

Unexpected Blessing

When my studies at Catholic University were completed, I had little time to worry about anything. I went directly to Poughkeepsie and was very busy providing what was needed to change the Normal Training School into a full-fledged four-year college, able to grant degrees in various fields. This is what kept me very busy from the very beginning, trying to do all I could to make a difference and to get the college solidly founded.

My whole first year here had required me to run back and forth from Washington, D.C., to Poughkeepsie as well as communicate with the State Education Department in Albany. I searched for the best teachers, supervised the campus construction, negotiated with the city of Poughkeepsie, and tried to keep myself open and not miss any opportunity that presented itself. I had just been officially named to become the first president of this new college and to assure it got off to a good start. To this effect, I attended as many meetings as possible in the area in the hope of getting better known and had been here a full year already when an opportunity presented itself quite unexpectedly. It was in late 1944 and early 1945.

A new company came to Poughkeepsie that was beginning to make an impression nationwide and eventually would become a global enterprise. It was the International Business Machine Corporation. The company decided to settle mostly in the Poughkeepsie area just outside the city. Little did anyone realize the impact it would have, not only in Poughkeepsie, but also in all the towns and cities of greater Dutchess County, to say the least. Off Route 9 IBM set up its majestic building and grounds and began hiring people from the entire area. It trained employees carefully and was opening branches everywhere.

The local chairman of the company got in touch with me as the president of Marist College and asked me if I would be willing to address IBM trainees in a kind of graduation class ceremony before they would be sent off to their various branches. It was to be just a short talk to encourage them to make a mark for themselves. They wanted a college president to make their graduates feel proud and give a bit of class to the ceremony as well. I was delighted to accept.

It was not a large class compared to graduating classes today, but it was enough to provide a golden opportunity. I asked if there was anything special that they would want stressed and was told not particularly, except maybe to stress that this was not just a Poughkeepsie project, but also something that was intended to make a much wider mark here and abroad. It gave me a clue. I stressed not what they had achieved up to now but what they were about to face. I warned them to be careful how they dressed for interviews. I also told them about the language that they used, the importance of a follow-up to any important meeting, and the courtesy that was expected of them and advised them to cultivate the ability to listen and learn. I also stressed, as requested, the importance of having a global perspective in working for a company such as IBM. I closed by telling them that they may well be aware that IBM means International Business Machines, and "that is correct as far as your product is concerned. But as far as you are concerned, you must always remember that IBM also in your estimation means: In Business for Mankind!" Evidently this thought went over big with the employers, even if it was meant for the employees.

In my conversation with administrators of the company, I suggested that they could send some of the trainees to us for courses we were offering, that we could work together, and we could also have some of our teachers come to help out at the company. The lectures or classes could be in either place, and we could have a helpful exchange with them. That is what really struck a point, and even if it started slowly, our contact and work with IBM has been a tremendous help to us. By working together with them, we have been able to make a difference in this area and have developed what is often considered the best-equipped small college of the area. The exchange of teachers grew and continued, and we have greatly profited by the experiment. In addition we have had, from the start, a priority with IBM in all its latest equipment. Its relationship with Marist has given IBM a model for working with various colleges around the world. We both learned something very precious, and both have profited. I do not mean in any way that I should take credit for the progress that has been made here at the college by both Linus Foy and Dennis Murray, but I believe that I did at least open the first door. And that, for me and for Marist, was indeed an unexpected blessing.