

Chapter 1

Submit!

An indistinct whispering filled the cell. Aine O’Riordan sat up trembling. She clutched the blankets and looked around. The beams of the half-moon struggling in a ragged night sky shone intermittently through the long narrow sash window, streaking her long fair hair with pale flecks. She listened intently. The unlocked door! Shadows passed across her. She swung towards the window. There was a smothered cry deep in the dark. Someone’s nightmare? Without thinking she rose and stumbled to the window. She could just make out a flock of fruit-bats gliding over the river far below and weaving through the moonbeams and shadows of the great eucalypts along the river banks. She listened again. Now there was nothing. Still trembling she crawled back into bed, took her rosary from the bedside cabinet and began whispering her prayers. She was drifting off into her meditation, when she suddenly felt pinned down. The whispering resumed. It came close to her face, close enough for her to feel the cold breath against her cheeks. She struggled to get up. She could not budge. Then she felt her nightdress being tugged at. She struggled desperately. The whispering, which she had not understood until then, pressed against her ear.

‘Submit!’ breathed a voice that sounded neither female nor male.

‘No!’

She tried to put her hand over her face.

‘Submit!’

‘No!’

There was a slow release of cold breath, as if someone was expiring.

‘You will submit.’

Despairing, she mounted a last desperate effort... Next moment, she opened her eyes to the early morning light creeping into the room. She found herself lying half-wrapped in her blankets on the floor. She was trembling uncontrollably. A sudden burst of magpie warbling in the morning chill of the surrounding gum trees dispelled the terror somewhat. There was a sharp knock against the door. She froze.

'Jesus suffering,' called a voice.

'We give Thee thanks, O Lord,' whispered Aine, relieved.

'I said, Jesus suffering,' repeated the voice.

'I'm sorry, Sister,' said Aine, hastening to the door. 'We give Thee thanks, O Lord.' The voice moved on.

All the time attempting to control her trembling, Aine quickly washed and donned the long black dress and veil that she had received the day before and joined the silent shuffling line of postulants as they made their way from the upper floor of the Convent of St Augustine to the chapel on the ground floor. The quiet rhythmical progression of the aspirant female religious helped Aine to settle as she took her place and walked in step. But as they were making their way along the gusting cloisters of the ground floor the whispering began anew.

It was so indistinct as to be almost inaudible. But she could hear it – she could hear something. Where was it coming from? Then she had the feeling that eyes were on her. She knew she should keep the custody of the eyes, but could not help glancing nervously around. She saw only the cold sandstone of the walls and cloister columns and the down-turned faces of her fellow postulants. 'Custody of the eyes,' she heard from a soft friendly voice directly behind her. She turned her eyes towards the ground, reassured by the voice. At the end of the cloisters, the postulants joined the novices issuing from their strictly sequestered quarters and followed them into chapel. As she took her place in one of the front pews, the postulant next to her leaned a little towards her.

'Are you all right?' It was the same friendly voice.

A glance revealed the attractive oval face and warm eyes the voice belonged to. It was one of the mature young women of the group that had entered the convent the day before. Aine nodded slightly, conveying with her eyes her gratitude for the friendly inquiry. She felt a gentle touch from an elbow. The communal prayers began and shortly she was immersed enough in her meditations to forget what was going on around her. Then the singing of the hours began. She joined in enthusiastically with her sweet voice. The terror of the night and the strange insistent whispering began to pass from her mind.

After Mass the community of nuns made their way to the refectory, where they were to eat in silence. Aine followed her fellow postulants and took a seat beside whoever happened to be in front of her. When the clacking and clanking of crockery and cutlery seemed to hold everyone in distraction, she looked around for the mature young woman. She thought for a moment she might be sitting next to her. But, no, there she was at the other end of the long table eating calmly and staring in front of her. Aine would follow her example and be content to

eat her breakfast while she pondered the life she had yet again taken steps to live. But her mind could only hover over it.

The whispering had gone, perhaps into the noise of the refectory, but she still had the feeling that eyes were on her, that she was being watched and observed. The furtive glances that she could not help casting around discovered nothing. Wherever she looked the eyes of the community were keeping their custody. Even the imposing Mother Prioress and her council of lieutenants sat expressionless at the front table with their eyes properly directed. Aine's heart sank. This was the third time since school that she had made a move to discern whether she had a vocation to the religious life. Each time, and in a different form, an inexplicable anxiety seemed to overtake her. Why? She felt she was being called. She had always felt that – that God had reserved something special for her. She had no desire for the things girls of her age wanted and enjoyed. She had no interest in boyfriends, fashions, music – all those things that had captured the attention of her contemporaries. She was sure she wanted a life devoted to God, to Jesus, to the Church – to doing God's will, taking Mary, Jesus's mother, as her model of humility, selflessness, and purity of mind and body. Then why the anxiety? And what was happening now with the whispering and the terror of the night? This was something new, something deeper, some new obstacle.

Her mind turned to the terror of the nightmare. Was it a nightmare, though? It had to be, surely. She would have heard footsteps and the shuffling of feet in the room. She would have heard the door open and close. She would have felt the person holding her down. But there was none of those things. She had felt the physical pressure of being pinned down, but nothing else. She was not even aware of the point where the attack had stopped and the person had gone. Attack? Was it that? In the convent? No, what she had feared did not happen. She was baffled. It must have been a nightmare, a terrible vivid nightmare. She tried to console herself with that thought, with the conclusion that it could not have been anything else. But she could not convince herself. She felt a strange unreality, as if dream and actuality were merging, and she could not know which was which. She was relieved when breakfast ended and the group of postulants made their way, as instructed, to their community room.

They had been sitting in silence for some minutes when the Prioress and Superior General of the order, Mother Jerome, glided into the room with the postulant mistress, Mother Cecilia. The postulants rose as one. Mother Jerome calmly gestured to the young women to resume their seats and then took her place in an armchair on the rostrum in front of them. She sat forward and upright, her shoulders very square and her

hands clasped lightly on her lap. Her demeanour was dignified and grave, projecting the authority of her position. But her eyes, in contrast, reflected a penetrating sympathy and understanding, and gave to her thin lips the appearance of being on the verge of an ironic smile. She made Mother Cecilia, who stood respectfully to the side, appear a little stiff and unbending. The turned-down sides of Mother Cecilia's mouth did not help in the comparison, Aine thought, feeling sorry for her. She could not alter what nature had bestowed unequally.

'Yesterday, you were welcomed formally into our convent as postulants in an appropriately dignified ceremony,' Mother Jerome began. 'Today I want to say a few words of welcome in a more relaxed way. I am pleased that this group of 1956 is so large, for there is much work to be done. Young women are more than ever in need of the right sort of education in order to make their way in our modern world. No doubt, some of you are here for that very reason – that you have experienced first-hand certain influences in what it pleases some to call our liberal society. In the course of your formation, should you pass through this period of postulancy, a period of careful discernment, you will be studying the background to those influences closely.' She paused and looked slowly around the room at the young faces.

'Our first motivation, however, must be what moved Eileen Foley, the foundress of our community of sisters. Eileen was once a young woman just like you, living in Belfast, leading the sort of life that comfortably off young women led. I would dare to say that she even mixed with young men, as some of you no doubt have done. Indeed, you may be surprised to learn that many years ago before I entered this convent, the species of young man was not wholly unknown to me.' Her lips broke into that slight always expected ironic smile. Aine felt the tension in the room dissolve. 'But life was not giving all that Eileen wanted. She led a good moral life and attended to her devotions and duty. But it was not enough. There was something missing. I dare say many of you recognized that feeling of incompleteness. I did. She began to meditate on the mystery of Jesus's redemptive suffering and death on the cross, the mystery that the world finds so ridiculous, a mystery of love. She resolved in her small way to respond with love to God's act of infinite love. That love was to be directed through the poor and uneducated to Jesus.

'Around 1850, Eileen moved to the slums of Dublin. It was not long before she perceived a need to minister to women, especially young women. There is much to this story to demonstrate the heroic virtue of Eileen Foley, but it is enough to say at this point that this was the beginning of the order which you have chosen to join, the Sisters of the

Suffering Saviour. Eileen Foley laid the groundwork for our foundation with her humility, selflessness, generosity, community spirit and especially her devotion to the Lord in His suffering. She gave the blueprint for the work that we are carrying on: the education of young women.’ Mother Jerome paused again, as if she was gauging how each young woman in the room was reacting to her words. She let her eyes alight on Aine. There was again the slight smile, but then a flicker of concern before her eyes moved on.

‘Our community is based on the ancient Rule of St Augustine, which Mother Cecilia will be examining in much detail with you. An understanding of the spirit of the Rule, and the interior response to it, is fundamental to your formation. In summary, it is a rule for a group of women living as one in charity devoted to the Lord and his Gospel. You will see how the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience arise quite naturally out of a foundation of religious based on this rule. It would not be otherwise. Without those vows it would not be the same religious commitment, not the same commitment to our Divine Master. You would not be able to take up the privilege only the female possesses: the privilege of becoming the loving spouse of that same Divine Master.’

Mother Jerome rose, but indicated that the young women were to remain seated.

‘Your period of postulancy is a time of self-examination, a time of deciding whether you are prepared to follow the process of emptying yourselves of all worldly attachments, of retreating from the self and all personal desires. Our order of nuns is not as strict and severe as some others. In our surrender to God we seek a balance between the withdrawn contemplative life and our vocation as teachers and carers. Nevertheless, in a way the life of a female religious is always a life against nature. You have to know that. You and your sisters will be able to judge whether you are truly willing and suitable to offer yourself in this grand way to God. Some of you will find in the course of the next few months that this calling is not for you. There is no shame in that. It means that Our Lord is calling you to something else.’

Aine listened eagerly. She was hearing about the sort of life that she wanted to lead. She heard the message she wanted to hear. She was filled with admiration for the dignity, authority and warmth that Mother Jerome radiated. This imposing woman filled her with zeal to do the work of the community. To be directed, to render obedience to a woman of this sort would not be a burden.

‘Before I leave you to the care of Mother Cecilia,’ Mother Prioress said, making ready to go, ‘I must make mention of the organizational

structure in which you will make your vow of obedience.’ She paused, once again with her slight smile. ‘I’m sure you would all much rather hear about the heroic early Christians who chose to be fed to the lions in the Coliseum rather than deny their faith, or St Francis’s talking to brother donkey, or of the travels to the Americas of those courageous missionary men and women. Unfortunately there are much drier subjects that need our attention. The following is of crucial importance for now and the future.

‘The vow of obedience seems increasingly for young people these days the hardest to imagine, and to keep. This is in part due to philosophical ideas that are gaining increasing currency. Every four years the professed sisters of our order elect a Mother Prioress and Superior General. The sister elected is given full organizational authority over our community. The votes of individual community members designate the person who will fill the office of Mother Prioress. The votes of the members, despite what is often affirmed nowadays, do not transfer authority from the members to that person to act out the will of its members. The person is designated; the authority comes from God. The exercise of authority is explicitly described by Our Lord himself. Our Lord came to serve. His apostles, especially his chief apostle, were to serve those committed to their care and jurisdiction. This is the proper constitution of authority: service and proclaiming the Gospel and God’s laws. Your vow of obedience does not render an obligation to me as a person; it renders obedience to the Lord, whose duties I must fulfil.’ Mother Jerome looked around the room once more.

‘It is possible that some of you are not quite sure what I am talking about or why I have taken the trouble to talk about it at all. In the course of your formation, indeed, in the course of your religious life, you will hopefully come to understand. I pray that you will understand if ever you are faced with a choice between the Church’s constant teaching on freedom, authority and obedience and certain views that are gaining increasing prominence in the secular world. Indeed, the clash of opposing views on those concepts is a matter for all society, not just for a religious community like ours. Unity and charity in service are at the heart of our community of religious sisters. Don’t forget that. I wish you all success in the coming months and pray that Holy Spirit leads you in the right direction.’

Mother Jerome bowed slightly and turned to leave the room. The postulants rose in silence. Mother Cecilia saw the Mother Prioress from the room. Aine’s heart was full, full of the commitment inspired by the Prioress’s brief talk, and confirmed in her desire to be a religious sister. She pushed aside the doubts; she drove out the terror and anxiety of

the night. Her only thought as she sat down at the bidding of the postulant mistress was that the night had all been a bad dream and foolish anxiety.

‘St Paul’s epistle to the Colossians,’ said Mother Cecilia, ‘chapter three, verses one to four:’

Brethren: Risen, then, with Christ, you must lift your thoughts above, where Christ now sits at the right hand of God. You must be heavenly-minded, not earthly-minded; you have undergone death, and your life is hidden away now with Christ in God. Christ is your life, and when He is made manifest, you too will be made manifest in glory with Him.

The rest of the morning passed in prayer and general instruction of the Rule and the behaviour expected of women religious. After lunch Mother Cecilia led the postulants from the cloisters down a steep rocky stairway past two level garden-bordered parapets to an open grassy area that stretched out to a ridge about ten feet above the Yarra River.

‘This is your first period of recreation,’ she said. ‘You are to use your time in accordance with the purposes of the period, all the while reflecting on the morning’s instruction. I will leave you to sit in conversation or to walk around the gardens. You are to get to know each other, not as seculars – for you are turning your backs on that life – but as fellow religious. Be careful of the ridge near the river. And the steps down to the jetty are strictly forbidden you.’ She then retreated to the next parapet where she could read her office and keep an eye on the young ladies.

Aine watched as the young women separated into small groups, chatting eagerly. A number seemed to know each other. She stood for a moment in indecision by a wooden bench. She must not give into her inclination to solitude, something that had long become a habit. The unrestrained laughter of some of the younger girls made her uncomfortable. She looked around for the mature young woman. She was talking with three others of around the same age, in the mid-twenties. Perhaps she should join those of her own age. But she was not one for giggling and exuberant conversation. Some of them turned and stared boldly at her, forcing her to make a move. She was on the point of moving reluctantly to the nearest group when the mature young woman caught her eye and beckoned.

‘You are not local, are you?’

‘No, I’m from Adelaide.’

‘Lovely town – my name is Virginia, Virginia Pearson.’

Virginia introduced Aine to her companions, who appeared to have acknowledged her pre-eminence. They greeted Aine with what looked like caution. With a brief account of their backgrounds completed, the conversation seemed stranded. There was some nervous movement, as Virginia’s companions now regarded Aine a little curiously.

‘Come on, let’s take a stroll along the gardens,’ said Virginia, moving off and giving Aine’s arm a short tug. Her decisive manner was reassuring because no matter how much Aine tried to ignore such curious expressions she was not always successful.

‘Are you happy with the idea of teaching?’ said Virginia abruptly to one of the young women, keeping a reassuring hand on Aine’s arm.

‘I am prepared to do whatever I’m told,’ Rose Lewis replied. ‘Mother Jerome said that there were other things I could do besides teaching.’ She glanced at Virginia. ‘I’m a good cook. And I don’t mind cleaning.’

‘That’s certainly important,’ Virginia smiled. ‘I’m hopeless in those things. My mother was always throwing her hands in the air at my kitchen clumsiness.’

The conversation then passed lightly and generally over the subject of the order’s schools and homes until they arrived near the ridge overlooking the river. There was a group of three younger women already there looking down at the dark green waters.

‘Go on,’ one was saying in a loud whisper. ‘You don’t dare.’

The threesome turned and looked furtively towards the postulant mistress whose attention at that moment was on her breviary. One of the girls, a tallish solid girl, quickly bent down amidst suppressed giggles and picked up some loose stones lying near the edge. With a sly look, she threw a stone into the river. There was a soft plop as the stone hit the water. She smirked at her companions and raised her eyebrows. Aine saw Virginia frown.

‘Come on,’ Virginia said, ‘let’s walk a little further.’

Their companions appeared not to hear and continued to watch the younger women as Aine and Virginia made their way to a wooden bench not far away.

‘I sometimes think it’s not wise for the convent to take girls directly from school,’ said Virginia. ‘Some experience of the world...oh, I’m sorry,’ she said, glancing at Aine, ‘there are, of course, exceptions.’

‘I have been more than a year out of school. I worked in my father’s business while I contemplated my future.’

‘Really? I would have thought you were younger.’

‘I was a year ahead of the others in my class. My father thought I could start school early.’

‘With your slight figure and fair hair, you actually look younger than the girls there.’ She nodded in the direction of the group still at the ridge overlooking the river. Aine blushed at the attention. Virginia smiled. ‘Your father was vindicated in his judgment if you passed through school without any trouble.’

‘I think I was naturally quiet and studious...not academic, but enough to do well...’

‘Are you all right now?’

‘Yes, well...what do you...?’

‘You looked agitated this morning...and pale, like you had seen a ghost.’ She gave a little laugh, but then hastened to say, ‘You really were upset, weren’t you?’

‘I was a little shaken from a bad dream. I’m probably not settled yet.’

‘What sort of bad dream?’

Aine was saved further discomfort by the approach of the three younger women who had been near the ridge.

‘Hello, you two,’ said the one who had thrown the stone into the water, ‘I’m Margaret McGuigan and this is Elizabeth Parker and Jannie de Kam.’ She sat down on a bench opposite. The other two followed her example while Virginia introduced herself and Aine.

‘You’re from Holland, no doubt,’ said Virginia to Jannie de Kam, a tall pretty girl with an unblemished ivory complexion and a full head of long flowing brown hair bursting from under the black veil.

‘Yes, my family arrived two years ago,’ said Jannie, her accent still noticeable.

‘I had quite a few Dutch children in my classes, children of migrants. Do you three know each other?’

‘Elizabeth and I know each other from school,’ said Margaret, who seemed to have assumed the leadership of the trio. ‘We met Jannie at the Youth Club. We hit it off. We think the same way.’

‘And what way is that,’ said Virginia.

‘Oh, the teacher saw me throwing stones,’ Margaret grinned. ‘You don’t have to go all timid and silent just because you want to be a nun.’

‘No, I don’t suppose so. But we’ll have to develop habits of discipline to deal with a class full of restless students.’ There was no mistaking Virginia’s meaning.

‘The girls in my class will have to watch out,’ said Margaret, mimicking the manner of a severe old-fashioned headmistress. ‘I’ll certainly learn them habits of discipline.’ Her friends tried to suppress smiles while she calmly brushed her veil back over her shoulders.

‘It will be an advantage if you are able to maintain your cheerfulness,’ said Virginia.

‘We had a wonderful teacher,’ Margaret went on. ‘Sister Andrew was always cheerful and enthusiastic. She made our classes fun – more like a girls’ club. It can’t be that hard.’

‘Depends on the teacher’s attitude. Cheerfulness and class order are not impossible.’

‘There were other nuns like that,’ added Elizabeth. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘Me, too,’ said Margaret, ignoring Virginia’s meaning.

‘No doubt the girls’ club carried its fun over to the youth club,’ said Virginia.

Aine looked at Virginia in surprise.

‘Not one bit,’ said Margaret, with sudden vehemence. ‘Those stupid boys! I don’t know how the girls put up with those ignorant dopes, let alone dating them. Yuk!’ She shuddered and stood up. ‘We had much more fun at school with the nuns.’

‘Yes,’ said Elizabeth, in bold support.

Jannie nodded her agreement, but not with conviction.

‘Many people think the nuns too stern and strict,’ Virginia continued to prod.

‘I’ll be stern and strict, too.’ Margaret resumed an air of playful defiance. ‘I’ll be the boss. But I will let my girls have some fun.’ She pulled a face that seemed to mean that she had said enough on that subject. ‘What made you want to become a nun,’ she said abruptly to Aine. ‘I bet you had plenty of groping boys running after you.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Aine, looking away.

There was a brief silence as if Margaret and her friends expected Aine to explain. Margaret shrugged her shoulders. ‘If you don’t want to talk about it...’

‘There’s nothing to say,’ said Aine. ‘After school I worked in my father’s business while I was deciding what I wanted to do.’

Each of the young women looked silently at her.

‘I think Aine wants to keep that private,’ said Virginia.

‘If it’s a secret...’ said Margaret.

‘What did you think of Mother Jerome’s talk about obedience and the governance of the order?’ said Virginia.

Again, Aine found Virginia’s undisguised aggressiveness odd.

‘I didn’t know what she was on about,’ said Elizabeth.

‘She was talking about the justification for authority and the vow of obedience.’

‘I know we have to be obedient,’ said Jannie, looking around in an uncertain way. ‘But what was all that about elections?’

‘She just wanted to say she’s still the boss, just like at school,’ said

Margaret. ‘We’ll get lines if we muck up.’ She grinned at her companions. ‘It’s just like school, really. And we’ll work out ways to get around it – and have some fun, too. Do you remember the sly digs Collie used to make about Mother Superior?’ she said to Elizabeth. ‘Hilarious!’ They both giggled.

‘Who is Collie?’ asked Virginia.

‘Sister Columba, our chemistry and physics teacher. She was great, really understanding, and a lot of fun.’

‘Does the name Leo XIII mean anything to you?’

Elizabeth and Jannie looked blankly at Virginia.

‘Who’s that?’ said Margaret. ‘My Irish background has not given me much respect for royalty.’ She looked keenly at Aine. ‘You have a double-barrel Irish name. How far back does it go?’

‘My grandparents arrived in Australia from Belfast.’

‘Belfast? You’d be full of it, too. Do you know who Leo whatshisname is?’

‘He was a Pope.’

‘A Pope?’ Margaret could not hide her surprise.

‘Pope Leo XIII was perhaps the most important pope of the last hundred years,’ lectured Virginia. ‘His social encyclicals laid out in precise detail the social teaching of the Church. Subsequent papal announcements have taken their lead from his work. Mother Prioress’s comments on the nature of authority are drawn from that teaching.’

‘Oh,’ said Margaret, deliberately looking bored.

‘Are you familiar with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*?’

Elizabeth and Jannie continued to look blankly at Virginia. Margaret frowned.

‘*Rerum Novarum*, known by its English title *The Condition of the Working Classes* was a seminal commentary on the clash between the ideologies of capitalism and socialism. His Holiness pointed out that the solution for society’s ills could not be provided by either ideology.’

‘Well?’ said Margaret.

‘You really have never heard about it?’

‘What if I haven’t?’

‘Your Collie did not mention it?’

The unrelenting poking and prodding was effective. Margaret went red in the face. ‘She was our science teacher. I was her best student.’

‘Are you familiar with any of the Church’s social writings,’ Virginia continued to goad, to Aine’s increasing bewilderment.

There was no response from the three friends. Margaret’s playfulness had gone and she began to glare at Virginia.

‘I wonder why you are here,’ said Virginia calmly.

‘Keep wondering,’ Margaret retorted immediately. ‘It’s got nothing to do with you. You’re not the postulant mistress, so you can keep your lectures to yourself.’ She got up. ‘Not only was I the best science student, I was also dux of the school.’

‘Your problems will not be resolved by running away to a convent.’

‘You’re one of us,’ said Margaret, between her teeth. ‘If I know little about some dead and forgotten pope, I know what equality is. I think charity and sisterhood are more important than knowledge of some dry historical fact. You deal with your own problems and forget about those you think I have.’ She walked off, with Elizabeth and Jannie following.

Virginia watched them for some moments. ‘I suppose you are wondering why I was lecturing them in that manner.’

‘Yes, I was,’ said Aine, thinking it was far more than lecturing. ‘I don’t think many Catholics are really aware of the existence of papal encyclicals.’

‘You are right, of course. It’s the result of a failing educational system. But you would think those who want to enter religious life would have some idea.’ She paused. ‘Well, have you heard of *Rerum Novarum*?’

‘Yes.’

‘From whom?’

‘My father. He’s involved with other men in fighting the communist threat in the workplace.’

‘Ah yes, good for him. Mine too. It’s a big struggle. It proves my point, though.’ She rose. ‘Come on, let’s walk some more. I’m not so serious all the time.’

They walked in silence to the far end of the garden. Aine pondered the unexpectedly aggressive manner of Virginia Pearson, who was otherwise composed and friendly, her open attractive face and bright confident eyes adding extra warmth to that friendliness, despite her sometimes sophisticated manner. Margaret and her companions did seem a little frivolous and cheeky, but it was only the first full day of their postulancy. Everyone needed time to adjust and settle in. Besides, there were many girls with high spirits like Margaret and Elizabeth. As a teacher Virginia should know that. Jannie de Kam was more subdued, though evidently admiring the bold outgoing manner of Margaret McGuigan. Virginia evidently saw more in Margaret and Elizabeth’s behaviour than her. Perhaps her experience as a teacher gave her more insight. Aine foresaw continuing friction.

While Aine pondered Virginia’s attitude, Virginia was reflecting on the unusual girl walking meekly beside her. From the moment of catching sight of her looking nervously around the cloisters, she saw some-

thing different in Aine. She understood Margaret's spontaneous comment about her appeal to boys. Aine was not just good-looking; she was striking in an unusual way. The slight girlish figure and the pale spotless complexion with the long silky fair hair would turn heads. She surely would not have escaped the attention of eligible males. Virginia could only conclude that she had taken steps to avoid mixing socially. But it was the meek manner that went with the appearance that struck her most. Whatever Aine's education and understanding of Church teaching, it was clear that there was spiritual depth to this childlike young woman. They arrived at the end of the garden where a high wire fence prevented them from going any further.

'Let's linger here for the moment,' said Virginia, turning to walk along the fence. Aine followed her without saying anything. They headed away from the riverside and came to a large rocky grotto built against the parapet embankment. There was a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes high up in a niche. Below on a ledge midway from the ground was a statue of St Bernadette kneeling. Virginia stopped and looked up at the statues.

'I asked Margaret and her friends why they were here,' Virginia began thoughtfully. 'The truth is that each of us should ask herself why she is here. That may seem an unnecessary question. One becomes a priest or brother or nun because one is religious. But that's an unthinking view. Plenty of people are faithful and virtuous Christians without it entering their heads to join the religious life.' She threaded her arm through Aine's. 'Let's sit down.' They sat on a stone bench facing the grotto, Virginia remaining thoughtful.

'I was going along minding my own business when it hit me,' Virginia resumed softly. 'I came from a good Catholic family, never questioned my faith, always attended to it; I left school and went to teachers' college, passed my exams and began teaching; I had caring friends and was popular with my students. Everything looked laid out before me. Shortly I would get married, have children and live happily ever after. Then for some unknown reason, I picked up a dusty book lying on the library shelves. It was St Augustine's *Confessions*. Its first paragraph changed my life forever. Are you familiar with it?' Aine shook her head. 'The first three sentences are from the psalms.'

Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty? How magnificent His strength! How inscrutable His wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought

of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

‘I found fathomless meaning in these few words – meaning from faith and meaning from reason. It stayed with me for days. Reading the *Confessions* was the start of my reading about the role of reason in defending and adhering to our Christian belief. I won’t go on any more about it – and I didn’t mean to begin. I am such a big mouth.’ She shrugged and glanced at Aine, all the aggressiveness of a few minutes before gone. ‘Anyhow, my reading found its way to papal writings. It was there I found my calling. You see, our devotions are fundamental to the expression of our faith. But I think it’s also important for us to know and understand the teaching behind our most expressive rituals. Can you see now why I questioned Margaret and her friends?’ She paused but did not give Aine time to answer. ‘I get so irritated by the cavalier attitude of...’ and then as if trying to shrug off the sudden irritation, ‘your feelings about being called came from quite a different source, didn’t they?’

‘I am afraid that I have never thought about it...I mean in the way you said,’ replied Aine. ‘I felt drawn by my understanding of Our Lord’s life and death and the example of His spotless mother. The perfect offering of one’s existence to God...I could not refuse.’

‘You’re not familiar with the Church’s great philosophers or their arguments supporting the Church’s doctrinal teaching, are you – St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, for example?’

‘No, if you mean actually reading their works. I know about them as saints, as examples of Christian living. The nuns spoke about them.’

‘You know about them the same way you know and admire such saints as St Francis of Assisi, St Therese of Lisieux, St Maria Goretti and others?’

‘Yes, those are among my favorite saints.’

‘That says a lot about you. You know these saints are known mostly for heroically living the message of the Gospels, and not for any philosophical work?’

‘Yes, I suppose you are right. I have never thought about that.’

‘You know, too, that you’re contemplating joining what is mainly a teaching order?’

If Aine had had little idea where Virginia’s questions were leading, she was now confronted sharply with the point being made. She had discussed a religious vocation with various people, including her parents, the nuns at school, the local priest, but none of them brought this

up. She was aware of the difference between a contemplative life and a vocation of teaching, but it had for some strange reason never figured in her search for the right religious congregation. She had naively thought that all religious would be contemplative to some extent or another. The idea of teaching a classroom of girls or caring for the infirm seemed to her something tacked onto the primary purpose of a religious life. It was a charitable task to be done willingly, and with self-sacrifice if necessary.

‘I understand your meaning,’ she said at last, and embarrassed that she had kept Virginia waiting for an answer.

‘I don’t mean to confront you the way I did with those silly school girls... , but it’s something for you to think about.’ Virginia then added reassuringly, ‘Your commitment to the religious life is obviously strong.’

Aine was grateful for her new friend’s support, and said so, but it did nothing to ease the disturbing anxiety she had so far experienced in her search for the right religious order. It flashed through her mind that the anxiety might be due in part to a presumption that she would immediately have her yearnings gratified in the first order she applied to.

‘I have not had an easy road so far, I have to say. I have been very indecisive.’

‘You have to expect that. It’d be strange if you didn’t...I don’t expect to sail through, either. None of us can be sure that we are suited. We are here to find out.’ Virginia stopped and considered the pearly unblemished face looking at her. ‘Was that the cause of your anxiety this morning?’ Aine’s face tensed. ‘Is it something more than that?’ Aine started, her mouth a little open. ‘It is, isn’t it?’ She took her hand. ‘Don’t worry, we are in this together. If I can ever be of support – a conversation, a friendly word – one glance is enough.’

‘Thank you,’ said Aine softly.

‘Come on,’ said Virginia, standing up, ‘I’m being too serious again. And I don’t mean to lecture, although it must sound frequently like I do. I’m always getting me into trouble for airing my opinions.’ She gave a little helpless laugh and walked closer to the grotto. ‘You know,’ she said looking up at the weather-worn statue in the niche above them, ‘this is what I like about our faith. It’s the specific concrete narrative; it’s the humanizing of some difficult abstract teaching. Before us is the story of the simple faith-filled peasant girl who received apparitions of Jesus’s mother. It’s also about the dogma of the Immaculate Conception – something that needs to be understood and explained to bemused outsiders. Come on, let’s kneel before this beautiful narrative and say a prayer that the Holy Spirit will guide us through the next nine months.’