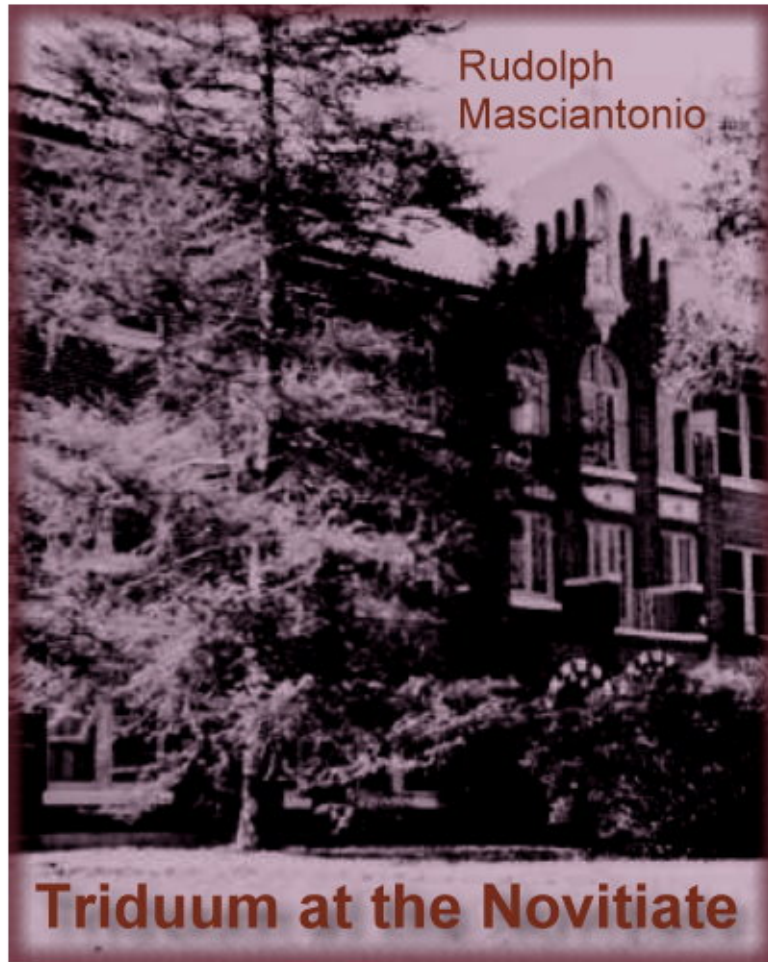


Free excerpt “Triduum at the Novitiate” by Rudolph Masciantonio



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TRIDUUM AT THE NOVITIATE

A Mystery Novel

by Dr. Rudolph Masciantonio

Sorori meae Marlenae, amatori fictionis

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CHAPTER I- THE FIRST DAY

The Novitiate was an old, meticulously- maintained three-story edifice set in the middle of the wooded Maryland countryside not too far from Baltimore but beyond the range of suburban sprawl. It had been a mansion, the primary residence of a millionaire for the first third of the 20th century, but after the stock market crash of 1929 it got sold cheaply to its current owners, a Roman Catholic religious order which made changes in the uses of the rooms but in general preserved the basic room divisions. Everything about the place was massive - huge walnut doors with polished brass knobs, wide marble halls, twenty foot high ceilings with ornate moldings and chandeliers. The first floor included the spacious institutional kitchen and the airy refectories. Here Postulants and Novices who were young men training for the religious life, the faculty Brothers who taught them, the retired Brothers known as "the Ancients", and any visitors took their meals. The second floor included a carpeted visitors' parlor, old-fashioned classrooms with real slate blackboards, the common room filled with desks, bookshelves and chairs where the Postulants and Novices studied, and the traditional chapel with its opulent padded dark walnut pews and richly-veined green and white marble altar. The third floor included Spartan dormitories and a very utilitarian shower room for the Postulants and Novices and plain private bedrooms and baths for the professed Brothers. There was also a huge basement that included a laundry room and Old Woody, a temperamental wood-burning heater that required lots of tender loving care during the cold season. Visitors often commented on the massiveness of the place and the unique way it combined austerity with opulence while diminishing neither. They also noted how pleasant and peaceful it was.

It was a warm and sunny day in early June. Pansies and azaleas abounded in the well cared for garden beds surrounding the building. Beyond the gardens and lawns in the immediate vicinity of the building were woods that had a clean, almost manicured appearance. Directly in front of the building sentinel-like was a huge statue of Blessed Brother Fulgentianus, the founder of the Brothers of Our Lord and Savior. The two minivans and the Pontiac sedan that the Brothers owned were kept in a driveway in the rear of the building. The absence of automobile traffic and even automobiles themselves contributed to the peace and medieval atmosphere of the place. The vehicles were used by either the Brother Procurator or the Brother Infirmarian to go

into town from time to time to buy supplies, but trips by either man were so infrequent that the vehicles seemed almost superfluous.

A young Novice, Brother James, rang the large brass handbell in the middle of the hallway on the first floor near the main entrance to the building and the chapel. In silence the Brothers and Novices assembled for Sext, the midday prayer coming right before the noontime meal. When all were assembled and kneeling at their places, a small bell rang and all rose. The Brother Director intoned the customary versicle asking for God's help: *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*. From long habit the Brothers responded by asking God to hasten to help: *Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina*. The brief and austere hymn *Rector potens verax Deus* was next recited or rather sung on one note.

Rector potens, verax Deus,
qui temperas rerum vices,
splendore mane instruis
et ignibus meridiem.

Exstingue flammas litium,
aufer calorem noxium,
confer salutem corporum
veramque pacem cordium.

Praesta, Pater piissime,
Patrique compar Unice,
cum Spiritu Paraclito
regnans per omne saeculum. Amen.

Ruler mighty, true God,
who temper the changes of affairs,
with splendor Thou preparest the morning
and with fires the midday.

Extinguish the flames of quarrels,
take away the heat of harmful things,
confer health on our bodies
and true peace in our hearts.

Grant this, most devoted Father,
only Son equal to the Father,
with the Spirit Comforter,
ruling through every age. Amen.

Then the Brothers sat down to chant in *recto tono* the appointed psalms verse by verse, the Brothers on the left side alternating with those on the right side of the small, traditional chapel. As the psalmody (as the chanting or recitation of the psalms and canticles was called) proceeded, the light from the sun streamed through the stained glass windows creating a ruddy and unearthly glow in the chapel. The chapel had colorful painted plaster statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph of the type

that were common in the 1950's, richly carved Stations of the Cross, a golden bronze tabernacle over the high altar, and a life-sized, bright colored crucifix above the tabernacle. The Brothers of Our Lord and Savior were a very traditional order that maintained chapels regarded by modernist critics as old-fashioned. The Tridentine Latin liturgy was celebrated with great reverence in these chapels and the mad rush toward "renewal" and *aggiornamento* seen in most religious orders of the day was almost completely absent. In fact, the order was fond of using the term "Catholic restoration" instead of "renewal" or *aggiornamento*. By clinging to old ways and well-proven practices, the order had prospered. It had grown quantitatively and qualitatively while other orders were collapsing from massive defections, lack of new vocations, and aging personnel.

Brother Thomas was a dark-haired, eighteen year old novice of Italian extraction from South Philadelphia. He had been in the Novitiate approximately six months. He liked wearing the traditional habit of the Brothers which consisted of a black cassock and white rabat made of plastic. Each day the rabat had to be scrubbed with a toothbrush and white cleanser. The *regularitas* or "meticulous observance of the rule" which the Brothers emphasized also appealed to him; everything was done at an appointed time in a way specified by the Rules and Constitutions. There was great peace in the Brother's community, set as it was in the lovely Maryland countryside far from the crime and grime of a big city. Brother Thomas recited the psalms of Sext with devotion and a sense of inner calm and happiness. He thought how lucky he was. Thoughts of his new manual labor assignment as Brother Patrick's assistant at the pond maintenance detail raced through his consciousness and he prayed for the strength to do well at the new assignment.

Brother Patrick was a man in his late thirties who looked much younger because of his baby face and trim, boyish build. He was a medical doctor who served as Brother Infirmarian in the community. Tall, fair-skinned and blond, he had a questioning mind and, unlike most other Brothers, he wondered why the congregation was not more receptive to the innovations of the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath and the "spirit of Vatican II" which had swept the Catholic world in the late sixties, the seventies, and the eighties. Here it was 1990 and the Brothers of Our Lord and Savior were very much like they had been in the fifties. He resented in some respects the strictness of the Rules and Constitutions. While the Jesuits, the Benedictines, the Christian Brothers and other religious orders were reformulating their rules, "refounding" their institutes through "renewal" of the charisms of their founders, and generally leaving the practice of the religious life more to individual members, the Brothers of Our Lord and Savior had remained both traditional and conservative. Sometimes in unguarded moments Brother Patrick would voice his sense of disquiet at the way things were, but generally he kept his thoughts to himself because criticism and open expression were not encouraged in the order.

As the Brother Infirmarian, Brother Patrick had a certain latitude that other professed Brothers did not enjoy, e.g., he went into Baltimore from time to time to examine and buy medical supplies. No one asked him to account in detail for his time on such trips or even for their frequency. He would routinely bring a pair of jeans and a casual shirt with him when he drove into the city and would change into his civvies when safely away from the Novitiate. Several years ago on such a trip he had gone into a bar in Baltimore called the Bike Stop ostensibly to use the lavatory. As it turned out, he

stayed for a few drinks and some interesting conversations with fellow patrons. Naturally, he did not reveal his identity as a religious. The Bike Stop became a kind of pressure relief valve for him. When the rigors of being a religious Brother seemed too much for him, he could arrange to slip off to the Bike Stop for a few hours and just relax and see how seculars his age lived. He thought of the Bike Stop as his little "hidden life".

The office of Sext drew to a close. It ended when Brother Director Joseph gave the signal of the community *Benedicamus Domino!* ("Let us bless the Lord!") to which the Brothers responded *Deo gratias!* ("Thanks be to God!") The Brothers silently and reverently withdrew from the old chapel to the refectory or dining room for the midday meal. When the twenty-nine or so Brothers that comprised the community had reached the refectory, Brother Director intoned the Latin grace before meals from the old *Breviarium Romanum* and the Brothers sat down in silence to eat. Each Brother had a heavy white ceramic plate, stainless steel tableware, a heavy white cup and saucer, and a cloth napkin in a napkin ring at his place. The table settings had been obtained without cost from a nearby Jesuit seminary that had closed down for lack of recruits. The napkins were supposed to last a full week before being changed. The napkin rings were different colors so that the napkins could be easily distinguished if one should stray from its place. The refectory was set up restaurant-style after each meal with the dishes and tableware in place for the next meal. During the meal a Brother read aloud to the community from a book selected by Brother Director. The reading usually consisted of a biography of a saint, a well-known spiritual classic such as *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, books which dealt with Catholic traditions and history, works on pedagogy (since the Brothers were primarily a teaching order who staffed hundreds of schools and colleges throughout the world), historical novels, and, in general, works which lent themselves well to being read aloud and which would be worthwhile to the community in the judgment of Brother Director. Professed Brothers, but not the Novices, were free to recommend reading material to Brother Director. The reading provided the Brothers with an on-going educational opportunity that would last a lifetime. Reading at table was a popular and well-liked feature of the Rules and Constitutions among the Brothers.

The fare at the meals was always very plain. Usually, it was basic American style food consisting of a vegetable, a potato course of some sort, and a meat or fish entree. The Brothers abstained from meat on Wednesdays in honor of St. Joseph, their special patron, on Fridays because this was the practice of the universal Church in the unreconstructed days before the Second Vatican Council, and on Saturdays in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom each Brother dedicated his life. Also served at the meals was a dish of bread (usually sliced white bread), a desert which was normally fresh fruit or a fruit cocktail, milk, and water. Condiments such as salt, pepper, sugar, catsup, mustard, butter, etc., were available but not widely used. Each Brother was expected to develop a "Sense Program" for himself which indicated the ways in which he planned to mortify or deny each of his senses. Usually, non-use of condiments would be included in the "Sense Program", which Brother Director had to approve for each member of the community.

Though the repasts were plain and talking was not permitted except at Sunday dinner and dinner on major feast days, they were very pleasant. The dining room or refectory had windows on three sides and the view of the lovely countryside lent a feeling of

tranquility to the meals. Swaying evergreens were visible year round. In the warmer weather cherry blossom, oak, and linden trees displayed their lush foliage. The lindens were fragrant, and their sweet smell wafted through the open windows of the refectory in the spring and summer. The Brothers cooked and served the meals themselves. Unlike many post-Vatican II religious orders, there were no hired cooks, waiters, or dishwashers. The Brothers did everything for themselves. They took turns at the various functions -cooking, waiting on tables, cleaning up and washing the dishes.

When the mealtime drew to a close, Brother Director would ring a little bell. The reader would then switch to *The Imitation of Christ*, an old standby from medieval times which was read consecutively a few verses at a time at the end of all meals. At a convenient point in the reading, the reader said: *Tu autem, Domine, miserere nobis !* ("But Thou , O Lord, have mercy on us!") to which the Brothers responded: *Deo gratias!* ("Thanks be to God!"). All rose quietly and the Brother Director intoned the long Latin grace after meals from the *Beviarium Romanum*. He said it from memory, although the card with the text was nearby just in case he should lose his place. He never did. At the end of the prayer the Brothers departed in silence. Those whose turn it was to cleanup and do dishes went directly to their tasks. The others went outside and began what was called Recreation of Rule. Brothers were assigned to small groups each of which had a Brother President. The major topic of conversation was the reading that had occurred at the meal. Other topics were allowed, but the Brothers were expected to speak in such a way as to edify their comrades. Certain topics were explicitly prohibited by the Rules and Constitutions, e.g., the Brothers' families or previous careers, politics, and sex. The conversations took place while the Brothers walked around the spacious property. In bad weather, the walk took place under the long covered area in the front of the building. The Recreation of Rule lasted for a half hour. Then the Brother President of each group would give the signal. By this time the clean-up crew which had been doing the dishes and setting up the refectory for the next meal would be finished its work.

The professed Brothers went to their rooms where they changed into their work clothes for the afternoon manual labor. The Novices went to the common room, a large study where each Novice had his own desk. They removed their habits there and then went in tee shirts and black trousers to the locker room in the basement where they changed into work clothes. The locker room was a windowless, warm area beside the boiler room. It had fluorescent lights, benches, and a ragtag collection of lockers -some gray, some khaki, some black- obtained by the Brother Procurator from army surplus, from an old Franciscan seminary in Winona, Minnesota, that had closed down, again for lack of recruits, and from the trash. The Brothers were very frugal in their living habits and the Brother Procurator was charged with obtaining all material goods for the community at the lowest possible price consistent with prudence and the desire that the item should last indefinitely. In fact, the Brothers enjoyed joking about the longevity of their clothing, shoes, and furniture. Everything seemed to be purchased or acquired with the idea that it would outlast the person to whom it was given to use.

Changing in the locker room was a source of embarrassment for Brother Thomas. He had grown up in a family where privacy was highly valued. The notion of being naked in the presence of other males upset him. Some of the Brothers changed their

underpants as well as their outer clothing. Typically they took off their army surplus white briefs or boxer shorts and put on army surplus athletic supporters. Out of a sense of modesty, Brother Thomas did not change his underpants. He put on his jeans, an old tee shirt, and an old pair of sneakers and moved quickly to his manual labor assignment.

His assignment was to assist Brother Patrick with pond maintenance. The pond in question was a doughnut-shaped lake, called St. Mary's pond by the Brothers, about a half mile from the Novitiate. The pond was fed by a small stream through artificial channels that Brother Patrick and others had constructed. The idea of the pond maintenance was to keep the water circulating through the artificial channels and prevent stagnation. There was also the hope that the pond area could be gradually improved to the point where it might be a suitable recreation area for the Brothers. The pond was surrounded by a thickly wooded area and was accessible via a dirt road from the Novitiate building in one direction and from the little town of Beltsville in the other direction.

Brother Patrick was already at the pond when Brother Thomas arrived. Brother Patrick gave the signal of the community, viz., *Benedicamus Domino!* Brother Thomas replied, *Deo gratias!* Giving the signal meant that the Brothers could engage in necessary conversation during an otherwise silent period.

"We've got to work in the water today," Brother Patrick said enthusiastically. "We've got to dredge the channels, deepen them, and get the water flowing through the pond. I've brought down bathing suits for both of us, though it's so private down here that we could easily work without them." Brother Thomas' face flushed red. Brother Patrick handed Brother Thomas a pair of the common stock bathing trunks. They were navy blue briefs made of wool with a small cotton interior supporter. Brother Patrick held the trunks by the small cotton supporter as he gave them to Brother Thomas. This action caused Brother Thomas to blush even redder. The Brother Procurator had obtained a large and inexpensive supply of these trunks from army surplus. Brother Thomas grew very nervous. The thought of changing into the trunks right there in front of Brother Patrick in broad daylight in the gleaming sunlight caused Brother Thomas to break out into a clammy sweat. Brother Patrick was very casual about undressing. He folded his clothing neatly and placed them on a nearby rock. He turned his back toward Brother Thomas and quickly slipped into the bathing trunks. As Brother Patrick pulled his trunks on, Brother Thomas caught a glimpse of his fellow Brother without clothing, the sunlight gleaming on the nude buttocks. The buttocks were lightly covered by soft, blond down of the type that teenage boys develop as they approach sexual maturity. Brother Thomas had hardly begun to undress. Sensing the uneasiness of the younger Brother, Brother Patrick said that he would get started on the work and thus left Brother Thomas in quasi-privacy to change.