

(May 10, 1906 - November 3, 1987)

Brother Joseph Damien entered our Marist Brotherhood on May 22, 1918 from St. Ann's Parish in Lawrence, Massachusetts. His investiture took place in 1921, and he completed his formation in Poughkeepsie, New York. While Joe spent better than three decades at Mount Saint Michael, he is also well remembered for the years he served as Master of Juniors. Joe made the vow of stability in 1942. He died peacefully at Lawrence Hospital in Bronxville, New York.

Brother George Fontana delivered Joe's eulogy at the Church of Saint Francis of Rome, Bronx, New York.

I have been asked by Brother Sean to say a word of thanksgiving for Brother Joseph Damien in these few moments of quiet after Communion.

I appreciate Sean's invitation, and I take it to mean: try to be the voice for all of us present here, to express to God our feelings of gratitude.

We have, of course, many feelings now: sadness, grief, emptiness, and loss, because a person who was special to us has been taken away. Yet, this is a moment for gratitude: gratitude to God, our Father, for the life of Brother Joseph Damien; gratitude to Christ, for the seed of his grace which bore such beautiful fruit in the actions and words of Brother Joseph; gratitude to the Holy Spirit for giving to Brother Joseph Damien the gift of a vocation to be a member of the family of Mary as a Marist Brother.

There are people whose affection and admiration for our deceased Brother have brought them to this Mass tonight: his family, his professional lay colleagues, Mount Saint Michael alumni, the members of the Mount Saint Michael's Mothers' Club. I ask indulgence of all of you if these words of thanks focus on Brother Joseph Damien's life as a Marist Brother.

In fact, I have confidence, that, although I thank God for what Brother Joseph Damien has meant to us Marist Brothers, you will feel united in sentiment. Given the simple, unpretentious manner in which he dealt with all the different people he met, I am sure that you will see a reflection of the man you experienced in the Marist confrere we knew.

I ask a favor also of Brother Joseph's contemporaries. If the glasses are too rose tinted, if the rough edges are too smoothed over, and if my words lack the humorous incident, these are the distortions of one who, in the early years of adolescence, encountered Brother Joseph and who, consequently, could never think of him as simply "Joe."

So, then, I thank God, first, for a series of mental snapshots I find in my memory, lovely images and amazingly lively ones, despite the passing years.

There is Brother Joseph Damien cutting wood behind the Esopus dormitory or attacking the October leaves on the front lawn with a battalion of young men around him, or walking, beads at his side, with those same young men, 1:00 in the

afternoon, praying the rosary along the Esopus roads before our afternoon classes began.

There is the image of Brother Joseph Damian teaching geometry, first classroom at the top of the stairs, and students getting marks on their Regents test far beyond their wildest hopes; or Brother Joseph, supervising study hall and dining room; and, of course, the image of him in the chapel (and I cannot possibly think that it was not the same all his life): at prayer, meditation, Mass -- standing, kneeling, leading -- a rock of stability and an oak of manly piety.

I thank God, also, that, in knowing Brother Joseph Damian, we have known one of those men of whom the old spiritual books spoke. Do you know the men I mean? Those whom the writer described thus: if a religious order were to lose all its Books of Rules, it had only to observe a particular religious to see the ideal portrayed by the Rules.

The language is quaint, I know, but the image is attractive.

With our first year novices I recently finished the section of our Constitutions entitled "Our Marist Identity." It is a very rich and beautiful section. I could have said, truly, to the novices, "If you want to know what the words in the book mean in the life of a man, lived out in the rough and ready world of everyday life with all its harsh aspects, look at Brother Joseph Damian.

"If you desire to know how humility, simplicity, modesty are enfolded, look at that man: master teacher, superb disciplinarian, excellent practitioner of Marist Brothers' pedagogy that leads youth by gentleness and firmness; look at that man taking his place unassumingly in the heart of the Mount Saint Michael community.

"If you desire to comprehend how a Marist Brother can practice our Marial Spirit in today's world, look at the naturalness of Brother Joseph Damian's devotion to Mary. See how a lifetime of unaffected devotion has brought forth into his relations with others Mary's benign feminine influence.

"And, finally, if you desire to understand what family spirit looks like, observe Brother Joseph Damian at the crossword puzzle, Brothers all around the table with him, working together, laughing, teasing, joking. What a great symbol of family spirit, and see how Brother Joseph Damian seems so profoundly at home and at peace with himself there."

My dear people, and fellow admirers of Brother Joseph, those are some of my memories of our deceased Brother. The psalmist says:

"O Lord, the lot marked out for me is my delight.
Welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me."

I identify deeply with those words. As I say them tonight, I also say, "Thank you, God of Providence, for giving me such a precious heritage through Brother Joseph Damian who fathered my Marist life."

I am sure that we can all say, "Thank you, God of benedictions, for blessing us with the life of a great man and a splendid Marist Brother."

Whatever your memory of Brother Joseph Damian, keep it alive. Whatever memory of him is dearest to you, speak it to others, so that they may know that a

flesh and blood man of holy life has walked side by side with us. Let us carry on his memory so that we live ever more richly the same full-hearted dedication he lived.

For Brother Joseph Damian: Deo gratias.

Reflection on Brother Joseph Damian, F.M.S. written by Brother Cyprian Rowe.

The feeling was very distinct, as if he wanted to be close to me, as if he wanted us to talk or just spend time together. And I was comfortable with the feeling. It was not always so. I remember a time when it would have been painful for me to spend time with this man whom I respected but found remote, cold, and ascetic. But in these latter days, I felt a warm strength, a tenderness he would have disparaged if I had named it. It was as if the years of pain had fanned his heart, bringing to fulgent life a repertoire of affection and longing for others that did not have to be repressed.

Brother Joseph Damian was my Master of Juniors. He played surrogate father to an throng of inchoate juveniles who thought they had been called to Brotherhood. Whatever the numbers, he managed. Never wasting a word, he gestured mostly with his eyes. They were a cold blue, somewhere between the color of late fall skies at 3:00 in the afternoon and the huge rocks we split in Tyngsboro when we converted the quarry. He controlled us in refectory and chapel and study hall, wherever he was, with the strength of his eyes. They spoke a universal language of yes's and no's we all came to understand. And as I think back, there were no maybe's.

There was during that first year in Esopus a great clearance. Every tree that needed to be cut down was cut down. What the criterion was, only Brother Joseph knew. Maybe it was the state of the bark or maybe it was the balance of the view. But he had a crew of Bunyan Boys who worked with him along the road between the mansion and the dorm. I never knew what was supposed to happen, but I guess it did. The notion settled within me that Brother Joseph loved working outdoors and liked those who, like him, flexed their arms in rhythmic gusto with the thrust and pull of two-man saws. I stood and watched from a distance, with some admiration and a precociously jaded sense that even at fifteen I was beyond change: I would never want to participate in the wood party. Yet I felt a little sadness, because when someone plays father others would like to be favored sons.

At Christmastime our world relaxed. Brother Joseph led groups of us off into the Catskills for long walks. Somehow I would end up walking with him and just the two of us in front would wind our way through the foothills talking for hours, warmed by the constant motion, but I feeling warmed, too, somehow by being with him. I cannot now remember what we spoke about. In fact, as I look back, I am amazed that on a number of vacation afternoons we found language that we could share across ages and cultures; I come now to this backward look and know that I felt then, and still feel now, that what was was good. What seems strangest to me is that my memory is of the two of us, walking together. Something tells me that I have reconstructed the memory, that there was someone or more than one with us, but time and need have screened them out and I remember only two --- Brother Joseph and me.

Now, as I think back on those golden afternoons, moving through the lower mountains, snow on the land, orchards and vineyards lying in uneven clearings

here and there, it seems, in these latter days, that he was symbolized for me in those mountains: they were solidly there. An immovable incident of nature that could carry you and envelop you, but was always discreet and never casually revealed its secrets.

I think I always admired him after I no longer feared him. There came a time when the book said we shared some juridic equality; nonetheless, he was always my Master of Juniors. He was always Brother Joseph. He remained one who had framed part of my childhood and for that reason had to be treated with formality. I could feel myself move around him as if his eyes would suddenly blaze against anything out of place.

Until the convocation, this was true. With him, as with some others, the convocation became a time of re-collection. It was like coming together and, in the meeting, pulling together all the pieces of shared life between us and recasting them in a different sort of fire.

Brother Joseph was there frequently. I did not remark his presence near me; people were there, that was all. But after a while, I realized he was present beyond accident, beyond the adventitious convergence of twos and threes and fours as crowds broke apart.

At first, I was embarrassed. I was nonplussed. I could no longer be a child with him and yet anything else seemed unendurable for me. But somehow, by his quality of presence he finally got through to me and I knew he knew. I also knew that he wanted to be human before my humanity. This situation is something of a dilemma for us as family. For while we own one another and in some way push one another through life as do the generations of blood, our generativity is different. We never have the sort of posterity that forces us to stop the fantasies of childhood.

There was simplicity in his eyes. Eventually it became comfortable for me. (I remember a time last summer when I realized that what had grown in me was perhaps the ultimate requisite for real friendship, the capacity for compassion. I realized that even when my mother had a heart attack, I needed her to be the strong sustainer of the child. When she "failed," the rage that masquerades as reason flared in me against her. Only last summer, during a class discussion on Paula Giddings's book, *When and Where I Enter*, was I able to become the child who sustains without violence to his age nor disappointment nor rage.)

Brother Joseph and I ate together down by the river in Poughkeepsie; we sat together in the garth at the Mount. We explored very slowly what was new to both of us, a relationship born of history, creating a friendship. So we talked away the evening, between the magic acts and the filling of plates and the interruptions of those breaking in to say hello. Then when the night closed in, we ended with "Until. . . ."

The last time I saw Brother Joseph was June 6. A glorious day, with faces and voices that filled the hunger of memory. A day which even while it spoke of continuities, of the impossibility of being separate from those who have made us what we are, wherever they may be, asserted an "in" and an "out" of choices; that, in a real sense, we stay together or pull apart in very specific ways. And in spite of longing for a "time when" we are made by our decisions, after the smiles on glad faces, after the reassurances, after the romance of false promises (truly felt), we all go back to our choices. That day, I rode to the cathedral with Brother Joseph and then back to the Mount.

Twenty-three years ago, I heard a Voltaire quote on Catholic religious. The substance was: Catholic religious are the only people who live unloved and die unmourned. If Brother Joseph had been called five years ago I'm not sure what my response would have been. Perhaps I would have said blandly, "Yes, he was my Master of Juniors." Or, "Yes, he was a wonderful teacher and a strong religious." Yesterday, though, when Brother Marius announced at the end of office that Brother Joseph had died, I felt a cry in my throat. Maybe the love had come late (or at least the knowledge of it) and maybe the mourning will not slay my spirits wholly in the coming days, but both will be there. And if I hear a chopping of trees, or a raking of leaves, or if I walk along a road winding like a benign serpent in snow-covered uplands, I shall remember who first made them more than incidental to me.