

The Pastor's Inferno is the fictional account of a priest's journey from denial to changing his life in his quest for redemption. Father Spador learns how to confront his behavior and its consequences as well as his motivations and relationships.

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THE PASTOR'S INFERNO

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The bible quote in Chapter 1 is taken from The New Jerusalem Bible.

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CHAPTER 1

*Have mercy on me, O God, in your faithful love,
in your great tenderness wipe away my offences;
wash me thoroughly from my guilt,
purify me from my sin.
For I am well aware of my offences;
my sin is constantly in mind.
Against you, you alone, I have sinned,
I have done what you see to be wrong.*

Psalm 51, verses 1-4.

The tinder sparked to life, igniting one of the logs and bringing the fire to a crackle. The rectory's front light would stand vigil until 9:00 PM while the foyer remained dark in hopes that there would be no visitors tonight. John looked at himself in the full length hall mirror. He was about average height, but growing thicker around the middle. No he-man but he guessed he was in decent shape for a man of fifty-nine. Sometimes he wondered if he was attractive. No one had ever volunteered an opinion in his thirty five years of being a priest and he had never thought to ask for one. His appearance seemed irrelevant in his occupation. His father once told him he would be bald by age thirty five, but a few wisps of hair still clung to his scalp.

Father John Spador eased himself into his favorite easy chair and raised the footrest. Should he have brewed a cup of tea before sitting down? It was a little more of an effort to get up and down these days. He realized that he was more likely now to think of doing something after he should have done it. Well maybe he would just sit for a while in the quiet. He could brew some tea later.

As the fire grew brighter in the fireplace, its reflection danced on the floor, walls and ceiling, chasing away ghostly bands of light and shadow which flashed across the room with each passing car. John felt most at ease when the fire provided all his light and soothed him with its warmth. The day began to fade from his awareness and that was just as well.

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Six AM Mass, a funeral, stopping by the reception afterwards to comfort the family, a visit to the hospital, reading the Divine Office and jotting down some thoughts for Sunday's homily all scrolled through his mind. During the day, his darker thoughts had no time to creep into his awareness. Maybe tonight he would be able to just sit peacefully with his thoughts.

John listened to the crackling syncopation of the fire, and watched the flames dance. His muscles began to relax, he breathed easier and the band of tension in his scalp receded as he let go of the day. Dinner with three fellow priests took his mind off his concerns at least for a while. As usual, he had eaten just a little too much for dinner. The filet mignon sat like a rock in his stomach. He really should find something lighter to eat when he went out for a late dinner. But steak was his favorite. Maybe next time he would try something different. Father Mike had commented on how delicious his salmon was.

His mind kept churning. During the day he tried to stay focused on the needs of his parishioners and his parish. He kept thoughts about himself at bay when he could. Most of the time he was successful. But once he reached this part of the day when no one else had any demands on his time, his thoughts wandered back to his life, to his decisions and to his actions and regrets.

John had tried many ways to keep his feelings from unsettling him. Meditation on religious mysteries only increased his discomfort. Relaxation exercises, yoga, long walks and racquetball helped. But in the end, everything he tried fell short. His thoughts kept turning to what he could have done differently or should have done before his life reached this point.

Interrupting his reverie, the chimes announced someone at the front door. Turning on the parlor light brought his train of thought to an abrupt halt. In some ways the interruption was a relief. He did not like the direction his thoughts were taking him.

He turned on the vestibule light and opened the door to a stocky, uniformed policeman and an equally stocky middle aged woman carrying a black zippered portfolio. Both were stone faced, giving nothing away. He saw neither the smiles nor deferential bows which usually greeted him. Theirs was obviously not a social call and they

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seemed an odd pair to be ringing his doorbell at eight thirty in the evening. A twinge of discomfort started to rise but he forced it back down.

The officer remained stony. The woman looked down at her portfolio rather than meet his gaze. He could not read them but their reserve unsettled him. The officer finally spoke, "I'm Deputy Sid Jerome from the sheriff's office and this is Mrs. Lempel from Social Services. Are you Father John Spador?"

No point being evasive. Maybe one of his parishioners was in some trouble and they thought he could be of service. "Yes. I am. How can I help you?"

While the woman looked back and forth between the two men, the officer continued. "A situation has come to our attention and we think you might be of some assistance."

John felt a little on guard, but still not sure he had anything to worry about. "What kind of situation if I may ask?"

"It's about a family who recently came to my office to report a matter of concern. May we come in to discuss it with you?"

John's discomfort started to gnaw at him but he could not think of any way to refuse them admission to the rectory without arousing their suspicion. "Of course, if you think I can be of help. I just lit a fire in the parlor. Even though it's mid September, it's starting to get chilly at night. Come in and sit down."

They followed him to the parlor with none of the usual comments most new visitors made on the Victorian décor. They removed their coats, folded them over their arms in unison and sat on the edge of their seats, a bit odd for two heavysset people. Looking in all directions, they seemed to be taking mental notes on his surroundings. John thought the officer and woman were taking quite a bit of time to organize their thoughts. The silence was becoming uncomfortable. "Would either of you care for some coffee or tea?"

"No thanks," the deputy replied for both of them, "I know it's a little late in the evening and I would like to get right to the point." Deputy Jerome cleared his throat and seemed to be deciding how he would get to the point. John wished he would just get on with it. Mrs.

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Lempel unzipped and opened her portfolio, folded it back, and took out her pen. He talked. She wrote.

He had no idea what this was all about. Well, maybe he had some suspicion, although he didn't think he really wanted to know. The tension in his muscles dissipated by the firelight just a few moments ago returned, accompanied by a gnawing feeling in his stomach. He could only wait for the deputy's next move.

Deputy Jerome cleared his throat once again and finally started. "This afternoon I had a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Anton who brought their fourteen year old son Seth to see me. Is it true he acts as an altar server in your church?"

The gnawing gave way to bile working its way up toward John's throat. It was all he could do to choke it back and keep his dinner from reappearing. He could only manage a thin-voiced reply. "Yes. It's true. He is one of many boys and girls who help out with services in the parish."

"I will get right to it. Mr. and Mrs. Anton related an account of some disturbing events involving Seth which took place during times he was alone with you. Seth confirmed their statements. We want to hear what you have to say about his allegations."

John was not used to being confronted in this manner. If he were not so busy being frightened, he would have been annoyed. He was unprepared for it and had no easy comeback. He tried to keep his voice steady. "What kind of allegations if I may ask and why is Mrs. Lempel with you?"

The deputy, unfazed by the priest's reply, continued in what seemed to John as his best professional manner. "It is the practice in this county that concerns about inappropriate behavior with minors be investigated by a team consisting of representatives from the sheriff's department and Social Services."

"Are you accusing me of a crime involving Seth?" John's muscles tightened even further. His face burned despite his struggle to stay calm. His voice was almost a squeak and he found it difficult to appear indignant.

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"So far we are not accusing you of anything. We are just here to discuss the allegations with you to help us decide how to proceed. What can you tell us about this matter?"

"I don't know what matter you are talking about. There must be some mistake. I don't understand what your concern is or what he might have told you. Seth has been an alter server in my parish for about three years. He is one of my most reliable boys. I can count on him whenever I need him, even for funerals which are obviously hard to anticipate. What did he say happened? What am I supposed to have done?"

Deputy Jerome maintained a calm appearance in the face of the panic John felt continuing to rise within him. "Father, what is the nature of your relationship with Seth?"

"Well, like I said, he is a quite reliable and dependable boy. I have become quite fond of him over the past few years. He has taken to spending some of his free time around the rectory and seems to have developed an interest in the priesthood. It occurred to me that he might well have a vocation and I have been spending some extra time with him recently to explore this possibility."

Mrs. Lempel noted his comments on her pad while the deputy seemed to take them in stride, continuing in the same even tone. "Thank you, Father. Can you think of any reason why the boy would have asked his parents to bring him to see me about his relationship with you?"

"I don't know what you mean. Seth has never expressed any discomfort about being around me. I have spent a little more time with him than with the other boys, but as I have said this was to give him a chance to explore his vocation. We have engaged in some recreational activities together like swimming and camping at my cabin in the mountains. Do you think he might have misinterpreted something about my interest in him?"

"What do you think, Father? Is there something you could have done which he might have seen as inappropriate?"

John's mind raced, trying to think how to phrase his reply to stress the normality of their relationship. "I have no idea what it could be.

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Let me see...No, I can't think of anything he might have viewed as being inappropriate."

"Okay. Did other boys always accompany you and Seth to the cabin?"

"Most of the time, yes. A few times the other boys were busy with family activities so Seth and I went alone."

"I understand there were at least two occasions when you went swimming with Seth in the evening. Were other boys present on those occasions?"

"Usually. But as I said there were a couple times when the other boys were busy and I was at my cabin alone with him."

"I see. Seth told me that on two occasions when you and he were alone, you suggested you both take off all your clothes in the cabin before going swimming nude in your pond. Is that correct?"

"...Yes. I believe so. Those were on particularly hot nights and I thought it would be refreshing to go skinny dipping."

"In your view, was this an acceptable activity for an adult and an adolescent?"

"I didn't see anything wrong with it. No one else was around."

"And when you were finished swimming, did you return to the cabin naked?"

"Yes, we left our towels in the cabin and came back in dry off before going to bed."

"Okay, on the nights you and Seth swam nude, where did you both sleep?"

"We usually slept in separate beds."

"I don't want to know what you usually did. I was asking about the particular nights in question."

"Well, a couple of times we slept in the same bed on a particularly cold night to keep each other warm. I believe we did so on those two nights."

"Father, you said a few minutes ago that you went skinny dipping only on particularly hot nights and slept in the same bed only on cold nights. If it was cold, why did you walk back to the cabin naked?"

"I don't like the tenor of this conversation. I would like to review this with my lawyer before we proceed any further."

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“Fine, Father. We will stop here. Based on what the boy and his family reported and your admission that you were alone with him naked at the times he alleged being abused by you, you are under arrest for suspicion of sexual abuse. Anything you say can and will be held as evidence against you. You have the right to a lawyer. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as I have related them to you?”

“Yes, I do.” What was happening? John felt railroaded during the conversation, or as he saw it, the interrogation. He had not admitted to anything like abuse.

“Okay, Father, get your coat. We are going to the sheriff's station. You can call your lawyer from there. In deference to your position in the community, we will not resort to handcuffs as long as you cooperate.”

CHAPTER 2

Once John had retrieved his coat, Deputy Jerome escorted him to the squad car, guided him into the back seat and closed the door. He looked forward at the thick wire mesh between the front seat and his space in the back. He suddenly felt trapped and imagined what a bird must feel like the first time in a cage. There were no door handles on the inside and no way to raise or lower the windows. Even though he had no handcuffs, his immediate environment was clearly out of his control.

John could think of nothing to say to the deputy during the ride and besides was too busy trying to sort out what had just happened at the rectory. He also recalled the deputy telling him anything he said could be used against him. Best to keep his mouth shut. He had said quite enough already. The deputy honored John's silence and did not offer any conversation either. He heard Deputy Jerome's cryptic report on his police radio that he was on the way back to the sheriff station with Father Spador in custody.

John was left with his own thoughts. *How did I get in this position? What if one of the parishioners saw me herded into the back of a patrol car? How would I ever explain that? One minute I was conversing with two visitors and before I knew it I was under arrest. It all seemed to move so rapidly. Is that the way it was supposed to work?*

I've got to focus on what's coming and how to handle it. I have visited parishioners at the jail before but never thought much about the arrest process. Booking is next but I'm not too sure what it actually consists of. Since I asked to talk with my lawyer, I suppose I will get that chance. But what else will take place? Will I have to go before a judge? Will I have a chance to post bail or will I have to spend the night in jail?

They have probably never had a priest in jail before. My fingerprints will be taken, although I'm not sure what that would accomplish. It's just the boy's word against mine. I wonder if they

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will ask me to take a lie detector test. I don't think they can do anything until I talk with my lawyer.

What will I say to him? Should I say it's all a mistake? Would he believe me? If I tell him what I already told the deputy, will he also think I am guilty? How could the deputy jump to such conclusions? Will my lawyer do the same thing? Maybe it's not such good idea to tell him too much either right now. For now maybe it would be best to just work on getting out of jail and discuss my case later. The whole matter probably won't be settled tonight anyway.

At least the siren is not blaring, making everyone stop to look at me. It's dark enough so people can't see me in the car anyway, but I can imagine what they would think. People usually show me respect. Deputy Jerome seemed polite despite the nature of the visit. I don't know what Mrs. Lempel thought. All she did was write notes. I wonder how I will be treated at the sheriff's office and at the jail for that matter should it come to spending the night there. Maybe if I had worn my Roman collar it would have helped. On the other hand, I don't want to draw attention to my being a priest. This is all so sudden.

Why didn't I think about all this before and consider what might happen to me. I am so used to people deferring to me and always answering everything I say with "Yes, Father." What will it be like now for me? I will have to deal with the bishop who won't be too thrilled with this development to say the least. I have always had his respect before, but what about now? I guess that's down the drain. I will be like an albatross around his neck. He will know right away that I am not at the church for Mass in the morning unless I can get out tonight. I wonder what the chances of that are.

God help me. Can I even ask for his help? Will God still be there for me or is it too late? Do I even dare pray? I would feel like a hypocrite. I always tell people God is there for them no matter what happens. Do I believe this for myself right now? I have prayed before about my sexuality. I am not sure God heard me or whether I really wanted his help.

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