

The Scholastics

I started by conducting personal interviews with each and every young Brother on campus, so that I would get to know them and become better able to direct them in their preferred areas. This helped me to prepare them for active life in the classroom and also life in a normal teaching community.

The interviews were my first duty so that I would be better able to understand what was needed and how we would be able to adjust to the pressures of divided living for a while. We needed to get some teachers from our schools to come to teach and get involved in the new venture. It had to become a work of the entire Province for it concerned the future of the whole Province. So I began by trying to get to know the variety of individuals. With few exceptions, all were Marist candidates from our various schools. We already had a few foreign Scholastics who came to us from Mexico and Canada, who had missions in East Africa and needed to have their candidates acquire a good knowledge of English to be able to teach. This project would provide so many diversified jobs that it was important to choose each individual with competence and character to fill the bill.

The interviews with the Brothers were most rewarding, for they all seemed pleased to be part of this new growth and expansion and happy to be in on the ground floor. It was revealing to me of what a great impact this would have on the whole Province. This was not now a Poughkeepsie project or a Paul Ambrose project but a real Marist undertaking, to train our own Brothers and, eventually, possibly admit lay students from the area as well.

Let me now share with you how the Lord can weave the fiber of the future unknown to us at the time but always with a genuine purpose. Without betraying confidentiality, I wish to reveal a surprise that hit me in these first days as Master of Scholastics from June 1943 on. In my interviews with the various young Brothers, I would generally ask if there had been any religious vocations in their family history, or how had they come to be interested in the Marist religious apostolic. Most of them had some Marist Brother who had made a special impact on them, and they wanted to be like him to imitate him in his dedication and work for the Lord. Many others also had relatives who had or were working in the religious life of the convent as Sisters, or had relatives as Marist Brothers. This was 1943-44 when I asked each one if there had been any religious in their family history.

I was stunned by one of the young Brother's answers. He told me that he had an aunt who was a nun and was evidently very happy in her life and proud of his attempt. I asked if she were also a teacher. He assured me that she was not, but working as a nurse for the sick, assigned to some Framingham hospital dedicated to people with cancer. I asked him if the name of his aunt was Sr. Mary Baptist. He was astonished and asked if I knew her. I told him that she had been the one who took care of my father before he died in that Framingham hospital in 1940. I went on to say how my Dad had been able to be of service to the nuns as he was always mobile since his cancer was on the head. He had been very close to the sister whose nephew was now my disciple "small world!

Another incident that happened during the first or second year of my work for the young Brothers of the Scholasticate was when the relative of one of them died. I recalled my own tragedy when my father died and I had not been allowed to attend the funeral. One Scholastic reported to me the death of a close relative. I immediately went to see the Provincial and asked what the regulations were about going to the funeral of a deceased relative. Bro. Louis Omer in his typical way asked me, "What do you mean by regulations? I named you in charge of the job and you will make the required regulations. I will respect what you decide." Then I told him the story of why I had come to ask him and I thanked him for leaving it up to me.

I could now understand why the Lord had put me through the trial that I had to suffer myself to become more sensitive to others suffering the same pain. The Lord has His own ways of doing things and after that incident, I wanted all the more to bless His Holy Name. Needless to say, I let the young Brother attend the funeral.

I was happy to be working with the young Brothers and getting to know them, for it would then make it easier later on to find out which one could best do which of the many jobs we would have to do with our own buildings. It made them feel that they too were an active part of the growth and expansion that would merit

being a college. I can honestly say that during my fifteen years in this job I never had less than 100 Scholastics in training, with the most being 163. They would come from the Novitiate, work at their studies towards the degree, and at the same time be available to work for the physical expansion of the college. We made it a point to keep all of the young and old Brothers fully aware of what would be coming next so that all were involved.

We prayed for success in our growth and planning, and we all worked hard together to make it a reality. Just about all of us felt that we were part of something new, something needed, and something Marist. It was a realistic imitation of the Founder and his example of hard work with the entire community working together as a family to effect the common good. Everyone was kept fully briefed, fully aware, and fully dedicated to the growth that we were all proud to be involved in.

My first duty was to figure out a plan for eventually having all the young Brothers and their activities together in one place, not divided as it was at present. That was my most pressing plan and preoccupation. My first concern had to be for the Scholastics. I talked that over with the Brothers on our faculty, and they agreed that the present setup was inadequate and that the change should be done now. At that time 100-plus Scholastics were sleeping at the Provincial House that had already been fully condemned by the Fire Department. They attended Mass in that chapel and also had their meals at the Provincial House. They came to the Greystone area only for their study periods and their classes. All courses were given at the Scholasticate. We had to find a way to provide for all our needs right in the center of the campus.

First of all, we had to do something about the old McPherson estate, which had been condemned and it was becoming a firetrap. We already had planned to send the retired Brothers to the newly established Juniorate community at our Esopus estate. There was plenty of room for the retired Brothers and also enough to provide for the Juniorate activities. All that was needed there was a gym, which had been approved and was being built. We needed to put up a building that would provide a proper dining room, and also a proper study hall for the young Brothers. This is what we planned at first, and in the background we also added what was called the Fontaine building, which was torn down in 1997 in order to make room for the James A. Cannavino Library. Fontaine served as our dormitory for the young Brothers. The faculty were housed in St. Peters. As soon as these basic buildings were provided, we would seek permission from the Fire Department to burn the firetrap Provincial House.

Actions on these plans were pressing. The Juniors and retired or sick Brothers were already moved to Esopus, and the sooner the Scholasticate building was ready the sooner we could move ahead. Permission was readily obtained and, as promised, there were no restrictions on our basic requests. We went ahead and built what was the library, also torn down in 1997 to make room for the new library. The top floor was our huge study hall for the Scholastics. The bottom floor was our kitchen and dining room. Our program for work had been developed so that construction of these projected houses would continue all year round.

First of all, the Scholastics would each choose a buddy. When one in the couple was at work on the construction during a week, his buddy was taking down all the notes in the classes so that he would have a full set of notes. Then when it was the buddy's turn to work, the other would take care of providing the class notes. That way everyone was covered. We also decided and obtained permission to invite a group of willing Brothers to come to continue the construction while the young Brothers studied during the summers. Thus construction was able to continue all year round. The Brothers of the Province felt that they, too, were part of the new project. We asked for and obtained Bro. Nilus Vincent Donnelly to oversee all the constructions now that he was finished with the Central Catholic gymnasium in Lawrence, Massachusetts. This was a master move, for Nilus was a careful worker with great contacts and very pleasant to work with.

A group of summer workers signed up to come to continue construction during summer months and we appointed a special Brother to be their Director who was fully in charge of them. Bro. Edward Michael Lavigne became clerk of the works and worked with Nilus as an efficient team. A third choice to complete the team was the Brother who would come to cook for the summer project. Thus it was not a college project nor a Poughkeepsie project but a Province project. There was a very precious spirit in these groups that was nothing short of a miracle. We were also blessed with no serious accidents whatsoever.

I here stop to say a few words about Bro. Nilus Vincent, who was an exceptional person. He had been an orphan adopted by a relative and was already used to plenty of hard work when he joined our training school to become a Marist Brother. He had many good contacts with personal friends who were architects and engineers, and Nilus had the kind of character that everyone loved; no one could refuse him a favor. I was with Nilus when we went to the Archdiocesan office to get the OK on our plans. When their architect asked questions, Nilus had all the answers. The Bishop then said that we could see that Brother Nilus knew his subject well, so let us start.

There is another point that I wish to make here concerning all constructions. Nilus told me that I should personally go to the city labor union to explain to them what we were doing. We needed to let them know right up front that the Brothers were doing all the work so that we would save money and manage with our limited funds. I then made a bold move and promised them that if ever we needed help for any of our buildings that I would come to them first.

That was one of the most important visits that I ever made. To this day we have not had any trouble. I must explain here that while we were constructing the new gym, which is now Marian Hall, a dormitory, we did need some help to complete the masonry on this building in order to be on schedule. We were running late, so I went to the union and asked them to come to see how many masons we would need to complete a part of the building before the next job on Monday. The boss assured me that he would send us six masons Saturday and Sunday, and that they would get the job done on time. I was afraid that he would make such an offer, and now remember the phrase, "Sorry, Sir, but I cannot accept that, you ask for help and then refuse it when it is offered?" I explained to him that on this campus we would not do any work on a Sunday. He answered that he could understand that from Brothers so he offered to send us eight masons on Friday at noon and all day Saturday. He promised that they would get the job done, and that there would be no charges. All I was to do was to give them their lunch of sandwiches and beer and maybe more of that at the end of the day. That was the bill, he said, and we could consider it paid already. That trip to the union had paid off.

I learned afterwards that many in Poughkeepsie were admiring the Brothers for their spirit and their willingness to work hard for what they wanted. All of the Brothers worked on the project and we were indeed fortunate that we never had a serious accident. Generally, if two nails would suffice to put into a piece of wood to tie it to another, Nilus or Frank Xavier would say, "Put four." If we needed a hole dug three feet they would be sure to deliver it with four feet of depth. And at every turn in the construction we kept planning for the future. We were sure to build with strong foundations so that we could someday add another story to a building. We never did skimp on any materials when safety was concerned.

One more point regarding Nilus, who was definitely avant-garde in every way and in everything he did. He was quite busy with all his construction and it became necessary for me to have regular meetings with him to find out, "What's next? What will you need for this coming week? How many men needed (always an even number) and how much money?" We had to plan ahead, but after we had missed a meeting or two, I realized that this could not go on. So we made an appointment to have supper at Coppola's each Sunday night where we would discuss the latest project, how much it would cost, and how many men would be needed. After a while this supper meeting was pushed to Monday nights so that we would be free on Sundays.

It was also at this time that I began to pray for Masses offered for the Holy Souls in Purgatory so that we could obtain the needed materials and be provided with funds. I also prayed that there would be no accidents to jeopardize our work, and that we could carry on in peace and deliver the buildings on schedule. I never doubted that we would succeed, but I felt a bit of personal security in praying to the Holy Souls to also please intercede for us.

Many of the Brothers could write tremendous stories just on their own experience on the "project." And I am sure that many are better left untold. There was still another building to be treated, and it has turned out to be a real gem.