

## August 28, 1913

It was on this day in 1913 that a bit of life, who was to become Leonard Edward Fontaine, appeared to the Fontaine family, who lived at 6 Thomas Street in Southbridge, Massachusetts. Southbridge, a small city about twenty miles southwest of Worcester, Massachusetts, had a unique factory called the American Optical Company that made most of the eyeglasses needed in New England. American Optical (A.O.) was a magnet for people looking for work.

The Fontaines were newlyweds and, like most newly married folks, were looking for a permanent job and a nice place to settle in order to start a family. Edward Fontaine married Loretta Desmarais and had been looking for a job about the same time that A.O. built an extension to their factory. The company was seeking a number of new employees for its new branch. Ed Fontaine was a very conscientious person and quite capable with his hands. He was a strong man who talked little and worked hard. The company was looking for reliable employees like Ed Fontaine to take care of the new extension that was doing quite well in Southbridge. Ed Fontaine filled the bill as head of the machine shop.

Later, he was to hit his head very hard on a metal table. The wound never healed properly and eventually became cancerous. Ed's spouse, Loretta Desmarais, was the oldest daughter of a very fine Catholic family originally from Canada. The family moved to the United States in order to find work at the various mills which were spread all over New England.

Ed and Loretta were lucky enough to find a tenement, as it was called, at 6 Thomas Street. It was a huge three-story six-tenement house. The Fontaines had the first floor on the right side of the building, and the building's owner, Tony Commito, and his family lived on the second floor above the Fontaines. Relations were very good between the owner of the building and the five other families who occupied it. Opposite that building was a farmhouse with cattle and plenty of wood for sale. Just a little more than a block away was the Catholic church with its primary school.

The new baby boy was brought to the Sacred Heart Church for baptism and the maternal grandparents, Tom and Agnes, were delighted to be the godfather and godmother. The pastor of Sacred Heart was Father Ducharme. To assist Father Ducharme was a new priest named Father Epinard who eventually became Father Ducharme's successor at Sacred Heart.

Loretta Fontaine had been educated in Canada and received her schooling from the Sisters of the Assumption, who were in charge of the school at Sacred Heart parish. Loretta decided that as soon as she was able to get out after the birth of their first child, she would go directly to the rectory and ask the pastor to baptize her son and place him on the altar as an offering to the Lord. This was an old Canadian custom in keeping with the word of Scripture that the first born to open the womb should be offered to the Lord in thanksgiving. And so, shortly after birth, I was baptized Leonard Edward and was offered to the Lord in keeping with the custom.

I grew fast and was the pride of my mother. Soon she found that she was pregnant with her first daughter, Lucille. After Lucille there was Rita and then another son, Arthur. Arthur died at the young age of eighteen months from meningitis. One of my earliest memories is of the day when the family went to church and then to the cemetery in a new model T Ford. I sat on the back seat with the little box on my lap holding the body of the little brother who God had taken. He was needed in Heaven, we were told, and that another little boy would be coming into the family some day. We had been very sad at the loss of Arthur, but our patience was rewarded when Earl was born. Earl proved to be the last for the Fontaine family for a while.

As a young boy I have memories of going to the Catholic school, training to be an altar boy, and serving Mass. My favorite teacher was Sister John of the Assumption. She encouraged me with my early plans to become a priest and insisted that I must first be a good and zealous altar boy and learn many things well before even thinking of going into the priesthood. My memories of school days are that I got along with all my teachers, and also with all my relatives, especially Grandma Agnes, who never missed a chance to spoil me.

Although I have few memories of my younger years, one memory is very vivid. When the soldiers returned home after the World War in 1918, I can recall being seated with other young friends on the curbstone of the sidewalk waiting to see the parade of returning soldiers. The khaki uniforms, and especially their strange pants that went down to immediately below the knee, stick most in my memory. The soldiers wore a narrow strip of khaki cloth that they turned around their legs from the ankle to the knee where their knee-pants ended. Since we had never seen regular soldiers before, and this type of uniform was new to us, our first reaction was that we were happy that we did not have to wear bands around our legs, but had only to pull up our short pants to our knees, and our long stockings covered the rest to the foot.

Another thing I recall was going with Mother to do shopping at various stores, especially when she went to the drug store, for we could be certain that, if she could afford it, she would get each of us an ice cream cone. As the eldest child, I also had the perennial duty of having my parents drum into me that as the oldest I must be an example for the younger children. I often took the blame for the others and had to promise to be more careful in taking care of them and to fully realize my responsibility as the eldest.

Outside of our tenement was a veranda with a three-foot high railing. Often in the winter when it had snowed all night, the snow would fill the six-foot drop from the ground to our floor, and at times the snow even came as high as the railing. We would dress warmly with several layers of clothes and jump down into snow that was way over our heads. It was our main winter excitement. During the summer, Dad spent his evenings chopping wood and piling it around the cellar. It was an important job if we did not want to freeze in the winter. We had a wood stove and used the gas burners to light up our tenement. The icebox was just that, a box with a special space to store blocks of ice that we purchased from the iceman, who came daily.

Mother ran the family. Dad was admired and respected, and he spoke so rarely that when he did have something to say, we all listened very carefully. He was a meek and kind person with great inner strength, and when we misbehaved the worst punishment was to be told by Mom that she would report that to Dad. We loved him dearly but were afraid to get him angry, for we could not predict what he would do or say. It was Mom's coup de grace for her to tell us, "Just wait till your father gets home." It was only once that I saw him remove his belt and use it on my sister who had misbehaved. It worked, and never again did we want to see him angry.

I had very few friends, and what friends I did have were mostly altar boys. I recall the day in April 1926 at age twelve when Bro. Frederick Charles came to give us a talk on the Marist Brothers. He said that he had come to recruit candidates to their training house in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, and to some other houses in the New York area. We did not know what a Brother was, so he explained that they were men who were running schools for boys just as the Sisters were doing for girls. I loved the Sisters who were my teachers, and especially Sr. Saint John of the Assumption, who had made quite an impression on me. Bro. Frederick Charles also made a lasting impression on me. He explained that the Society of the Marist Brothers was like the Society of Jesus, except that they did not become priests but remained Brothers and taught in poor country schools where students had been neglected. What impressed me most was that he stressed that the Marist Brothers were trying to live as Mary did; the aim of loving and serving Jesus as Mary. He told us that no one ever loved Jesus or served Him better than Mary, and that is what the Brothers wanted to imitate and follow in their lives.

That day I felt an interior call telling me, "This is it!" I told Brother Frederick that I wanted to go and was willing to join the Brothers that day. He took down my name, birth date, address, and age, and then told me that I needed the permission of my mother and father. He further told me that there was no room right now but as soon as the older boys graduated and went to Poughkeepsie there would be room for me to join in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts. He would notify me when to come.

I went home thrilled to tell Mom. "A Brother?" she asked. "What is that? Is it someone who works for and with the fathers? It must be some kind of official altar boy." I explained that being a Brother was something like being a nun. Instead, though, they were men working in schools, teaching children and bringing them closer to Christ. They were a group of religious men who take vows and live in a community, and whose congregation is dedicated to Mary. They love and serve Jesus as Mary did.

That is all very nice,â€ Mother said, â€œbut I wonder what your father will have to say! Besides, you have to be a special holy young man if you are going to work for God and for Mary, His Mother. Is that what you want or is it what God wants? If that is what God wants, it will be OK with me, for I am sure that they will train you for that.â€ My sister asked me if I was going to be called â€œMaristâ€ or if I was going to keep my name as Leonard. I told her that I did not know any details, but that I was ready to accept whatever they told me to do. So, I was a bit relaxed in that I had found my calling, and yet also nervous, for I did not know how Dad would react. I was the oldest of the children, and he often reminded me of that and implored me to set a good example for my sisters. I thought to myself, â€œI hope that the Lord will inspire me as to what to tell Dad.â€

That evening at supper Mother said, â€œLen, tell your father what happened in school today.â€ I explained to Dad about the Brother who came as a recruiter and that I was immediately attracted to that way of life and would like to join them. Dad took his own good time in answering. I remember him asking, â€œHow do you know that that is what you want to do with your life? You are much too young and need a lot more training. You should concentrate on your studies and on becoming a good person before you think of becoming a teacher. We'll talk about all that later.â€ I went off to bed excited and happy that at least Dad had not said no.

I had met Brother Charles in April; May was around the corner. I concentrated on my studies in order to have the best possible grades and waited patiently for him to get in touch with me. I did what he had told me to do and said this prayer: Dear Lord, if you want me to become a Marist Brother please help me to pass all my exams in school, and please make Dad agree that I should go to serve you as Mary did. I also prayed to Mary for the same favor. I said it daily as the Brother suggested. When school was finished we had a lot of little jobs to do around the house, and I was faithful and did all of them well. I worked with Dad to chop wood and to pile it up in the cellar for the winter needs. I remember saying every night before going to bed a small invocation that Brother Charles had suggested for me to say daily: Please Mary, help me to become a good Marist Brother if you think that I can be useful in serving Jesus the way you did.

A few days before my thirteenth birthday, I received a simple postcard from Brother Charles saying, â€œHappy birthday. We have room now, come any time.â€ I spoke at length with Mother, insisting that I go and give it a try. Mother told me that she had talked often to Dad; he felt that I was too young, but if I still wanted to go, he would not stop me. So we planned to have my uncle drive me to the Marist Brothers in Tyngsboro, in the small car he had just bought. We would go the following Sunday; I was all excited. Dad remained very quiet. On Sunday morning we all went to Mass as usual, and I served for the last time. I had not noticed that Dad was not with the family that day. When we returned home after Mass he was not with us for breakfast. Mother said that he might have gone to my auntâ€™s for breakfast, and possibly had Mass with them earlier. It was time to move on.

We packed and were ready in the car. And I told Mother that I just couldnâ€™t go without saying goodbye to Dad and kissing him goodbye. I never liked to kiss him because he used snuff and I could smell it on him. Before we left I asked to make a stop at my Aunt Emma's house; Dad was there. I went over to him and told him that I was leaving. He said nothing. So I bent down and kissed him on his cheek and said, â€œGoodbye, Dad.â€ He still said nothing. It was then that I broke down and cried, as we left the house to head to do God's will.