop, discovered he hadn’t gotten away with it after all. Just fourteen more months and he would have his twenty years of service. They would be, he was convinced, fourteen sweet months of anticipation. He would move through them with the patience of a saint, anticipating his retirement—a decent pension, clean sheets, hot showers—and the sinful pleasure of evening a score.

Anderlee wet his lips, his eyes now almost closed. Waiting, he had discovered, allowed the pleasure of anticipation; as intense a pleasure as the surging, erotic euphoria of a mission accomplished.

He peered again into his scope. In his mind’s eye he saw not al-Zahidi but an aging Wilfred Gunnison—bishop’s robes and all—right in his crosshairs. He couldn’t miss.

Anderlee blinked himself back into the moment. Five men were now visible, two carrying semi-automatic weapons. That meant two others remained in the building. The five walked slowly toward the small caravan of trucks, his target doing the talking. The group paused, as though one of the men had asked a question or made some kind of point... It was enough; al-Zahidi was down.

2

Baltimore, Maryland 2005

Father Bryn Martin, former master of ceremonies to the retired archbishop and now chancellor of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, had heard the rumors—he was to be named a bishop. But the call that would change his life still caught him off guard. He was in the archbishop's office late in the day, summarizing a numbing auditor's report, when the phone rang. Archbishop Charles Cullen, Gunnison's recent successor and Martin's new superior, raised his eyebrows in a gesture of frustration as he lifted the handset. Martin looked down at the report in his lap while Cullen listened. He lifted his eyes to see Cullen's wide grin.

"Father Martin is in my office now, Archbishop. I'm sure he would like to hear the news directly." Cullen, his light blue eyes watering with pleasure, reached across the desk and handed the receiver to Martin. The accented voice, cultured, even lyrical, was that of Archbishop Lorenzo Tardisconi, the Holy See's ambassador to the United States—and the man in charge of the selection of all new bishops in the country.

"Father Martin? This is Archbishop Tardisconi."

"Yes, Your Excellency. This is Father Martin."

"The Holy Father has chosen you for the office of bishop, to serve as auxiliary to Archbishop Cullen." Tardisconi paused to let his message sink in. "Will you accept?"

Distracted by Cullen's obvious delight at this pivotal mo-

ment in his chancellor's life, Martin felt a rush of excitement and pleasure—the understandable but dangerous pleasure of ecclesiastical affirmation, the almost adolescent thrill of being held in favor, of being noticed.

“May I have some time to think about this, Archbishop?”

“I suspect, Father Martin, that you have been thinking about this for some time now.”

Despite the vaunted secrecy veiling the process for the selection of bishops, word had made its way through the clerical network that a new auxiliary for Baltimore would be named in the near future. Bryn Martin was a presumed favorite, perhaps the favorite. In spite of the papal sanctions meant to insure confidentiality, two different sources had told him he was being vetted. Instinctively, Martin knew this was no time to appear humble.

“I am honored, Archbishop, and humbled. Yes, I will accept the appointment. And I am most grateful to his Holiness, to you, and to Archbishop Cullen for your confidence in me.”

“Praised be Jesus Christ,” Tardisconi replied piously. He promised to pray for the new bishop-elect and turned abruptly to matters of protocol. “Two weeks from this Tuesday the announcement will be made simultaneously by the Holy See, by my office in Washington, and by Archbishop Cullen. Until that time you should confide only in your spiritual director and with chancery staff responsible for essential preparations for your ordination as bishop. Archbishop Cullen will advise you in the matter of the customary gift of gratitude to his Holiness.”

Martin repressed a smile at this last point of protocol. For centuries papal honors, especially episcopal and abbatial appointments, have been a major source of revenue for the Vatican treasury. The bishop-elect had no idea what amount would be appropriate. He would have to trust Cullen for advice.

Cullen took the phone back and ended the call with customary courtesies.

“This calls for a little single malt,” he said.

It was growing dark outside and the desk and table lamps shed a soft, golden glow, much like candlelight. The two churchmen sipped their whisky and talked easily—like members of a select and exclusive club—for the next half hour.

For the past six months there had been signs, subtle yet telling to any astute clerical eye, that Father Bryn Martin was held in favor. He had clearly won the new archbishop’s confidence, and Cullen seemed to enjoy Martin’s company. But Martin never allowed himself to forget that while his working relationship with Cullen was cordial, they weren’t really friends—not yet anyway. That was a mistake even the savviest of veteran priests often made. Seminarians are taught to think of their bishop as their spiritual father and, since the Second Vatican Council, as an older brother. From a *realpolitik* perspective, that is hardly the case. Their bishop is, in truth, their feudal lord who, by ecclesial tradition and personal instinct, uses familial images and language to control his vassal priests.

It hadn’t taken Martin long to grasp this reality. More than fraternal concern, more than fatherly support and encouragement, what really grounded the relationship of priest to bishop was loyalty—not loyalty to Christ and his gospel, but loyalty to the ecclesial system, to the culture of privilege and preference. In theory, of course, it should be the reverse. But loyalty to the gospel before loyalty to the institutional church could get a priest into real trouble. The conviction that loyalty to the institution assured a priest he was being loyal to Christ and his gospel is the great lie in the Catholic Church.

With their glasses emptied, Cullen and Martin rose from their chairs.

“Thank you, Charles,” Martin said softly. “This wouldn’t have happened, I know, without your endorsement.”

“It’s a great honor, Bryn, but you will find out soon enough

the job has its burdens. And the burdens will crush you if you don't tend to your spiritual life." Cullen paused. "And the privileges? They're more dangerous than the burdens."

Cullen and Martin embraced, the brief, slightly awkward hug men often exchange, with Cullen patting Martin's back in encouragement and congratulations.

"Get something to eat, Bryn, and then make a few phone calls. Don't take Tardisconi's admonition to secrecy too seriously. You know who you can trust."

The press conference announcing his appointment was only two hours away. With his mind racing, Martin reached for the newer of his two black suits. Clerical politics, he had discovered early on, demanded of the career-minded priest an air of public piety and just the right degree of deference. There was a theatrical dimension to the hierarchy that bordered on camp. There were roles to be played. It would never do for a priest to go around saying he wanted to be a bishop or a chancellor or even a monsignor. No, a climber had to channel his ambition carefully, had to be noticed, had to project an air of gravity, and above all had to project an air of absolute, unquestioning loyalty to the minutest of the church's teachings and policies. Maybe this was what was bothering Martin. Maybe this was what made his mind race and his stomach tighten. Had he become the kind of climber he despised?

He couldn't finish his usual breakfast bagel and coffee. He returned to his room and sat down. He couldn't pray, couldn't think. His inner turmoil displaced any possibility of a peaceful interlude before the press conference that would forever change his life.

He should have insisted on more time to think about it. To pray about it. That's what he should have said. And that's what

he should have said when Archbishop Gunnison had first asked him to be his master of ceremonies. Instead, Martin had acquiesced on the spot both times. It was the beginning of his rise to the office of bishop—and the end of his innocence.

As he sat alone, Martin remembered it all—the appointment as Gunnison’s master of ceremonies, the call from Tardisconi, and his own obsequious response. Yet another scene, this one rife with the musk of guilt, came into focus. Martin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out what happened so long ago in that dark car parked in shadow outside the archbishop’s residence. Was the archbishop’s bizarre behavior that night behind Martin’s rise from master of ceremonies to chancellor and now to bishop in just two and a half years—an astronomical ascent as church careers go?

Bishop-elect Bryn Martin got up, left the rectory through the side entrance, and with his hands buried deep in his overcoat pockets walked the short distance to the Catholic Center. On this day, of all days, the incident he was trying to forget should be left to the mercy of God. Waiting for the light at the corner of Cathedral and Mulberry, Martin told himself he wasn’t sad at all.

3

Baltimore, 2007

Dan Barrett and Paul Kline half raised their long-necked bottles of beer in a subtle man-toast to Mark Anderlee.

“It’s great to have you back home,” Dan said.

“Yeah,” Paul added, “it really is. Twenty years of army life. I don’t know how you did it.”

The three men meeting for drinks in the Belvedere Hotel’s Owl Bar had known each other since Blessed Sacrament elementary school. But it wasn’t until their high school years at Loyola Blakefield that their friendship took hold. After graduating, Barrett and Kline went on to college and eventually to teaching careers in two of Baltimore’s Catholic high schools. Anderlee had enlisted. Now, more than two decades since their years at Blakefield, they were gathering for beer and wings to celebrate Anderlee’s retirement from the Army and his return to Baltimore.

“I feel bad I never wrote,” Paul said sheepishly.

“Forget it. If you had written I would’ve felt I had to write you back. You did me a favor.”

The three smiled weakly.

Barrett and Kline had looked forward to the evening and hearing about Anderlee’s two tours in Iraq.

“We heard you were the leader of a goddamn sniper unit, for Christ’s sake,” Dan said, coaxing him on. After the first round of drinks, Mark opened up a little but spoke only in generalities,

never once hinting at any heroics on his part. It was clear to the two civilians that their old friend wasn't into recounting his experiences as a soldier—at least not tonight.

“What're you going to do now?” Dan asked.

“My Army pension is pretty good so I don't have to look for a job right away. I'll be staying with my Aunt Margaret until I find a place I like. Maybe in a few years I'll go someplace where I won't freeze my ass off during the winter months. My folks are living in South Carolina. I'll check it out. But right now I have some business here in Baltimore.”

Barrett and Kline exchanged a glance.

“What kind of business?” Dan said.

“Church business.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Mark?” Paul asked.

Anderlee looked over his shoulder to make sure their waitress wasn't heading for their table.

“One night I was on patrol in Tikkrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. It was routine, nothing out of the ordinary. But on that patrol, on that quiet night, I realized that as much as I hated Hussein, there was someone I hated more. And I swore to myself I would square things when I got back home.”

The three men leaned in across the table as Anderlee, his voice just above a whisper, said, “The summer before we started at Blakefield, I spent two weeks at Camp Carroll, the summer camp run by the archdiocese. There was a priest, Father Wilfred Gunnison, an older guy in his fifties or so who was like the chaplain or something. The prick messed with me.”

“Mark,” Barrett interrupted, “Archbishop Gunnison?”

“Yeah, I'm talking about the Most Reverend Wilfred Freakin' Gunnison, the retired archbishop of Baltimore. One and the same.”

“Damn,” Dan said.

Kline was speechless.

The two men, their stomachs suddenly cramped, sat staring at their beer bottles. Anderlee, without raising his eyes, broke the silence.

“It was the summer I turned fifteen, Father Wil, as we called him, tells me he has to do weekend Masses at some parish in a small town in Pennsylvania, about two hundred miles north of here. Do I want to go with him, give him some company? I said okay ‘cause I couldn’t think of any reason to say no. He goes to tell one of the counselors I’d be away for two nights and I go and put some stuff in my backpack.”

He took a swig of beer. Neither of the others touched theirs.

“Gunnison says to be ready to leave in an hour—around 4:00. He had it all figured out. We’d drive for about a hundred miles or so and stop for dinner, spend the night in a motel, and drive the rest of the way to the parish on Saturday.

“I need to be at the parish in time for confessions and the Saturday vigil Mass,” Gunnison says, all piss pious and friendly like. The plan was to spend Saturday night at the rectory and then, after the two Sunday morning Masses, we’d drive back to Camp Carroll.

“It started out okay. He isn’t that hard to talk to, and he can be funny. And I was kinda pleased he asked me to go along with him. Well, we got this motel room, two double beds, TV, nothing special. I thought we might go to a nice restaurant but there weren’t any nice restaurants around. We found a family-owned place that was okay and then went back to the motel. There was really nothing else to do.

“Gunnison kept saying I should consider it a mini-vacation, but it was a mini-trip to hell,” Anderlee said coldly. “Then he said since we were on vacation, a drink or two was in order.

“I was almost fifteen. Yeah, I thought, I can handle a few drinks. He had this plastic shopping bag with two bottles of Jack Daniels and a six-pack of ginger ale. Then he sends me out to the

ice machine while he gets the plastic glasses from the bathroom.”

“Another round?” the waitress asked, appearing from nowhere.

“Sure,” Paul said without looking at her. They waited while she left.

“So we sipped whiskey and ginger ale and watched a little television,” Mark continued. “Gunnison had a second drink and so did I. This one was stronger. But booze wasn’t the only thing in the shopping bag. He had a bottle of skin lotion in there too. He goes, ‘What’s really relaxing, Mark, is a massage. Have you ever had one? I’ll give you one and then you can give me one.’

“I’m getting a funny feeling now but I don’t say a damn word. It’s dark outside by this time, and Gunnison gets up and closes the drapes and puts the safety chain on the door.

“‘Let’s get undressed,’ he says, but then he says, ‘but it’s a good idea to wear jockstraps.’”

The waitress came with their beers. Anderlee waited until she left, neither Barrett nor Kline said a word.

“Gunnison produced two jockstraps from his suitcase. I’m not thinking so clear and my stomach was tightening up. But then I got undressed and there we were, wearing nothing but these jockstraps. He takes the bed spread down and the blanket and has me lie face down on the sheets. Neither one of us was saying anything. He put lotion on my back and shoulders and started rubbing. He rubbed my neck and arms and then moved down to my lower back. I’m starting to freak out. He put lotion on the back of my legs and massaged them down to my ankles... and then my butt.

The other two looked at each other, and then down at the table.

“‘Roll over,’ he told me, but I didn’t want to roll over. By this time I had a hard on. He rolled me over and I’m glad I have the jockstrap on but he could tell I’m excited. He massaged my chest

and I'm lying there with my eyes closed. His hands moved down to my stomach and he's breathing heavy now. He says something about giving a massage is hard work. My eyes were still closed but now his hands were just above the waist band of the supporter. Gunnison was no longer straddling me. He seemed to be kneeling at my side and leaning over me. Then he rubbed my stomach, but his left elbow is right on my prick. His hands stayed on my stomach but his elbow kept pressing down on me." Mark paused. "And then I came."

Kline and Barrett hadn't moved. They lifted their eyes from the table, knowing they just had to look at Anderlee. They wanted to say how sorry they were. But they didn't know how.

"Gunnison reached for the towel he'd placed on the bed and says he's going to get the lotion off me. He wiped the lotion and mess I'd made without saying another word—like what he's doing is the most natural thing in the world."

What Anderlee didn't tell his two friends was that he was so upset and confused he had almost cried.

"Okay, Mark," he says to me, "it's your turn to do me."

"Gunnison went over to his bed, pulled the spread down and stretches out on his stomach. I said I wasn't very good at it and was going to go to bed.

"Gunnison didn't say anything at first. Then, like after a moment from hell, he said it was okay and he was a little tired too.

"He got up, took his jockstrap off and headed to the bathroom, making sure I saw his boner. He was in the shower a long time and I cleaned up a little and got into my T-shirt and shorts. I hadn't brought any pajamas. My back was to the bathroom and I pretended I was sleeping when he came back in the room. He got in bed and turned out the light and said good night. That's what I said too.

"'Good night, Father.' I should've said, 'Hey, you forgot to say your night prayers.'"

Kline and Barrett gurgled little nervous chuckles and sipped their beers wondering what the hell you say to a friend who has been messed with by a priest.

“I was sick and scared and felt like shit. I didn’t sleep at all that night. I don’t know what time it was but I heard him get up and go into the bathroom. I could hear him pissing. He turned the bathroom light out then came back and tried to get into my bed.

“I just said, ‘You’ve got the wrong bed, Father,’ but like I meant it, and he backed off. After that I was terrified he’d try to get into my bed again. That was the worst night of my life.”

Dan slowly shook his head. “The bastard,” he said.

Paul nodded agreement. The eyes of both men seemed to shrink and grow dark, their lips pressed so thin and inward they were invisible. They sat, frozen, for a while. Mark signaled the waitress for another round.

“Gunnison didn’t try anything the next night at the rectory. He stayed in the pastor’s bedroom and I had the guestroom, but we had to use the same bathroom. I found it hard to look at the guy. And listen to this. Before the Saturday evening Mass he asked me if I wanted to be one of the altar servers. I couldn’t believe it. I said no, I’d skip it that time, and next day we drove back without saying hardly anything. When we finally got back to Carroll, it was too late for supper and he asked me if I wanted to go out for pizza. I told him, no, I wasn’t hungry and grabbed my backpack and headed for my cabin. I was sick and tired and starving.”

“So what did he say when you left?” Dan asked.

“He said, ‘Hey, remember you owe me a back rub.’

“Then when I saw him Monday morning he acted like nothing had ever happened. I didn’t know what to think. Did he just give me a massage and I got so excited I came? I felt confused, I felt guilty... I felt like shit. So I pretended it didn’t happen and

tried to act like everything was okay. After a while I didn't think about it so much. But I had a secret and it wasn't a good secret. I never thought of telling anyone—not even you guys.”

Outside the three men let the night air wash over them. Before moving to their cars, Paul asked, “Are you going to talk to Gunnison?”

Mark looked at each of his friends, and as he did his expression changed.

“Oh, yeah. I'm gonna to talk to Gunnison. You bet your ass I am. He lives in that stone house next to the Basilica. I've spent a few days watching the place. I know when he comes and goes. I'm going to pay the pervert a surprise visit and, believe me, I'm gonna do more than talk to him.”

Kline and Barrett exchanged an anxious glance.

“First I'm gonna get some money from him. Then I'm gonna make him shit in his pants. And then, when I'm ready, I'm gonna take him down.”