

Crisis of Conscience

By: Roberta Kelm

Andrew MacLeod tied his family's donkey to a tree, well within range of a large patch of thistles for him to eat. He gently stroked the animal's nose and silently said goodbye.

The seventeen year old boy unloaded his fishing rod and the picnic dinner his mother had prepared for him, and carried it over to the river, near the deepest part. His parents had smiled knowingly when he had asked for a day off to fish alone. In another month, he would enter the seminary at Arx Fidei and begin his preparation for the priesthood; there would be no time to fish once he began his studies.

Ever since he was a child, Andrew had wanted to be a priest. However, he knew that path was closed to him, that God had turned His back on him.

He set down the fishing rod and dinner basket on a flat rock beside the river. He sat down next to the rod and began to eat, thinking back to the events that led up to his decision.

He remembered that as a child, he had been able to tell when people were telling the truth and when they were lying. As the years passed, he found that he could easily control the family's obstinate donkey, the same one who had carried him here; his father, the village cooper, put Andrew to work delivering barrels to his customers. Other strange things began to happen, that he could not explain -- until just recently.

In the past several months, rumors had gripped the town that the curse of the Deryni had risen again. It had been long believed that the cursed Deryni had been eliminated from Gwynedd in the late 910's, around the time of the deaths of King Cinhil and his sons. Now, in the reign of his grandson, King Uthyr, it appeared that they had returned.

Last Sunday, Father Jonas had confirmed the dread news: "Satan has once again risen to devour those who will not stand strong in the Truth. Truly, the accursed Deryni have once again risen among us. The Church will be triumphant against this scourge. Even now, episcopal troops are seeking out the Evil Ones, to consign them to the flames of their Dark Master. All shall be burned; if a child shows evil, his parents shall also be burned. For it is known that whatever is holy cannot bear what is unholy, so therefore if one bears a child with the Deryni curse, that one must also be a member of the Devil's brood."

Andrew had read and agonized for three days after that. He now knew what he was; he was Deryni, the Devil's own.

For three days, he debated his options. He thought about praying, but what would be the point? God would not listen to the prayers of an accursed Deryni. He was alone, with no one to confide in.

At last, he reached a decision. It would look like an accident: an afternoon swim while fishing, a freak incident, and his body would be found days later downstream. Oh, he knew the Church's teaching on taking one's own life, but what did it matter? He was already condemned to burn in Hell as the spawn of the Devil that all Deryni were. And by drowning, he would spare his parents the horror of the flames and the shame of his death by a more obvious suicide.

Looking up at the sky, he saw that the sun had moved past the midpoint of the sky. It was getting late. It was time.

Taking off his tunic and hose, he stepped into the river. It was colder than he had expected. He swallowed nervously and waded deeper into the water.

"I don't expect you to hear me, Lord, or to pay heed to my words," he thought as the water rose on his body. "I expect nothing for myself, accursed as I am. Only please let my parents escape the flames. Let them not come to harm from my iniquities."

The water rose above his head. He made no attempt to struggle. He stood in the water and let the darkness engulf him....

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He felt a strong pressure on his chest, once, twice, then strong arms turning him to his side. Two sharp blows to his back, then he coughed and spit out what felt like a gallon of water.

"There you go, lad," a voice came to him through the darkness. "I thought I'd lost you."

Andrew opened his eyes. A monk was kneeling beside him; no, not exactly a monk, but dressed in a grey monk's robe he'd never seen before. Blue eyes sparkled from a face framed with wispy grey hair, yet despite the appearance of age, the monk seemed quite vigorous and hale.

The monk helped Andrew to a sitting position. "I assume you suffered a spasm. Best to wait for an hour after eating before braving the waters, lad."

Andrew's confusion turned to anger. "Why did you pull me out?" he sputtered. "Perhaps I meant to do this deed! What right do you have to interfere?"

The monk's face registered his shock. "Meant to do....my son, you would take your own life, in disobedience to the Church's teachings on the matter?"

Andrew looked away. "You shouldn't even be talking to me, Brother," he said woodenly. "I'm already damned."

"Dear son," the monk said, "what sin could there be that God in His mercy cannot forgive?"

"The curse of the Deryni, Brother...how should I call you?"

The monk shook his head. "My name does not matter. Continue, my son."

Andrew buried his head in his hands. He told the monk everything; how he had discovered hidden talents as he matured, the proclamation from the pulpit about the Deryni and their ultimate fate, and most of all, of his desire to be a priest that was no longer able to be fulfilled. "The river was my only way out," he concluded. "I would not have my parents suffer the horror of the flames were I to be discovered, or the shame of my own suicide. So you see, since God has cast me out, there is nothing else for me to do."

The monk's face had darkened as Andrew shared his story. At the end, he closed his eyes and bowed his head. He muttered something under his breath that Andrew could not quite make out, perhaps a prayer of protection from evil. Then the monk looked up and smiled.

"So, you believe God has turned his back on you? Tell me, who called you to be a priest?"

Andrew was confused. "Why, Brother, I thought the Holy Spirit had called me. But if I am damned, I must have been mistaken..."

"Were you mistaken?" the monk continued. "Or are those who would condemn people for the circumstances of their birth the mistaken ones?"

"But the priests say..."

"They say what they have been taught to say, that Deryni are evil from birth," the monk said. "They fear and kill what they do not understand. But does not the Psalmist proclaim, 'I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth'? And did not the Lord say when He called Jeremiah, 'Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee'? If the Deryni are truly evil from birth, then how would the Lord allow such evil to be born?"

Andrew blinked. The monk appeared to glow; but surely that was a trick of the sunlight, wasn't it?

"It is no trick," the monk said softly. "I too am Deryni. But it is not a curse; it is a gift, but one to be used with caution."

"I don't understand...."

The monk smiled. "What is your name, son?"

"Andrew..."

Before his eyes, the monk changed. He grew perhaps a handspan taller, his eyes turned from blue to sea-ice grey. He looked familiar, like a painting Andrew had seen somewhere.

Transformed, the monk stood up, took the boy's hands in his. "My son, do you truly believe that you have been called by the Holy Spirit to the priesthood?"

Tears filled Andrew's eyes. "I do."

"Do you now in the presence of God commit yourself to this trust and responsibility? "

"I do"

Will you endeavor so to minister the Word of God and the sacraments of the New Covenant, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?"

"I will"

Will you undertake to be a faithful pastor to all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them and with your fellow ministers to build up the family of God? "

"I will."

"Then, my son, may the Lord who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace and power to perform them."

Andrew felt the monk's hands rest on his forehead. "Andrew, receive the Holy Spirit...."

The boy felt the ground beneath him spin, darkness overcome him....

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The next day, the donkey was found, still tied to the tree. A search of the riverbed found the remains of a lunch, and a fishing rod floating in the water. Of Andrew MacLeod's body, there was no trace.

A Requiem Mass was sung in the parish church for the repose of Andrew's soul. His parents grieved his loss. "Such a shame," his mother said. "He would have made such a fine priest."

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When Andrew awoke, he was in a church. Several men and women were surrounding him. As he opened his eyes, one of them said, "Praise the Blessed Camber! He lives!"

He struggled to sit up. "Where am I?" he asked.

"You are at St. Kyriell's in the Hills," a woman said, kneeling beside him with a bowl of broth. "Brother Michael found you on the road unconscious. We have cared for you in the church for 3 days. Here, drink this."

As he drank of the broth, a man said, "We have not had a priest in several years. Will you stay and minister to us?"

A priest...Andrew looked down and saw the stole around his neck. Where it came from, he had no idea. "Yes, I will stay," he said, suddenly feeling content.

"Come," the man said, "let us help you stand, and we will show you your lodgings."

As they passed out of the church, Andrew froze before a painting on the wall. "Who...who is that?"

The woman bowed and blessed herself. "That is a painting of our patron, the Blessed Saint Camber."

Andrew stared at the image of the unknown monk in wonder. It would be many years before he would finally comprehend what had happened on the riverbank, when what he thought was lost forever was given back to him.

~ *Finis* ~