

A Golden Reflection by Sister Bernadette Marie Ondus, SS.C.M.

Sister Bernadette Ondus, College Misericordia Class of 1955 wrote this reflection the week after her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion June 2005. Sister has been a prison chaplain since 1991. She is also the editor of the newsletter of the Sisters of SS. Cyril and Methodius, *Our Times*.

Self-help books have always had a prominent place on a best-seller list. These days, it seems the number of memoirs is increasing. Recently, I've read quite a few and have even read a book about writing memoirs by Judith Barrington.

What is the difference between a biography and a memoir? Ms. Barrington tells me a memoir has the element of reflection on significant aspects of one's life. Reflecting on one's life is a given at reunion time. Getting together with college classmates sparks experience, sharing with those with whom one has been in contact over the years and also with those not seen since Graduation Day.

Just a few days before I went to my 50<sup>th</sup> reunion at College Misericordia, I discovered a buried treasure in an old suitcase. I found a series of letters I had written from 1951-1955 while I was a student at the college. I wrote these letters from college or from my home in Lenox, Massachusetts, to the principal and a teacher/librarian at St. Cyril Academy, Danville, Pennsylvania. Armed with these missives, I went to the reunion with a view to sharing them with the others. I'm certainly glad I had documentation, since I discovered that I actually remember very little of those days, far less than my classmates.

The first letter addressed to the SCA principal, Mother M. Bernard, is dated September 23, 1951. In it I tell her about arriving at the college on a Friday afternoon on the train from New York. I recount what occurred after: "I was shown to my sleeping quarters at St. Joseph's Cottage. I sleep in Room 9—the same room Frances Sochar and Mary Ellen Leiby slept in" (two earlier SCA alumnae). "My roommate is Janice Kidron from Trevorton, Pennsylvania."

My father told me that before I went to college, he had prayed that I would be assigned a good roommate. He felt, and rightly so, that having a good roommate would insure my success and well-being at school. His prayers were answered for Janice and I were thoroughly compatible and opted to room together for all four years.

Since she lived closer to the college than I did, she provided us with green bedspreads with rainbow trim and a lamp. She kept our furnishings over the summer and brought them back in the fall. The lamp, dainty and feminine, suited her personality. Janice never wanted to use the ceiling light because "it makes the room look too much like a kitchen."

I continue my account of my introduction to college life: “We have a large freshman class—about fifty-six resident students. Most probably the day students will swell our number considerably.” I continue with the names of all the places from which the students come: Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Haiti, Hawaii, Formosa, Singapore and Peru.”

On Saturday we registered, had our physical examination and arranged our schedule of studies.” I list my classes as Religion and the Study of Scripture, American history, Latin for use, French 1, college algebra (which I had to take because chemistry conflicted with French), physical education and a choral period.

Although I tell Mother Bernard that life at college is different from life at the Academy, I have some advantages over the other girls. For instance, some of my classmates went to public school and never had Sisters. Also “some freshmen are homesick and say they want to go home.” Some find rising early difficult. “Since we have Mass at 7:30 a.m., we rise about 6:50 a.m.” Being away from home and rising early were just a continuation of my life at a boarding high school.

Some of my classmates did not reside at St. Joseph’s Cottage which fell to the wrecking ball in 1987. I hope they realize what they missed. Sister Eloise McGinty, a legend in her day and a legend to this day, presided over this legendary building. One of our funniest stories concerns the “incident of the alarm clocks,” which will be preserved in oral history in the archives. A harmless prank, it merited campusing (punishment of not being allowed to leave campus) for all the cottage’s inhabitants. In the 50’s, being campused did not curtail ones’ freedom all that much (where was there to go?), as Janice declared when we discussed this story during the reunion weekend.

One of the principals in the episode of the clocks was Betty Yannaccone, Minersville, Pennsylvania, who now lives in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I have a fond recollection of Betty’s concern for my future after college. I majored in Latin at CM, not a very practical subject unless you planned to become a teacher. Though I never planned to become a teacher, I somehow wound up in a college where the majority of students had decided to make teaching their life’s work. I wanted to be a journalist. In the college catalog were listed journalism classes. No one ever taught any, as far as I know.

Though I was pretty well set on becoming a religious in a congregation which at that time was primarily a teaching community, Betty did not know that. What could I do after graduation as a Latin major? She decided that the only possibility was becoming a medical records librarian. Dear Betty even found out the name of a hospital in a city near my hometown, St. Luke’s in Pittsfield where I could work as a medical records librarian.

As a young person who was aspiring to religious life and writing to members of the congregation I planned to join, I included in my letters references to yearly retreats provided at the college. On April 15, 1952, I wrote to Mother Bernard from my home in Lenox: “A few days before we left for home we made our annual retreat. Father Alban Carroll was our retreat master.” Two years later on April 4, 1954, I wrote to Sister

Tarcisia from the college: “At the end of March our annual retreat took place. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. Father Andrew Ansbro, C.P. was our retreat master. Father is director of the ‘Catholic Career Conferences’ and has a wealth of experience and understanding in counseling youth. His talks were most inspiring. I wish you could have been present at his talk on the Passion. He took his crucifix in his hand and spoke to Jesus so feelingly. He couldn’t do enough for us and was so concerned that each girl makes a good retreat. He made a very great impression on me.”

Later on January 27, 1955, I wrote again to Sister Tarcisia about another event that impressed me: “I’ve been in a state since Sunday. I found out that a very good friend of mine—one of my classmates—is entering here (Mercy Novitiate) next Wednesday. I have been as excited as she is. It never affected me this way before. She gave me her class ring as a memento. I think she believes that I intend to enter here also. Of course, I didn’t say anything about my future plans. She is very happy, though, and I feel she will persevere.”

I never purchased a class ring since I knew from the outset I would enter the convent eventually. A little over a year after I wrote this letter, I, too, entered the novitiate at Villa Sacred Heart in Danville.

The classmate I refer to here is Sister Mary Lucy Pennoni, R.S.M. who did not complete her senior year with us. I knew her well because the entire class was divided into sections alphabetically for the courses everyone was required to take. My last name ends with O, hers with P.

Sister Patrice and Sister Annunciata knew all along I was going to become a Sister. In a letter to Sister Tarcisia on November 1, 1954, I say: “When I returned (from a visit to Danville) I went to report to Sister Patrice. In the course of our conversation she said that she thinks I’ll be going back someday. A little later I met with the Dean (Sister Annunciata) and she said the same thing.”

And now I come to what I call the piece de resistance of this reminiscence, my involvement in drama at CM. Another advantage of going to the Academy was the emphasis on music, both choral and instrumental, and the opportunity to participate in speech and drama. When I came to CM I continued to act in plays. In one of the clippings I have from a Wilkes-Barre newspaper, the caption under the photo announcing our Christmas production states that “Bernadette Ondus ’55, who has appeared in all major productions since her freshman year, plays the role of Satan, the world’s chief adversary.”

Before I proceed it is important to make clear to my readers that my career in drama would never have flourished if the college had been co-ed in the 1950’s. If the Misericordia Players had teamed up with the gentlemen of King’s or Wilkes, they would have taken the male roles. I then would never have gotten the chance to take the roles of villains, Satan, Corvinus and the Third Tempter. Since I was willing to get my voice down to a lower range, I was a favorite with Miss Loughlin.

When Miss Agnes C. Loughlin, director of the Misericordia Players, told me I would play the part of the adversary (Satan) in the Christmas production, she said with a slight smile, "You're the best devil in the school." I'd be interested in learning what she said to Sally Lou Butera '57, a drama major, when she gave her the part of the Advocate of the Angel Gabriel in the same production.

In the January 27, 1955 letter to Sister Tarcisia I told her several Sisters of Ss. Cyril and Methodius congratulated me on my performance. (It's always easier to be convincing as a villain.) I was too tongue-tied to tell them I was an Academy graduate. (Subconsciously perhaps, since I had just made a hit playing Satan, I thought it best to keep my identity secret.) In the letter I also mentioned I had never seen any photos of myself but that some freshmen have pictures of me in costume. Something makes me think I had a red cape and even a tail. (I hope I'm not making this up.) If any CM graduates who were freshmen from 1954-55 are out there reading this, the archives would appreciate the photos. I'd like to see them also.

Our senior year was winding down and the one big thing those who were aspiring teachers had to do was six weeks of practice teaching. I was among them because, of course, I had taken all the education courses. In a letter to Sister Tarcisia dated January 27, 1955, I tell her practice teaching begins on February 1, and " ...I am rather afraid to think of it. When we were handed observation sheets and lesson plan sheets, I got petrified. I'm teaching at the Dallas Township High School—Latin and French, I guess. I'll probably observe the first week. I'll write more later."

In another paragraph I say: "Besides teaching I have to keep up with my own Latin and French so I can go back to class for the remainder of the semester after teaching is over." All this is the prelude to a decision I made regarding my participation in the year-end drama. Wisely, or so I thought, I decided to break my record of being in all CM productions since freshman year. The Dean, it seems, had other plans. One day, probably after practice teaching had already begun, Sister Annunciata asked me to be in the cast of *Murder in the Cathedral*. I would be the Third Tempter, another male role, another villain.

Now there are two items of interest here. First of all, I must say the decision to be in the play was a difficult one. I don't know about the other future teachers of America, but after a day in the classroom I was totally exhausted, to go to play practice after that was a superhuman feat. Of course, I really had no choice. All those who know Sister Annunciata realize she would never have taken no for an answer.

What is even stranger, however, is the fact that I had no recollection of ever acting in a play entitled *Murder in the Cathedral*. I learned the news from a letter I had written on March 17, 1959, to Sister Tarcisia: "I started out not being in the play, but now I have the role of the third tempter. The play is T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. It is being given April 3 and 4. Please pray I do well." In an earlier paragraph I tell Sister our last day of practice teaching was March 15. I gather from this that I had sleepwalked

through most of the practices. At least I had two weeks of regular routine before the performance of the play.

A play I have a better recollection of was presented by the Misericordia Players in the Irem Temple, Wilkes-Barre, on Friday, March 28, 1952 according to a clipping I have. It reads in part: "This production will be first in the culture series program planned by the music and drama departments of the college." I played Corvinus and the photo I see myself looking villainously at Agnes played by Rosemarie Eckenroth, Class of '54. Another member of the Class of '54, Wanda Fine had the lad, Fabiola. Her sister Suzy was in the Class of '55. Also in the photo was Martha Dougherty, Class of '54, whose sister Ann Louise was in our class. The play was presented before Easter vacation in 1952, according to a letter addressed to Mother Bernard from Lenox written on April 15. After the matinee two Sisters of SS. Cyril and Methodius asked to see me. "I was very surprised and happy to see Sister Salome. I was hoping some of our Sisters would attend the play. I was overjoyed to find that Danville had a representative in the person of Sister Salome."

Besides drama, because I was interested in a literary career, I became involved with the *Thinker's Digest*, whose guiding force was the pet Sister Miriam. I recall going up on an elevator to a cubby hole (literally) on the fourth floor of the main building, I believe, to work on this publication. In only one of my letters do I have a brief reference to the *Thinker's Digest*. In a letter to Sister Tarcisia from January 27, 1955, I say: "Wait until you get the next *Thinker's Digest*. It's about sanctity in marriage. It's to counteract the other one." I really would be interested in discovering what "the other one" was about. Perhaps some one out there among our readership has a clue to solving this mystery.

I owe Sister Tarcisia (R.I.P.) a debt of gratitude for preserving these letters. Besides being a teacher/librarian at St. Cyril Academy during my time there, she was for an extended period of time the moderator of the Alumnae Association. Evidently she had a file on the graduates. Mine contained these letters from which I have quoted and the clippings about the plays. Thanks also to the present moderator who turned the file over to me.

I have often wondered where people who wrote biographies and memoirs got their material. No doubt from their own personal memory bank. Perhaps, though, they too were fortunate enough to come across some letters in an old suitcase.