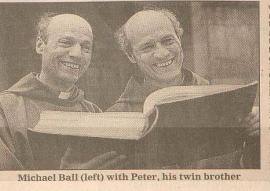


# EVIL BISHOP DROVE ME TO SUICIDE

The Bishop of Gloucester was forced to resign last week after admitting to an act of gross indecency with a young aspirant monk. Graham Turner asks how this holy man, who had dedicated his life to bearing witness against the sin and sensuality of the world, finally succumbed to it himself

## The temptation that led a saintly monk into the wilderness

IT HAS THE elements of a Shakespearean tragedy. Peter Ball, 61, the Bishop of Gloucester, who resigned last week after admitting an act of gross indecency with a young aspirant monk, is a man of extraordinary dedication and charisma. For decades, he slept on an old horsehair mattress on floor and rose for prayer at 4.30am. Some would have said he was a saint.



Michael Ball (left) with Peter, his twin brother

Yet suddenly he has been brought low by foolishness, sin and gross error, for which he now regrets most bitterly, as I discovered in talking to some of the people involved in this affair.

The details of what actually went on at Bishopscourt, his home in Gloucester, are still murky. As in all such matters, the whole truth is impossible to ascertain, but what seems to have happened is that, while the young man was staying there last year, there took place a series of incidents which, according to the Bishop, sprang from his desire to help and comfort someone in considerable distress and which did involve physical contact.

The young man, however, who last week said his version of events to the Sun after offering it to at least one other national newspaper, claims that the Bishop sexually assaulted him. He duly complained to the police, who then spent 15 weeks turning out every cupboard in Ball's life over the past 20 years.

Whatever else the police found — and there may well have been other allegations — they evidently decided to take no further action.

Bishop Ball's life's work in ruins, has been through a dark night of the soul, blacker and more agonising than he could ever have imagined. He has been living under virtual house arrest for much of the time with his identical twin brother, Michael, the Bishop of Truro, and a monk like himself.

His weight has fallen from 111 to 10 stone. He has found himself unable even to listen to music or do any of the other things he enjoyed before. He has faithfully kept to his usual times of prayer but found only a terrible blackness in the silence. In his distress, he has sought the help of a psychiatrist.

When, at the age of 16, he and his mother met the bank manager, who announced proudly that his son was to go to Birmingham University, Peter asked his mother if there really were universities other than Oxford and Cambridge.

There was, Bishop Ball readily admitted, a great deal of arrogance in these attitudes and assumptions, a sense that "we were going to be rulers". There was also, he added, a tremendous desire to be of service and no great hunger for success, if only "because the money was already there".

At Lancing, he was a sporting hero. He ran, played football and tennis for the school, and duly became head boy.

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From the beginning, indeed, Peter Ball seemed to have a charmed life. He was born into a sheltered, upper-middle-class home in Eastbourne. His father, who had been an officer in the King's African Rifles during the

Hundreds of young men were going into the church. According to Peter Ball it was not unknown for 10 per cent of a whole year-group at Lancing to become ordinands — and he and his brother followed suit. At that time, Peter was courting one of Sir Anthony Eden's nieces, though they were

quality made him a welcome guest at many of the country's great houses. He saw a good deal of the Norfolk and the Abernavenny and was a friend of senior Tory politicians such as John (now Lord) Wakeham and Sir Ian Gower. He spent hours conferring with Lord Wakeham after his wife was killed in the Brighton bomb, and was a staunch friend to Jane Gower when her husband was murdered.

Peter Ball had an extensive range of friendships outside the diocese. Perhaps through Gower, he met the then Mrs Thatcher and dined with her at the Savoy in his monk's habit. He was on close terms with several members of the Royal Family, including Prince Charles, the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret in particular. He presided at Sandringham, and corresponded with Prince Charles, not least during his recent marital difficulties.

Peter Ball also became a governor of three major public schools — Radley, Wellington and Lancing, though he frequently deplored the fact that, these days, they are almost unimpaired by a lust for success that a spirit of service is at once lost through a speech day at which the head did nothing but list all their successes.

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There was also the contentious issue of women's ordination, to which he was, at first, totally opposed. Now, however, he found himself in a diocese whose laity had voted in favour by the largest majority in the country, with 70 per cent of their clergy behind them. Bishop Ball told his staff that, although he himself was against the idea, he believed in the Church and would happily ordain women priests.

When the Synod voted in favour last year, Peter Ball obtained, while his brother and with the support of his diocese — voted against. According to Michael Ball, there has never been this rivalry between the two of them "though we do spar", and Peter certainly found it difficult when his brother became a diocesan bishop before he did.



Cross purposes: Peter Ball helped scores of people in their search for faith and consolation in a large house added to his sense of isolation.

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Michael is more cautious and, in some ways, more worldly, than his brother but, during these last months, has stood beside Peter and shared his agony.

It's been like a confrontation with the other half of himself, said a man who has worked closely with the brothers in recent days.

During his years at Lewes, Peter Ball offered young men under monastic vows for a year at a time. They were known as Little Brothers and Sisters. It was to this group that the aspirant monk who complained about what Bishop Ball had done to him belonged.

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When Bishop Ball was asked to become Bishop of Gloucester in 1991, he felt a great sense of relief after the difficult years in Sussex. In the event, however, the move created further strain in a man who was already desperately tired. His friend says that, going alone

tragedy, Michael has at times almost felt guilty about carrying on as a Bishop when his brother can no longer do so and he has had to tell himself his greater responsibility is to the wider Church.

Each time they thought they had reached the bottom of the abyss, there were still further depths to plumb. This last week has been no exception.

Now, in his weakened and chastened state, Peter Ball is in desperate need of a lengthy convalescence to rebuild his bodily and spiritual health.

What happens thereafter depends both on his own resilience and on what the Archbishop of Canterbury decides. At least, a great many of his influential friends — including former Cabinet Ministers — have stood by him. Several, indeed, have invited him to stay with them.

Peter Ball may well have made grievous errors, but he is certainly no chaffarian. His passionate and genuine conviction is that our world has travelled down a perilous and slippery road of sensuality and luxury, from which it must be redeemed by a group of people who stand and witness against it.

His tragedy is that he has been tempted to go down that same slippery road himself.

**He had dinner with Mrs Thatcher at the Savoy wearing his monk's habit**

unhappiness not helped by the fact that he had taken all his own church. Speaking to 250 of his local clergy, he once asked them, rhetorically, what they felt was the best place for their wasted paper baskets? Without waiting for a reply, he suggested that, given all the blumph which came from head office, under the letter-box was as good a place away.

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