Chapter 1

We Can Become Fire

The monastery where I live, Little Portion Hermitage, nestles in a wooded valley off a rural route in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas. Our community lives in solitude, far from the nearest streetlights or porch lights. At night, the sky is filled with stars, and you can count them if you have the time. Our woods, though, are so dark that you can't see much beyond two feet in front of you.

In a place with such deep, dark nights, you come to appreciate the force of the Gospel's simple observation "It was night" (see John 13:30; also John 3:2). Night is the time when the wild beasts enjoy their brief advantage over human intelligence. They can see us; we can't see them. They can move easily through the terrain. Our every footfall is a guess—and a potential pratfall.

April 29, 2008, was just such a night. It was after eleven, and I was wrapping up my tasks for the day a bit later than usual. My wife, Viola, was already asleep in bed. Our hermitage, like all the homes at the monastery, is a "green" building. Partially underground, it retains heat well in the winter and

keeps pleasantly cool in the summer. Its great source of light by day is a skylight in the roof.

There was something about the skylight that startled me when I looked up from my desk. It should have been black with the night, but it was radiant—with a golden orange glow.

Well, that's really strange, I thought.

My tired mind reached for implausible explanations as I headed for the door. Maybe there's a problem with the well, and the utility crew is working late.

Just three steps beyond my door I knew that the glow was nothing so benign. I felt intense heat. And I looked up to see the whole back end of the common building of our community—just a hundred yards from my hermitage—engulfed in flames.

The golden glow I had seen in the skylight? It was the immolation of our chapel, our library, our business offices, and the refectory where we share our simple meals.

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My community is the Brothers and Sisters of Charity, and we have been living together since 1979—first on the grounds of Alverna Retreat Center in Indianapolis, and then, since 1982, in Arkansas. We built the structures with our own hands from native stone and good wood. We built the community with similarly seasoned materials—the heritage of early Christianity, the traditions of Christian communal life. In other words, we built our monastery as much with books as with blocks.

We weren't born in the valley where we now live. We converged there, came intentionally as disciples. The road we took was not just that rural route in the Ozarks, but a far more ancient path: the way of the Fathers.

We are a community that integrates families, singles who are free to marry, and traditional consecrated celibates. Our configuration is rare, if not unique, in modern times. But we fashioned it on models we found in the fourth century, when Christians in many lands undertook great experiments in living common life. Even as we built our buildings, we pored over the long-ago eyewitness accounts of the lives of Anthony of the Desert, Pachomius, John Cassian, Basil the Great, and the Fathers of the Egyptian desert. They and their companions fled the cities of the Greco-Roman world in order to make communities for intentional contemplative living. They succeeded so well—and built so sturdily—that many of their monasteries are still standing today, in spite of persecutions, and in spite of many centuries of natural disasters (what the insurance companies call "acts of God").

You can also see "monuments" of those ancient builders in the later experiments of Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Dominic de Guzmán, and Ignatius of Loyola. The saints depend upon the saints; the Fathers took up what the apostles had handed on; the apostles learned the ways of common life from Jesus.

From the first generation, it has been so. "And they held steadfastly to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. . . . And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:42, 44–45).

If you spotted the ancient monasteries from a helicopter high above, you would be looking down on an ancient Christian commentary on the scriptures. If you took a few turns and flew over Little Portion Hermitage, you could look down

at our own particular reflection on the Gospel. We built the Gospel, as we saw it, into the layout of our roads and roofs.

Our monastery, as I said, consists of a large common building surrounded by small habitations—hermitages—where individuals and families pass their days in quiet work and prayer and in solitude with God.

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Maybe you can imagine, then, what passed through my mind in the instant that I recognized what was happening to our common building at the monastery. I stepped out of my hermitage to see the work of so many years, the work of our hearts and minds and hands, going up in flames.

At first, I thought I would rush in and save what I could from the chapel. But I saw right away that the flames rose highest in the back end. The chapel—with its altar, tabernacle, and the choir stalls where we pray—was already gone. The vestments and vessels used in the sacred liturgy were gone. The icons were gone. So was my office, with all the community's records from thirty years of family life, and the awards and mementos of forty years of making music, and every photograph I had of my childhood, my late parents, my past.

I turned back to wake Viola. We ran, stumbling in the darkness, to every hermitage, banging on the doors and shouting, "Fire! Fire!" We called 911, but knew it would be a while before any emergency vehicles could make their way to our secluded valley.

I hurried back in the direction of the big building and impulsively rushed inside. It was thick with black smoke. I couldn't see anything, and soon felt I was going to pass out. I went back outside for air, then back in, but I was unable

to retrieve anything. I did this a few times before giving up entirely.

By now the whole community was there, feeling frantic. I realized our efforts were futile. So I said, "Let it burn. Let it burn. It's not worth anybody getting hurt. Let it burn."

We all walked down to the grove to wait for the fire department. We just kind of stood there, listening to the fire roar, pop, and boom, and we tried to let go of it all.

There came one particularly loud boom, and we began to see dozens—and then hundreds—of what looked like little butterflies hovering around us. They were beautiful embers of light. And we realized that they were paper.

"There goes the library," someone said. "There it goes."

That's when I felt the loss—thousands of volumes, the repository of so much knowledge and tradition, stored lovingly in bank upon bank of stocked bookshelves.

The "butterflies" flitting around us were pages of Cyprian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine—my spiritual and intellectual companions as I founded the community. The books, with all my marginal notes, were gone.

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A fire is a catastrophic loss, and you feel it immediately. It doesn't have to be Notre Dame Cathedral. Emergency crews worked through the night and overcame the blaze; but it was not long before we began to realize the extent of our losses. Kind neighbors brought us food, but we had no utensils to eat with!

To this day, I still begin to walk to the library to retrieve a particular book, only to remember when I get halfway that it isn't there. Yet I'm also coming to realize that I still have it all. Perhaps my bond with the ancient Fathers is closer than ever.

Early on, when I realized I no longer had my volumes of the Fathers close at hand, it occurred to me that the Fathers themselves owned very few books. Even for their spiritual descendants in the Middle Ages, books were a rare luxury. There were no printing presses, and certainly no electronic media—no audiobooks, podcasts, software, or websites. St. Thomas Aquinas once said longingly that he would give all of Paris for just a single volume of St. John Chrysostom's sermons.

I know that feeling! But I also know that I have what I need of the Fathers. After spending so many years steeped in their lives, I find that their words and ideas arise often in my mind and my prayer. If I have the impulse to reach for their writings, it's because I want to complete a thought already begun. I want to remember where the Fathers went from there.

One of the great lessons I'm still learning from the Fathers is detachment from things, even the best of things—even the beautiful words of the Fathers.

After losing all those thousands of volumes, I'm finding that the witness of the Fathers remains with me, and in many ways it is stronger now than ever. We take what our Fathers have given us and pass it along to the next generation.

I continually return to the companionship of these great men who have exercised a true fatherhood—a spiritual fatherhood—in my life. I have learned to walk this path because I followed after them, like a little son, watching what they did and trying to learn from them and imitate them.

I think of St. John Cassian, the great monastic father of the fifth century, and how he spent his youth among the "athletes of prayer" in the Egyptian desert. He later traveled to France, where he founded monasteries and set down his memories

of the great men and women he had met and the lessons they had taught him.

There is an enigmatic story from fourth-century Egypt preserved in the sayings of the Desert Fathers:

> Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."[1]

I had consumed all those many books long before the fire consumed them. The last time I saw them, they had indeed "become all flame." Now I need to become what I found in them. I need to become all fire, with a blaze that can consume the world (see Luke 12:49).

Chapter 2

We Must Be Our Fathers' Children

I was born in 1954 to a Methodist mother and a Presbyterian father. On my mother's side, I come from a long line of preachers and circuit riders. My grandfather, James Cochran, was a preacher and a singer, so I've come by my work honestly. He and my grandmother, Maggie, traveled all over western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma, founding little churches.

I can't say I was raised for the family business. But my parents filled a world with goodness for their three children: my brother, Terry, my sister, Tanni, and me. My childhood days were rich with baseball, music, and the great outdoors. Any one of these pursuits was enough to occupy me through a very happy day. One such day, when I was four, I ventured into the woods on a vacant lot and found a moss-covered "fort" that other children had built and abandoned, probably years before. I spent hours in quiet solitude there while my parents anxiously searched the neighborhood for me.

My parents loved music. When my father was young, he played violin with the local symphony; and my mom played

piano. They recognized that we children had some natural gifts for it. Once, watching television, I saw a man playing banjo, and I was determined to do what he did. I tried to build myself a banjo out of parts I found around the house. My father saw all this and bought me a real one. Then he took a crucial step further. He found me a teacher named Steve Lawrence. He had himself studied under Jerry Waller, who at that time was a banjo player of near-legendary stature where we lived.

My parents, Dick and Jamie, fostered in me many natural goods that I still enjoy today. Our religious practice was probably typical of the suburbs in the postwar baby boom. It was regular, though not especially deep. My mother was a pastor's kid, and she had seen the unpleasantness that comes with congregational politics. She was wary of deep engagement. As with many families of our time, religion was something we knew intensely now and then, at Christmas and at funerals.

Even so, God himself intrudes. I remember riding in the car with my dad—I was maybe six years old—and looking out at the nighttime sky. I asked my father, "What is God like?"

He said, "Well, son, he is real big."

Dad accommodated infinity to my six-year-old mind, and I can still meditate on his response today.

My father encouraged all of us children to do what we loved; and, as we grew, music edged out all the other rivals for our attention. He stayed with us. In fact, Dad eventually became our manager and booking agent when my siblings and I launched our professional careers in music.

I've chronicled that career in other books. My friend Dan O'Neill told the story in detail in *Signatures: The Story of John Michael Talbot*. Here, it's enough for me to say that our star rose rapidly, first as the Quinchords, then as Sounds

Unlimited, then as Mason Proffit, and finally as the Talbot Brothers. We were the advance guard of the "Country Rock" wave that would sweep the country in the 1970s. We experienced all the giddiness of the rise to rock stardom, we played with just about everyone, and we keenly felt the dips in the roller coaster of the music industry. One year, John Denver was our opening act. The next year, we opened for him! All of this happened quickly and, it seemed, easily. We set our goals, and we achieved them, even while we were still teenagers. I should have been satisfied. Yet I was restless and wanted something more. I looked to the rock stars we were hanging out with, and they had everything we thought we wanted—but they were still unfulfilled and unhappy. I knew there had to be something more.

I began to have questions about God, but I wasn't sure how to pursue them. I looked for transcendence in human love, too, when at seventeen I met Nancy, who was intelligent, beautiful, and three years older than me. We moved in together; and then, under pressure from my parents, we married and soon had a child.

My religious questions, however, wouldn't go away. Was there something more than what the world called "success"?

At the beginning of his autobiographical *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." My own story tracks his rather closely at points—and perhaps especially in my twenties. Like Augustine, I was looking for transcendence and ecstasy. Nature presents shadows and images of these in human love, but the heart continues to strive after the divine reality that casts the shadow. If we don't recognize this, we run the risk of making human love into an idol, a false god.

In the process of discovering Jesus, my discovery found a focus of sorts in the Jesus Movement that was just then emerging from the 1960s counterculture. As I drew closer to Jesus, the people around me noticed a change. I was trying to be kind; I was striving not to be the arrogant adolescent I had been.

At the same time, I couldn't deny that my relationship with Nancy was faltering. She had married a rising rock star. I was becoming a serious Christian. We were married for only a few brief years when she confessed to me that she thought we had made a grave mistake. She said that I should have been a monk. In the Jesus Movement, at that time, there were many options available, but being a monk wasn't one of them. That's unfortunate, because perhaps I would have benefited if I'd had a sound tradition and community to form me.

More and more, I turned inward, but not always in good ways. My mentors in the Jesus Movement encouraged me to memorize Bible verses that could serve as a sure and inflexible rule of life. As a result, my "nice guy" phase was short-lived and gave way to a crabbed, closed, judgmental, obsessive phase. I developed opinions about everything. They were usually negative and usually about how other people were living. And I had a scripture—or three—to back up every opinion. I became insufferable in a new way. My bandmates would probably have preferred my old arrogance to this Christian variety. But I was sure I was right.

Inside, however, I was miserable. Nancy and I drifted apart. When we separated, I took refuge with my parents in Indiana. At their home, I proved her right by becoming something of a hermit—craving solitude, spending hours close to nature, trying to pray.