

The novel follows the vocational pathway of Father Pat Keefe as he seeks to aide the victims of child sexual abuse, finding himself at odds with church hierarchy. Themes of justice and mercy, faithfulness and conscience flow through the work.

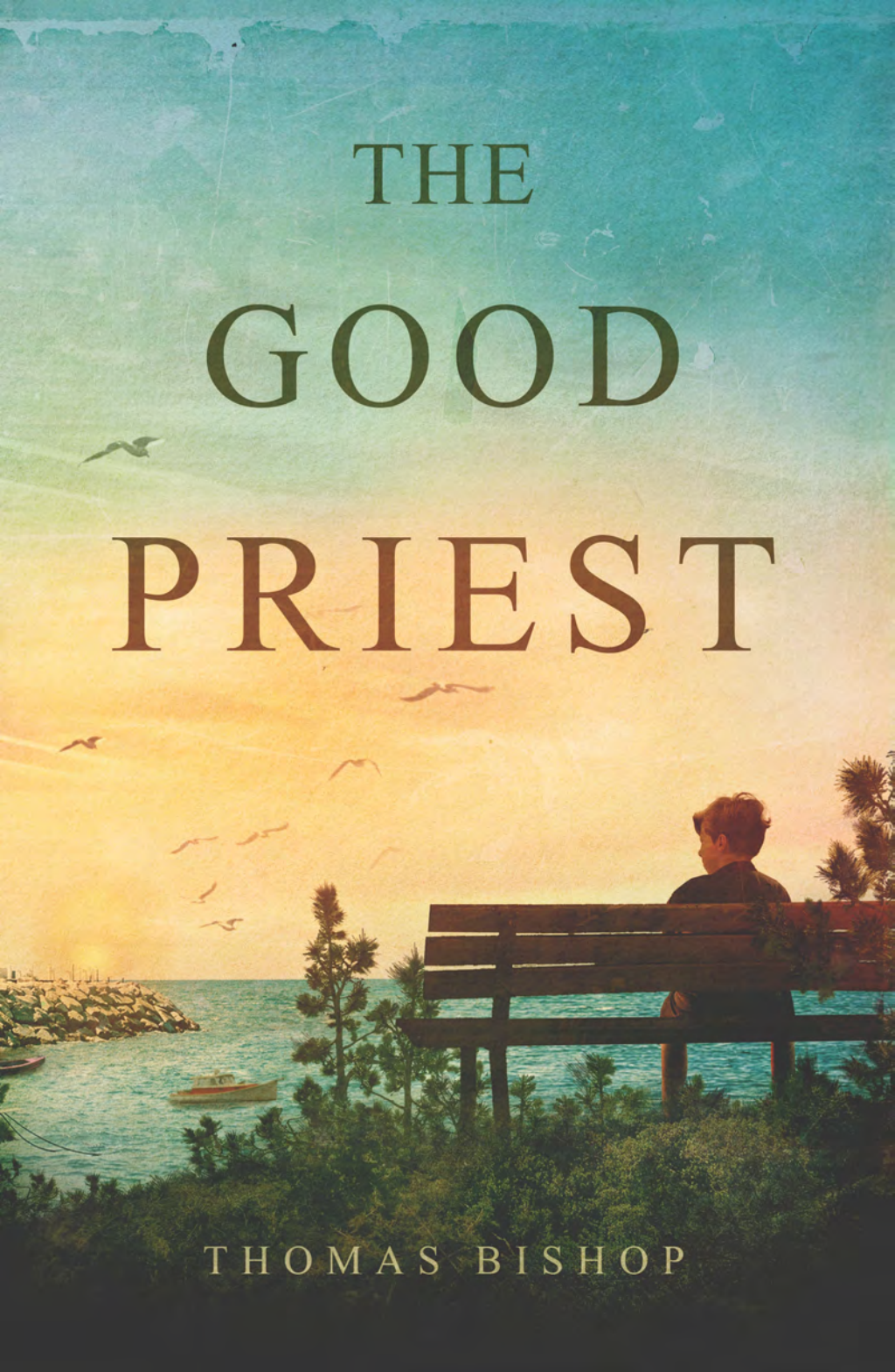
THE GOOD PRIEST

By Thomas Bishop

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THE
GOOD
PRIEST

THOMAS BISHOP

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I

A KILLING

1990 had been a reasonably calm year at the Suffolk State Penitentiary for Father Pat Keefe, now in his eighth year as the prison chaplain. At forty-two, he was physically fit and morally content. His trim frame wasn't showing age except for the occasional white hair intermingled with his generally fair tones and a slight thickening of his midsection. He was comfortable in his ministry. All that was about to change.

He was in his office when the call came. "This is Chaplain Pat Keefe speaking."

"Father Pat, this is attorney Jed Baker. I'm not sure you remember me but we went to the same school in Duncan's Cove before you left for the seminary. I was just a year behind you and friendly with your sister Susan."

"Of course, Jed, I remember you. Don't you come to Mass at Holy Family on Sundays? I think I've seen you there a few times with your family when I'm home visiting. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Father Pat, as you may know I have an office in Duncan's Cove for the general practice of law. Right now, I'm down at the MacDonald Juvenile Detention Center in Westin to see a youngster who's accused of killing a priest. I think I need your help. Could you come?"

"Oh no, that's horrible. Of course, I'll come right away, Jed, but I'm not sure what I can do. I'm a priest, you know, not a lawyer."

"I get it, Padre, but I think this youngster may need more than my kind of help. I know from your sister Susan that a few years after your ordination you returned to school for a

master's in social work and now you're the chaplain at Suffolk. Your learning and experience might be very helpful as I try to sort out the best approach for representing him."

After quickly finished his chore, Pat drove to the MacDonald Juvenile Detention Center, about an hour's distance. As he neared, he quickly recalled its fortress-like appearance from his days as a seminarian when he volunteered there as a tutor. The massive stone structure was surrounded by razor wire-topped fencing broken only by a guarded gate. To Pat, the facility was foreboding: anything but welcoming. What a place for parents to come to see their kids, he thought, as he stopped at the closed gate. There, he was met by a guard who checked his identification, then directed him to park in the visitor's area and proceed to the entranceway as the gate swung open.

At the front door, Pat summoned a response by using a buzzer alongside the door. "Who is it?" barked the voice. "Father Pat Keefe, here to meet with attorney Jed Baker, who's representing a youngster just brought here." As the door clicked open, Pat was directed from the unseen speaker to enter the building. Once inside, he was screened by guards before being ushered through another door. There, Jed Baker stood waiting for him: blond, curly hair, short in stature, slight paunch, mid- to late thirties. Just as Pat had recalled.

Face tight, the lawyer silently shook Pat's hand. "This is awful, Father. A kid by the name of Lawrence Jefferson has just been arrested for murdering Father Gregory Mason, a priest in St. Mary's parish in Foxon. He's here now. Thank you for coming."

Pat only loosely recalled Mason, whom he thought he might have met once at a convocation of diocesan priests. Younger, he thought, maybe about five years out of seminary. "Terrible, for sure. God bless this fallen priest and God save this boy" was all Pat could muster as he tried to absorb the enormity of the situation.

“The boy’s parents called me for help and I saw him earlier today. He’s sullen, minimally communicative, and has an odd calmness about him except when he blurted out that Mason deserved what he got for what he had done to him and he was glad he was dead.”

“Would you come in with me to see him? Maybe he’ll open up more with you.”

“Of course, Jed,” Pat sighed, “but I know from what I’ve studied about sexual abuse of children when I was getting my master’s in social work that often they won’t open up to someone they’ve just met. They don’t have any trust. And, if he’s killed one priest, why do you think he’d talk to another one, and someone he doesn’t know?”

“Not sure, Padre, but if you’re willing I’d like to give it a try. In this case, the boy has already told his story to the police and his parents and, of course, to a jury in public. So maybe it’s different. I know the shooting has something to do with the boy’s claim that the victim sexually assaulted him, but right now he doesn’t seem interested in talking much. Maybe you can unlock him a little. I think I’ll need to really understand this youngster if I’m going to be able to do him any good.”

“Okay, Jed. Let’s give it a try.” Pat smiled warmly.

The two of them were shortly ushered into a room, where the boy sat on a chair by a table, two empty chairs facing him. The lime-green windowless room was otherwise barren of any furniture or adornments. The youngster was hunched over, arms crossed in a protective cocoon; tall for his age, Pat guessed, somewhat overweight, hair disheveled. “I’m Father Keefe, son. I’m not here to judge what you might have done and I want you to know, as well, that I care very much about you. I hate it that some priests abuse kids, and if that happened to you, I hope you will trust me enough to talk with me. I want to help you.” That seemed to get the boy’s attention as he unfolded his arms and looked up at Pat.

“How do I know you’re not just another perv, some other priest who wants to shut me up, keep me from talking about

what he did to me? I told all this stuff to the dumb jury and they just fell for what that creep said. I don't want to talk about it anymore. It didn't do any good before."

"That's okay, son, but I want you to know that if you were hurt by another priest, that hurts me as well. Please let me try to help. We know what the jury did but we're new to this. We're here just for you and it would help us if you could talk about it to us."

What followed came out without palpable emotion.

"That bastard tried to grab my dick and then he lied about it, made me look like a liar, and I took care of him for it."

Baker interjected, "Maybe start from the beginning, Lawrence. We're not in any hurry."

"Oh, okay. We go to church at St. Mary's where Mason showed up about a year ago. I was on the parish CYO basketball team and really liked it because I was taller than a lot of the other kids and could get rebounds even though I can't jump very high. After one practice, Mason told me to stay behind to work on my shooting because I was getting fouled a lot in games but not making many foul shots. For about a half an hour, I practiced while Mason got the ball and threw it back to me. Afterwards, I went to the boys' locker room, took my clothes off, and went to the showers, which were big enough for four people. Do I really have to tell this to you? I told it to the jury and what good did that do? I'm tired and just want to be alone now."

Pat interjected, "No, Lawrence, not if you don't want to. Maybe that's enough for today. We can come back."

"Yeah, I want to go to my room now."

Baker and Pat looked at each other in silent recognition that they shouldn't press the boy.

"Okay, Lawrence," Baker said, "I'll be back to see you."

Pat chimed in, "And I'll come too, Lawrence, if you'd like me to."

The boy just stared ahead as the two men left the room.

Outside, Baker suggested they sit together in the room where they first met so he could fill Pat in on the rest of the sad events.

“Here’s what the boy told the prosecutor and then the jury. After he had been in the shower for a few moments, Father Mason came in, totally naked, and with an obvious erection. Of course, Lawrence didn’t use these words, but this is the gist of it. He approached Lawrence with a bar of soap in his hand and, without comment, started to wash him, first his back and then around to his front, where he put his hand on the boy’s penis and began to rub it. Lawrence said he asked the priest to quit but, instead, he continued and then clasped the boy’s hand and put it on his penis, directing the boy to stroke him. I guess the boy then got his gumption up and shoved the priest hard while telling him to get away from him. He told the prosecutor that Mason almost fell while backing away. At that point, according to Lawrence, the priest was angry. He threatened the boy that if he told anyone he’d throw him off the team, saying that he caught him trying to steal stuff.”

“What happened next, Jed? This is an awful story.”

“Well, from what his parents told me, he didn’t go back to basketball. When his dad asked him why, he said he didn’t like the coach, that he thought he was mean. I guess they just let it go at that. When his mom asked him a couple of times if anything was wrong because his conduct seemed to have changed—staying in his room a lot, not going out with friends, things like that—he just told her he was fine and asked her to leave him alone. She just chalked it up to growing pains.”

“Then, how did it finally come out?” Pat asked.

“Well, one time about three months after it happened, he got into a fight with another kid from the team, a boy named Jimmy Koch, and he blurted some things out. I guess the Koch boy was angry with him for quitting the team. He said that because they didn’t have any other tall kids, they didn’t get far in the tournament at the end of the season. He said it was

Lawrence's fault and he called him some unkind names for not sticking with it. Said he was too scared to fight for rebounds, things like that. According to Lawrence, that riled him enough that he just yelled that the boy better watch out for Mason, not to let him near him in the shower because he's a real perv. When Koch asked him what he was talking about, Lawrence just clammed up.

"The Koch boy told his parents what Lawrence had said, and his mom, who also teaches at the school, asked Mr. Evans, Lawrence's homeroom teacher, if he had been acting weird. Mr. Evans reported that Lawrence had skipped school a few days and his grades had taken a nosedive, going from As and Bs to Cs and even a couple of Ds. Evans said he had talked with the boy's parents but no one seemed to know what was going on with him. Then, Koch's mom and Mr. Evans decided to talk to the school social worker and then they called in Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson to discuss the situation. After that meeting, it all seemed to come together for the parents and they sat down with Lawrence. At first he was hesitant to speak with them. Apparently he said he was afraid they'd be angry with him, but, with prodding, he then opened up to them. Next, the police were contacted and a Detective Melissa Barnes from the Foxon Police Department came to speak with Lawrence and his parents. That led ultimately to the arrest of Father Mason."

"That's quite a story, Jed. Was there then a trial, and what happened?"

"Oh yes," Baker replied. "From there it all goes even further downhill, if that's possible.... Father Mason was subsequently charged with attempted sexual assault of a minor and child endangerment. He got a lawyer, Cynthia Towns, who had been retained by the diocese for him, and the case later went to trial, where Mason was acquitted of both charges.

"Some of this I learned from Carl DeMatha, whom I spoke with earlier today. Interestingly, he's the same prosecutor who

tried the case against Mason and he's now representing the State in the case against Lawrence. He told me a bit about the trial. Beforehand, he prepared Lawrence. He told him what he was going to ask him and he tried to reassure him about the process. He said he warned him too about the defense attorney, Ms. Towns, by telling Lawrence that she'd be asking him questions too, but he hadn't been prepared for what she unearthed. After some fairly benign questions, she got into Lawrence's school record, and suddenly she started asking him about his suspension from school last year.

"DeMatha admitted to me that he was totally unprepared for this line of questioning. He said he objected but after arguing with the jury out of the room, the judge agreed with the defense lawyer that she could get into the reason the boy was suspended. When it came out that he had cheated on a test, DeMatha said, he could just feel a chill in the courtroom. That fact, combined with Mason's heated denials under oath, likely sealed the outcome. Mason was fairly quickly acquitted of the charges against him."

"I meant to tell you," Baker continued, "that Lawrence did actually talk with me about the trial a little bit when I first met up with him earlier today. He talked about the courtroom itself, how it was, in his words, 'real scary.' He said that when the court person came to get him in the hallway and he had to walk into that courtroom with a lot of people there and the jury sitting by the side, he was shaking afraid. He even described the room itself. Said it was big with high ceilings and a lot of wood, and the judge sat on a bench above everybody else. He remarked to me that everything was so quiet when he walked in and then, when he sat down, there was Mason sitting at a table next to his lawyer and staring right at him. All of that, he said, scared the hell out of him, or words to that effect."

"What was the boy's demeanor in reciting the trial facts to you, Jed?"

"Well, in a way, it was eerie, Father Pat. He spoke in a flat tone, almost at a distance from the content of his account as

though he was giving a report about something that had happened to a stranger.”

“Did the prosecutor say how the boy did in the trial?” Pat asked.

“Yes,” Baker responded. “He said he thought the boy did okay on direct while telling the story of what happened to him but he tensed up once the defense lawyer started asking him questions. Then it all came apart once the jury heard about the cheating incident. He felt very bad about that because he had been unprepared for it. The only other witness he called was the Koch boy, who looked as scared as Lawrence. He recited the facts of his dustup with Lawrence but couldn’t add any more. The defense lawyer, Ms. Towns, did what any good defense lawyer would do. She just pointed out through terse questioning that the Koch kid hadn’t been in the shower and he only knew what Lawrence had told him. DeMatha said that when she sat down, he could see the slight smirk on her face, which he was sure was for the benefit of the jury.”

Baker continued, “Let me tell you more about what the prosecutor said. When I asked whether the priest had testified, he affirmed that he did. He said that he denied the entire incident. He said that Lawrence had been a mediocre ballplayer—so-so, in his words—and that he had benched him because he was lazy and had shown up late for several practices. He said he thought the boy had quit the team probably because he wasn’t getting any playing time and that he couldn’t handle his coaching style. It all seemed plausible. Certainly, it appears the jury bought it.”

“Can you talk about what happened after the trial, Jed, how we got to this point?” Pat asked.

“Yes, I know about that from the boy and from piecing together other information I have received. Oddly, Lawrence was willing to talk with me about this part. Really, he just didn’t want to get into the details of the assault itself but he was fairly open about everything else and, strangely, about his own post-trial activity.

“Five days after the trial, Father Mason was found dead in a confessional booth at St. Mary’s. He had been shot four times, all in the face. Lawrence seemed proud of this. ‘I took care of that dirty bastard,’ he said. He went on: ‘He did that to me and then he lied about it and nobody believed me. He deserved what he got. It was like he hurt me all over again when he got up there and lied. I don’t feel bad about what I did, except I know my parents are real worried and now I’m in all this trouble but I’m okay now.’”

“In recounting this part, did the lad show any remorse?” Pat asked.

“No, unfortunately, he expressed none. I’d say, to the contrary, he seemed satisfied with himself. I actually taped it when I met with the boy earlier. Here’s what he said.”

Baker then retrieved a tape from his leather tote and placed it on the seat beside them. Without comment, he started it.

“I was really kinda relieved. A week after the trial, I got a gun from the drawer of the table next to where my parents sleep where one time I saw my dad put it. I grabbed it when I knew they had gone to the movies. I took that gun to church on that Saturday afternoon ’cause I know that’s when they usually hear confessions and, pretending that’s why I was there, I went into the confessional and knelt down and I asked if the priest on the other side of the screen was Mason. Once he said yes and started to ask why I wanted to know, I pointed the gun right at his face and yelled at him that he lied in court and made me look like the bad one. I blasted him a bunch of times, then dropped the pistol right there in the confessional and ran from the church.

“A little while later, a cop car came along and asked where I was going. I guess I mumbled something to the cop like ‘he had it coming to him’ because the cop got out of his car and had me stand up against it while he felt me all over and then he put handcuffs on me. As soon as I got in the car, I said I wasn’t surprised that it didn’t take them very long to find me

and I asked if the prick was dead. I told the cop that Mason deserved to die as he had hurt me and then lied about it in court and made the jury believe him.”

Baker then stopped the tape.

“At that point,” Baker said, “I ended the interview. I assured him that I was going to try to help him but that it might take a while. In the meanwhile, I cautioned, please don’t talk any more about this as that could only make matters worse.”

“As you might gather, Father Pat, Lawrence’s identification as the shooter is not a question; he’s admitted it to several people and his handprints are all over the Glock semiautomatic he used. A pretty vicious weapon, by the way.

“His legal culpability and appropriate punishment are still up in the air, however. Normally, a fourteen-year-old kid charged with a nonviolent crime would be sent to juvenile court where the proceedings are not open to the public and the punishment cannot extend beyond the person’s eighteenth birthday. But in the case of a serious violent crime, the prosecutor has the option to ask the court to transfer the case to adult court where a person, once convicted, can be sentenced just like an adult. In this case, that could mean years of confinement. Sorry for the lecture but I’m just trying to say that keeping the case in the juvenile court would be much better for Lawrence, and Padre, that’s where I’m hoping you can help—on the mitigation side of things.”

Pat nodded. “Hard to be sure, but Lawrence certainly fits the profile of a kid who’s been abused. From what I know so far, I haven’t heard any other reason for his sudden change in behavior after he left that team. Of course, you know you’ll have to do some more work on that score, but I’m very interested in helping, Jed. Lawrence seemed oddly calm when we met with him as though, in his mind, a terrible wrong had been redressed. He did not seem overwhelmed with guilt for having killed Father Mason. Rather, he appeared to be flat, almost uninterested in what might happen to him. He certainly didn’t show any kind of remorse or any introspection about the

enormity of what he did. I think you might want to consider getting a psychiatrist to see Lawrence in order to give you an assessment of the boy's mental state."

"Yes, I've thought of that, and I've already reached out to someone for that purpose—a psychiatrist I know. Someone I've worked with before. She's very good."

While the two men were speaking, Mollie and Tim Jefferson arrived in the anteroom where Baker introduced them to Pat as a priest and an old friend from Duncan's Cove. He quickly added that Pat had an advanced degree in counseling and was now a chaplain at the men's prison in Suffolk. The Jeffersons, both in their early forties, were blond, trim, even athletic looking, and smartly clothed—she in blouse and skirt and he in an open-collared shirt, blazer, and slacks. They just nodded in tacit acceptance of Pat's presence. When Baker asked them if they'd like to sit down and talk after their visit with their son, they seemed eager.

After less than a half hour, while Jed Baker and Father Pat waited, the parents returned to the anteroom. Mrs. Jefferson was in tears, trembling; Mr. Jefferson was quieter, stiff-lipped, but to Pat's practiced eye, shaken as well, struggling to hold it in.

"He seems so quiet, maybe sullen. I'm afraid he's not feeling at all sorry for what he did. What do you think will happen to him?" Mr. Jefferson asked.

Calmly, Pat responded, "I'm only a priest, Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson. I think Attorney Baker would be the better person to answer you, but in my view, there's room for mercy in the justice system. Lawrence is just a youngster. Even though he's charged with a terrible crime, his age and the circumstances could be factors in what happens next."

Mrs. Jefferson told Pat that they were good Catholics and thought they had raised their son right and just couldn't understand what could make him do such a horrible thing. Here, Pat thought he could be more helpful. "Mr. and Mrs.

Jefferson, let me ask you about Lawrence as a youngster growing up. Did you ever have issues with him being truthful?"

"Absolutely not," Mrs. Jefferson said, with her husband in nodding agreement. "He was no angel but our issues with him were his attention to his schoolwork, and we often had to prod him to make his bed and do his share of household chores, but his faults were more things he didn't do. We didn't think he had a mean bone in his body. Yes, he did cheat that one time last year and we had a long talk with him about it. Not to make any excuses, but he had a test right after he had been sick. Anyway, that incident was an anomaly. Lawrence was never like that."

"What about basketball?" Father Pat asked. "Did he seem to like it, and what did he tell you about quitting?"

Mr. Jefferson answered. "Lawrence has not ever been what you'd call real athletic, but we have a basketball hoop over our garage door and once in a while we'd play HORSE together or just mess around for fun and I thought he had some talent, particularly because, at five-feet-ten, he's tall for his age. So I encouraged him to go out for the basketball team. I thought it would be good exercise for him and maybe, if he had any success at it, give him a bit more oomph. We were really surprised when he came home and told us he had quit and, boy, we now wish we had pressed him to tell us why instead of just letting him be, thinking it was a teenage thing that he had to work out on his own."

"When did you find out about the incident with Father Mason?" Pat asked. He wasn't surprised when they said it wasn't until they had gotten a call from the school counselor.

"Then," Mr. Jefferson said, "he told us the whole story. He was really angry at Father Mason and so were we. We were pretty hot, thinking this guy, a priest after all, had assaulted our Lawrence. Actually we were mad as hell, Father. And, you know, I can't get it out of my mind that it was my gun he used. I just bought it a few months ago because there have been some robberies in our neighborhood. We live in a very nice

area and I guess some people think we're ripe for the picking, so I got this gun. We have some pretty good stuff in the house but I never thought..." His voice trailed off as his head sunk to his chest.

Baker responded, "Mr. Jefferson, I can imagine how you may feel about the gun, but you owned it legally. You have a right to protect yourselves. I know that can be a hard spot for you but please don't go there. Now, the focus has to be completely on Lawrence."

Jefferson just nodded. They talked about the trial for a few more minutes and then Mrs. Jefferson asked, "Father, if he did this thing, and I guess he did, what about his soul? We're good Catholics and we're really afraid he's damned himself by killing Father Mason."

Pat thought for a minute and then said, "Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson, God is merciful and forgives those who have done even terrible things so long as they repent and truly feel sorry for what they have done. I will come see Lawrence again and I will pray with him and, in time, I hope he will come to understand that what he did was very wrong, something he probably knows deep down from his upbringing, though now he seems to be in a kind of spiritual shock. When he's ready I will hear his confession, through which I believe he will receive God's forgiveness.

"He will have to be punished for this, however, and you need to steel yourselves for that reality. When we get to that point, I can talk with you about our penal system for juveniles and what happens there because I have worked both in this place and in the adult prison as a chaplain. Of course being locked up, kept from home and community for some period of time, is no fun for anyone, but let's hope he can be in a place where he can continue his high school studies. We can talk some more when you'd like."

With that, Pat gave Lawrence's parents his card, identifying him as the chaplain of the Suffolk prison and

providing his work telephone number. They embraced as they parted.

Pat left these searing meetings concerned for Lawrence's well-being, not only in terms of his likely punishment, but also for his spiritual welfare.

Within a week, the psychiatrist, Dr. Meagan O'Toole, came to visit Lawrence in the company of Jed Baker. As they entered the room where Lawrence had been brought, he just looked up at them, his eyes expressionless. "Lawrence, this is Dr. O'Toole. I have asked her to meet with you as she is going to work with us to help you. I'll be right outside, but I think it's best if you and the doctor speak alone." And with that, Baker left the room.

O'Toole was prim, mid-forties, with her hair tightly pulled back in a bun, but once she spoke, warmth radiated from her. She took a seat across the table from Lawrence, smiled at him, and then asked, "Lawrence, it's nice to meet you. Can you tell me why you think you are here?"

"Yeah, 'cause I killed that shit priest," he quickly answered without looking directly at her.

"Gosh, Lawrence, that must have felt weird, doing that," she suggested.

"Not really. He had it coming for what he did."

"I'm wondering, Lawrence, how does that make you feel now?"

"What do you mean? I'm happy he's dead if that's what you mean. Otherwise, I'm okay—a little sad because I miss my parents and don't like it here. They keep me pretty much to myself," he answered flatly.

"Do you want to talk about your parents, Lawrence? It sounds like you might be close to them." She tried another tack. But to no avail.

"What for? They had nothing to do with this. I don't feel like talking about them," he sullenly answered.

And so the conversation continued. Dr. O'Toole probed to unearth Lawrence's feelings but, to her, he seemed castled off,

a moat around his emotions. After about forty-five minutes, O'Toole told Lawrence that she was pleased she got to meet him and said she'd return in not too many days.

Outside, she sat down with Jed Baker. "Well, Jed, these are only first impressions, of course, and I don't really know the boy, but he seems walled off. There's no sense that any coping mechanisms have kicked in, probably not just from the killing of the priest but from the trauma of being assaulted, as you explained. My hunch is that after the assault, Lawrence probably just didn't have the resources to get back into emotional balance. He got knocked off his pins and still hasn't recovered.

"Killing this priest may have been seen by him as the only way out. I think you might want to get a psychologist to give him some tests, as they might give you some useful information in defending this kid. Of course, I'd be very willing to work with him. He is going to need a lot of therapy to regain his balance, and, based on my experience with other abused kids, if he can't get his equilibrium back fairly soon, his life's path from here on could be very rocky."

After about a month, Baker called Pat at the prison. "Hi, Padre. I just wanted to bring you up to date on Lawrence Jefferson's case. A psychologist administered several tests, which basically confirmed Doctor O'Toole's initial assessment. While Lawrence's fund of knowledge, his basic I.Q., is intact, he's at sea emotionally, just floundering without a beacon. Dr. O'Toole has seen him again a few times. Her initial impression is the same. She thinks that he never recovered from the assault and then, metaphorically, felt assaulted again at the trial by the defense lawyer's questioning his honesty and Mason's fabrication, and that the combination of those factors likely overwhelmed his coping ability."

Pat replied, "Well, that's what you and I sensed; it's useful to have it confirmed by the pros. Where do you go from here?"

"Well, my next step," replied Baker, "is to meet with the prosecutor. I've asked Dr. O'Toole to write up her impressions.

That, and the testing results should help in my discussions about what might happen to Lawrence in court.”

Pat next heard from Baker ten days later. He said that he had met with the prosecutor, who was willing to talk about trying to work out a plea agreement. “I think I told you when we first met at the Center that the prosecutor, Carl DeMatha, is the same one who had represented the State in the trial against Mason for assaulting Lawrence. When I spoke with DeMatha, he said his boss believed he should now handle the charges against Lawrence because he already knew so much about the underlying facts. I was really happy to hear DeMatha say he had believed Lawrence, that he had in fact been assaulted by Mason in the way he claimed, but that the trial just didn’t go his way. He explained it’s often tough to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt when it’s just a one-on-one crime with no witnesses and, maybe, the fact that Lawrence had that cheating incident on his record really hurt him with the jury.”

“Well, that’s something,” replied Pat. “Actually maybe a very good omen for the youngster.”

Baker said that he was buoyed by the prosecutor’s apparent sympathy for Lawrence and that he had scheduled another meeting with the prosecutor.

“Would you be willing to come, Padre?” he asked.

“Of course, Jed, but to what end? I’m no lawyer and can’t really talk about the legal punishment.”

“I know,” said Baker. “I would like you to explain, on the basis of your education and experience, what happens to these kids who are assaulted, as that may help the prosecutor and me come up with a reasonable plan for Lawrence in terms of his sentence. Your physical presence, combined with the reports from the mental health folks, could go a long way in achieving a reasonable outcome for this kid.”

“Sounds good to me, Jed. Just let me know.”

A week later, Baker and Pat visited Carl DeMatha’s office, which was located in a ten-story, early twentieth century stone

building adjacent to the Foxon courthouse. On the second floor, the elevator opened into a small waiting room where a gray-haired woman sat guard at an oversized oak desk bearing a computer and a telephone next to a pile of small sheets of paper that looked like phone messages. When Baker identified himself, she smiled and pointed for them to continue into the inner part of the office, where they found the prosecutor seated at a large metal desk strewn with manila folders—each one, Pat later learned, representing a criminal case pending in court. The look of a busy man, Pat quickly decided, and maybe not a very organized one. DeMatha's physical appearance matched his desk—unkempt, uncombed hair flopping over his ears, haphazardly dressed in a tie that clashed with his shirt with a wrinkled jacket draped over his chair. With a quick glance around the room, Pat saw more files on an adjacent table and books in shelves piled every which way.

As they entered, DeMatha stood to extend his hand to Baker in a warm greeting, revealing pants that looked like they had never met an iron. "Good to see you, my friend, and, Father, I'm Carl DeMatha. Please, let's sit so we can talk."

"You know, don't you, Jed, this kid is going to have to serve some time. We can't just put him on probation after killing someone no matter how bad a guy Mason was."

Baker was prepared. "I don't disagree with you, Carl. I'd like to talk with you about where Lawrence will have to serve his sentence and, of course, how long it must be."

"What do you have in mind, Jed?" And so the plea bargaining began.

"Well, he's just fourteen now, Carl. Maybe a sentence of four years to be served here at the juvenile detention facility to be followed by a period of probation."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the prosecutor. "Four years for a murder seems way too short even if he is a kid."

At that point, Baker asked if Pat could talk about what happens, generally, to kids who have been abused.

“I think I told you, Carl, that Father Pat has a master’s degree in social work and works full time as the chaplain at Suffolk.”

“Yes, of course, Jed,” the prosecutor responded.

Pat started slowly, wary of appearing to be a know-it-all and not wanting to patronize.

“Well, Mr. DeMatha, in my master’s program, I studied about child abuse with particular attention to its long-term effects on the victims. Unfortunately, there is an increasing body of literature on this subject. I’m certainly no expert but what I’ve learned is that these kids’ lives often spiral into dysfunction. Lots of reasons for that but one constant appears to be the lack of early intervention. That’s not surprising because so many victims bear their burdens in secret. Here, you have the chance to fashion a disposition for Lawrence that could actually help guide him back so that whenever he’s released from custody, he has a chance of a reasonable life. Living with the knowledge that he took a life, of course, will be a heavy burden for him. But if he doesn’t get intense counseling now, I fear that his life will just descend into a miasma of despair and then who knows in terms of his social conduct.”

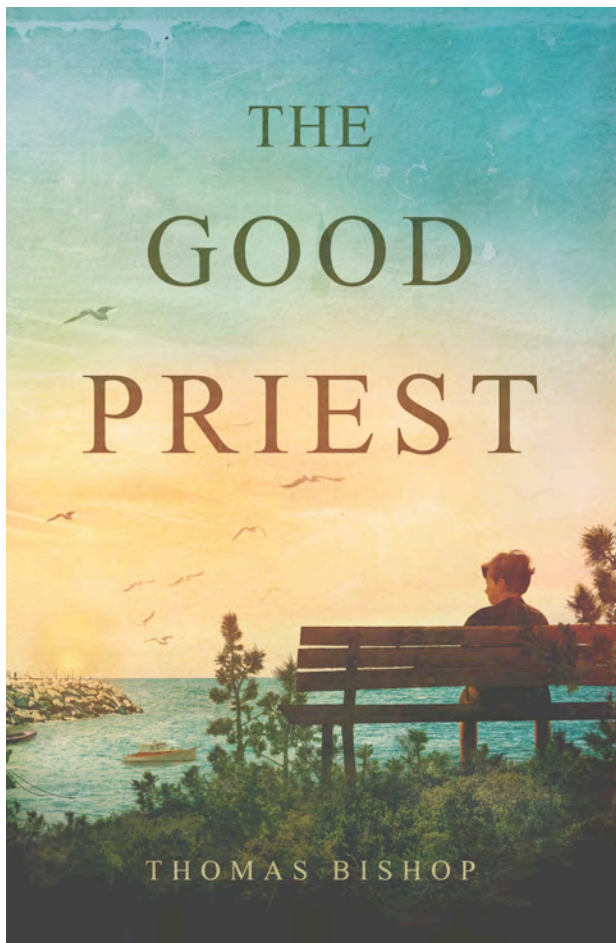
As though on cue, Baker added, “And, Carl, you know that the men’s prison would provide none of that. Perhaps the juvenile facility might work so long as the boy can get the counseling he needs, and, of course, sending him there for a reasonable period, I hope, could satisfy the State’s need that he be punished, confined for a while.”

After more good-natured and earnest back and forth, including a discussion of the reports from the mental health experts, the lawyers agreed that the case would be transferred to the adult court, where DeMatha would recommend that the youngster plead guilty to manslaughter, a lesser charge than murder, and that he would be sentenced to a period of twelve years, suspended after serving four years, to be followed by eight years of probation to include continuing counseling as

recommended by the probation department. While Baker said he thought the top end of the sentence, twelve years, seemed a bit high as any violation of probation, even for a minor violation, could expose Lawrence to eight more years of incarceration, he didn't push his view because he was relieved that all of the boy's incarceration would be served at the juvenile center, where education and counseling would be available to him.

Later, Baker told Pat about his subsequent meeting with Lawrence, when he told him what was likely to happen. Baker reported, "The boy seemed unmoved, almost uninterested in his fate. It was an unnerving kind of interview, Padre, one I'm not used to with my adult clients."

Once hearing this, Pat wondered to himself whether Lawrence's outcome had already been determined in that shower room at his school. He knew the boy had broken one of God's sternest prohibitions, but he could not reconcile the damnation of the boy's soul with the goodness of a forgiving God. He resolved to periodically visit the youngster and, over time, try to gentle him back to spiritual equilibrium. He sensed, as well, that he had been emotionally dislodged by the horrific tale of an abusive priest and his violent slaying by a boy whose innocence had been stolen from him. What was the value of his role in this nightmarish tale, he wondered, and could this youngster ever recover? Only time would yield the answers.



The novel follows the vocational pathway of Father Pat Keefe as he seeks to aide the victims of child sexual abuse, finding himself at odds with church hierarchy. Themes of justice and mercy, faithfulness and conscience flow through the work.

THE GOOD PRIEST

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