

CHAPTER 1

Persecution

Near the end of the second millennium of Christianity, grave doubts existed about the future of faith in Jesus. Materialism in America and atheistic ideologies in Europe eroded religion. Science was claiming ever more of the territory of knowledge for its own, leaving little scope for faith. Fundamentalists and Evangelicals fought the good fight but failed to offer a distinctly new vision of God capable of conquering the brave new world of secularism. A few tiny religious movements challenged the status quo, notably the controversial “Family” or “Children of God.” About the size Christianity was at the time of the crucifixion, it promises religious innovation as well as revival, if only it can survive the persecutions.

This chapter will document the high tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment experienced by this remarkable religious movement, based on interviews with many of the participants and on documents provided by the group. The massive repression it has suffered in several nations testifies to the hostility that some outsiders feel toward the Family. Its countercultural history reveals its own opposition to some conventional institutions. The terrible shock of the Argentine raids introduces us quickly to the human beings who suffered them, then a flashback scans the quarter century of development that brought the movement to this crisis. The goal of this chapter is an understanding of the human meaning that sectarian tension has for the members of the Endtime Family.

Assault

At 2 o'clock in the morning of September 1, 1993, eleven-year-old Steven awoke suddenly in his Buenos Aires commune, as heavily armed police burst

into the bedroom he shared with a half dozen other boys of the Family. They grabbed him out of bed, and without a word of explanation a doctor began checking him all over. Soon a psychologist was bombarding him with questions but giving no answers in return. In the cold rain, the police moved the boys between the converted garage and the house, and then back again to get a change of clothing. The raiders threw all their possessions in heaps scattered across the floor, as if they were frantically looking for something. Except for muttering about lawyers and saying the children would be allowed to say good-bye to their parents, they refused to respond to any questions. Then, breaking their promise, they pushed the children on a bus without letting them see their mothers and fathers, and rushed them off into the gloomy night as the littlest ones cried and the bigger ones stared anxiously into the darkness.

Across town in the Media Home reserved for those who had responsibility for communicating with officials and the press, Steven's mother, Claire, awoke at the same moment as her son to yells and pounding on the door. As the police burst in, they commanded the stunned Family members to raise their hands or be shot, and they waved a search warrant that gave no clue about the purpose of the raid. Within moments, fifty officials and social workers had invaded the home, herded the three children into the living room where one of the parents prayed with them, and began confiscating written material and tape recordings. Police vehicles carried most residents of the home away in a short time, but Claire and some of the men were kept under house arrest for sixteen hours while the officers cataloged all their possessions. One asked Claire where the safe was, and when she told him there was none he angrily threatened to tear the place apart until he found it. Later she refused to sign a statement agreeing that the material confiscated was sufficient evidence to justify her arrest. Surrounded by four policewomen, she was hauled off and held incommunicado, told she had no right to know the charges against her or to see her son.

At the Flare, a home for seventeen young adults, Sunny was still half asleep when a camera flashed in his face and men in bulletproof vests with semi-automatic weapons stormed into his room. They took his passport and told him he was under arrest, as guards stood by the telephone to prevent them from warning other Family homes and from calling their lawyer. The teenagers gave the raiders Christian witness, telling them they were unwittingly involved in religious persecution and projecting a confidence during this horrible episode that could only have come from profound faith in God. Most residents of the home legally were minors, and before long the police had lined them up, taken away many of the possessions they wanted to bring with them, and carted them

off. They kept Sunny behind until they had completed ransacking the house. As they finally took him away, an officer whose heart had been opened by the dignified demeanor of his prisoners advised him to bring blankets and let him stop to buy food, because where he was going neither would be provided.

That night, the Argentine police seized nearly 140 children and dozens of adults at five communes of a millenarian group that called itself the Family but was better known to the world as The Children of God. The formal charges centered on sexual abuse of children, but the raid was an unrestrained outpouring of moral outrage by officials who had neither sympathy nor understanding for minority religions. The raiders had received special training from self-appointed experts of the international anticult movement, and the attack was merely the most violent action in a worldwide attempt to destroy the Family. From their earliest days a generation before, the Children of God had been the target of professional deprogrammers who physically seized members in order to brainwash them on behalf of their parents. Of all the groups in the Jesus movement that followed the collapse of the hippie and psychedelic movements of the 1960s, none was more feared and despised than the Children of God.

Genesis

One evening in April 1966, the family of David Brandt Berg clustered around a Texas campfire, wondering what fate the future held. For some years, David had worked for evangelist Fred Jordan, helping him set up a missionary school called the Texas Soul Clinic and traveling the country to promote his television program. But the job had ended in an argument, and the family had neither savings nor immediate prospects of income. In the darkness, David listened to the joyous music of his children, as Aaron played his guitar while Hosea and Faith sang. "It seemed like the hairs stood upright on the back of my neck, and I was so thrilled and the Spirit of the Lord came upon me. I saw a picture of these young folks singing out before other young folks these same songs." Three months later, still penniless, they went on the road to spread the gospel, in an old Rambler and a Dodge camper.

David came from a family of evangelists. His grandfather, John Lincoln Brandt, was a very successful preacher, author and leader in the Disciples of Christ.¹ His mother, Virginia Brandt Berg, was a popular radio evangelist for the Christian and Missionary Alliance.² In 1965, while visiting Jordan's ranch in Texas, she had received the Warning Prophecy: "Even now, the skies are RED, RED with WARNING, and BLACK, BLACK with clouds gathering

for the GREAT CONFUSION which is ALMOST UPON YOU!”³ David studied the books of Daniel and Revelation, the parts of the Bible that described the Endtime that would usher in the Millennium, and their traveling ministry set out to proclaim this apocalyptic vision. The Endtime must be close, because never before had mankind possessed the means to destroy itself. Fifty million people died during the seven years of the Second World War, and by the late 1960s, intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads could kill ten times that number in a single night.

Often they sang and gave testimony in churches along their way, receiving a little money but not much encouragement. Their ministry had no name until a minister introducing them to his congregation picked up the phrase “Teens for Christ” from their handbill. One at a time they recruited other young people, starting with Josh, who had met Aaron and Hosea at the New York World’s Fair, Josh’s brother Caleb, and Serena whom they found in Florida. In February 1967, David united Faith and Josh in marriage and ordained them ministers along with Hosea, Aaron, and Caleb. Then followed nearly a year on the road, often splitting into two teams, from the snows of Wisconsin to the sands of the West Indies. From California, Grandmother Virginia wrote saying they should come minister to the young “hippies” who had turned on to drugs and dropped out of society. Toward Christmas they obeyed her prophecy: “Thou shalt go to the Land of the Setting Sun and there it shall be shown thee what thou shalt do.”⁴

The first month at Huntington Beach, California, they were “flat broke,” surviving with the help of grandmother’s modest pension, and they sank into desperation that climaxed when grandmother died in March. For David, this was a turning point that demanded either surrender or swift triumph. “One dark night, penniless and in despair, I walked the streets with the drugged and despairing hippies as discouraged as myself who were wandering around as sheep having no shepherd, when God suddenly spoke, ‘Art thou willing to go to these lost sheep to become king of these poor, lost beggars? They need a voice to speak for them; they need a shepherd to lead them and guide them, and they need the ROD of My Word to guide them to the Light!’”⁵

For the food, they learned to “provision,” as when Hosea would collect unsold sandwiches at day’s end from lunch truck drivers. For the light, they borrowed the Light Club beach-front coffee house in the hours of the week when its sponsor, Teen Challenge, could not operate it. The children and the earliest recruits would do most of the work with the hippies, build personal relationships with a few and draw them into the group. David realized now his mission, to fulfill for these hippies the prophecy of Ezekiel 34:23, “And I will set

up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.”

Called “Dad” by his children and by intimate followers, he became “Moses David” to the world, proclaiming a revolution that embraced the hippie counterculture while rejecting the drugs that had been its center and its curse. In many respects, the hippies were already members of a millenarian movement. Their gurus, like renegade Harvard professor Timothy Leary, had proclaimed that “psychedelic” drugs would expand consciousness, revealing the innate pathology of ordinary American society and ushering in a new age of free love. But like lemmings swarming to a cliff overlooking the sea, the hippies of California had crashed on the beach, and Moses David was now laboring to salvage a few from the wreckage of their dreams.

Father David and his family visited churches now as much to shout challenges at the ministers as to seek help, and after being thrown out a few times they began to picket the houses of conventional worship. They grew in numbers and in infamy, soon arousing the hostility of the establishment that hounded them out of California. On the road again, they picketed the national Baptist convention in New Orleans and marched through Chicago in red robes pounding their staves on the ground. A newsman in Camden, New Jersey, called them “the Children of God,” so for the second time an outsider had bestowed a name on them. Briefly after 1978 they called themselves “the Family of Love,” and today they prefer simply “the Family,” but they are still widely known by the name this reporter gave them. And at the beginning of the 1970s, as the Children of God led by Moses David, they denounced the hypocrisy of the established churches and prophesied that the End was at hand.

Hippies, religious seekers, and disaffected wanderers joined by the hundreds, as Family teams crisscrossed the continent. A few horrified parents hired Ted “Black Lightning” Patrick and other deprogrammers to steal back their sons and daughters, and a national “anticult” movement arose with the Children of God high on its hit list.⁶

Part Jewish in ancestry, Father David felt high anticipation when he flew to Israel in 1970, and his flock began spreading out across the globe. He communicated with them through frequent publications, called “MO (Moses) Letters,” some of which were distributed on the streets as tracts. Family groups entered Britain, Holland, Germany, and Scandinavia during 1971, and by the end of 1972 the balance of the membership was outside the United States. A sense that the Endtime was approaching energized their witnessing, and Father David suggested that the appearance of the comet Kohoutek heralded the beginning of the end in 1973. He was not the only one to give it great significance, and drug

guru Timothy Leary blessed it as the “Starseed” that would bring the Golden Age. Ironically, professional astronomers were wrong, too, when they prophesied that Kohoutek would be the comet of the century, and it passed Earth without incident.

A new era was indeed beginning for members of the Family. They no longer disrupted conventional churches, but made positive efforts to bring Jesus to everyone they met. Literature distribution on the streets, called “litnessing,” became a chief source of funds to augment the food and other things the groups were able to provision. Their music blossomed, opening the hearts of strangers as they spread into Latin America and Asia. Soon their recordings were bringing in money and transmitting a message of love. When the Family was growing rapidly back in the United States, there had been a strong emphasis on celibacy, but now marriages were encouraged and thus babies began to be born in increasing numbers. The hippie free love ethic returned in a new, spiritualized form. Through visions and experiments, Father David developed a new form of witnessing, called “flirty-fishing” or “FFing,” in which women of the Family would offer their love to emotionally needy men, as a sample of God’s love.⁷

Early in 1974, Father David moved to Tenerife in the Canary Islands, accompanied by a young convert named Maria who had become his wife. Tried first on a large scale in Tenerife, FFing was soon adopted in many branches of the Family around the world. For a long time, perhaps beginning with a MO Letter titled “Scriptural, Revolutionary Love-Making” in August 1969, Father David’s writings had stressed that sex was a gift of God, as holy as any church sacrament if performed out of love. Journalists hungry for a story, and activists of the anticult movement, soon took renewed notice of the Children of God, painting lurid images of cultic prostitutes.

Mexico

One of the first violent reactions came in Mexico in 1978. The Family was becoming quite popular there, appearing on TV, making phonograph records, and converting some children of influential people. Then vicious publicity about flirty-fishing spread from Spain and unleashed a persecution, even though the three homes around Mexico City had not experimented with this controversial form of ministry. Family members went on a TV talk show that previously had been very friendly but were shocked to see that the commentator had turned against them, and the telephone calls from viewers were extremely hostile. At

the time, the Family was registered with the Mexican government as a nonprofit organization, so the authorities knew exactly where the homes were located when they launched a surprise attack.

In the dark of night, police teams broke open the doors of the two homes inside the city, tore off the bed covers, and arrested the stunned Family members. A third home was situated just over a state line, so it took longer to get the necessary warrant, and the raid came in the middle of the next day, when hardly anybody was there. The three-year-old daughter of Phil and Sandy had accidentally cut her lip, so Sandy had taken her out for medical attention, and others were on various errands. But soon the authorities had gathered them up and carted them off to an immigration facility. They were allowed only a single phone call among them, but they fortunately were able to contact a friendly nonmember who found them an attorney and volunteered to make arrangements for their children.

Phil says the authorities tricked them easily, because they were young and inexperienced, falsifying their testimonies. An official wrote out an affidavit for each prisoner, leaving much empty space, then told them to sign along the sides of the paper. Afterward, the corrupt police added terrible confessions at the bottom, which the prisoners knew nothing about, justifying the charge of abuse of public morality. Other prisoners told them they would be locked up for at least six months even if they were found innocent, because justice moved so slowly in Mexico. If found guilty, they were told, they might be incarcerated for as much as five or even ten years. Officials from the American embassy were very unfriendly. Phil recalled, "They didn't want anything to do with us. To fulfill their obligation they came and visited us, but that was it. They didn't intercede at all or try to do anything on our behalf."

Altogether twenty-five were arrested, including two bewildered men who merely worked at the commercial print shop that produced the Family's literature. After the first weekend, the thirteen men were taken to a brand-new prison with decent food. But the twelve women were locked in an old, dilapidated institution, that reminded Sandy of a dark and dirty dungeon. One blessing was that members of the family were kept together in the same cells at both prisons, although they also mixed with ordinary convicts.

True to the religious principles that gave the Family strength, the members in both prisons immediately set about being model prisoners and ministering to the other inmates. Sandy exclaims, "We witnessed! And we put on shows! We helped organize, and we cleaned."

Phil recalls, "We decided to turn the place upside down. We sang every day. We decided we were going to clean that place from morning to night and

do the best job we could.” Every night before going to bed the men would sing the hundred and third psalm, “Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. . . . The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” The sound would ring through the halls, like a chorus of angels. Phil said, “It was beautiful to see that if we kept our faith, even in prison, the Lord was with us.”

Every Sunday, Phil’s and Sandy’s daughter would visit one of her parents, and it was always very painful to let her go afterward. She was being cared for by friends, but they did not speak English so the little girl could not really communicate with them. Thinking back on those terrible days of separation from his daughter, Phil doubts he could tolerate such abuse of one of his children by the authorities again. But with faith and fellowship to sustain them, the two dozen religious prisoners survived week on week of persecution.

After nearly two months, a day dawned unusually clear. Mexico City’s constant air pollution lifted and the sun beamed down the promise of hope. Opening a Bible at random, the men received a verse from the thirty-seventh psalm, “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass. And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.” They joyously told incredulous ordinary prisoners they knew they would be released this day, and miraculously the prophecy came true.

The Family believed powerful enemies did not want them freed, whatever the validity of the formal charges against them, and American publicity made the case an embarrassment for the officials. Therefore, when all but one minor charge was dropped, they were held until the middle of the following night to avoid media coverage of their release, then placed in a rented bus. Just an instant before the bus pulled away, friends ran up and put the tiny daughter of Sandy and Phil in through the window. Under cover of darkness, the bus rushed north to the border and dumped them in Laredo, Texas, where another family home took them in.

Argentina I

Brazil also deported members of the Family, and some left that country only to start homes in Argentina. Among them was Claire, a Canadian who had originally gone to Brazil for a year as an exchange student. Initially, the dozen adults in Buenos Aires took regular jobs. Claire first taught English to the owner of a big amusement park, who then hired her to manage the payroll for his hundred and fifty employees, while her husband oversaw the personnel and

the maintenance of the park's machinery. One member drove a taxi and did odd jobs, while a couple made a good living teaching English. Some American members had a successful musical band, doing television commercials as well as regular performances, and Argentine members had a band that played in famous night clubs.

During Argentina's dirty civil war, the military government was extremely repressive, and thousands of citizens disappeared without a trace, most of them murdered. Therefore the Family was very cautious in its ministry, aware that their literature might be branded subversive. In the early 1980s, however, they began quitting their jobs and doing full-time missionary work, which at first consisted of provisioning and music shows. Gradually they became more adventurous, selling Spanish-language color posters of Jesus and the Endtime, and distributing music cassettes and eventually videos.

Typical posters are twelve inches by sixteen and have action-filled, cartoon-like color pictures on one side and a story on the other. "Martyrs of the End" shows a voluptuous, scantily clad woman being blasted by one of the Antichrist's storm troopers, as she tries to distribute Family posters on the streets of a futuristic city, and her spirit rising ecstatically from the grave. "Crowns of Life" depicts Jesus giving a saintly halo to a faithful Christian woman, also voluptuous and scantily clad, as she arrives in God's great Heavenly Space City.

The 1980s were a time of consolidation for the Family around the world. Several thousand children had been born to members and were now growing up and requiring regular home schooling and stable environments. Many communes coalesced and a new structure of communication and leadership emerged. While The Family's missionaries was spreading Father David's message throughout the nations, enemies conspired against them. Some were angry ex-members or the bitter parents of members. Others were professional deprogrammers who made their livings saving supposed victims of brainwashing from the cults. And others were journalists or petty public officials who saw career advantages to be gained by demonizing small religious groups that were different from the majority. The Family had often suffered mild persecution, but now the tempo increased as if in fulfillment of their Endtime prophecies. Police raided one of the homes in Argentina, not the immense persecution that would strike them four years later, but a terrifying shock for those involved and a warning of dire events in the future.

One morning in November 1989, the children of a Family home near Buenos Aires were waiting in their living room for the bus that always took them to school at a bigger home, called the Heritage. This was to be a special day at school, and the children had dressed up in fine clothes, but the bus had

broken down so they were passing time by reading a story. One of the girls looked out the window, saw several news photographers, and exclaimed, "Oh, how nice, a wedding!" But five minutes later, seventy police from three different units assaulted the house, some leaping over the fence while clutching automatic weapons, and burst through the door. The jeweler who had rented the house to the Family had been robbed some time earlier, so he had installed bulletproof windows and a television surveillance system that only stimulated the attackers' wild imaginations.

The surprise raid had been triggered by a dispute between a husband and wife that escalated into religious persecution. When the couple split up, some time before, the wife had joined the Family, bringing her two children with her. The husband did not complain at first, but after a while he decided he wanted his children and saw an advantage in allying himself with an anticult movement that had been trying to stir up public hostility toward the Family. The authorities were already suspicious of any form of unconventional religion, so they were quite ready to believe wild claims about child abuse.

When the raid took place, most of the adults were already out of the house on their daily business. In the midst of her errands, Claire happened to phone another home and heard, "You've got to go! Your house is raided! It's full of police!"

Concerned about her seven-year-old son Steven, she rushed home. When she reached her neighborhood, the entire block was filled with vehicles and people. Members of the public were pawing through vast piles of Family literature that had been thrown onto the lawn. With a mixture of glee and feigned horror, one woman held up one of Father David's letters about revolutionary sex and squealed, "Look at This!"

Claire told the police at the front door that this was her home, and they let her in. The first person she spoke with turned out to be a news reporter, and she challenged him, "What are you doing in here? Wandering through our bedrooms!" Earlier, the house had been flooded with reporters, until a member of the commune had complained that this was a violation of the residents' rights, but apparently the police had allowed a few press men to remain. This turned out to be to the Family's advantage, because when the police claimed to have found cocaine in the kitchen towel drawer, it could not be used as evidence because any of the reporters might have placed it there. In fact, the Family was convinced the police had brought it with them. The officers told Claire and the others they had to sign a paper confessing that the drugs had been found in the house, or they would be arrested. She exclaimed, "I don't care if I'm going to jail! I'm not going to sign anything. We don't have drugs! We don't believe in drugs!"

The police made good on their threat, hauling Claire and a dozen other members away. The women were thrown into solitary confinement cells where they were held incommunicado. They were not allowed to contact a lawyer or anyone else, and they received no food at all for the first three days. Claire's cell was completely dark, with no light or window, and she had no blanket. Cement walls and a steel door enclosed a narrow space, hardly more than three feet by six. The women would have to scream sometimes for hours before the tough policewoman would take them to the only toilet in the cell block. The place was appallingly filthy, infested by rats and cockroaches. The water was undrinkable, and Claire became violently ill. Not permitted to go to the toilet, the best she could do was sit in the darkness and vomit into an old carton. Ordinary prisoners in a regular cell turned up their radio so she and the other women of the Family could listen to a news report of their arrest, and they heard that the state was planning to put their children up for adoption.

After a week, the women were released but placed under house arrest. The men who had been seized were confined for two full weeks before the case against them collapsed. The judge of the minors' court concluded, "I am convinced that these minors are living in a suitable environment for their physical and moral development, and this court of law is therefore not called upon to intervene." Returned to their parents, the children could begin to recover from the trauma they had suffered.

Spain, Australia, France

The following July, police and social workers raided a home in Barcelona, Spain, seizing twenty-two children and locking them in welfare institutions for nearly a year. The persecution paused for many months, then resumed all the way around the world.

Before dawn on May 15, 1992, dozens of police and agents of the state community services departments of Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, assaulted six Family homes, dragging away 142 children aged two to sixteen. Television cameramen went on some of these raids, tipped off by the authorities, and enemies of the Family fed horror stories about supposed child abuse to the media. Quickly, however, sympathetic attorneys and the Family's own efforts turned the tide of opinion, and after six days the children were released.

Family homes in France near Lyon and Aix-en-Provence were raided at dawn on June 9, 1993. In later affidavits distributed by the Family, victims recalled the wild brutality of the attack. "My first impression was that terrorists

or robbers were storming the house,” said a 15-year-old American named Amor, “as armed men were running everywhere. One of the plainclothesmen banged our door open and was frantically swinging his gun at us and shouting loudly!”

Forty-three-year-old Richard Leclerc, a lightly built Canadian clad only in his underwear, was the target of a military charge. “Four men dressed in bullet-proof vests, wearing helmets and carrying automatic weapons, came rushing around the corner of the house, screaming and then heading straight towards me. One of them had an axe, which he swung into the door of our caravan, which immediately flew open. They then grabbed me and dragged me from the caravan across the gravel driveway, leaving my right knee badly bleeding and bruised. I laid on the ground while three of them pinned their guns on me and the fourth handcuffed my hands behind my back.” They threw his wife out of their mobile home onto the ground, cuffing her hands behind her back, not caring that her thin summer nightgown left her unprotected against the early morning cold.

Awakened by shouts and screams, Canadian Denise de Brocke Michaud hid in a closet with her baby girl and four small sons. “It sounded like some insane killers were breaking everything and killing everybody!” One child asked if they were going to be killed, so she led them in prayer. “Then someone kicked open our unlocked bedroom door and in a couple of seconds, the closet door flung open and a man wearing a helmet and all dressed in black pointed a gun at us and shouted at me, ‘Put the baby down!’ At first I still did not know it was the police and I said, ‘No, she’s just a baby! Can I take her with me?’”

The police took thirty-eight children away from their parents, and told some they would never see them again. The ten children of Samuel and Heidi were dispersed to several foster homes and institutions: the twin babies Celeste and Angelique, two-year-old Nicholas, Marie-Claire, Christophe, Raphael, Olivier, the twelve-year-old twins Benedicte and Agnes, and Etienne who was fourteen. The parents and children did not see each other again for fifty-one days, when a judge finally ordered the children’s release.

Argentina II

In Argentina, The Family had followed the French seizure closely. When the children in France were released, the Argentine group distributed thousands of leaflets announcing the judge’s decision and explaining that the attack had

been proven unwarranted, hoping thus to forestall a similar action in their own country. But there were many dark signs. Each home seemed to be under covert surveillance, and one of their landlords exclaimed, "Hey, you people are in big trouble!" Helicopters frequently buzzed the largest Family home and school, called the Heritage, and trespassing photographers attempted to snap pictures of the children. One day Claire was working in the Heritage, preparing for a press conference, when a chopper roared right over the roof, shaking doors and windows. She ran into the courtyard to see what was happening, and the machine was so low she could clearly see the pilot's mustache.

The Family had seen the handwriting on the wall. No matter what they did, no matter how much effort they invested in telling the mass media about their innocence and their faith, the forces of destruction continued to rage against them. Worried meetings produced a decision to move most of the non-Argentine members out of the country, using this opportunity to shift their efforts to more propitious mission fields. They held a farewell party at the school. Members got their travel documents in order, bought airline tickets, and packed their most precious belongings. The courtyard at the Media Home filled up with miscellaneous things they planned to sell. Claire believes the police learned about their plans and moved up the date of the raids to catch them before they could leave Argentina. Despite all their preparations, the raids caught them by surprise, and thus they fell victim to the most massive persecution the Family had suffered.

The police bus took Claire's son, Steven, to a huge institution that had been abandoned for a long time and was just being renovated. Encircled by a three-story-high wall, the building was dark and damp. Plaster was crumbling off the moss-covered ceiling and walls of the two warehouselike rooms in which they were thrown. During their incarceration, a construction company fixed up several other rooms nicely, but the children were never allowed to use them. For the first week, there was no electricity and no water in the pipes. When water did begin flowing, and the children drank it, they became sick. The roof leaked so badly they could not sleep when it rained.

When the children first arrived at the institution, they received little cups of soup and were then subjected to marathon medical and psychological examinations. In self-consciously friendly voices, the psychologists tried to get the children to admit they had been abused sexually. "Oh, we know you're parents have brainwashed you. But there's nothing wrong with that. All you need to do is tell us." The youngsters refused to submit to interrogation unless Family adults were present, but any parent who objected to the proceedings might be hauled off to jail.

At the beginning of the medical exam, the doctor would ask each child if he or she had ever had sex or had witnessed parents having sex. When one of Steven's friends answered "no," the doctor left the answer space blank on his questionnaire so he could write in "yes" later on. Over and over they took Steven's fingerprints; twelve times he had to press each fingertip on the ink pad and paper documents. The girls were subjected to vaginal exams, under the primitive assumption that only an intact hymen would prove their virginity, and in the chaos of the examination area all kinds of people wandered through while the girls were so intimately exposed.

As days passed, older children and some parents who were allowed to stay with their children began trying to make life livable in the institution, because they realized they might be imprisoned there for a long time. After a while the toilet paper, soap and lice shampoo ran out, and despite the filthy conditions the director refused to provide any more for a long time, so all the children contracted lice. They were not permitted to use the institution's washing machines, and the police had not let them bring more than one change of clothing, so every night Steven had to wash his shirt and underwear by hand. The few adult women permitted to stay had to clean the babies' diapers as best they could. There was no schooling, few activities were possible, the food was disgustingly greasy, and the meager staff of the institution did practically nothing for the inmates. It began to look as if the real child abusers were not the Family but the authorities.

Steven was deeply shocked to realize that his mother was in prison, and unlike the many young people from families of eight or even ten children, as an only child he had no contact with any other relatives. Representatives from the Canadian embassy visited a few times, because Claire was from Canada, and one wantonly terrified Steven by confidently predicting that his mother would spend the next thirty years in jail. Men from other embassies offered to take some of the children to nonmember relatives in their countries if they would forsake the Family, but every single one of them refused. More than a month passed, and Steven was not allowed to see his mother.

In the hours after the raid, Claire, Sunny, and many other adults were thrown into the Martinez district jail. The holding cell where they put Claire and seven other women was barely ten feet on a side, with one dirty mattress on the floor. Forty of the men were crammed into a small group of cells with no furniture, just concrete and bars. The weather was bitterly cold, and the few blankets they had brought with them were the only protection they had. They soon exhausted the tiny bit of food a few had brought with them, and because

the jail gave them none they starved until friends learned where they were and began bringing gifts.

As a sign of their incompetence, the police had arrested four people who were not even members; two of them were mothers of members and the others, boarders in their homes. These strangers were amazed when the members of the Family responded in the way they always did to calamity: They sang hymns and prayed. One jail official was so enchanted by the men's singing of "Amazing Grace," that he asked them to repeat it over and over, and he opened all the hall doors so that the glorious sound would reach the women prisoners on the other side of the building.

All around the world, members of the Family prayed for the captives in Argentina, and at Father David's personal urging every home gave up its weekly movie or entertainment night in solidarity with them. Soon, members were demonstrating at Argentine embassies or at other places where their voices might be heard. Jackie and John had been away from Buenos Aires completing arrangements for their emigration from the country when the raids hit their home. Mindless of the danger to themselves they rushed back to the city and launched a campaign to free their friends. While they were in the midst of a television broadcast, the police arrested them directly from the studio. After two days, several people including the nonmembers were allowed to leave the jail, leaving five women and sixteen men.

At first it seemed mysterious why some were being kept in prison and others released, but as the prisoners compared notes they began to see a pattern. Claire was among the best-known spokespeople for the group, and a dissident had fingered her as a leader. Sunny had recently celebrated his twenty-first birthday, so he was merely guilty of being technically adult in a home chiefly composed of minors. A French member named Daniel had a computer in his room, thus possibly was responsible for the Family's documents. A German member named Juergen had defied police orders during the raid by trying to put a jacket on a child being led out into the rain. In one case a member was held merely because he had signed his name to the lease renting one of the homes. The common thread was that each of these members looked as if he or she might be a leader, or in some way had ever so slightly resisted the persecution.

On the sixth day, they were taken to the court house, and this gave them their first opportunity to make their case to the media. The police wanted to put coats over their heads, but they refused, so as they were led manacled into the building they were able to shout to the waiting news people: "Religious

persecution! A gross violation of human rights! What are you doing with my children? I just want my children back!”

Inside the building, each member was interrogated with a list of questions, while a secretary wrote down the answers, often changing them. “They asked me about our sexual beliefs,” Sunny recalls. “I said our sexual policies are very clear. Sex for minors is definitely prohibited. When you become of legal age, which here is twenty-one, you are a free moral agent and no one has control over you. They put on that declaration that I had said when someone turns twenty-one they’re initiated into sex. They made it sound like some kind of initiation process, kind of a ceremony.” As Sunny was urging the secretary to correct the document, he heard footsteps coming up behind him, and a hand reached over his head and grabbed the paper away from him. “I looked around, and there was a heavy-set man standing there with a scowl on his face. The guy looked insane; he looked like a nervous wreck. He was shaking.”

“What are you doing?” the man demanded angrily.

“I’m correcting my declaration. I have a right to correct my declaration.”

“You don’t have any rights here!” the man screamed. “I tell you your rights! You don’t tell me the rights here!”

Sunny seized the document back from him, saying, “This is my declaration, and I’m going to make it the way I want it.” He returned it to the secretary. “Please keep correcting this.” With the wild expression of a raving maniac, the man stormed from the room, slamming the door. Only then did Sunny learn that he was the judge himself, the man who held Sunny’s fate in his hands.

John had a similar experience when he was interrogated. At one point, he reported, the judge lost his self-control and began yelling, “Do you believe in the Virgin Mary? Do you recognize the Pope?” To John, a French member of the Family, this sounded like the Holy Inquisition.

Like Sunny, Claire had to struggle for every grain of justice. “The woman who took my answers lied unashamedly at every turn. I asked for my lawyer to be present; she claimed that he had never presented himself at court at any time, and she assigned me a court-appointed lawyer. My lawyer, I found out later, was right down the hall and had asked for me several times. He had also been lied to and told that I wasn’t there.

“When the woman finished typing my answers and gave the form to me to sign, I saw she had twisted several points I had made, trying to make them say the opposite of what I had intended! I had a hard time getting her to correct them, but she finally did. It was obvious that there were no means they wouldn’t resort to, to accomplish their purpose.”

Three days later they were again transported to the cells in the court house to learn their fate. Desperately, they prayed, Claire remembers. “We had already read in the papers that the judge had raided our home a second time and held a press conference in front of it, at which time he declared that due to the serious nature of the crimes, we would not be freed pending our trial. However, on the radio the night before, it had been announced that we were to be released and all the policemen at the station had also told us from ‘inside sources’ that we would be released.”

This time they were transported not in cars but a truck with a canopy on the back, made especially for prisoners. For Sunny, it was an infuriating experience. “They did a lot of things to try to weaken us. For example, when we were brought to the court house, the judge’s order was not to give us any food. In tiny little cells all day, twelve hours without any food at all. They gave us water, that was it. So it was worse than bread and water; it was just water. So all those things just built up and made me really angry! How someone could come into our peace-loving, Christian homes and raid them and tear them apart, tear the children away from their parents, put us in this horrible dungeon cell, and not even feed us, transport us in these horrible vehicles, not tell us what was going on. All of that together, it was just amazing to me how somebody could do that. Obviously it was the Devil right behind it himself—the classic examples all throughout the Bible of evil persecuting the good. That’s the only explanation, because it was amazing how any human could do the things they did to us. We waited. Finally at the end of the day they told us the judge had ordered preventative prison. In Argentina, that means you go to jail for as long as the judge says, whether they have any evidence or not.” The charges covered a wide territory of vice: multiple rape, slavery, conspiracy, discrimination, child abuse. Sunny thought it was outrageous that he was being charged with child abuse simply because he was twenty-one, while his friends a few months younger had been sent to institutions as abused children.

The police manacled Claire’s hands behind her back, and as they led her out of the court house, she began to sing, “God Is Our Refuge and Strength.” Soon the captives were all singing. The prisoner van waiting for them was a horrifying torture device, divided into windowless, steel cells, like coffins standing on end, each large enough for only a single person. But the police pushed two people into each cell, where they were forced to stand in the darkness, squashed against each other, gasping to breathe the weak stream of air coming through the tiny slot in the door. One man was left in the narrow aisle between the cells, and he tried to fan air into them and give comfort by reciting scripture. They sang “Amazing Grace,” and they prayed. A terrible, long ride that

slammed them around in the cells, during which one member fainted, brought the men to one prison, and the women to another.

Their greatest fear was that they might be separated and that alone each member would be beaten or even killed by violent inmates who believed the stories that they were cultic child abusers. At Caseros Prison, the men's prayers were answered as an entire, huge "pavilion" dormitory room was provided for the sixteen of them. Except for an hour on each clear weekday in the exercise yard, they would spend all their time there, sleeping on the metal bunk beds, cooking on the stove, using the toilet, and washing in the laundry sink. The institution was managed on military lines, as most of the prisoners came from the army or police, and the sixteen learned to march in formation with their hands clasped behind their backs, to stand at attention for inspection, and to answer smartly "Yes, Sir!"

At Ezeiza Prison, the five women were far less fortunate, placed in a cell with four ordinary prisoners who at first would not let them sing hymns or pray above a whisper.⁸ Threats of violence constantly terrorized them, and during their incarceration another prisoner actually was beaten to death by inmates who were jealous that she was about to be released. Two months into their captivity, a pair of extremely dangerous women were added to their cell, an AIDS-infected lesbian couple named Deborah and Cristina who acted out their brand of sexual intercourse for all the other women to see. They brought a filthy pet toad with them, which attracted flies, and a contraband knife, which reminded everyone that Deborah had been convicted of murdering an elderly couple with a razor. Another band of inmates conspired to kill the Family members, but their complicated plan fell through. Deborah and Cristina were removed to another cell, and three weeks later they instigated a riot that nearly overwhelmed the guards. Several times, inmates attempted to attack Claire, but the nearest she came to death was an uncontrollable attack of vomiting and collapsing blood pressure aggravated by months of poor nutrition.

At both prisons, the religious captives witnessed to the other inmates. The men gave Bible classes to trustees who were allowed to enter their pavilion, telling them about the coming Endtime, and after a few weeks they received a guitar. Sunny recalls, "All sixteen of us guys would get together and we would sing sometimes, and we would have real fun times, singing all kinds of songs, rock and roll and everything. The music would ring throughout the whole prison and all the prisoners would hear us singing." The women had a much rougher time, but they ministered to the individuals who shared their cell and to the guards, many of whom responded appreciatively.

Eventually, children were able to visit their parents once or twice a week. On his twelfth birthday, Steven embraced his mother as the two of them wept softly, remembering that she had been imprisoned at his eighth birthday as well, during the 1989 persecution, and wondering whether she would ever be free again.

On December 13, three and a half months after the raids, an appeals court ordered the immediate release of the twenty-one adult captives, and over a period of days the children were also released. Their homes, all supposedly under guard by the police, had been thoroughly looted. Everything was gone, even the toilet seats. Not a single possession remained from Steven's childhood, not a toy or a personal photograph. The food in the kitchens stank with rotteness. There was no money left. Claire and the others struggled painfully to prepare a home for the children. When she and Steven joined again in freedom, he kept telling her excitedly, "Mummy, I'm so thankful I'm in the Family!"

Reflecting on her experience, Claire says, "After this Argentine experience, I can see the Endtime a lot more clearly." The persecutions seemed to confirm the Family's millenarian prophesies, but the valuable help of friendly outsiders and the simple passage of time might seem to disprove them. Most members left Argentina, as most had left France after the persecution there, moving on to more favorable mission fields in several other nations. The Family writes and speaks out about the injustice of Waco, and they have met a few of the surviving Branch Davidians, but they have not yet experienced their own deadly persecution in America. The Endtime seems so close, but the Antichrist has not yet revealed himself, and the chief concern of the older generation has become the care and education of their children.

Reflections

In 1994, about the time of Father David's death, his son Hosea thought back to the beginning of the movement, when the Children of God had expected the millennium immediately. "When we were younger and we were talking about the Endtime and how soon things would come to pass, we had a much more narrow view of what needed to be done in the world before Jesus could come back and before the Antichrist could take over. Much to our surprise, God has allowed twenty-five years to take place to enable us to preach the gospel a lot more, to reach a lot more people. And also during this time he has caused a lot more Christians to wake up to see that we are living in the last days." Returning to the United States for the first time in twenty-two years, he

discovered a society that had fallen deep into violence, depravity and social disintegration. Yet the Endtime had not yet begun.

“People say, ‘What about your father? He said the time was short so long ago. Doesn’t this show that he’s a false prophet? That he’s not really reliable?’” Hosea believes in the power of Bible prophecy, but he knows that the shadow of uncertainty lies over every precise prediction. “Jesus’ disciples thought he would be coming back before they died. But now we certainly don’t believe any less that we are in the Endtime than we did twenty-five years ago. I never thought I would have children and they would grow up and have children of their own, but that’s happened. I’m not complaining.” He smiled and gazed across the wide, green fields that surround a rural Family commune in the eastern part of the United States, a warm and healthy home, filled with the laughter of children.

“God is restraining the Antichrist forces from taking over the world and establishing the one world government,” he explained. “I’m very happy because I thought time was short. I gave my life to the Lord, and I went to preach the gospel with all my heart and with all my life as much as I could. The fact that he has continued to espouse that urgency of reaching the world with the gospel right now, it’s important, we cannot wait.” He recalled his years of mission work in Macao, unsupported by any prosperous American denomination, and he looked ahead to the opportunity of evangelizing China in the Mandarin language he was studying. “So the Endtime, the end of the world has not come for me or for you. But the end of the world has come for millions of people who have died in the past twenty-five years, and many of them without the gospel. There are millions of people who are dying every year without the gospel. It’s the end of the world for them. Are we wrong because we think that time is so short?”