

North of Hope

A Consideration of the theology of priesthood

A Senior Studies Report

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I. Analysis

John Hassler's *North of Hope* is an attempt to show that God transcends all things. His main character, Frank Healy, rediscovers his pastoral self by realizing more deeply the love he has for his God and the woman he has always loved. Libby, Frank's high school sweetheart, grabs on to him with passion and desperation in hopes that they can rediscover their love for each other. After 20 years they meet again with different lives. Libby has gone through three troubled marriages which have left her betrayed and demoralized to the extent of suicide.

For 20 years Fr. Frank has served on the staff of a Catholic academy in a big city. The bishop has closed the school and Frank falls apart (Greeley 366).

Frank, coming from both his love for Libby and his passion as pastor, goes to her side and begins to fill her emptiness of depression with the balm of God. Frank finds himself caught up in his love for her and his own vulnerability in questioning his calling to priesthood.

Contemporary theology of the priesthood teaches us that the call to priesthood comes from our home parish, the group which establishes the existence of God in our lives.

God always calls his priests from specific human and ecclesial contexts, which inevitably influence them; and to these same contexts the priest is sent for the service of Christ's Gospel (John Paul II 12).

Therefore Hassler shows his readers that by the beginning of the book the formation of Frank had already begun. How did Frank get to the altar? Was he instructed by God through his personal need to experience a deeper spiritual realm or was this his Catholic expectation from his mother and Eunice Pfeiffer? Frank, at first is serving at mass and is compelled, either by the need to be responsible to his Catholic family (father, mother and Eunice) or because he knows serving is a rewarding experience even at the age of seven. He feels privileged to be in the presence of his pastor, Father Lawrence, who he is fond of.

. . . he [Frank] had accompanied Father Lawrence to Basswood and served mass with three Indian boys, Our Lady's on the Basswood Reservation being a mission church attached to St. Anne's in Linden Falls, Father Lawrence being pastor to both parishes, and Frank (altar boy at St. Ann's since the age of seven) being very fond of the pastor and accompanying him on errands whenever possible, liturgical and otherwise (13).

This is or at least from Hassler's point of view seems to be, the first sentiment of priesthood we get of Frank Healy. The fondness Frank has for Fr. Lawrence is associated with the Church and ideally manifests itself in a positive image of that type of lifestyle (priesthood) in Frank.

After Frank's mother died, Eunice took the liberty to take on the instruction of Frank and the discipline of getting him to priesthood: ". . . but what did her

personal happiness matter (she was fond of saying) as long as she had helped to create a priest of God".

In Robert Schwartz's book, *Servant Leaders of the People of God*, an ecclesial spirituality for American priests, he speaks of this calling of the faithful into a more increased participation in sacraments:

The desire to serve the Lord and the church in some ministerial capacity has captivated a remarkable number of the faithful, the emergence of new ministries and the provision of ministry training programs for them being a major preoccupation of church life (Schwartz 188).

Frank is already playing a role of "minister" and example by way of his adherence to Fr. Lawrence's lifestyle. Frank spends most of his time with Fr. Lawrence and enjoys the company of the priest. Frank questions what a calling is and how a person receives it. It may be a typical question and even normal occurrence for a young boy in a small town to spend such a large amount of time with a priest who is (an easy companion). But given the emphasis of Hassler on these early details of Frank Healy's life, concluding that Frank Healy would become a priest seems more than likely.

The following citations support the "priestly" activity that Frank has begun:

he [Frank] has accompanied Father Lawrence to Basswood to serve Mass. . . , being very fond of the pastor and accompanying him on errands whenever possible, liturgical and otherwise (13). And then there was that

evening once or twice a week when Father Lawrence and Eunice Pfeiffer either them for dinner or invited them to the rectory. Frank was eager for these evenings . . . (16).

The question of priesthood is brought to a startling awareness, when he is told his mother says, "I want Frank to be a priest". The fact that Frank was already unconditionally committed to his mother's will already, and then with her last words given to him in the form a request, or more precisely (as Frank saw it) a decision, he realized that he had to be a priest. "'Will I be a priest?' He looked troubled. 'If it's my decision, it's hard to know what to do.' Then he brightened a little. 'But if it's my mother's, then it's easy'(35).

The text here goes on to express the feelings and thoughts conveyed from Libby. Here we will define Libby acutely as a symbol of secular society (one who does not understand the Catholic priesthood and who is in the American society). She gives a perfect response which could be classified as stereotypical of today's secular society: "Listen, Frank it's your life, so it's your decision. How could it possibly be anyone else's". Frank feels a calling in him, but he does not know what it is. "Frank, I don't see how anybody could ever want to be a priest". Libby voices her opinion of Frank's priestly ideas. Her response is typical of how American society would question Catholic priesthood. John Paul II refers to

pressures which make discernment difficult for American young boys and men. Libby is an example of the type of mentality that argues against Catholic priesthood. John Paul II explains in detail the specific dysfunctions that challenge American Catholic men.

The many contradictions, and potentialities marking our societies and cultures, as well as ecclesial communities, are perceived, lived and experienced by our young people with a particular intensity and have immediate and very acute repercussions on their personal growth. Thus, the emergence and development of priestly vocations among boys, adolescents and young men are continually under pressure and facing obstacles. The lure of the so-called "consumer society" is so strong among young people that they become totally dominated and imprisoned by an individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic interpretation of human existence. Material "well-being", which is so intensely sought after, becomes the one ideal to be striven for in life, a well-being which is to be attained in any way and at any price. There is a refusal of anything that speaks of sacrifice and a rejection of any effort to look for and to practice spiritual and religious values. The all-determining "concern" for having supplants the primacy of being, and consequently personal and interpersonal values are interpreted and lived not according to the logic of giving and generosity but according to the logic of selfish possession and the exploitation of others (John Paul II 19-20).

The influence of the modern world attributes diversely to factors which initially question the likelihood of a rightly formed priest. The United Council of Catholic Bishops address this conundrum in our society.

Candidates for the priesthood are immersed in a rapidly changing world, deeply affected by secularism and its manifestations which have marked this century (consumerism, materialism, pragmatism, etc.). These factors undoubtedly

have a negative influence on formation. On the other hand, there are elements which exercise a positive effect: for example, a committed faith, a united family, a sound culture, solidarity, the promotion of human rights, etc. Many responses have called for an assertion of the fact that Christ is always the one who calls. He continues to call even in our own day and will provide priests for His Church and the whole world, as ministers of His pastoral charity (USCC 15).

Frank's archetype for his missionary calling came from a nostalgic attachment to Fr. Zell, the lone frontier priest who first braved the northern wastelands of upper Minnesota against climatic adversity so as to bring sacraments to converted Indians.

A great man, Fr. Zell, one of the true saints of the church. His parish was practically the whole northern tier of counties, and he'd think nothing of walking fifty miles to marry baptize or bless a fresh grave. (61)

Throughout his life Frank followed his "forefather of asceticism", Fr. Zell, as an example to himself of the kind of sacrifice he must endure to simplify his life and live the Christlike example. There was a point in Fr. Zell's ministry that particularly interested Frank; the last hours of this "saint's" life he lived with complete trust in his mission and faithfulness to his people. The following passage originates from Frank's ardent aspiration for ministry. This particular story of Fr. Zell impressed Frank to the extent that he too wanted to be a spiritual hero and live out the Christlike example like Fr. Zell. The story reads like this:

. . . . He started out across the ice to celebrate a second Mass over there on the far shore. In those days there was another clan of Indians living over there. . . . Now, of course he'd had nothing to eat since midnight because he had that second Mass to celebrate, and so he was already weak from lack of nourishment when a sudden wind sprang up and picked the snow off the ice and obscured his vision. He walked and walked and never found land. At one point the Indians waiting caught a glimpse of him in the blowing snow and a party of men set out to guide him, but they, too, were baffled by the wind, and when they finally came upon his body, his heart had already stopped and his arms and legs were frozen so they couldn't bend them. The nearest weather station in those days was Minneapolis, two hundred and fifty miles south of here, and they had a temperature of twenty-two below zero that Christmas Day. So enthralled was Frank by the Father Zell story (perhaps, in part, because his own mother had died on Christmas Day), that he'd made it his business to read every book and pamphlet Father Lawrence could find for him on the early priests of the north woods. (61-2)

Oddly enough, outside his pressuring from Eunice, Frank's subtle escalation of lifestyle and thoughts toward a priestly life became apparent with his association with Fr. Lawrence. An obvious transition was his changing of childhood heroes.

Poring over the inflated, pietistic prose of these booklets, Frank was tempted to transfer his worship from certain baseball players (Ted Williams, Johnny Mize, and Bob Feller were his holy Trinity) to the team of frostbitten, mosquito-bitten, God-bitten men who suffered incredible hardships to bring Christ to the frontier (62).

Further on in this passage is an allusion to how Frank will live out his parish life (or would envision it) right on the reservation, far from other priests who did the same pastoral work as he.

They were a small team--nine priests in all of northern Minnesota in the late 1800s--and because of the vast distances between settlements they seldom saw one another, each going his solitary way on foot and horseback, by sleigh and railroad, by canoe and lumber wagon, carrying the sacraments across the prairies and into the forest and leaving behind in every hamlet and tent and sod hut the solace of Christ's redemption. Wherever they went, all nine were respected by the faithful and faithless alike, but only Father Zell (Frank learned from his reading) was the Indians spoken of with admiration bordering on love. God's Pathfinder, the Indians called him. Whites and Indians alike traveled in caravans to Berrington, the seat of the diocese, following his body to its grave (62).

Frank read these books of brave priests and was awed at their heroic achievements. It seems that Frank saw these men as an example of either idealized mythical legends, something to be admired and people who answered the call of the times. But also he viewed them as realistic men who struggled against natural barriers to bring the Church to God's people. Hassler does not mention what goes on in Frank's mind but Frank's actions give us a hint to where these stories are leading him. He pursues questioning Fr. Lawrence, his childhood companion, what is a "calling" to priesthood? Frank was so captivated by and interested in these rugged persevering priests that he took it on himself to question even his own calling. The first steps of reflection in his calling have sparked the recognition of the (Holy) spirit within him. Playing with this new inspiration occurring in his mind (mainly because of not

knowing what it was) Frank questions Fr. Lawrence: "'How old were you when you heard the call?(63)'" As with all callings (including those of all people, not just priests) there is a search to find what we are to do in life, or to become aware what God has planned for us. This requires a communication "link" of sorts which displays to us a way to plan our course of action. However, this is not a simple procedure, for it requires from the person a commitment to prayer and reflection with an open mind for God's "footprints" and "broken branches" from the feet of His people. Adrian, Fr. Lawrence, answers Frank, "'The voice doesn't come from above so much as from within.'" and "'There will be a sign(63)'".

The pursuance of living the Christlike example is an arduous task fulfilled only after many years of experience. This "imitating" of Christ, as Frank aspires to imitate Fr. Zell, becomes his sole focus throughout his priestly life. Assimilating his readings of the prophetic Zell, Frank puts in to action a lifelong following by his purposeful imitation. Edward Malatesta explains imitation as explained in the gospels.

The task of the Christian is not to read the gospel but to live it, or better still, in the challenging words of John XXIII, 'to bring the modern world into contact with the vivifying, perennial, and divine energies of the gospel.' At first, imitation tends to look to *the past*, to the existence of Christ in history but it is in *the present* that it must be lived so as to become a discernible and actual sign of His presence and action in the world today (Malatesta 84).

Malatesta explains the understanding of imitation that should be lived out according to the gospels. The world today must realize that Christ is present now, and by living that gospel reality we show a symbol of his presence in our lives. Along with that imitation that Frank struggles to actuate is the understanding that Christ too was human, which means he also struggled with human events. In the following citation Frank is caught in a struggle which makes him uncomfortable with his priestly calling. The struggle is between the romantic high school love he still remembers for Libby and the commitment he has discerned for priesthood.

My heart is kicking with something I'm afraid is love. I've got enough trouble putting my vocation back together without a woman stealing my heart (164).

This self disclosure of Frank brings to light the emotional depth (love) he has for Libby, however during a vocation crisis the moment catches him vulnerable and "agitated" with the sudden imbalance of childhood love and adult commitment.

John Paul II comments that one of the most challenging aspects of training priests is the commitment to keeping them "updated" the how people change with the Church. If we are to keep the Church strong we must keep our priests strong, both for themselves and for their people. That strength comes from their constant reevaluating of their significance in God's calling of them. John Paul II says:

The formation of future priests, both diocesan and religious, and life-long assiduous care for their personal sanctification of the ministry and for the constant updating of their pastoral commitment are considered by the Church one of the most demanding and important tasks for the future of the evangelization of humanity (John Paul II 5).

Even after a struggling moment with his love for Libby, Frank still goes back to prayer to God. As Frank drives away he realizes his easing of spirit and natural turning to God. In his summoning of God with a mysterious change he finds another sign to his calling:

Dear God, am I not the happiest man in the world and doesn't life make perfect sense? Libby is Tom's wife and my bond with her has nothing to do with sex because it's a pure mingling of souls. And isn't this a gorgeous afternoon--the sun slanting across the fresh snow and the tattered snow clouds trailing away to the east and, dear God, look there, those handsome horses grazing in that snowy pasture, their rough winter coats tawny in the sunlight (164-65).

Even in his "apparent crisis" he continues to go back to God. The above quote signifies how Frank has been called to have an unique recognition of God in his life. Even when he was a child he was comfortable with being by himself in nature, serving on the altar, and pondering the deeper meaning in things. Frank possesses the gift of God's friendship. This friendship to the loving God works through Frank to Libby. The one person in Frank's life who lives that love is Monsignor Lawrence.

Frank admires in the Monsignor's old age how "superb" his listening skills have been honed. Even at his age, with geriatric patients who talk his ear off, it seems that there is some grace that the Monsignor has acquired through his years to fully give to these needy people. The following citation by Schwartz recognizes how Monsignor Lawrence has maintained and refined his life to give of service and witness the coming of God.

In gathering and guiding people, priests are to focus on two objectives: service to human need, and witness to a kingdom which is present and still to come (Schwartz 215).

As the book progresses it is obvious that Frank reflects on his life regularly and without the accompaniment of other people. Hassler seems to have created an atmosphere for a person who fits the priesthood to a tee, without having revealed that was his intention. However, Hassler's view of Frank, with its constant struggle to find self-understanding through Frank's humanness, Frank is overwhelmed by alcoholism, love for Libby, and transition between professor and pastor.

Throughout the novel the reader is carried away by Frank's lifestyle surrounded by this crisis, which at first reveals itself as a mark against priesthood, but actually is the means (experientially) to his greater prayer life and spirituality. The original "calling" that Frank had as a child is even stronger now because it has undergone refinement through God's revelation in Frank's experience.

It is important to note that the calling to priesthood has not changed, but that person to whom it is revealed has captured enough of the signal to know where to proceed in life. Frank has recognized that whisper of God's voice to be a deeper level of understanding of their calling, calling more to a committed mission of discipleship.

The beauty of Hassler's priests is that in *North of Hope*, they are not letter perfect individuals (inhuman), but instead fully human people challenged with the cross of sinfulness in the grace of God. With that said, there is a Christlike quality in Hassler's priests, but especially in Fr. Frank who focuses on Jesus's example in his entire life. The following is an example where Frank is fulfilling the example of Christ.

His stall was partially curtained off, so that he could see neither the pews nor the altar. He had a view only of the oil burner, and above it, on the wall, a small ceramic portrayal of the Eighth Station, *Jesus speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem*" (280).

This is an allusion of Frank's counseling to Eunice, Verna, and Libby under the pain of his "big leak" symbolizing his own personal crown of thorns. Even with Frank's many years of education, he understands definitively how humility works. Humbly he applies his suffering servant role as a priest eager to serve his people. Frank, focuses on how he exists in the eyes of God within the Pearsalls' controversy. Opening himself to prayer and listening to God he finds peace. The following

quote emphasizes the how the Christlike image is key to the priest's vocation and imitation of Christ throughout his life.

Therefore the true minister of Christ is conscious of his own weakness and labors in humility. He proves what is well-pleasing to God and, bound as it were in the Spirit, he is guided in all things by the will of him who wishes all men to be saved. He is able to discover and carry out that will in the course of his daily routine by humbly placing himself at the service of all those who are entrusted to his care by God in the office that has been committed to him and the variety of events that make up his life (Ordinas Documents 15).

This document on priesthood captures well how a priest should live with the cross of humanity. He also specifies the importance of being humble in God not only because of our struggles but also because of our commitment to the people of God. Frank models such humimility before God throughout the novel.

The passage of Frank in the confessional goes on to include the following quote where he himself parallels Jesus during the Passion of the Cross.

Jesus and the three women with their heads together, he wearing a crown of thorns and encumbered by his cross, the women weeping into their cloaks (280-81).

The cross of Frank is this life of uncontrollable doubt, the "big leak". The doubt of being unable to see himself as he should be or would want to be is his failed attempt in his eyes to see his efforts bare fruit or grow in his parish, the difficult crisis of the Pearsalls and his doubt

about whether he is a good priest mixed with his love for Libby, and lastly, his transition of starting over with the seminary shutdown encompass Frank's "big leak". But in all of his challenges Frank is still a priest who involves himself into the lives of his parishioners. He denies himself to be the living image of Christ.

This Christlike challenge of Frank's priestly theology is his complete involvement into the matters of his parishioners. He is living the life of Christ, the person of Jesus who yearns to give these people the kingdom of God through his presence in their life. He is always diving into peoples' problems and asking God what he is to do with them and how to bring them closer to God through his own talents and example. Hassler invokes in his readers with Healy a sense of complete devotion to his work of discovery, being the living of the incarnate Word which has been both taught to Frank and also experienced through his prayerful reflective lifestyle. Frank looks to find in people and himself the love which he has for God. This love is additionally seen by Libby through her perspective in a way that encompasses the romantic, charismatic, and caring part of love. However beautiful that love of hers may be, such as in her relational confidence with Frank, a conflict arises between how he can show her real love and how she can (or would want to) show him love. Frank displays his celibate commitment to show to Libby how she

needs to realize the love Frank has been giving her, that being an unconditional type. Late in the novel a scene in Libby's apartment accentuates this in vivid detail.

She was in the bedroom a minute or more before she called to him and went to the door and saw her standing naked beside the bed. She put her arms out to him. 'Lie down with me, Frank.' . . . 'Libby don't you understand.' . . . He picked up her robe off the bed and draped it around her shoulders, guiding her hands into the sleeves. She was trembling. As he drew the lapels together over her breasts he reflected not with regret so much as wonder on the superhuman perversity expected of the priest, the contrariness of covering the sublime nakedness of a woman other men—normal men—would naturally disrobe. And yet this did not feel like perversity to Frank. Not tonight. Not with Libby so distracted, so desperate, so vulnerable. It felt like common sense. 'You're absolutely right, Frank. I'll never, never understand' (409-10).

Since Libby does not know what real love is and Frank is her most intimate companion, there lies a sharing of selves that lets each other open to growth. Libby, through her trials of marriage and experiences in vocational choices, seeks a deeper fulfillment in her experience of love. Frank provides that in his pious direction. But Libby does not catch on to this until the end of the novel when she has lost all that is precious in her life, or at least those people to whom she is attached:

Rising from the bed, she had gone into the front room and looked out at Noonan's Car Wash and the Buena Vista Apartments and was struck by the absurdity of living alone at the age of forty-four on a grimy street in a frigid city of strangers. She was unable to afford a used car. She as unable to get along with her daughter.

She'd had a dolt and two perverts for husbands (410).

At the end of the novel some time after the suicidal attempt, Libby and Frank talk by the Badbattle river near the old Aquinas seminary, now a vocational school. After coming to the pinnacle of Libby's struggles, she finally is on an upswing toward happiness. And the one person directly responsible is Fr. Frank Healy, who loves her dearly. He admires her resilience and persevering spirit, how it seems to endure human tragedy after human tragedy somehow surviving. In the following quote Libby and Frank embrace to finally love each other in peace.

Frank leaned close to her, gripping her shoulder. 'You're strong, Libby. I've watched you hit bottom and I've watched you bounce back. You're resilient.' It was true, she thought. Life had been bruising her for longer than she cared to remember, but except for that black night in February when the train invited her to destroy herself, she'd never given up (431).

Libby's spirit wanted her to live a life of fulfillment, a life which acknowledged a transcendence to living in real love, a life willing to be guided by a Catholic priest and be opened to true happiness. One person who fulfills this symbol of real love is Frank's famed Monsignor Lawrence.

Monsignor Lawrence is the angelic figure in Hassler's novel. "Loving-kindness" is the experienced pastor whose charisma of compassion and devotion to his parishioners runs throughout Frank's life. Frank sees Adrian as being

content with his life (presently, past, and in the future); through his Adrian's giving of himself to others in the Holy Spirit, has been given by God a complete content nature in his last days of his priestly service.

In opposition to "Loving-kindness's authentic priestly service, DeSmet, is a young priest who seems to be the in priesthood only for its comfortable lifestyle. He was shallow with spiritual matters:

He [Frank] was curious to know how a mental lightweight like DeSmet might view Bishop Baker, who for all his breezy glad-handing was not a superficial man my any means. Frank had it from several parishioners that Gene DeSmet could go weeks without saying anything spiritual from the pulpit. His homilies were based on newspaper articles. Drive safely, he preached on holidays weekends. Have your well water analyzed for impurities, he advised during a pollution scare(241).

Danny Ash, one of Frank's childhood friends who had been to DeSmet's masses made a comment on how priests have changed since his day:

. . . seminaries were turning out idiots these days. 'Where are the tough, hard-working, he-man priests of the past, Frank? Where are those priests who feared God and nobody else?' (241).

On the other hand, Frank envisioned himself as more of the hard working priest since he followed the imitation of the saintly Fr. Zell. In critically looking at DeSmet's character, he did not fit the image of Christ. As a spiritual leader of the church DeSmet must invite the challenge of parishioners to follow the gospel and the goodness which the church offers.

In a word, priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the Head and Shepherd (John Paul II 39).

Frank spends his life trying to be virtuous. In the seminary he began to fast so as to condition his body to endure longer times without food, like Fr. Zell, another sign of his living beyond this world. DeSmet and Bishop Swayles on the other hand played golf and bought stock, focusing wrongly, on worldly wealth.

While institutions have the right, provided this is allowed by their rules and constitutions, to possess whatever they need for their temporal life and work, they should avoid any semblance of luxury, excessive wealth and accumulation of property (Caritatis Documents 13).

During Adrian's near death experience in the hospital, Frank looks over the parish office to find little or no photographs, notes, or personality in the rooms. He thinks of how he simplified his life in the seminary, how important it was to him to think beyond mere materialism and remind himself of the ascetic life so as to fully embrace the lifestyle of Christ. However, people in his life now were important too, people like Libby, Adrian, and Verna. He wanted to hold on to sunsets, memories, and relationships that used to have no meaning for him. Fr. Frank had truly lived the life imitative of Christ, but he had fallen over time into the humanness of sin (alcohol abuse) he struggled to redefine his relationship with Libby

and most importantly Jesus. In the midst of this crisis, Frank still continues to take his challenge to God.

. . . dear God, how like me. I never take pictures, I've never kept a diary or journal, and except for a few short-lived exchanges with graduates of the Academy, I've never been one to write letters. When I was a seminarian, I suppose I would have been glad to foresee myself this aloof from the world. In those days I equated remoteness with holiness and strove to perfect an aversion to this life and a love of the next. When did I change? Why did I change? Why, this afternoon, am I sitting at this office window watching the sun go down and wishing I owned a photo album? Wishing I had someone to write to. Wishing I had at least one clerical suit as spiffy as Gene DeSmet's. Is it Adrian's mortality that's making me feel so bereft, so unattached, so frightened? Yes, dear God, frightened (258).

Fr. Frank is a simple person, who wants to find the deeper meanings in life, as this quote above tries to focus on. Some personality types find more meaning in these deeper meanings and want to surround themselves with this deeper context, that same personality type would be most apt to be called a seeker. The reason he does not have "photo albums, spiffy suits," and an adhesion to his past "remoteness" is because he is beyond those forms of happiness. He knows that real meaning is found in his heart, his lifelong connectedness to God, and intimate love for people like Libby and his parishioners.

Fr. Frank has a peculiar identification with internal seeking which warrants him, at least from Libby's eyes and

Mrs. Tatzig, the housekeeper, a mysterious nature. Fr. Frank wants to help people and be the active participant of goodness in their lives. He wants to bring to life the Christlike image to the extent that they recognize how God is working in their lives. This quote brings insight to Fr. Frank's purpose, which is different from other priests.

It was a matter of secret shame to Mrs. Tatzig that after psyching out every last clergyman assigned to her at St. Ann's, she'd finally been served up a priest she couldn't read, couldn't get next to. 'What's cooking in that Father Healy?' she'd asked her sister more than once, not that her sister would know, and her sister's reply was, 'Maybe nothing.' Not the right answer by any means. Mrs. Tatzig had known a couple of priests with nothing cooking them. They were lazy men, living for their next meal and next drink. They stood at the altar like sticks and delivered sermons that put you to sleep. No there was something definitely cooking in Father Healy. He had a seeking, unsatisfied look in his eye. He liked his food and he like his rum, but food and rum weren't enough for this man. His mind was on something more (292).

What was Frank thinking? It is not important that we know the information, but the form of meaning he seeks in his life. A well known philosopher also looked to find a deeper meaning in life, his name is known as Socrates. Socrates was also known as the seeker, one who lived to know the answer to life's highest questions. Ultimately, he looked to find the how and why of who mankind fully is. However, the means to finding that is through human experience, and nothing is more challenging for Frank than to discover God in his encounters and challenges, his *raison d'être*.

The pastoral aspect of Frank's priesthood has shadowed his relationship with Verna, Libby's abused daughter:

Her eyes softened a little. You know what I like about you, Frank? What? You've been here to see me, what, four times? Five. Five times, and up until this minute you haven't given me a single piece of advice (311).

Further in the passage Frank conveys the role of the trusting servant:

She let go of his lapels, stepped back, and looked at him with her eyes steel-hard again. Why don't I believe you? Because you've never known a man you could trust (312).

The above is a practical application of the trusting servant of Christ. Fr. Frank assures Verna that she needs to be listened to and because that has not been present for her in the past is the reason she feels she should not trust him. The Church views this listening role of Frank as a vital part of priesthood. John Paul II comments specifically on how essential this process of counseling is supposed to be in each priest.

The [Vatican II] Council says, they [priests] should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes and recognize their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able to recognize with them the signs of the times'. . . Above all it is necessary that he be able to teach and support the laity in their vocation to be present in and to transform the world with the light of the Gospel, by recognizing this task of theirs and showing respect for it' (John Paul II 158-9).

John Paul II says that the formation of the listening servant is essential for competence in knowing the "signs of the times". The formation of these skills should be especially learned in the seminary. During Frank's time in the seminary he emphasized self-denial, a quality characteristic of the person who supposed to reflect the example of Christ in his celibate calling. The full understanding of self-denial can only be "rightly formed" from an educational and experiential level. Restricting any natural human tendencies needs to be carefully monitored and reflected upon through prayer and formative spiritual direction. Vatican documents address the issue of self-denial in the following quote.

But if charity is to grow and fructify in the soul like a good seed, each of the faithful must willingly hear the word of God and carry out his will with deeds, with the help of his grace; he must frequently partake of the sacraments, chiefly the Eucharist, and take part in the liturgy; he must constantly apply himself to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service and the practice of all virtues (Gentium Documents 42).

Hassler's Healy follows well in the image of Christ as the church looks at what role Christ plays. Specifically the priest as professor, a position which Fr. Frank held for twenty years at the Aquinas seminary, mirrors principally priestly formation:

The whole training of the students [priests] should have as its object to make them true shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord

Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd. . .
(John Paul II 153).

Fr. Frank, though in crisis, maintains his spiritual need of and for God. His reflections overshadow throughout the novel his situations of difficulty which seem to almost burst with despair and hopelessness. However, through the grace of God his efforts and struggle to endure the situation teaches him to cope. John Paul II speaks of the need for pastoral or practical theology, which is a key formation in the education and discernment of seminarians and priests. For a priest to properly understand the aspects of the ministerial challenge, they must have a grounded pastoral reflection on their place in the service of the Church. Therefore this quote emphasizes the theology of the struggles which is portrayed by Hassler's Fr. Frank Healy.

Like all other branches of formation, pastoral formation develops by means of mature reflection and practical application, and it is rooted in a spirit, which is the hinge of all and the force which stimulates it and makes it develop. It needs to be studied therefore as the true and genuine theological discipline that is: pastoral or practical theology. It is a scientific reflection on the Church as she is built up daily, by the power of the Spirit, in history; on the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation", as a living sign and instrument of the salvation wrought by Christ through the word, the sacraments and the service of charity. Pastoral theology is not just an art. Nor is it a set of exhortations, experiences and methods. It is theological in its own right, because it receives from the faith the principles and criteria for the pastoral action of the Church in history, a Church that each day "begets" the Church herself, to quote the felicitous

expression of the Venerable Bede: 'Nam et Ecclesia quotidie gignit Ecclesiam'. Among these principles and criteria one that is specially important is that of the socio-cultural and ecclesial situation in which the particular pastoral action has to be carried out. The study of pastoral theology should throw light upon its pastoral application through involvement in certain pastoral services which [the candidates to the] priesthood should carry out, with a necessary progression and always in harmony with their other educational commitments' (John Paul II 155-6).

In portraying the above mentioned theology John Paul II defines the real "living" of theology in order to capture the full meaning of the continuance of church tradition. While we are asked to live in a certain way in the eyes of God and the church, we are also asked to be responsible to that in a certain way. Fr. Frank responds to this responsibility by becoming a humble servant by way of counseling, confessions, the holy sacrifice of the mass, and unconditional love to Libby.

To further accent Fr. Frank's "big leak" John Paul II enlightens us on the subject of priestly responsibility in the modern world. The emphasis of this responsibility is mostly in charity and forgiveness that the priest lives out in his example of Christ in present day. It is exclusively important that all the priests efforts show visibly as well as internally to himself that all his efforts show Christ workings in the world. Fr. Frank recognizes that as he hears confessions and gives homilies. This is how John Paul II words this responsibility.

The priest must be a witness of the charity of Christ himself who 'went about doing good (Acts 10:38). He must also be a visible sign of the solicitude of the Church who is Mother and Teacher. And given that man today is affected by so many hardships, especially those who are unknown in inhuman poverty, (Indian reservation) blind violence (selling and using of drugs) and unjust power (Judge Bigalow), it is necessary that man of God who is to be equipped for every good work(cf. 2 Tim 3:17), should defend the rights and dignity of man (Libby and Verna). Nevertheless, he should be careful not to adopt false ideologies, nor should he forget, as he strives to promote its perfection, that the only redemption of the world is that effected by the Cross of Christ (big leak)(John Paul II 157).

The word pastor, priest, or more appropriately "father" could easily mean the one who holds the paternal learder of a family. The role of the father of a parish stands as head of the spiritual community where individuals focus their lives on the transcendent world . . the kingdom of heaven.

He [Frank] no longer felt confused. He was becoming absorbed in his work. He suspected that he was actually doing some of his parishioners some good. Both at St. Ann's and at Our Lady's, he could sense a vague kind of spiritual unity taking shape around him. More and more people were coming to him and opening up their souls and either asking for advice or—more often—asking for confirmation of the advice they'd been giving themselves. More and more of his people were receiving the Sacraments; he sensed a heightened regard for the Eucharist and he might be the only priest in the diocese—indeed, in America—to report an

upswing in the number of confessions. He was becoming increasingly aware of himself as surrounded by two small communities of faith, one Indian, one white, and being nourished by them as he strove to nourish them. They did not follow him so much as cluster around him. He was not so much their leader as their center. They were not his followers; they were his family (371).

This experience Fr. Frank is having is the reaffirmation of his successful transition of roles, from professor to pastor, an aspect of his priestly life which was almost dormant during his years at the seminary. At the end of the above quote Fr. Frank mentions how he is not followed by his parishioners, but rather they clustered around him. It seems that this is a change in focus of the parishioners' spirituality. They have realized, whether consciously or unconsciously, that their focus has changed to Christ, who the priest reflects during the Eucharist. ". . . they were his family", is a signal of unity in the body of Christ. The parish has gone beyond being a group of people gathered together in a building to a unified people who have recognized God in their lives. The spiritual leader (priest) performs the faculty of the priest when he presides at mass. In the next quote John Paul II defines how the priest lives his "witness of faith and love". Through the sacrifice of the mass, Christ is continually manifested in his people so that they may have eternal life. Fr. Frank has brought the unity of the Church to his parishioners.

Bringing this type of unity requires a special call by God. John Paul defines the specifics of this mission and call of priests and concludes by specifying how the spiritual role of the priest takes root in the Church by its intrinsic function given directly by God.

By your Holy Spirit you anointed your only Son High Priest of the new and eternal Covenant. With wisdom and love you have planned that this one priesthood should continue in the Church. Christ gives the dignity of a royal priesthood to the people he has made his own. From these, with a brother's love, he chooses men to share his sacred ministry by the laying on of hands. He appointed them to renew in his name the sacrifice of redemption as they set before your family his paschal meal. He calls them to lead your holy people in love, nourish them by your word, and strengthen them through the sacraments. Father, they are to give their lives in your service and for the salvation of your people as they strive to grow in the likeness of Christ and honour you by their courageous witness of faith and love (John Paul II 40).

In John Paul's above quote/prayer he invigorates the purpose of the called. He says "... as they grow. . . " in the likeness of Christ and "... honour you by their courageous witness of faith and love. This is especially important for Hassler's Healy, who struggles to find himself. In the challenge of his life he must undergo a conversion which makes him reevaluate the mindset he had in love. He learns that he is called to be a priest, but at the same time he is also the only person who can truly help Libby Pearsall. Frank is challenged to live out his calling as priest and also to take the risk of loving Libby. Frank

fears that after having been a professor for twenty years his enthusiasm for priesthood has diminished. This lack of enthusiasm makes him question his priesthood. Libby shows up and confuses him even more. All Frank's insecurities come together and form what he calls his "big leak". But the end of the novel Frank has learned what God had called him to do, to truly love Libby as he always did, but live his priestly calling. Through his faith and perseverance God plugs Frank's "big leak" with self confidence.

II. Response

Hassler's grasp of the priestly lifestyle and spiritual discernment is excellent. It would seem at times that he would have had to interview many priests to fully understand what is really going on in their lives and minds to fully be able to put in ink the specific challenges which Hassler is so knowledgeable.

In light of the dysfunctional world which this novel portrays, the American priesthood faces the violence of drug use and trafficking, a non-catholic social mentality, the increased desire for material gains, and all kinds of abuse against the human person. This realistic picture of our world is not one which will attract men to the priesthood. It requires the priest to be conscious of his calling and deeply connected to a life of prayer and ministry.

The role of the priesthood today is to take the willingness for worship and the energetic youthfulness of the America society and focus that into guiding the people to Christ. Jesus, too, was youthful and energetic in preaching the gospel of God and willing to motivate humanity from suffering to conversion, give mercy to the rejected, and heal the dishearted. Fr. Frank attempts this noble cause against the American dysfunction in the

Christlike image. His counseling and psychological placement of Verna and Libby, hearing confessions of parishioners, and turning in Judge Bigalow and Dr. Pearsall, places Fr. Frank in the service of the living gospel of Christ.

I, myself, am a fourth year seminarian in college. Now versed with a strong background in Catholic thought, inspired by spiritual reflection, I can clearly see the struggles of Fr. Healy. John Paul talks of the relationship between the life experiences of the priest and their spiritual discernment.

Therefore, an intimate bond exists between the priest's spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry. . . ." (John Paul II 62)

It would seem that the character of Fr. Frank could only be known through an experiential method that Hassler would not have easy access to. I've experienced this in my ministry throughout the seminary, but rarely would someone else know such intimate and bonding knowledge of priesthood unless they were in some way extremely informed of a priestly life.

Hassler's portrayal of priesthood is much of what I would conceive of as the fulfillment of the priestly image. While reading *North of Hope*, I could not help but think of how I, too, am like this Frank Healy. I can relate to his introverted childhood, secluding himself in nature, bewildering about women, and tickling the idea of

priesthood in his mind until he found himself at the footsteps of the seminary. Like Frank, I, too, pondered deeply about the bigger issues of the world, often serving on the altar with the parish priest, and dealing with the crisis of parental relationships. No doubt some of the attractiveness of this book was surely the similar associations I had with the main character.

"Why would anyone want to be a priest" as Libby says in the first part of *North of Hope* while walking to school with Frank speaks much like our society today. I can relate with Frank here. Trying to distinguish between the external pressures to be a priest and trying to distinguish the internal drive to be a priest is a difficult process. It takes years to see the tendencies of a person's call to know where one is truly called. Nevertheless, going where the Holy Spirit leads us can only be of benefit for ourselves as well as others. "How could it be anyone else's [decision]" (another line of Libby's) is Frank's confusion between his mother's request and God's request for Frank's life. In other words God created Frank to be something and Frank is getting signals now, however he is also hearing his mother's dying wish. Frank must decide whether he accepts his call, which may well be God speaking through his mother, and know that it is a call and not a command. He needs to accept it as his own personal desire to answer God's call.

Hassler shows how in modern day, the redeeming power of love, through the God-given gift of priesthood, can fulfill gracefully new lives and mend the "American tragedy" of the broken family. The smooth telling is done so well that one finishes feeling simply and comfortably redeemed. The transcendence of humanity, specifically focusing on a man and a woman, illuminates the higher plane which they have found in love. That plane as seen through the eyes of a priest, exemplifies how wonderful the calling to a "spiritually paternal" example of love (Christ), truly is.

Frank Healy progresses through his life with a natural faith in God. Though it may seem from the character of Frank that he has lost something or has become fragile through his "big leak" or crisis, actually he is a stronghold because he continually recognizes himself as the suffering servant to his people.

Frank is Libby's string of hope in a despairing life which seems to have a time bomb ticking away. Libby is Frank's reassurance of personal love in his life. He needs someone to love him intimately outside the higher love he has for God. However, in this loving relationship lies a dependency on each other that keeps them tied together, giving each other the therapy each need.

Hassler creates an incredible realistic picture of people today who struggle against good and bad to

accomplish a happy life. In the course of figuring out each other's crises, Libby and Frank hold on to the innocence of their childhood friendship and lifetime love of companionship which stands complete against all the dysfunction which impedes their freedom of self-fulfillment. Only after living through the struggles does the simple, but important trust they place in each other blossom from dependency to a loving relationship. . . happiness.

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