

Love in a Rectory

by

Catherine Berry Stidsen

I used to pray for people to die. I was about ten years old at the time and the reason for these somewhat astonishing petitions seemed quite logical; I delighted in securing mass cards for the deceased from the pastor of my parish church.

"And please, Catherine, be home on time for supper, " my mother would warn as with a toss of my long dark curls I threw the school books onto my desk and scooped up the list of donors and stipends and went first to the convent where the beautifully decorated mass cards were purchased.

The selection of the cards, while it required the utmost care, I would not permit to be time consuming for just a few steps away across the cobblestone street stood my goal, the rectory. Money and lists in one hand, cards held carefully in the other, with temerity I would approach the rectory door bell, use my elbow to ring it once lightly and begin counting to twenty very slowly, measuring the time, when, according to the sisters in school, it would be proper to repeat the ring.

When the door creaked open, one of the pastor's sisters, both of whom kept house for him, usually answered my query as to whether or not the pastor was in with, "My goodness, Catherine, you must get a commission from the poor souls. Come in, child, I'll call Father for you."

Into the cool, dark office I would follow her. The proper posture was to sit demurely with legs uncrossed and eyes on the somewhat threadbare carpet. But invariably my eyes wandered to the one corner in the room where the oatmeal wall paper had loosened considerably, to the desk in the far corner that looked like something right out of Charles Dickens, and to the pastor's swivel chair that had an almost horizontal position without anyone even in it.

When the pastor entered the hall outside the office, I would rise and say in halting German as he entered the room, "Gelobt sei Jesus Christus, good afternoon, Father." And he responded, "In Ewigkeit. Amen. And how are you, Catherine?"

Seating himself at his desk, the pastor would ask, "For whom are these masses to be said?" It was a most unnecessary introduction to the subject at hand for he surely knew that no matter who had died in the parish or the town, I had tracked them down and done some solicitation.

As his hand formed the beautiful script distinguishing the pupils of the "old school", he would turn and say, "Catherine, if you keep this up, when these souls are saints in heaven, they'll pray for you and you won't have much time to spend in purgatory. Won't that be nice?"

"Oh, yes, Father, came my happy exclamation as I picked up a blotter from the desk to dry the cards he had already written. As if the spiritual aspect of this deed ever entered my conniving mind!

"Catherine, I think the curls are longer, and so are you since the last time I saw you. But never be ashamed of being tall. Just think what a privilege it is when you are in a crowd, or better still, for processions, think how closely you walk to the Blessed Sacrament," and then he went on to finish the cards.

Then the act really began. I would feign a departure, gathering the cards together, preparing to kneel for his blessing, and quietly he would lean back in the swivel chair, and say, "If you didn't have to leave so soon I might have a story to tell you...a story about, well, let's see, maybe one about a missionary who ate monkey meat and thought it was chicken."

Giggling with delight and anticipation I would take the straight-back chair he indicated to the left of his desk and be completely happy, for this was the real reason I had come...one of the pastor's stories.

He told me about the Chinese and their inventions, about things that happened to him when he - was a boy, about my grandmother and grandfather who came to the country as immigrants from Austria-Hungary. He abounded in stories about my mother and my aunts and uncles when they were students in the parish school.

There was one story about this immigration that I eventually learned from my mother, not my pastor. He never had a car and said he wouldn't until all his parishioners could. The times were hard for his people and he made a habit of walking to their homes at supper time unannounced. He would share whatever was on the table and note everything. One evening when he arrived at my grandparents' home there was only boiled potatoes with lard for the evening meal and no heat in the house. Father ate the meal as though it were the finest food.

The next morning a food basket and a ton of coal arrived. There was a note in it to my grandfather. My mother said it read, "Dear Joe, This is a loan. Sometime when you are in a position to do so, and you will be, you must do the same for someone else, please, and ask them to do the same. Sincerely, Henry A. Gantert."

I do remember Father's telling me often, "Catherine, we must give the poor our charity in such a way that they can forgive us for it." It was years later that I learned that this was a favourite saying of St. Vincent de Paul, one of Father's most loved saints.

When the triple tolling of the church bell signaled the Angelus; we would rise together and salute the Queen of Heaven, rather, Father might have saluted her. It was then that I would get queasy thinking that I was already thirty minutes late for supper.

At the prayer's conclusion I would leave with a final, "Thank you, Father.

May I have your blessing?"

Once again we exchanged the greeting, "Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen." And the pastor's last remark always was, "Give my regards to all at home, and be a good girl, Catherine, a really good girl."

And when I arrived home late for supper, my mother would scold to no avail, and finally with a smile toying at the corner of her lips would ask, "What did Father talk to you about today?"

I remember rather wistfully answering, "Everything, Muz, just everything, like he always does. Muz, is it wrong to pray for some more people to die soon? Not the well ones, I mean, just the pretty dead ones? And Muz, does God mind very much if I love Father? It's terribly hard not to."

For two months before my First Holy Communion I had been very ill and was absent from school. My mother faithfully taught me the required catechism lessons each day during my illness and when I was able to return to school, it was determined that if I could pass a barrage of questions aimed at me by the pastor I would be able to receive the Holy Eucharist with the other children in my class.

I do not remember the question and answer period too well, only that he was so gentle. But I still have the picture of the Mystical Rose which the pastor gave me at its conclusion, telling me to strive to be like her, and to remember him especially on my First Communion Day.

Then there was the time after I received the sacrament of Confirmation and stood in front of the church pouting because the bishop had called on Carolyn, the girl in front of me to recite the beatitudes when I could say them just as well as she did, any old day.

The pastor heard me and made me say them for him. When I stumbled at the Seventh Beatitude he asked me how I would have felt if that had happened when the bishop were doing the questioning and wasn't I a silly girl to doubt why the Holy Ghost had inspired the bishop to ask Carolyn? What a wise man!

I once heard him say to one of his sisters that he was glad they were having a chocolate cake for dinner that evening because that was his favourite dessert. What was the result? For his birthday and every other special occasion until I was old enough to bake, my mother was plagued until she provided a chocolate layer cake for my pastor. When I did try my hand at the culinary arts we had many laughs together over his "poor old teeth" after one of my concoctions.

I was drafted on several instances to help the sisters in caring for the sanctuary of the church. In those days the sisters teaching in the parochial school also took on that duty and hordes of us children were the bucket brigade. For those who liked the work, eventually there came more important duties and I became so familiar a figure working side by side with the sisters that the pastor dubbed me the "Lord's Assistant Housekeeper," even though one day I let the sanctuary lamp which I was replenishing fall and hit him on the head.

And of course, there was the school choir. The pastor would distribute nickels to the choir members after anything that took place at an out-of-school time, for example, a funeral on a Saturday. I always was the recipient of the paper wrapper from the roll of coins and a religious medal. No nickel! It was my custom to put all payments for musical services in the poor-box in the rear of the church and very soon I began to receive the usual nickel along with the wrapper and medal with the admonition to deposit only the nickel in the alms-box.

I was frightened on graduation day from the parish school. Father noticed it and called me to him after the ceremony. He told me there was nothing to worry about if I were good. He told me not to let high school change me. He said if I followed Mary I would not stray.

It was during my sophomore year that Father became so sickly that he could not offer mass and had no visitors. The assistant priest took over giving out mass cards. Father would attend the children's mass on Sunday mornings and one Sunday when I stayed a while longer to finish my thanksgiving after Holy Communion he came down the aisle and stopped at my pew.

Pleased and surprised, I looked up as he greeted me with, "You're taller than ever, Catherine, and I'm glad you are. I shall need a good strong arm to lean on to make those," he began, pointing to the four steps which lead from the rear of the Church into the Rectory. "Can I depend on you on Sundays for your help?"

I did not miss a Sunday after that. The longing in my heart for days gone by was lessened slightly by this one small service I could offer him once each week. He used to leave me each Sunday with, "Be a good girl, a really good girl, Catherine. That way I'll always be proud of you. I am proud of you now; let me always be. "

Junior year came and went with little change in his health. Father was failing noticeably now. I taught catechetical classes the summer before my senior year and one morning after class word came from the rectory that the housekeepers wanted to see me before I went home. I rang the doorbell of the rectory, mulling over in my mind the lessons I had taught the children, thinking of the experiences I would have to relate to the pastor on Sunday morning. I was counting one and two and three and four.....

It was the older sister who answered. "Come in, Catherine. I have something to tell you." I tensed all over. There were tears in her eyes. Were the rumors that I had been hearing true?

"Agatha and I thought you would want to know, Catherine. Father is going away. He's going to the"

"Don't say any more, please," I stammered. "I... I think I'll bring a chocolate cake down to him on Saturday. I... Thank you for telling me, Miss Gantert. And thank Mrs. Tighe, too. I really appreciate this. Goodbye."

That Sunday I wore my loveliest summer dress and a big white picture hat which Father liked because "these small hats are just silly. If you are wearing a hat at all, I say, wear a big one."

I watched him receive Holy Communion and then return to his chair in the sacristy. When the church emptied he came slowly from the sacristy, and unable to genuflect, he bowed deeply to the Blessed Sacrament. He opened the sanctuary gate and looked once more long and lovingly at the main altar and around the sanctuary. He even looked at the lamp which I had once dropped on his head and I thought he smiled. Not a word had been said at mass about his departure. But that would be like Father.

I wanted to run to him, to get on my knees before him and beg him not to leave; instead I knelt meekly in my pew, trying to concentrate on the prayer book in my hands, waiting for him to come to me.

"Praised be Jesus Christ, Catherine." He talked so thickly now it was difficult to understand him.

"Now and forever. Amen, Father," came my choked reply. I won't cry. I won't.

"I'm taking a good long vacation, Catherine," he began.

"And. . . a . . . much deserved one, . . . Father."

"You must come to visit me often in my new home."

"I will, Father. I promise I will," came the muttered answer. "But Father, must you do. . . "

"Don't you think I deserve the rest?"

"Oh, yes, Father," and the tears flowed down my cheeks and all the bitterness and anxiety exploded into "but what am I to do without you? I'll miss you so. And my graduation, you won't even be around to see me in my cap and gown. And I might be a speaker at the Commencement. I know you wouldn't have been able to be there, but. . ."

"I wanted you to make me proud of you, Catherine," he chided gently,

"but I don't want you to be proud."

"It's just. . . Please, forgive me."

"That's more like it. This is the young lady I want you to be."

"Please, Father, will you give me your blessing?" I pleaded. Why did it seem that there was so much finality about this blessing? I could not help myself. The tears began afresh.

He put his hands on the crown of my hat at the end of the blessing as was his custom and then to my amazement, rested them on my cheeks, turning my face up to him. "This won't be the last blessing. You must promise to see me often. Do you promise?"

I nodded my head in affirmation.

"And now, Catherine, may I have that sturdy arm of yours once more to mount that precipice of steps over there to the rectory?"

I nodded again. Words would not come.

Three days later Father left the parish in which he had served for sixty-one years, fifty of them as pastor. He retired to the diocesan home for aged priests. I kept my promise. I saw him numberless times after that but he did not fit the Venetian blind, plush furniture surroundings. The sisters in charge there confided that they had a terrible time with him because he was always complaining about how soft the furniture was and sitting on newspapers to "better support my old bones."

But today Father has come back home. His people are gathered once more to see him and honour him. The Holy Name Society is out in full force to meet him. The Sodality is gathering hourly to pay him special tribute. The Altar and Rosary Society have the church spanking clean; school children are filing in and out in perfect order to greet him. Catholics and non-Catholics and even one Jewish furniture store owner are here crowding the little church to see him once again.

But he will not stay long with us. For tomorrow, after the Archbishop and the clergy have added their greetings to those of his parishioners, Father will leave the old parish for a far place. Strange that in death he will be many miles distant from the people whom he so tenderly loved and so exclusively served.

I hurt too much to cry. I peer at the candles about the bier. I can just see Father's face from where I am kneeling. There is a peace and calm and freshness in it that has nothing to do with embalming. Of that I am sure. A newly-ordained priest of the parish is kneeling in front of me. His shoulders are shaking. He is quietly crying. I wonder what memories of the pastor are crossing his mind at this moment.

For myself, I know how I will always remember him. I can see beyond all this to that cool, dark office, the pastor sitting back precariously in his swivel chair, with a little girl beside him, listening attentively to every word, loving him very much and hoping that someone would soon die so that she could come again for more mass cards and more stories...and him.

Requiescat in pace, my beloved Father!