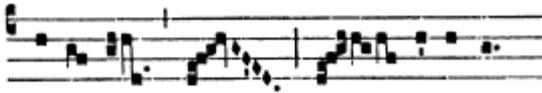




Archbishop In Flames

Excerpted from **THE MEGAPODE**

A novel by Michael Finley



THOUGH NINE YEARS OUT OF TEN IT FELL within the sorrowful season of Lent, there was still no greater nor more joyfully celebrated feast for the Society of Bernard than that of its namesake, Bernard de Veaux, eleventh martyr of Oceania, the 16th of February. And in

the entire history of the holy congregation, not one of the celebrations matched the pomp, splendor, or showmanship of today's.

Already the grand choir was gathering in the rear of the seminary chapel. Visitors from up and down the eastern seaboard milled about beyond the vestibule, where Fund Days were well underway, and children dressed for church dashed from booth to booth, shirttails flying, and adults sipped coffee from styrofoam cups.

Madame Coordinator Mrs. Mieczniewicz, with her new assistant Victor Van Eyck standing alongside, was in her glory, and glanced across the atrium toward her uncomfortable predecessor, Len Lewis. The senior members of the fund-raising committee for the new St. Bernard's Bluff, which was to be raised up upon the site of the current St. Bernard's, might not be speaking any more, but one half of that committee, Mrs. Mieczniewicz thumped herself, had not sold itself short. She and Van Eyck had worked like dogs to get invitations printed and mailed, news releases issued up and down the coast, phone calls placed to the proper personages -- everything from the linen for the Archbishop's breakfast table to the pinning of name-cards (HELLO! My Name is Brother Gaspar) on the countless cassocks floating up and down the plank veranda of House Major. Of course she was proud -- of the big things and the little things, from the mimeographed novena cards to the fifth of Johnny Walker Red in the quarters of the Very Reverend Willard James

Croatch, Archbishop of Philadelphia.

Already the big man was moving in the sacristy, gazing contentedly at himself in the full mirror, while acolytes Diener and Dodge assisted him in donning the rose-lilac chasuble of the occasion. It was the latest rage in chasubles, floor-length as opposed to the standard sandwichboard jobs most priests had issued to them. The Archbishop liked the medieval flavor of the vestment. The Fourteenth was his favorite century.

He pirouetted in the mirror, admiring his magnificence. What a fine figure he cut, so tall and so -- so big. He had about him the congratulatory air that came with the knowledge that, should the need arise, he could swallow his enemies whole. The Archbishop was the sort of man who could never love his fellows quite so well as he loved himself.

The first year seminarian Marty, who had never before served as acolyte before, followed the Archbishop's movements from his hiding place behind an opened cabinet door.

"You there," the Archbishop motioned to Marty, "hand me that mirror." And while Marty fetched the hand-mirror, Croatch peered out at the gathering congregation. He seemed especially to take notice of Mrs. Mieczniewicz, whose teeth seemed visible all the way around her head.

"Here you are, Father," Marty said. Then, catching

himself, "I mean, your -- your Highness?"

Croatch eyed Mrs. Mieczniewicz and grunted. "You've got yourself a real corker with that one," he said.

The truth was that the Archbishop wasn't on hand due to Mrs. Mieczniewicz' persistence on the telephone, but in spite of it -- the deal had been worked out months earlier, just between Croatch and St. Bernard's Rector, Monsignor MacConacht. MacConacht and Croatch shared the same wavelength -- Croatch put in his appearance at the St. Bernard fund raiser and MacConacht put in a good word for Croatch with the Mother House in Rome.

The Archbishop smiled benignly and twirled again in the mirror. Rose-lilac was nice, he seemed to be thinking, but his favorite color was cherry-red.

For Marty's part, he was ready. The Archbishop's presence did not daunt him in the least; the great throng gathering outside did not give him pause; the candles, flowers, incense and music -- water off a duck's back. Today he was at the peak of his powers, at peace with himself, and he could feel the natural grace flooding his being and emanating outward again, but with a certain topspin. The World may have come to the door to St. Bernard's for a glimpse of an Archbishop, true; but what they would take back with them the memory of a certain young acolyte who stunned everyone with his perfect altar stylings and his incredibly Christ-like instincts at the Mass.

The choir launched into the Asperges and the procession began: first Mieczniewicz, with a silver-plated crucifix on a stick; then a half-dozen seminarians in black cassocks and albs, carrying candles; then the censer, Marty, in red and white, smoke spilling from his chained vessel; then Fathers Harris and Tichenor, the concelebrants; then Archbishop Croatch, in pale rose-lilac; then Dodge, Marty's counterpoint, also censuring; then Provolini in black, holding aloft the crucified, gold-plated Christ.

It was a grand parade, and Marty enjoyed his part in it. When they arrived at the sanctuary, the two-by-twos parted and encircled the statue of St. Bernard de Veaux, with his over-rouged cheeks and over-red lips, and both Marty and Dodge stopped to cense the statue. The Archbishop bowed, and the half-dozen boys in black wheeled the statue, which was mounted shakily on a stainless steel refectory cart, back into its alcove on the altar's left-hand side.

By now the choir had concluded the Asperges and had struck up St. Bernard's own theme, "Thank You, Lord (For Sparing Me the Cup)," and Father Lewis, who was filling in for Tichenor, was waving his hands expansively as his charges scaled the mixolydian heights. The congregation in the pews could be seen to surreptitiously sniff in the sweet smoky air. The Archbishop as putting on a whale of a show.

THE THREE CELEBRANTS advanced to the center of the sanctuary and formed a line symbolizing the Holy Trinity. Dodge and Marty stood below them on the bottom step. The six seminarians in black took seats with the choir, while the torch-carriers stood opposite one another guarding the altar. Deacon Diener backed down the red-carpeted steps and proceeded to the three chairs beside the little washstand, and waited for his big moment, when he would chant the day's Epistle. Marty kept a close eye on Dodge, mimicking his every motion.

The Mass was underway. *Dominus vobiscum*, the three celebrants said, whirling, and then whirled right around again. The congregation chimed right in with the common mispronunciation, *Et cum spiri tutuo*. The rhythm was better that way, Marty nodded. Only the priests and seminarians got it right. Marty stifled himself a yawn -- he could feel his jaw muscles tighten around the yawn. It was all too easy, he thought. He daydreamed, as he had done since he was a little boy, bored with the ritual in front of him. He imagined the priests were the kaleidoscoped dancers on the Jackie Gleason Show. The Willard Croatch Dancers, featuring The Acolettes, he named them. He pictured the Archbishop doing the basic Gleason schtick. And away we god!

At the Kyrie, Marty glanced over and realized he had lost Dodge. Somehow, the older boy had sidled over and

backwards about three paces, to make more room for the celebrants to whirl around in. Marty swallowed air -- suddenly the grand symmetry was off. He hoped no one noticed as he inched backward down a step. Father Tichenor, catching the misstep from his periphery, shot Marty a meaningful look.

The choir was going full-blast on the Kyrie, which enabled Marty to get squared off again with Dodge across the room.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dodge hissed through his teeth.

"Lord, have mercy," Marty murmured. Then came time for the Readings, and the torch-boys came out of retirement to escort Diener over to the Lectern, where he opened his big book to the 6th chapter of Revelations, something about lambs and beasts and seals.

Deo gratias. And the choir sang the Amen devised from the theme of St. Bernard, and then there it was again. *Dominus vobiscum.*

Marty daydreamed again about all the funny Latin phrases in the Mass. Asperges became asparagus, of course. *Ora pro nobis* was oh wrap your nose up. *Liberamus domine* turned into liver on a stormy day.

The same was true for English. Who could forget "oh

my God I am hardly sorry" or "Hail Mary, full of grapes"?

Marty and Dodge took their places adjoining the chairs of Father Harris and Archbishop Croatch, while Tichenor spieled off the Gospel about the Clever Steward. When he had finished, the big man rose and advanced to the Lectern to give the homily. With the usual amplified fumbling with his microphone, he launched in to his talk.

"The theme of my discussion today, my friends, is: "Bernard de Veaux, eleventh martyr of Oceania, and patron saint of the little things in life!"

It was the dullest thought which had ever occurred at the Bluff -- no mean feat. For the longest time it appeared that the Archbishop would succeed where the cannibals of the Solomons had failed. "... and so I suggest to you today that perhaps it would do each of us a bit of good to pause from time to time in our own lives, and to ask ourselves this simple and yet, oh-so-relevant question: What does the life of St. Bernard de Veaux have to do with my life?"

Marty was fantasizing even as he nodded sagely at this thought. He was picturing a latecomer arriving at the chapel, opening the doors, and drowning in the deluge of vomit pouring out onto him. It was that kind of a homily. He scanned the faces in the congregation. There was his friend Dubois, gazing distractedly at a stained-glass window. There was Mrs. Mieczniewicz and her new helper, Victor Van Eyck. And there, in the back row, arms crossed almost defiantly (it seemed to Marty), and with an

expression of great irritation on his face.

Odd, Marty thought -- hadn't the Monsignor MacConacht ever heard a bad sermon before? And even so, it was the feast of his own order's one hero, surely a day for all to celebrate. MacConacht almost looked -- and this was quite impossible, more likely he was suffering from indigestion -- as if he bore a grudge of some sort against the beloved martyr!

The Archbishop was brief if not concise, and his sermon managed to further diminish Marty's concentration, so that upon resumption of the Mass he made the mental error of intercepting the three priests and escorting them back up the altar steps, instead of following from a discreet distance, as Dodge was doing. Marty realized with a mortifying backward glance that he now headed the grand procession.

Very well, he vowed, if I am to lead then I will act the part of a leader, and accordingly he thrust his head high and advanced haughtily across the center line, where he bumped into the genuflecting Dodge and nearly tumbled right over him. It was a textbook shoulder-block, perhaps the best Dodge had ever given, including times he had done it on purpose.

Dodge looked up at Marty with a stricken expression. For there, just ahead of the two in the tabernacle, rested Dodge's God, behind the brocade drape; and there, behind him in the congregation, sat his parents and other relatives

from Buffalo; and here, standing beside him and serving as his counterpoint in worship, was Jerry Lewis.

Somehow the two managed to maneuver around one another, and Marty and Dodge stood side by side once more. The Archbishop and his helpers were back to their old ways, bobbing and dipping up front. The choir began its Offertory hymn and the two boys, taking that as their cue, lifted their censers again, censed the priests, and set the censers down, Marty setting his down a bit clumsily, the chain not retracting on one side. He made a note to attend to that once he returned from the Lavabo, and rose to traipse after Dodge to the tiny wash-stand. The Archbishop washed his hands and handed Marty the towelette, which Marty took great ceremonial pains to fold, laying one holy corner carefully over the other. When he turned to return to his place beside Dodge, Dodge was gone.

Marty rocked back and forth on one leg, trying to spot Dodge amid the whirling chasubles. No luck -- the sacramental personnel were blocking his view of his partner -- who very simply had gone up front to close the gate to the sanctuary. Marty concluded that Dodge had felt sick or had to visit the lavatory.

Very well, he concluded, he would manage somehow alone. In fact, he thought, this might be his big break. Without Dodge around to force Marty to comply with his bilateral symmetry, Marty was suddenly free to substitute

his own symmetries. No more of this mismatched Laurel-and-Hardy genuflection. His spirit soared. What should he essay first?

Since he could no longer flank the three concelebrants, he decided it would be most symmetrical to line up at the end of them, making four. And so he did, trailing his censer -- chain still off-kilter -- behind him, taking his place behind Father Tichenor, splashing frankincense enthusiastically up at the rose-lilac chasubles.

Never mind, now, that the line of three symbolized the three-natured aspect of God. And never mind that the Mass had intensified beyond the period of praise and proclamation, and was now deep into re-enacting the miracle of the Last Supper. Never find, finally, what in Marty's mind constituted excessive archery of the eyebrows darting his way from the aggrieved Father Tichenor, and from the even more disturbed Father Harris farther up the line. Never mind the disdain of the Archbishop himself, who turned at the conclusion of the Offertory finally to behold -- as a surprised man beholds his vaulting shadow late at night in a bad part of town -- the Fourth Wise Man. And never mind, ever, that the lid on Marty's censer was precariously tipped and threatened to fall apart at any second.

Never mind any of that.

The important thing was that Marty Frye was finally outside himself, blossoming as he never had blossomed --

deep in his spirit, with a joy that rose up out of him like magician's doves, like a glistening meadow of dew-sprinkled Jerusalem artichokes.

Later on he could explain, and everyone would understand.

ACTUALLY, NOT ALL of him was outside himself blossoming. There was still a non-dove, non-Jerusalem artichoke part of him already busy making apologies.

Gentlemen, he would say, you must all bear in mind that your job up there today was to celebrate the Mass. My job, as I saw it, was to cense things. It was my best judgment that you three fellows were the very sort of thing I ought at that time to have been censing.

He rested his case.

BUT THE REST OF MARTY FRYE was in all its glory. He disdained everything but the sight and scent of smoke rising above the tabernacle roof to the wooden feet of Christ.

He disdained the look on Ralph Diener's face, shaking his head in little compact twists and making No! kisses with his lips. He disdained the blood in Father Harris the Hairy Beast's eyes, and the fire in Father Tichenor the Runty Marine's. He disdained the tittering from the

congregation and the choir, the stifled grins of the young torch-boys, the look on his pal Dubois' face, as on a man who has just swallowed a Monopoly board. Oblivious to matters of The World, Marty stumbled after the troika of celebrants, like Dopey after the rest of the dwarfs.

Now was at hand the moment of reckoning, and Marty was now jolted into it -- the Consecration. He was on his feet, he saw, if from a great distance. He was standing during the Consecration! Fathers Harris and Tichenor were already lifting the hem of the Archbishop's chasuble, and the Archbishop was hoisting the large white wafer.

Marty panicked. He looked around him, at Diener, at the torch-boys, he saw Dodge kneeling at the bottom of the steps -- so that's where he was hiding! -- and Marty panicked even worse. His blood turned to cold glue in his veins, he clung to the hope that Dodge would now save him somehow, that Dodge would take him and lead him gently, like the "big brother" he had once been to him, lead him gently down the sanctuary steps.

But Dodge looked at him with vengeance in his eyes, clasped the bell-cluster in his right hand, and as the Archbishop said the magic words *HOC! EST! ENIM! CORPUS! MEUM!* Dodge jangled the bells for all he was worth.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice. It was consummated. And time stood still for Marty Frye, standing paralyzed at the altar's top stair, back facing the Transubstantiation. He felt a willowy tingling in his thighs. He imagined the curtain in an temple rending inside him. And while the hard bread of men was being transformed behind him into the pliable body of Christ, Marty's pliable little penis rose up in front of him like a blood-streaming rood.

Marty set his censer down loosely and put his hands to his temples. He stared down at his middle. Was it visible, the thing that had grown under his cassock and surplice? Could the whole congregation behold his indignity?

It was. They could. It looked to him as if he were hiding a swiped bottle of muscatel taped against his stomach. It was as plain as the nose on his face, he told himself, his heart kicking its way out of his rib-cage, as obvious as a tarantula on an angelfood cake. Every eye was upon him, and upon his peculiar condition, every hands was heaping imaginary faggots at his bound feet, every prayer implored the Almighty to blast the hapless boy on the spot he had blasphemed.

Of course, this was all happening in a dream, he told himself. Every night he had dreams, and this was simply another. Why, there was Dubois in the third row, looking ill -- Dubois was so smart, he knew the word for this whole experience was *deja vu*, where a thing happens and you know it happened before but you can't put your finger

on it. That was what this all was, Marty thought, one of those *deja vus*.

That thought comforted Marty as he stood on the altar stair, and he sank to his feet with a tired smile, rolling his eyes to the chapel dome. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, he murmured, beating his chest drunkenly.

And when he rose, every eye on the house upon him, his shoe caught at his surplice, the surplice tore off him at the shoulder, slid onto the floor, landed on the censer, tipping it over. The surplice quickly burst into flame, and the loose coals rolled down the three remaining altar steps, spilling unceremoniously all the way to the communion railing, setting several fires in half a dozen smoldering stripes.

MARTY FRYE SAT AFTER THE CONFLAGRATION in a folding chair back in the sacristy, his mind reeling as it tried to weigh the morning's events. All around him the commotion continued to swirl. He could not quite piece it all together -- the chain of events never quite connected. For now he decided to sit calmly and be the unblinking eye on the premises while the hurricane around him spent out its last energies.

The Archbishop was far from spent out. He leaned against the wardrobe, hands trembling, his breath coming in spastic, smoke-inhaled sputters. From moment to

moment he would glance over at the sloe-eyed Frye boy, and then he would bring himself to his full adult height, shake his finger, and then not know

what to say. Fathers Tichenor and Harris, ignoring Marty for the moment, danced frantically around the great man who had nearly fallen in the line of duty, and hoped he would not need nitroglycerine tablets.

Marty was effused with an eerie, inconsolable peace -- something like bliss but also a lot like despair. He saw the mad gestures of the Archbishop when the prelate pointed at him, and he tried to remember where he had seen that gesture before. Finally it came to him -- it was from Dubois' enactment of Dreyfus case. The moment when Emile Zola took the stand. J'accuse! J'accuse! It was an interesting time in French history, from Dubois' description. On the whole Marty wished he had been part of it and not this.

As for the Archbishop's true feelings, Marty had no need to worry. Suffering from smoke and third-degree burns along his neck and scalp, the Archbishop could not be held accountable for his feelings at this time. Of course, the entire episode might have been less discomfiting overall had his rose-lilac chasuble not exploded in sudden flame at the altar, singeing his hair and burning his back. Why the big vestment conglomerates couldn't fireproof their chasubles was beyond him.

Marty could only remember the smell, and a curious

smell it had been, of hair crackling. He wondered whether that was what St. Lawrence smelled like on the spit in the days of St. Sixtus. "You can turn me over, boys," the madcap saint is supposed to have said. "I'm done on this side." Catholic humor was not without its moments.

Just then Monsignor MacConacht ambled into the sacristy to offer the Archbishop his comfort and condolences. Marty was fascinated. Now the Rector seemed strangely relieved and pleasant, where up until Martin's mishap with the censer he had seemed agitated and unhappy.

"You just sit a moment, your excellency, while I rub some of this stuff onto that neck."

"Ow! Oh!" the Archbishop winced in complaint, but was then seized by another coughing fit.

"There, there," the Rector said gently. MacConacht seemed -- cleansed or something. There was compassion in his voice as he soothed the Archbishop's hacking, a lilt in the way he spoke, and a decided spring in his step. He even seemed to regard Marty with an attitude of -- gratitude?

"Who put him up to this? The Cardinal?" Croatch lapsed into another fit.

The Rector shrugged helplessly, sympathetically. "No one, excellency. We're certain he acted alone."

Marty brightened: the Unbalanced Loner Theory.

"No, the Cardinal was in on this, it has his mark all over it. I'll wager my soul it was the Cardinal."

"Unlikely, excellency. The boy knows nothing of all that."

"What is he, a retard?"

Marty frowned.

"No, excellency." Mutter, mutter... "a discipline problem."

The Archbishop, regaining his composure, pushed MacConacht out of his way and regarded Marty across the room with the utmost vilification. Without taking his eyes off the boy, he spoke to the Rector:

"The kid's a menace."

"Come on, Willard, I'll buy you a drink. "The Rector took him by the wrist.

"He's a Goddamn hazard."

MacConacht led the great man away. Fathers Harris and Tichenor were still busying themselves cordoning off the altar area, cleaning up after the disaster. Marty noticed Dubois trying to get through to the sacristy but being pushed away by the Hairy Beast. Marty lacked the energy to have shrugged, but if he could have he would have.

For now it was all over -- everything. Seeing Dubois

in the doorway was like getting a postcard from his own life. Great to hear that The World was having a wonderful time out there; he wished he could be there too. But it was not to be.

He gazed dreamily out toward the sanctuary, smoke and steam issuing in equal amounts from the passageway with an incense-like languor. He wished he had daisies by the dozens, so he could tear all the petals off, like Ophelia did. No, not daisies -- Jerusalem artichokes.

That done, he would tangle himself in the wreath he had made and go jump in the duck pond in front of St. Bernard's Bluff. And they would find him like that, floating face-up, a weird, demented smile on his face. And they would bury him outside the seminary grounds, in unblessed soil. And the stone would bear this inscription:

HERE LIES BROTHER MARTY, WHO GOT
ALL HIS SHAKESPEARE FROM
CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED

Too late to be sorry, he thought, and too late to make amends. Too late for anything save that single perfect act of contrition, and then -- the duck pond.

Even were he somehow to rehabilitate himself after this heinous crime, his fellows would never suffer his presence among them. Tichenor and Harris had let him know their feelings -- mainly, a sempiternal dragnet of revenge. The boys had likewise hardened against him -- he could tell from the looks on the torch-boys' faces;

unconsciously, all had elected him to eternity in Limbo, with no time off for good behavior, no visitors and no between-meal snacks. A stern bunch, his pals.

He was already passing time in Limbo. Already he missed the excitement of The World. He missed even the excitement of his downfall, that sunny Sunday morning of the Feast of St. Bernard de Veaux. What, thinking back, had been the most exciting part?

Many people would say it was when the fire department showed up, with their over-the-shoulder sprayer cans and long rubber boots, tromping down the center aisle and up into the Holy of Holies like Atilla and the Huns. While the storm-troopers clambered in, hoses streaming, the rest of the congregation huddled bug-eyed by the double doors.

Marty, however, welcomed the firemen -- in the tumult surrounding him, they could be neutral witnesses, in case things got really out of hand. As long as they were near, he felt safe. There was even a moment or two when he gave serious thought to joining up with them -- a career consideration which, before this fateful convergence of sacrament, fire, and sex, had never occurred to him, but one which, come to think of it, was damned attractive. Caught up in the excitement, however, he was too slow to collar one of them and ask for literature.

That was a big moment, certainly. Another came earlier, when him, but one which, come to think of it, was

damned attractive. Caught up in the excitement, however, he was too slow to collar one of them and ask for literature.

That was a big moment, certainly. Another came earlier, missing word moment you expected a cinder-block to issue from her gullet. The Archbishop, even with his mitre on and his crook flying at high-mast, could have tumbled all the way down her sideways; or Dante pitched his tent between her tonsils.

And what a yowl commenced to come out of her, so piercing and so tremulous, so that even the chapel bells atop the cupola hummed mildly from the vibration; yet so eloquent, so to-the-point:

"FIRE!"

And the entire congregation then rose, unclicked, in the most perfect mass genuflection ever executed. Even people lining up at the Communion rail had second thoughts, and joined the crush at the double rear doors.

A great, great moment. But the best was still to come. There stood the Archbishop, the host in his hand and the back of his garment beginning to smolder. He was a perfect portrait of mixed emotions, and it was to his eternal credit that he did not then drop the Blessed Sacrament. But when the sparks caught the hem of his alb, the white undergarment, and he instinctively whirled to extinguish the fire -- alas -- the host did fly up out of his

hands and over the lectern.

Now two things happened at once, and the eye had to choose whither it was to go: whether to zero in on the remarkable leap Father Tichenor the Runty Marine made, vaulting the prie-dieu and diving down two smoking steps in the nick of time to catch the sailing host in the end-zone; or whether to behold the singular resolve of Harris the Hairy Beast as he advanced up the steps to the burning Archbishop, seized the great one by the nape of his neck, and with one brisk sweep of his hairy hand slit the garment down the middle and stripped it off the Archbishop's body.

+ + +