

The First Masses...

Five years after the providential foundation of the Army of Mary, His Eminence Cardinal Maurice Roy, Archbishop of Quebec and Primate of the Church in Canada, established this Work as a "Pious Association" on March 10, 1975. A courageous action on his part when we are aware of the underhanded battle which, from the very beginning, was led by other authorities working with him. Did not Bishop Lacroix say to Marie-Paule: "Know, Madam, that everything Cardinal Roy does, Bishop Audet undoes."? Thus, it was not surprising that the difficulties would intensify even more. But on every occasion, the meetings requested by Cardinal Roy with the directors of the Work permitted that light be shed, and the truth counterbalanced the numerous accusations that were a complete fabrication.

So they waited for Cardinal Roy's death, on October 24, 1985, before striking at the Army of Mary and its Foundress. On May 4, 1987, his successor, Cardinal Vachon, revoked by a new decree the status of "Pious Association" granted the Army of Mary. However, this revocation did not take away from the Army of Mary its deeply religious and Catholic characteristics, and the divine Work continued to spread. The battle continued, finally resulting in a Doctrinal Note issued on August 15, 2001, by the College of Canadian Bishops, approved by each bishop including our present Pontifical Commissioner. Only two bishops who knew the Army of Mary and the Sons of Mary and who knew that this Note did not comply with the truth, did not sign it:

– His Exc. Bishop Eugène P. LaRocque, Bishop of the Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall in Ontario, who, after having carefully looked into the Community of the Sons of Mary for five years both in Rome and in Canada, accepted them in his diocese. A campaign of defamation was immediately launched against him, but he was later exonerated of all blame.

– His Exc. Bishop Colin Campbell, Bishop of the Diocese of Antigonish in Nova Scotia, who, having also carefully observed the Sons of Mary, welcomed them in his diocese. In his turn, he had to endure persistent opposition, and he finally handed in his resignation for reasons of health.

In spite of these two voices which were opposed to it, the Note was published and put on Internet, spreading a slick of calumnies everywhere in the world...

In the 1980s, as soon as the adversaries learned that the Sons of Mary were studying in Rome to become priests, everything was done to prevent their ordination....A watchword had been issued by the Archbishop's Offices in Quebec: "The Sons of Mary will never be ordained priests!" But God was watching over His Work and the first ordination of a Son of Mary took place in 1986 and was performed by Pope John Paul II himself. Subsequently, other ordinations took place from one year to the next.

Instead of rejoicing, hearts hardened and the orders issued throughout Canada stipulated that the Sons of Mary be prevented from exercising their ministry.

Below are the testimonials, from among so many others, of a few priests who had come back to Canada to celebrate their first Mass.

Sr. Chantal

Shadows and Lights of First Masses

Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort and, closer to our times, Saint Maximilian Kolbe have insisted very much on the necessity, in our consecration to Mary, of desiring to do totally the will of the Immaculate, of being perfect instruments in her hands, of letting ourselves be totally guided by her in all the events of life through which she reveals her will and makes use of us as her servants.

Obviously, the ultimate object of all love is God, the infinite Love, but the best way to love God is to love Him through Mary. The goal of our life is to strive to love Jesus as Mary loves Him. It was in drawing inspiration from the Marian spirit of these two great saints that each of nine Sons of Mary advanced to the priesthood on May 30, 1987.

However, the atmosphere of that day was quite painful, for it was marred by Cardinal Vachon's act of revocation of the Army of Mary's decree of establishment as a Pious Association. But in spite of all the ambushes and the strivings by certain authorities to block the ordinations, Mary finished by triumphing over the traps. Some days later, June 2, 1987, once again it was guided by Mary that the nine new priests had the grace of celebrating their first Mass under the dome of Saint Peter's in Rome, in nine different chapels.

Personally, my heartbeat still quickens with emotion when I think again of the signal favor I had of celebrating my first Mass on the very tomb of Saint Peter. All thanks to Mary, Mother of the Church, who led me to that holy place!

Then on June 4, I and some of my confreres arrived in Quebec with the group of pilgrims from Italy who had come to participate in those ceremonies marked with the seal of Providence. But since it was from Quebec that opposition to the ordinations had come, it goes without saying that we were awaited with a certain aversion on the part of some members of the clergy.

In my case, one of my nephews was already planning the celebration of his marriage and he wanted me to be the officiating priest. He had already discussed this possibility with the assistant parish priest in charge of preparing the couple, but this priest was not too favorable to the idea of a Son of Mary, a priest of the Army of Mary, blessing that marriage. His negative remarks and comments had upset my future niece.

Trusting in Mary, I went to the rectory to ask the parish priest for permission to bless my nephew's marriage. The parish priest was absent, so I had to deal with the assistant. The refusal was quick in coming, his utterly false statements being buttressed by the most absurd reasons. Among other accusations, he claimed that the Army of Mary was circulating among Sherbrooke churches a statue said to be miraculous, and that people were thus being captivated in order "to make money". In vain did I deny this and even name the persons concerned, explaining that they were not of the Army of Mary; there was no reasoning with this assistant.

So finally, instead of having it out with him, I decided to leave without requesting anything whatsoever, leaving it to the parish priest to preside over the marriage at which, on the appointed day, I was present simply as one of the faithful, and offering up this suffering for the spouses, while telling myself that the Blessed Virgin would be quite able to draw benefit from this event.

In such an atmosphere I did not look into the possibility of celebrating officially a first Mass in a church of my district, with relatives and friends, all the more so since I was aware of the more or less disagreeable measures the parents of one of my confreres had to take to have permission for a single Mass. I left it up to God and Mary to organize whatever they wanted. Needless to say, in all the Centers of the Army of Mary there was no lack of places where Masses could be celebrated. Almost every evening, I was on the road to one Center or another.

One evening, it was the turn of Kingscroft. Since a number of the Knights of Mary were active in the upkeep and smooth functioning of the church, the parish priest was asked if I could celebrate Mass in the church. He consented on condition that I not hear confessions...(???) The news spread quickly and the Knights from neighboring districts assembled there. I did not present myself in the confessional, but it was not long before someone came to me in the sacristy and asked to confess. I could not refuse. Moreover, Canon Law stipulates: "Those who have the faculty habitually to hear confessions whether by virtue of their office or by virtue of a concession by the Ordinary of either the place of incardination or that in which they have a domicile, can exercise that faculty everywhere, unless in a particular case the local Ordinary has refused..." (can. 967, §2), and such was not the case. This penitent having finished, a second appeared, and thus a line formed.

It was a splendid summer evening. From the crowded little church there issued the strains of a solemn Mass. It is understandable that after Mass the conversations should have been prolonged, there in the balmy evening, as on the occasion of a big celebration. And, in fact, it was a celebration organized by our Mother in heaven, so was it not perfectly natural that everyone should have something of heaven in their eyes and a radiant smile on their lips?

But that was not all; Mary was not finished with her considerateness. Since my mother was living in a senior citizens' home, it was quite normal that I should go to celebrate Mass with her. I had asked of the chaplain authorization to celebrate Mass in the chapel with members of my family and some friends. With his consent we had planned having this family Mass in the evening after supper when the chapel would be free. During the day, a discreet offhand invitation led to another then to another, finally ending like a chain of telephone calls between Knights of Mary, such that it even led to the presence of some former confreres,

Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

And lo and behold! the beautiful chapel of the home resounded with melodious hymns, whereas no preparations had been made for this. The Mass of the new priest took on a festive allure without the bishopric authority being in any way disturbed by it, for the sweet Mary had silently organized everything all unbeknown to it.

How could we possibly not give thanks to the Most Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary for their most thoughtful attention and almost palpable presence? In truth, the Blessed Virgin is present, as a kind Mother, in our journey towards Heaven. No situation of any single one of her children escapes her Heart of goodness. May she help us to participate in the triumph of her Immaculate Heart!

Father Maurice Péroquin, O.F.F.M.

A First Mass in Honor of Saint Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr

At the beginning of August 1987, on the occasion of my holidays in Canada and after my ordination to the priesthood at L'Aquila in Italy, arrangements had been made with the parish priest in the parish Notre-Dame-de-la-Défense in Montreal so that I could celebrate a first Mass in Italian for all my relatives and friends from the Italian community in the metropolis, my home city.

As soon as I arrived in Montreal, an appointment was set up with the parish priest so that we could finalize the last details for my first Mass set for the evening of August 10, 1987. During the meeting, the parish priest, of Italian origin, asked me certain questions about my spiritual development, my educational background, my Community and my belonging to the Work. Then he said he wanted confirmation from me that my first Mass would be only a first Mass and not a ceremony of the Army of Mary, for he wanted to avoid, at all costs, any difficulties he might have with Archdiocesan authorities. I reassured him, saying that it would be simply a first Mass for my family and Italian friends (even if, in itself, there would be nothing reprehensible with celebrating a ceremony of the Work, quite the contrary).

On the morning of August 10, I received a telephone call from one of the assistant pastors, always with regard to the Mass set for that evening. He told me that there seemed to be a problem with my celebrating Mass in the parish, that is to say, my belonging to the Army of Mary. I reassured him also, confirming that it would be simply the celebration of the day's Mass in honor of Saint Lawrence, deacon and martyr. This clarification having been given, the curate in turn confirmed that there would be no problem in my presiding over the Eucharistic celebration that evening.

Shortly before the appointed hour and as it had been agreed, I went to the sacristy in order to prepare for Mass. Suddenly, a priest of a certain age, a Francophone, came up to me and said point blank: "You cannot preside the Mass this evening; I am the one who will preside." Calmly, I told him that there had probably been a misunderstanding, for arrangements had been made in the preceding days so that I could preside over my first Mass in this parish. The priest repeated that I could not preside but that I could nevertheless concelebrate. So I said to him: "As far as I am concerned there is no problem in the fact that I do not preside over this Mass, but there are between 550 and 600 people presently sitting in the church, who have come especially to partici-

pate in my first Mass. All you have to do is explain the situation to them yourself." Somewhat embarrassed over the situation he had put himself in and which risked arousing rather sharp reactions on the part of certain lay people, the priest told me that I really could preside over the celebration with no problem. Then, he asked me if he could concelebrate with me, and I was pleased to agree to this.

Once the Mass was over, this same priest came up to me again in the sacristy to talk to me, probably surprised and touched by such a large gathering, that was both simple and prayerful. He said to me: "If I had known there would be so many people for a weekday Mass... We should have been informed of this in advance. This way, we could have organized the celebration of the Mass on Sunday instead of on a weekday evening." As for me, I simply specified that the intention had only been to celebrate a simple Mass, in order to give my relatives, friends and acquaintances an opportunity to participate in it without disturbing the parish's normal activities.

Before we left each other, the priest, visibly moved and calmer, shook my hand as a sign of fraternal and priestly friendship, and wished me a happy and fruitful ministry. I thanked him and in turn wished him a fruitful and holy ministry.

Whatever the deep motivations of or whoever the original actors were in this intervention which was as little justified as it was edifying, the fact remains that this little story, among so many others, is part of a story which is much greater and more important, that of a Work of God and of a "Handmaid" that are the real stakes in a battle which has been going on for so many years, but without which this first Mass and the thousands of others that followed would never have been celebrated.

One day, while I was still a deacon in Rome, Father Lionel Mélançon, on a visit to the Generalate House of the Passionist Fathers, said to me: "Even if you become a priest and celebrate only one single Mass in your life, it will all have been worth it." I still thank him today for having shared with me a bit of the ardent zeal of his priesthood, this flame that finds its source in the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who wishes to enkindle the entire universe, and which never dies out. May this same fire of love which also burned in the heart of the deacon Saint Lawrence and which gave him the strength to deliver his whole body to the supreme witness of martyrdom obtain for us all the grace of perseverance, fidelity and sanctity.

Father Pierre Mastropietro, O.F.F.M.