

Sleeping with the Nuns

Greater Cincinnatians, while pondering a pleasant Sunday afternoon drive, would be well served to visit the lovely grounds of St. Walburg Monastery, the handsome residence of the Benedictine Sisters. Located in Villa Hills, Kentucky, high above and overlooking twenty-two miles of Ohio River, the Community's two hundred plus acres capture the splendid campus of Villa Madonna Academy, one of our region's nationally-ranked college prep schools.

Benedictine Orders extend far back... to 480 AD. The history begins with St. Benedict. He is foundational to all their monastic Orders. The Benedictine Sisters of St. Walburg Monastery are one of the oldest orders of Benedictine women in the country. The five initial Sisters arrived in Covington in 1859, just months before Abraham Lincoln was elected. They had traveled a goodly distance from a Tenth Century St. Walburg Abbey, still standing on the cobbled-streets of Eichstatt, Bavaria, located halfway between Nuremburg and Munich. During the journey, they paused at a Convent in Erie, Pennsylvania, where they became aware of a pressing need in Covington for teaching the German immigrant children, their new language of English.

While undertaking their principal assignment, these five Sisters also tended to the wounded Civil War soldiers, who were encamped very near their first Monastery in Northern Kentucky. In due course, these well-missioned and enlightened nuns, opened Villa Madonna Academy, and then Villa Madonna College, now known regionally, as Thomas More College.

In a progressive and orderly path, and early in the 20th Century, the Benedictine Community relocated its home base from Covington to Villa Hills. The Mother House completed construction in 1937, establishing the permanent Monastery of the Benedictine Sisters. Aside from their ample academic disciplines, the Sisters were given to self-supporting labor, like most other monastic communities. They farmed their own vegetables and fruits, and housed a full assemblage of sheep, milk cows, pigs and chickens.

The full story of our Benedictine Sisters remains quite compelling, and no matter the vantage point, it rises to a spiritual pinnacle. My bridge to the Sisters stands alone. The trail was nourished by my dear wife, a 1959 graduate of Villa Madonna Academy. Judy believes in timely re-validation of our love for the other, to be evidenced by pro-active concern, and possible affiliation with one, or more, of the partner's independent interests.

That sounded just fine, when we married in 1992, but admittedly, I was not fully prepared, when she energetically recommended to the Sisters, thru Villa's President, that her husband might make an able member of the Academy's Board of Directors.

Whether their further interest in me was a desire for a businessman on their Board... or perhaps a token Protestant... or simply a nice-way of expressing gratitude to my spouse for gifting seed-money for a Class Scholarship, I am not quite sure. The reason notwithstanding, I accepted their invitation, and anticipated, with favor, my participation.

I readily recall the initial Board Meetings, and being impressed by the gentleness of Sister Andrea Collopy, in her mid-eighties, crafting careful and comprehensive Minutes of the Meetings. She was Judy's history teacher in the fifties. I remember the warm manner of Sister Christa Kreinbrink, another of their Notre Dame graduates, and her intellectual grasp of the Community's buildings and grounds. These ladies of the cloth are no lightweights, and caused my perception of Judy's education to magnify. To begin each Board Meeting, an opening prayer embraced the mission, and though, I was the only one not *crossing*

myself, the prayer proved unifying, and warmly wrapped around the Benedictines' message.

There is no doubt, the personal benefits to me, in serving six years on the Board, far outweighed my modest contributions to their Community. When my three-term limit concluded, I was happy for a Balanced Budget, and having witnessed high stewardship by their Prioress, Sister Mary Catherine Wenstrup, through a turbulent period. Best of all for me was a measured bonding with the Community, while gaining heightened respect for the monastic profession, and especially their moral courage.

This past June was my last evening to attend a Board Meeting. A member of the Executive Committee, Vice Chair Sister Deborah Harmeling, had graciously extended an invitation for me to spend the night at the Monastery. That prospect came as unexpected as when first invited to be on the Board. Inasmuch as Ms. Judy had made travel plans, and was scheduled to be away from the Farm on that evening, the special occasion, to lodge in their midst, was welcomed.

From the Prioress, I learned there were two guest rooms, one for traveling visitors and another for the Bishop. When I asked, "how many times has a Bishop

stayed here?”... the Prioress, at first, seemed reluctant to answer, but finally, in a burst of liberation, exclaimed, “none have ever stayed.”

And yes, when I was escorted to the Bishop’s suite on that special night, I really tried to avoid rolling my shoulders, but yet, it certainly had the feeling of being in “tall cotton,” like we say in North Carolina, when one is awarded the penthouse.

Recently, a blogged message by Sister Mary Carol Hellman, reminded all in her sphere, that St Benedict had instructed his Rule for Monasteries... “the guest is to be received as Christ.” Unfortunately, Ms. Judy caught me re-reading that blog “way too many times,” upon which, she cut off the martinis, and sternly scolded for my sacrilegious imagination.

Now back to my special night! Absent of any inclination to read or view television, I opted for my pajamas, and quickly snuggled into the Bishop’s bed. My first thought was of Martin Luther. My experience was an antithesis, indeed, from when Catholic Monk Luther declared, the church hierarchy “corrupt for selling indulgences” to those souls wanting to be free of sin. Luther defiantly nailed the 95 Thesis to the door of Wittenburg Castle Church in year 1517... and here I was –

just two years shy of 500 years later – covering for the Bishops... at good ole St. Walburg Monastery.

I found myself reflecting on the moral courage of these nuns, realizing how near they were to me, and how close I felt to them, on this night. A few of them had shared the deep emotion when they had crossed beneath the transom from family life to a life-binding embrace with a new community, many in their late teens, and early twenties, no turning back, facing with fortitude the unhappiness in relinquishing so much of what one had loved, and confronting the uncertainty of the path ahead... that is moral courage. I recalled, Winston Churchill describing courage as the first of human qualities, which guarantees all other qualities. I so admired these nuns, likely amplified by a nagging guilt from times in my past, when I failed the test of having the moral courage to do what my conscience was persuading otherwise.

Moral courage, as distinguished from physical bravery, was defined quite similarly during Ancient Greek and Roman times, as well as in the medieval years. Both, Catholics and Anglicans, refer to it as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Courage, historically, was counted among the four cardinal virtues, along with prudence, justice and temperance.

Acts of courage in the bowels of the Holocaust had no end. The Irene Sendler story stands with most memorable. She enabled the escape of twenty-five hundred children from the Polish ghetto, already walled-in by the Nazis. By sedating the children, and placing them in the bottom of tool boxes on the floor of her truck, she transported a few at a time. Irene changed each of their identities, but preserved their real names in jars buried in her backyard. Though captured and severely tortured, she survived the war.

The power of collective courage displayed recently by the good people of France, caused a reminder – all the way back to that half-bit of a soldier becoming the backbone of France’s faith. Saint Joan of Arc, a mere teenage girl, whose spiritual courage and inner strength showed no limits when her Army won the Battle of Orleans. After being captured, during her trial on the charges of witchcraft and heresy, she refused to disavow, accepting nobly the consequences... of being burned at the stake.

In 1995, only twenty years ago, Prudence Crandall was designated Connecticut’s State Heroine by the Legislature. One hundred and sixty-two years earlier, she was a school teacher, a Quaker, and had opened the first school for

Young Ladies and Misses of Color. Her quiet inner conviction was in defiance of overwhelming ridicule and violence. Her own words ring, “Shall I permit prejudice... to remain undisturbed? Or shall I venture to enlist in the ranks of those who with Sword of Truth dare hold combat with prevailing iniquity.”

The unbridled courage of Sojourna Truth, just twenty years later, was displayed at a Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. She was the only black attending. Following days of pompous ministers sermonizing on women’s inferior position, she took to the podium against a blanket of protests. She first turned to the clergy, asking “who said women were too weak? No one ever helped me into a carriage or over a puddle. I worked as hard as any man, plowed and planted, borne children, and had them taken from me. No one but Jesus heard my sobs.” The large audience of women, who had come from many cities, exploded into applause, when she bellowed in conclusion, “Ain’t I a woman?”

A Fellow of the British Royal Society of Literature, Mr. Salmon Rushdie, was anxious on the day Ayatollah Khomeini ordered Muslims to affect Rashdie’s execution. The death sentence resulted for authoring his enlightened “Satanic Verses.” Rashdie was living in London at the time, and barely made it to a scheduled appointment with a broadcasting editor before large curious crowds

were assembling at his known venues. His life was clearly in grave danger, but when asked by the editor, “in light of Muslims being ordered to kill you... looking back... would you have done anything different?” He calmly replied, “I (now) wish I’d written a more critical book.”

Two years ago, he authored an article in the New York Times entitled Whither Moral Courage? He noted how difficult to see politicians, Nelson Mandela being an exception, as having moral courage, declaring “there are no Gandhis, no Lincolns, any more,” then noting ... “political courage, nowadays, is almost always ambiguous.” When referencing those from the French Enlightenment, who challenged religious orthodoxy and opened the idea of free thought, he was thinking Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. Rashdie is saddened so few Muslims have not stood for Saudi poet and journalist, Hamza Kashgari, for his liberating words about the Prophet Muhammad. Rashdie is concerned, “this new idea- that writers, scholars, artists (and ordinary citizens) who stand against orthodoxy or bigotry are to blame for upsetting people,”... is spreading too fast, and must soon be marshaled, by re-stating over and over again, that those are the “men and women standing on the front line of liberty.”

My sleeplessness, on this special night, persisted. Reflections were of events during my younger years, the same years as when many of these Benedictines were making their courageous decisions.

In my fall semester at the University of North Carolina, in 1959, I was a member of the Debate Team. Dr. Warmoth Gibbs, President of North Carolina Agriculture & Technical University, the all African American school in Greensboro, North Carolina, had extended an invitation to William Friday, the President of UNC at Chapel Hill, for an inter-collegiate debate, between UNC and North Carolina A & T, on their campus. Whether it was the first invitation, I don't know, but it was the first acceptance by an Atlantic Coast Conference school. President Friday was pleased by our Team's willingness and enthusiasm for the event. When we arrived on the host campus, we were cordially met by President Gibbs. The reception committee escorted our Team across the quadrant to Harrison Auditorium. Unlike most college debate forums, commonly in a classroom with a pipsqueak audience, the auditorium was packed to the rafters. I recall a warm reception, and very generous applause by an appreciative audience at the conclusion of the debate. That warm feeling was only recorded in our minds, not in the press, but we knew, a collar-line had been broken.

Literally, in that same fall semester in 1959, four young men, from fine African American homes, had enrolled as freshmen at North Carolina A & T. The four, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair and David Richmond, quickly became friends. In their dorm room, “bull sessions” stirred their imaginations. From class discussions about recent current events, they were informed on President Eisenhower sending federal troops to protect the Little Rock Nine, and in that same month, September, 1957, they knew President Eisenhower had signed the first Civil Rights Legislation since Reconstruction. It was a voting rights bill that also established the Commission on Civil Rights. And, of course, Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat in Montgomery stirred many discussions. They were drawn to Martin Luther King’s leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and his adherence to a nonviolent strategy, and its ultimate effectiveness.

After Christmas vacation, Joseph McNeil was returning to school when he was denied service at a Greyhound bus station. Joseph, once back on campus, shared the experience with his colleagues. Their resolve to make sacrifice, and seek change, strengthened during January. And, on Feb 1st, 1960, just after 4:00 PM, the four well-dressed freshman students from North Carolina A & T University entered F.W. Woolworth in Greensboro and sat down at the “white only” lunch counter. They requested coffee. They were denied service... then

asked to leave. They stayed seated at the counter until 5:00 PM, when the store closed. The next day, twenty-five of their fellow students returned to the store with them. Newspaper reporters and T.V. Camera, police officers and hecklers gathered all about. The students studied their school books at the counter. Woolworth's service continued to be denied.

On Wednesday, the number of student protesters rose to sixty, and by Thursday the numbers had grown to three hundred, including three white supporters from the Women's College of the University of North Carolina. I was familiar with the Women's College at the time... having recently visited there with two of their alums- my aunts- my father's two sisters. The growing movement was all over the news, and my fellow debate team members rallied to talk about it. We were sympathetic, but none possessed the leadership, or individual moral courage, to pro-actively pursue our sympathetic sense.

On Friday and Saturday, meetings were held between the student leaders, college administrators, and store representatives from F.W. Woolworth, and S.H. Kress, whose lunch counter had been added to the protest. The stores asked the college administrators to end the sit-ins. The administrators clearly stated, they could not control the private activities of the students.

Early Saturday, more than 1,400 North Carolina A & T students assembled in Harrison Auditorium and voted to continue the protest, and by mid-day thousands packed both stores in spite of bomb threats, gangs of aggressive white males, and Klu Klux Klan members visible in the crowd.

That same evening another mass rally was held at Harrison Hall, and with the encouragement of Dr. Gibbs, the students voted to suspend demonstrations for two weeks. Dean William Gamble defined the students actions as “giving the stores time to set policies regarding food service for Negro students.”

The following Monday, students in Winston Salem and Durham conducted solidarity sit-ins. More protest quickly followed in Charlotte, Raleigh, Fayetteville and High Point. Momentum spread to Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and even extended to F.W. Woolworth stores in New York City. By the end of February, the movement had spread to thirty cities and eight states.

By the end of March, the sit-ins had spread to fifty-five cities in thirteen states. On April 1st, the students resumed the sit-in when the corporate headquarters

of Woolworth and Kress refused to integrate, and on April 2nd, the lunch counters were closed.

Thurgood Marshall, speaking at Bennett College, the black liberal arts college for women in Greensboro, on April 3rd, urged his audience not to compromise. What followed was an economic boycott of the stores.

On Easter weekend the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized students, from all over the nation, at Shaw University in Raleigh. That is when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formed. Many here knew the group as “SNICK,” which gained national influence. Student pressure was unrelenting, and, at long last, on July 21st during summer recess, Woolworth management informed the community they “would serve all properly dressed and well-behaved people.” Four employees of Woolworth were the first African Americans to eat at the lunch counter. The Greensboro Record’s headline read, “Lunch Counters Integrated Here.”

It proved the beginning of the end. By the following fall, nearly 100,000 had participated not only at lunch counters, but kneel-ins at segregated churches, sleep-

ins at motel lobbies, swim-ins at pools, wade-ins at segregated beaches, read-ins at libraries, play-ins at parks and watch-ins at movies.

These four young college boys collectively determined not to intellectually jettison what they had learned of civil protest from Ghandi and King, and locked into affecting change nonviolently. They admitted to being very anxious. Their moral courage distinguished them.

The aftermath, its affect... is a good part of the nation's story. All four boys found responsible career paths, such as Franklin Cain, earning a degree in chemistry, had a distinguished thirty-four year career with Celanese Corporation, and served many times over as a University Trustee in North Carolina.

Another Joseph McNeal, the one, you may recall, who was denied service at the Greyhound Bus Station; he became a Major General in the U.S. Air Force, and as late as 1995, was Commander at Doblin Air Force Base in Georgia.

The life-size sculpted statute of the Greensboro Four is a magnificently mounted symbol at North Carolina A & T University signaling the place and time. The caption at the base says... February One.

The closing of Greensboro Woolworth's in 1993 presented the Smithsonian Institute an opportunity to acquire the historic artifact...the four lunch counter seats.

What became of the Woolworth's store? It has become a celebrated location in Greensboro, converted to the International Civil Rights Center and Museum, which displays the Lunch Counter, minus the four seats at the Smithsonian.

Now fifty-seven years after the events in Greensboro, and having reached the autumn of my life, a question could be asked. Besides the cordiality of those gracious innkeepers last June, what benefit might befall a good ole Methodist boy when granted guest privileges to the Bishop's suite ... at a Monastery?

Being allowed to reflect upon, and gaining a better sense of the critical virtues of our society, was like Lewis & Clark finally reaching the Pacific. In recognizing commonality with the Benedictine nuns, and those four freshmen boys in Greensboro, offered clarity and link with those virtues, historically referred to – as the cardinal virtues – prudence... justice... temperance... and courage.

My conclusion about that special night – both the Greensboro Four and my Benedictine Hosts enjoy a character with each of the cardinal virtues... and on behalf of Society... it is my wish tonight... may God Bless them all.

Frank H. Mayfield, Jr.

The Literary Club

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