

Murder in the Abbey Chapter One Excerpt

Chapter One: Answering the Call

The long white plastic garment bag hung on the door hinge, fluttering now and then when a June breeze made its way into the box filled bedroom now devoid of most of those neat things which personalized it as belonging to a particular person. Red lettering on the bag let it be known that whatever was in it was from a grand Chicago department store named Marshall Fields & Co. or so one would think since that's what was printed. In this case, they would be wrong. There was no business suit, overcoat or such in the bag. Rather what it protected was the newly arrived black cassock from T. O. Morrow and Co., another Chicago business but one catering to the huge Catholic Population of the Windy City. They were the vestment makers for the clergy, religious article purveyors and Catholic prayer books, Missals and religious themed book seller of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the entire mid-west. Whether you wanted a Rosary made in Italy so as to give as a gift, or a Miter for a newly consecrated Bishop, or the latest book by the most famous of all Bishops in the United States, Fulton J. Sheen, Morrow's was the place to go. And the owner of the cassock went downtown to its main store frequently on the Lake Street EL. The elevated electric powered metro train met other branches of the rail system and formed a Loop of elevated tracks supported by steel structures and long staircases, which led passengers up or down metal steps (no escalators) from the platform station. These screeching, spark flying trains ran every ten minutes around the central business and retail area of the city. It was this circle of tracks which gave the downtown area its name of The Loop.

None of that transportation history mattered to the almost nineteen year old young man who was quietly yet frantically packing away what he called his "neat stuff" so that his mother would not misplace it in one of her cleaning frenzies as he termed her quite focused cleaning routine. Cardboard boxes lay about the now stark looking room surrounded by windows, as it was once used as a sun room just off the living room when the apartment building was constructed in the early 1900's. It was quite like living in a fish bowl, but it was his little kingdom and he knew every inch of it and where each of his special things should be. Thus he knew when his mother had cleaned his room as his miniature Eiffel Tower brought home to him by his father's brother (Uncle Edward) or his tiny Statue of Liberty which he purchased on his first ever trip plane trip which was to New York City. His only other vacations were with his parents (Arthur and Rose) and younger sister, Janet, which took them to Muskegon Michigan along the Great Lake's shore or Holland Michigan for the Tulip Festival. Such an adventure to New York City was due to his working as the office boy for Swiss Air Lines on Michigan Avenue just east of the Loop. The manager of the airline Office, one Harold Berry, took him on Capitol Airlines out of Midway Airport to the city where Broadway shows which were once just a dream had now become real to him. That was when he was sixteen, but it began a love affair between him and that city which was only challenged by his desire to study in Rome at the Apostolic College for priestly formation.

This call to the Priesthood was something he heard since he was preparing for his First Communion at age seven at Sorrowful Mother Church. Through his elementary school years, this vision of becoming a priest was daily witnessed by his family. In the basement of the red brick two story apartment building consisting of four units, there were two sections. On one side was the laundry area and storage areas for

each of the apartments. Since the building was owned by the De Cenza family, that is his father, his father's sister and two brothers, each of those sheds as he called them contained wonderful things for him to explore as a child pretending to be searching for treasures. On the other side was a finished recreation room with a bathroom. Here is where he and his sister held their parties when they entered high school but before that, it was his Cathedral. On the far wall of the long cement floor room with plastered walls and tiny windows which brought in daylight and the view of ankles of those walking alongside the building on any given day, was his altar. This consisted of wood planks held up by aged wooden sawhorses. This was covered in his mother's white cotton tablecloth. Along the back edge of the altar were small plastic statues of Jesus, Mary, St. Joseph and St. Francis of Assisi on marble pedestals which were more like pieces of marble with flat tops. Weekly he would have his friends over and celebrate mass using his Bishop Sheen Latin and English Prayer Book. For vestments, he wore pieces of cloth from his grandmother's collection of rags, as she referred to them. His grandparents humored him and thought that his calling was a blessing for the family. But his father thought otherwise. The first born son, and only son, of an Italian-American family was destined to carry on the name by producing a new generation, so it was out of the question to entertain such a vocation.

Thus upon completion of eighth grade in the Catholic School, he was sent to the local public high school. His altar and those plastic statues were packed away and left as a childhood fantasy housed in a box in the shed in the basement. The REC room would be commandeered by his sister for her many friends to gather and dance away to the songs of Elvis, the Beatles, Bobby Darin and the one group he really liked, "The Righteous Brothers" and their "Unchained Melody" song. Following graduation, Ron entered the University of Illinois in Chicago. His was eighteen and his world and that of his family was about to change.

He began to date a Jewish girl with a lovely figure and a breast just waiting to be fondled, with permission of course. It would be out of the question to think otherwise for Ron De Cenza despite the sexual revolution which was just beginning to raise its radical head on campus. His father was breathing a sigh of relief. He didn't care if the girl was Jewish or Protestant, Italian, Polish or Irish as long as she would keep the priesthood from his thoughts. But then it happened; the event which would shatter his father's dream of grandchildren. The grandfather of Ron's girlfriend, Sarah Shapiro, passed away. He was invited to participate in the "sitting Shiva" ritual, which was a seven day mourning period during which one would visit the family and sit with them to share memories and offer comfort. Luckily for Ron, he had a Jewish Aunt in the family and learned that he was to bring candy or a similar small gift, like flowers. The experience raised in him the importance of ritual and faith in one's life. He felt that "call" to ritualize one's faith once again.

Secretly, he began to visit the priests of Sorrowful Mother Church to discuss the possibility of entering their formation program which led to being ordained a Priest in their order, which was called the Servants of Mary or Servites for short. He was informed that this could be done but only after he caught up on his Latin, the language of the Church. Despite the Vatican II Council sessions already conducted and the one schedule for the fall, which would confirm a variety of changes in the Church including the introduction of the local language of each country to be used in the Liturgies and Eucharistic celebrations, Latin was still the language in which theology and Scripture was taught along with Greek

for the Scripture lessons. Given Ron's lack of any Latin background except for some Mass prayers when he was an Altar Boy, a different approach was needed. They suggested that he enroll in Latin School which was conducted by the Benedictine Monks at St. Benedict's Abbey on Lake Como not far from the Illinois state line. And so during the Easter break, he informed his family of his intentions to go away to school for the purpose of preparing to enter the Seminary. Since then, his mother has been weeping daily and his father had become sullen and quite quiet, which for him was most unusual. But it was a done deal and they knew it. So they comforted themselves in the fact that they could visit him on Sundays since he would be so close by. By the end of the term, he had informed Sarah of his decision. She took it rather well considering that he was so well received in her family.

Ron brushed his long thick almost black hair off his forehead absentmindedly. Ignoring his latest acquisition, the Cassock, he glanced at a book resting against the box in which the Cassock was brought home. It was Bishop Sheen's latest book titled, "The Priest is not his own." Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was an icon of the American Catholic Church whom Ron idolized as did millions of others. He was raised as a youngster on watching his "Life is Worth Living" TV show as the entire family gathered around the small 12" screen of the Zenith TV set, long since gone. Now a counsel Zenith TV sat just outside the door of his bedroom before which his father would sit on the plastic covered French Provincial couch with his bowl of popcorn and watch old movies with Ron and over which he and his sister would argue when the Late Night Talk show came on, which she adored and he loathed. Both the book and the box were lying on his perfectly made twin bed. Not that he was such a perfectionist when coming to making up the bed, but this day, his mother Rose had made sure that on his last night home, his bed would be made with freshly laundered sheets, just taken down from the clothesline in the backyard, and a perfectly tucked in Bedspread of beige cotton with no ornamentation in the weave. Despite Ron's inclination to enjoy the Baroque when it came to Church décor, in his personal life everything had to be plain. That's why he usually wore black pants and a white or blue shirt. In fact his wardrobe sorely lacked anything else except for one pair of denim blue jeans. These were neatly folded and in his suitcase which was placed on the top of his almost empty desk.

Ron picked up the book and patted it. He then placed it in the suitcase on top of the jeans. "You're coming with me Bishop Sheen. I think I'll need your profound words to get me through tomorrow, if not the rest of the year in this Monastery they're sending me to."

As he was opening, the bottom drawer of his desk, a sweet voice called to him. "Ronnie, you have a phone call." One could still hear the sadness in his mother's voice these last few days. It was as if her son was going to his grave rather than to a vocation which would help people find God in their lives.

"Okay Mom, I'm coming...who is it?" He placed a year old newspaper into one of the big boxes of things which he was not bringing to the Abbey. The date of June 3, 1963 appeared over the headline which read, "Pope John XXIII is dead." Then he ran into the living room, jumping over his sister who was watching of all things the news. "Jan, what's with you; watching the news, I can't believe it."

"Don't get cute with me Ronnie; just because you're going to become a priest doesn't mean that I can't smack you."

"Ohhh...I'm so afraid; spare me Lord," Ron laughed as he ran down the hall toward the kitchen to take the phone call. He took the receiver from his Mom's hand as she looked up into his big cocoa brown eyes which looked back into her tear filled dark eyes much smaller than his own. He held his hand over the mouthpiece of the receiver. "Mom, who is it?" he whispered.

"It's your friend Bob." She turned away and went to the sink and fussed over a few dishes left from breakfast. They were perfectly clean and dry but she rewashed them just to keep herself busy.

The cradle phone had a long cord connecting it to the wall just outside the kitchen entrance. It rested on a small table which was handmade by Ron in woodworking class when he was in the eighth grade. It was stained blond and matched nothing in the house but it was made by his hand and so his mother treasured it. It stood about three feet high and had a shelf mid-way up on which rested the phone book with the yellow pages. A lace cloth covered the top and the base of the phone rested on it. Ron slid down the wall and sat on the oak stained wood planks of the hallway floor.

"Hi Bob, are you ready to go?" Ron quietly asked as his mother tried her best to listen over the running water in the sink.

Bob Wentz was one of two of Ron's closest friends. They met in gym class at the University and hung out together since those days of running the mile which Bob never finished given his portly body and lack of enthusiasm for such an activity. But did he love the "Bobs" a roller coaster ride at Riverview Amusement Park on Western Ave. near Belmont Ave. off which Bob's family lived. They would ride it over and over again never getting sick to their stomachs and laughing at all the tough guys who did. His other friend was Carolyn Kerkman. She came from what Ron called a classy family who had cocktails before dinner and sat in the dining room for dinner every night, unlike his family which ate in the kitchen except on Sundays and holidays. The three of them could be seen downtown on any given weekend. But she was already gone to the Convent of St. Mary's in Indiana to become a nun. Her parents and Ron's mom had been in contact with each other as Rose tried to comfort them upon losing their only child to the Church.

Bob answered in a hushed tone which alerted Ron that his mom was having a time of it like his own. "It's been tough these last few days. How about you, are you ready to do this?"

"I think so; I'm almost packed; just one suitcase like they said and a small box with a few things to remind me of home." Ron hesitated. He could hear the water still running in the kitchen. "My Mom is really a mess. My Dad isn't home from work as yet; but when he does, I think it will get worse."

"Mine too; you think I was dying or something."

"Well at least you have some brothers to carry on the German heritage of your family. Mine think the family heritage will die because of this. It's not like my sister will ever think of becoming a nun like Carolyn," he laughed.

"I heard that smarty pants," yelled Janet from the living room.

Ron ignored her and continued. "Listen, once at the Abbey tomorrow let's make sure our parents get together...you know to be of comfort to each other. The good-byes will be tough."

"Right...oh my Mom is calling me. See you tomorrow."

The call ended with the click sound of the receiver being returned to the base of the phone. Ron placed it back on top of the table he had made. "*Not too shabby of a job for a thirteen year old,*" he thought as he did so. Jumping to his feet, he slowly reentered the kitchen to find his mother standing on the kitchen table in order to reach the cabinets situated above it. "Holy crap! Mom, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, just getting down the big platter for the turkey I'm roasting for tonight," she casually replied as if she hadn't a care in the world though her heart was breaking.

"Just get down and let me do it. Remember the last time you tried this?"

Rose grabbed hold of Ron's extended hand and scooted to the edge of the table. She held it firmly, not that she needed to but it gave her a greater connection. Stepping onto the chrome legged chair between the table and the sink she commented that she didn't know what he was talking about. Then holding out both of her hands, Ron helped her to jump off the chair. Landing on the linoleum covered floor with the slightest thud sound, she turned her 4 ft. 11 inch frame of a body toward her son and smiled. "See no problem at all; though once you're gone who will help me to reach the serving platters?" She began to place a guilt trip on her son.

He wanted to reply that Janet was still at home and could easily do it for her; that is if she could separate herself from the soap opera show she watched all summer. But he decided not to take the bait and refocused her on his original comment of what had happened just a month ago when she was doing the very same thing. "So are you saying that you don't remember how you broke the old kitchen table? You don't recall how it cracked in the center and you got trapped between the caving sections? Well let me help you out here..." he paused and got into character exaggerated to the hilt in a high squeaky voice. "Help me, help me," he shrieked. "Then Bob and I came running into the kitchen and found you stuck and holding onto the cabinet door to keep yourself from totally falling through the table. You could have broken a leg or worse."

She smiled and patted his head. "But my son was there to save me, wasn't he?" She had returned the conversation brilliantly back to his departure.

"I give up... just promise me that you won't attempt this without a ladder or Janet to help you."

Rose kissed his cheek and then patted it. "I promise, now go finish packing before they arrive. I have to put on the water now."

Putting on the water meant filling a large metal pot with water and a dash of salt and bringing it to a boil so that the pasta could be placed into the boiling water for about 6 or 7 minutes that is if it was Capellini. If it was the short thicker pasta called Penne then it would cook another minute or two.

Ron turned toward the hallway as Rose opened the freezer door of the refrigerator. She took out three bags each filled with small oval shaped dumpling-like flour potato balls, one of them fell onto the table with a loud thud. Ron turned to make sure she wasn't climbing on the table again.

"Mom, you made gnocchi, I love you." He ran to her and gave her a hug. "But you shouldn't have; you could have waited until I was home for Thanksgiving break," he paused. "Turkey and gnocchi...this isn't Christmas."

She just returned a slight smile.

"And another thing...whom are the 'they' you referred to?"

"Oh just your grandma and grandpa Stella, Cousin Buddy and Aunt Jo, Aunt Antoinette and Uncle George, your Godfather Uncle Bern, Uncle Ed and Aunt Katherine, and your cousin Marcella...let me see, oh and Janet's girlfriends from down the street, the Alliotto twins, Darlene and Diane."

"Oh is that all?" an exasperated Ron replied.

His Mom smiled again. "Well let's see, Aunt Sally and Uncle Joe, Cousin Bobby, Aunt Anne and Uncle Jerry and cousin Geraldine will be coming for dessert; your favorite, chocolate ice box cake."

Ron's face brightened; his cheeks reddened with delight for his Mom was so right about his favorite dessert which was chocolate pudding cooked on the stove and placed over layers of graham crackers and then set in the refrigerator to cool and later be topped with whipped cream. "You know with meals like this one tonight it's no wonder why I am not 200 pounds."

"Don't be ridiculous, you are thin as a rail and I fear that they will not feed you properly. Those Monks are always fasting and giving up something for we poor sinners," she quickly changed the subject as she began to choke up again. "You know Aunt Sally was quite upset when you broke up with that nice Jewish girl."

Ron lowered his head as if in shame. "I know it was a great disappointment. She didn't want to be the only Jewish girl in an Italian family. She had given up on her boys, Dick married Marilyn, a German Lutheran and Bobby is dating that pretty Polish Catholic girl, Carol. So I was her last hope for another follower of Judaism to come into the family. It didn't matter that I am only eighteen."

"Well she was thinking ahead, that's all. In any case, you'll be nineteen in July and that's all water over the hill or whatever the expression is. You have been called by a much higher authority to serve others like the Disciples of Jesus did."

"Oh Mom, you make it sound like Christ came down and personally asked me to follow Him." He looked at his Mom who was now being lighted up from the rays of sun entering the kitchen from the enclosed back porch windows. She appeared to be glowing with heavenly light. He kept further comments to himself. "I guess I had better finish packing before the onslaught arrives and all hell breaks loose."

"Watch your tongue Ronnie, priests shouldn't use such language."

“Sorry, but I’m just an aging ignorant teenager who can’t even speak Latin.” He slowly prodded his way down the hallway, jumped over his seventeen year old sister lying across the living room floor in front of the TV and reentered his bedroom. He scanned his room to make sure all was as he wished to leave it. There were only two items left on the bookcase which had once belonged to his grandma De Cenza. One was a bronze bust of President John Kennedy which his father had cast for him after the President’s assassination some seven months ago. He took it off the shelf and began to wrap it in tissue paper, placing it in one of the big boxes headed for the storage shed in the basement.

It wasn’t as if Ron was a big Democrat. In fact when he was sixteen he actually worked for the Republican National Convention held in the Chicago Union Stockyards. He soon became a leader of the youth group at the convention who were to be aides to the delegates, delivering messages and refreshments to them. One of those he served was Senator Barry Goldwater. The Senator was so impressed by the boy’s skill and adeptness in getting things done that he brought Ron’s name to Vice-President Richard Nixon’s attention. He had just received the nomination to be the standard bearer of the party for President in the 1960 election. By the time Ron received a congratulatory letter from the Vice-President which invited him to become the leader of the Young Republicans; Ron had already been elected President of the Young Democrats. He had chosen his candidate not on political or earth shaking issues but rather because Kennedy was the first Catholic since Al Smith to receive the nomination to run for President and this time there was a good chance to win. Ron’s faith trumped the political issues of the day. He had chosen the dashing altruistic sounding Catholic nominee.

He closed the box and taped it shut. How things had changed since the assassination, in fact even before that with the death of Pope John XXIII. The new Pope, Paul VI, continued the Vatican II Ecumenical Council and the Church was in the midst of great change while the world was in turmoil since the death of both the Pope and then Kennedy. One of those changes was the changing of the language used in prayers and liturgy from Latin to the local one used in a particular country. And yet here was Ron and his friend Bob being sent off to Latin School to learn a language which was on the verge of being eliminated from popular use in the Church.

He picked up the last item sitting on the red bookcase shelf. He remembered the very day in which he had painted his grandma De Cenza’s bookcase that vibrant color for as he was doing so Fahey Flynn appeared on Chicago TV and announced the death of Pope John XXIII. It was June 3, 1963. He wrapped the brightly painted statue of Michelangelo’s rendition of the Pieta in tissue paper. The devotional statue also belonged to his grandma De Cenza who had died of pancreatic cancer shortly after his First Communion day. It was to come with him to the Monastic Abbey School of St. Benedict. He placed it into the small box which contained the more practical and mundane items also being brought to the Abbey; things like pads of paper, pen and pencils, shaving cream, safety razor, toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant and a couple of bars of Ivory soap. He sealed the box, closed the brown leather suitcase and strapped it tightly after clicking it shut.

Ron stepped back and tripped on the small cement step which led down from the living room into the former sun room. Bright sunlight hit him in the face through the open venetian blinds. Stumbling into

the living room he crashed into his sister who caught him. She had been standing in the doorway watching him as he packed away his final items.

"Holy shit; that was a close call," he pulled himself out of his sister's grasp. "Thanks Jan, I could have left with a broken leg or something."

His sister grinned from ear to ear. "Holy shit...Father Ron that just won't do. At least say it in Latin. It will sound more elegant."

Ron plopped himself onto the plastic covered sofa to the sound of crinkling and kicked off his shoes. "Isn't that the whole point of this Jan? If I could speak Latin, this whole sad affair wouldn't be happening. I would be at St. Mary of the Lake Minor Seminary on Touhy and Harlem just a twenty minute drive away."

"So now you will be two hours away, hardly at the ends of the earth."

"To Mom and Dad it might as well be," he changed the subject. "So there's going to be a big shindig to send me off...jealous?"

Jan pushed her brother to an upright position and dropped herself in the space created. "Really, a bunch of Aunts and grandma crying their eyes out that the family line is dead, not to mention Mom. You're breaking her heart you know."

"You really know how to hurt a guy," Ron slid off the plastic covers and stood at his bedroom doorway.

"There's a way to make it better you know."

He turned about and grabbing her by her arms lifted her up off the sofa. She shook her head, her short cut hair hardly moving at all, her big brown eyes which rivaled his twinkled; she smiled. "Just show them that you are sad to leave and for being such a disappointment to them. Turn the guilt trip back on them. It works all the time, trust me."

Returning a devilish smile he nodded. "How did you get so smart? It's the most Catholic thing ever, the feeling of guilt that is...I should have thought of it."

"You're a boy," Jan replied. "And your heart is with the Lord now. You can't find it in yourself to turn the tables on our family of all people."

"So because I am a boy, I am stupid is that it? What next? Are you going to burn your bra?"

"Don't be a dope Ronnie. They want to know that you will miss them but the call of the Lord is so strong that it can't be ignored." She stretched out her arms wide and deepened her voice as best she could.

"Ronnie, I need you to serve me." She plopped her hands onto his shoulders. "It's simple see."

"It's sinful but beautiful. Okay at dinner when they start sharing those memories of me when I was a little boy, that's when I'll do it." He hugged his sister, a miracle of sibling love to be sure. "If I forget, kick me under the table but not until I finish my ice box cake." He grinned evilly.

