

(September 2, 1907 - Sept 6, 2001)

By Brother Charles Filiatrault

Although Brother Lawrence has had an impressive record of personal and professional achievements, he was seen by some as being a somewhat private person, known well among the Brothers by relatively few. I really doubt that he would approve of having anyone talk publicly about him, especially if that person were to speak about him personally.

At the risk of "rushing in where angels fear to tread", I would like to share some of my impressions of Brother Larry based upon the fact that he was a fellow Religious Brother and a member of our community. Furthermore, I believe that we can learn a great deal from our Senior Brothers, and that in many ways they are the prophets of our times. Having recently turned 94, and recognized as the Dean of both Provinces, I certainly believe that Brother Larry qualifies in this area, as well, and that it would be possible to say something about him while respecting privacy.

One of my most memorable encounters with Larry was at a community meeting we had on October 10, 1995. The topic of discussion for the meeting was "On Improving the Quality of Our Community Life." He suggested at that time that we express our gratitude to one another more often, that we demonstrate mutual support more readily, that we find practical ways of putting our vow of poverty to work, and that we work for justice. Brother Larry was a big fan of Dorothy Day, and he subscribed to the Catholic Worker. While sharing his reflections with the community, Brother Larry suggested that we be more careful about our use of basic commodities, such as food, water and electricity. He was never shy about putting these suggestions into action. I can still see him going from room to room turning off lights that were left on and telling us that fans were of no use in an empty room, that their only purpose was to give an individual the feeling that he was cool. In Larry's mind, the money that was saved by a more frugal use of basic resources could then be directed to the poor. He also spoke of the "little virtues". I never quite understood what these little virtues were, except for the fact, that I knew from first hand experience that I was not practicing the "little virtues" if I stood directly in front of his line of vision while he was watching TV out on the patio.

As a result of Brother Larry's suggestions at that meeting, I became more and more interested in what the "little virtues" were all about. I did a little research and I found that it was Saint Marcellin Champagnat himself who spoke of the "little virtues" within the context of the smooth functioning of local communities. I feel that the "little virtues" could also apply, not only to religious communities, but also to the smooth functioning of family life, as well as to our interpersonal relationships as members of planet earth.

In his writings, Father Champagnat describes the following areas as being critical to the smooth functioning of community life:

- Knowing how to excuse and readily forgive others.
- Knowing how to bear with shortcomings
- Being ready to share in sorrow and to bring relief.
- Knowing how to avoid disputes and impose personal views.
- Being alert to the needs of others.
- Knowing how to listen.
- Treating others with respect.
- Knowing how to yield and to adapt when this is possible.
- Putting others first and our own personal interests second.
- Never to grow weary of doing good.
- Being cheerful and full of good humor.

What I would like to do at this time is to put before you three items taken from the life of Brother Larry that I feel reflect how he practiced the "little virtues".

The first item is this cribbage board. There was a time when Brother Larry and Brother Danny Kopecky would play shuffleboard on the patio in our community. Both of them were quite competitive, and neither one liked to lose. Later on, in spite of the fact that he suffered from Parkinson's disease, Danny would often ask Larry if he wanted to play cribbage. Seeing the two of them in their '80's playing cribbage was really something to behold. There are times, I think, when Larry would let Danny win just to make him feel good. In my mind, the cribbage board became a symbol of the drawing together of many of the little virtues: putting others first, knowing how to yield, knowing how to bear with shortcomings, and especially, having a spirit of play and knowing how to be happy. Leon Bloy once observed that joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God. When watching Danny and Larry playing cribbage, I have also felt the presence of God. I think that our communities, our families and our world would be better places if we were not to forget the importance of play in our lives.

The second item I would like to share with you is this six ounce wine glass. Nearly 25 years ago when Brother Lawrence came to Miami, just skin and bones, it was Dr. Eduardo Delgado who identified his problem as Addison's Disease and prescribed the needed medication that kept Brother Lawrence healthy ever since. Dr. Delgado has been his primary physician ever since and has saved his life several times since then. It was he who permitted Brother Larry to have two six ounces of wine every day, and so it is that every day at precisely 11:00a.m. Brother Lawrence would organize himself a little ritual consisting of one six ounce glass of Rhine wine and two home made chocolate chip cookies. The same ritual would be repeated at 4:00p.m. He would celebrate the ritual alone, but there are times when he would share the ritual with others. Rituals such as this one provide an opportunity for emotional hospitality and the practice of the "little virtues". Jesus knew the importance of ritual and was not adverse to the use of wine. Biblical scholars tell us that wedding feasts typically lasted for seven days, and that at the wedding feast at Cana, He turned at least 120 gallons of water into wine. Jesus knew the importance of ritual especially when it provides a context for the exercise of the "little virtues". Brother Lawrence, I feel, was also aware of this.

The third and final item that I would like to share with you is this stack of letters. On any given day, Brother Lawrence would typically receive letters such as these requesting financial assistance: The Christian Appalachian Project, the Special Olympics, the Missionary Sisters of Africa, Mercy Home for Boys and Girls, Catholic Relief Services, Camillus House, and the Medical Missionary Sisters.

For those of you who may not know, the Brothers receive \$95.00 per month which they use for personal needs: clothing, travel, vacation, restaurants, etc. Brother Lawrence would ask to receive his \$95.00 in cash in denominations of \$5.00 and \$10.00, and he would send them where the needs were. He was putting into practice the "little virtue" of being alert to the needs of others that he mentioned in our Community Meeting of October 10th, 1995.

Every once in a while, there would be a special letter along with all of the others. He always looked forward to his letters from his sister, Antoinette. At times, he would receive a letter from a special friend, such as this one, that he received shortly before his death. It came from a friend of his who is 101 years old. In this letter, she expresses her encouragement to Brother Lawrence by quoting the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, "This is the flight that man was born for." If only a "happy few" could be counted among Brother Lawrence's closest friends, I am certain that she must have been one of them.

I may never have the privilege of being included among the "happy few" of Brother Lawrence's closest friends. However, I did have the privilege of being his caregiver for almost ten years and I accompanied him through the ups and downs of the dying process that has lasted for several weeks. I had the opportunity of observing him up close and personal during a very critical time in his life. Whenever I would ask him: "How are you doing, Larry?" He would often reply, "I'm doing o.k." Good psychologist as he was to the end, he would then ask: "And how are you doing?" This would inevitably be followed by: "And how are the brethren?" We could perhaps add yet one more virtue to all of the "little virtues" I mentioned earlier, and that is, the virtue of fidelity. Along with many of the other "little virtues" that Brother Lawrence introduced me to, he was especially faithful to his relationship to Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and if he were able to speak to us today, he, no doubt, would refer us to Paul's Letter to Timothy:

If we die with the Lord, we shall live with the Lord. If we endure with the Lord, we shall reign with the Lord. In Him all our sorrow, in Him all our joy. In Him hope of glory, in Him all our love. In Him our redemption, in Him all our grace. In Him our salvation, in Him all our peace.

Editor's note: I had the privilege of teaching at St. Ann's Academy during the time Larry was Principal (1951-1954). He never relished this administrative position, preferring get back to his work in guidance. But from him I gleaned a sense of professionalism in teaching; he always wanted to see the larger picture. For many of us, 'guidance' was a sissy sport. He showed that it was an important element in service to our students. Apparently his superiors recognized this, as his master's thesis had the honor of being printed in chapters in the Bulletin of Studies. --
Richard Foy