

1983

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Recommended Citation

McClain, Joseph P. C.M. (1983) "A Legend...," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol4/iss1/3>

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A Legend

Joseph P. McClain, C.M.

Father Slattery almost never, at least in my experience of him, spoke of himself. Certainly he guarded as secret his life with God. To write of him is difficult, for observation, no matter how close, and recollection, however accurate, cannot supply the dimension which could come only from himself. Moreover, he is one who became a legend in his lifetime. The influence of the legend is pervasive. And legend, even as it transmits history, both enhances and distorts it with the interpretations of the narrator. This account of Father Slattery's years in Germantown after his return from Rome will seek to avoid interpretations.

I first came to know Father Slattery in the period of 1942-44, when he was Provincial and I a novice. Novices observed his prayerfulness, his abstemiousness at table, his mild and modest deportment and, when occasionally they had the opportunity to be associated with him more closely, even a subtle sense of humor. But, if experience of him was limited, curiosity about him was not. And this was nourished by stories from older confreres. Even then the legend seemed to be operative. The stories portrayed him as everything from a fantastic catcher in a ball game to a saint who practiced heroic mortifications. I cannot speak for the reliability of such recollections. I can only record that the novices experienced him as different from other confreres, were curious about him and eagerly believed the

stories supplied by those who seemed to know him better.

My first sustained association with him was in the fall of 1967, when I spent several months in Rome as a member of a commission preparing for the General Assembly of 1968-69. I visited him regularly and came to know him as a good source of information about what was going on in the Province. Sometimes I was surprised at how freely he spoke and I know there were occasions when he provided information to which I would not have been party had I been at home.

For those present in the meeting of the General Assembly on the morning of September 18, 1969, whatever other recollections they may have of Father Slattery, the dominating one will likely be this occasion. It was then that he sought the Assembly's assistance in discerning the Will of God for him. His question to the Assembly was this: "Should I present my resignation from the office of Superior General at this first session, or at the second, or not at all?" The Assembly's response to this question is known to us all.

But it was not the unprecedented event, but the manner in which Father Slattery departed himself, that makes the occasion memorable. He accepted the advice of the Assembly with incredible equanimity. With great simplicity he spoke to the delegates:

"I thank the Assembly for its advice, in which I see an expression of the will of God.

I wish to take this occasion to thank you here present and all the Congregation for your cooperation during my generalate. In particular I wish to thank our Assistants General, past and present, our Secretary General, our Econome General, and every member of the Curia Generalitia for their tireless and precious cooperation. Much of the good accomplished is due to their devoted help.

If during my generalate I have given offense to anyone, I ask pardon.

I thank the Congregation for its patience with me during my generalate.

I would like to apply to myself the words which St. Vincent placed at the end of the Rules: 'Firmiter nobis persuadendum est, quod, juxta verba Christi, cum fecerimus omnia praecepta sunt nobis, dicere debemus: nos servos inutiles esse: quod debuimus facerem fecisse, immo, sine illo, nihil facere potuisse.' "

The scene was a profoundly moving one. If you had witnessed it, surely you would agree with the observation of the editor of the *Newsletter of the Extraordinary General Assembly*:

The chronicler is only trying to give a bare recital of what happened, without comments of his own, which are uncalled for. But at this point he feels he must record the emotionally-charged atmosphere of the Assembly on this historic occasion and to confess unashamedly that Father General's speech and whole bearing brought tears to the eyes of many of those present, as evidence of a living example of sanctity.

Although the first session of the Assembly concluded on October 5th, Father Slattery did not return to the States until November. On November 5th he sailed from Naples aboard the *Michaelangelo*, accompanied by Father Guieseppe Tomaselli, who had been a translator at the Assembly and was returning to Baltimore. When the ship arrived in New York on November 12th, because of a severe storm, it was unable to dock. The confreres and Daughters of Charity who were on hand to welcome him home had to return the next day to greet him as he disembarked. He returned directly to St. Vincent's Seminary in Germantown, where the confreres from the

houses around Philadelphia had a reception for him that evening. He had first come to Germantown in 1909 as a student in Gently. Except for the period of his graduate study in Rome, the years in the generalate or as Superior General, and one year during his provincialate when he had lived at St. Vincent's Rectory, the seminary had been the only house in which he had been stationed.

It was August 1972 when I came to St. Vincent's, and, from then until the end of 1981, I was in almost daily association with him. Even prior to this, however, on occasional but regular visits to Germantown, I had observed that he lived among us as though he was the least of us. Certainly he never sought, and seldom was he afforded, any treatment which distinguished him as a former Superior General. Within a brief period after his arrival home, he had established a pattern of activity and an order of day from which he seldom deviated until the final year of his life. One could almost tell the time of day by where he was or what he was doing.

His day began early and, as his infirmities made him increasingly less agile, even earlier. Dressing was for him a painful task and required considerable time. It was also his practice to make his bed before leaving his room. Nevertheless he was usually the first to arrive in the chapel for morning prayer.

As others arrived they saw him, magnifying glass in one hand and his breviary in the other, reciting morning prayer. This was a familiar sight, for it was repeated again at evening prayer. Usually he prayed the Office of Readings after breakfast, so it could be seen then also. Although he was assured time and again that he was dispensed from reading the breviary, it was a dispensation of which he did not avail himself. Even when his sight had so deteriorated that most acts which required reading had been abandoned, even when reading had become acutely

painful, he retained the practice of praying the entire office.

The only day that you did not see him at morning prayer with the Community was Monday. He regularly heard confessions at the Miraculous Medal Novena services in the Shrine Chapel on that morning, beginning at 6:45. This was his practice into the final year of his life. He had a regular clientele of penitents. Possibly some of these were among the persons he would occasionally meet with in the parlor.

Immediately after morning prayer he celebrated the Eucharist. In the first years after his return he did this on the altar in the Miraculous Medal Shrine. When the walk to that Chapel became too taxing for him, he began the practice of celebrating in Perboyre Chapel. Often on Sundays he would be assigned to celebrate the Eucharist in the tribune for the infirm confreres and their nurses. Seldom did he concelebrate, and even these instances were limited to the early years after his return. At Mass, as when reading the breviary, he customarily employed a magnifying glass, at least for the variable portions of the Mass. The impairment of vision which made it difficult for him to stay abreast of a group while reading appears to have been the reason why he stole the march on the Community at morning and evening prayer and why he seldom concelebrated. I recall that on several occasions when he did concelebrate a large-print text was provided for him.

Even when he was bent over at an alarming angle and could only shuffle along, he continued to kneel during most periods of prayer. In the last years, however, he sometimes sat. Yes, there were occasions when he might nod. To the end, when he genuflected his right knee always touched the floor. No matter how severe his pain, this was his unflinching practice. In chapel I was almost directly

across from him and often noticed that he remained totally motionless during prayer, that even the expression on his face never changed.

Although Father Slattery seldom initiated a conversation, it was easy to engage him in one. Then one discovered that he was surprisingly well informed and a charming conversationalist. His chief interests remained those to which he had devoted his life, the Congregation and the Daughters. His recollection of persons with whom he had been associated, houses he had visited, and events in which he had participated was best demonstrated when confreres from other Provinces visited him. At times he would remark that details escaped his memory. Surely some did. But the marvel and the blessing was how keen his memory remained.

All his conversation, however, was not reminiscence. Usually he watched the evening news on television. Probably it is more accurate to say that he heard the news, for it is doubtful that he saw much. He also scanned the daily paper, again with magnifying glass in hand. Though this was only a matter of a few minutes, he sometimes noticed items which others had overlooked. Undoubtedly he formed opinions, but these were not disclosed. He had a knack for talking about a question without manifesting his personal opinion. The nearest I recall his coming to this was during the Watergate era when he characterized one or another of its disclosures as "incredible." But even this remark was not without ambiguity. Which was incredible, the disclosure or the media reaction to it?

United States citizenship must have meant much to Father Slattery. I presume that it is generally known that after he was elected Superior General, for whatever reason, he reluctantly became a French citizen. Within days after his resignation from that office he spoke with Father James Collins about his desire to reassume his citizenship.

When he returned to the States, Father Collins immediately began negotiations to accomplish this. Father Mark Mullin's brother-in-law, Jimmy Byrne, who was a Representative in Congress, approached the State Department about the matter. When the circumstances under which Father Slattery had renounced American citizenship were explained there, that Department's decision was that he had never lost it. The American embassy in Rome was informed of this decision and ordered immediately to issue a passport to him. And so he returned to the States as one of its citizens. Father Slattery was always exact about voting, even in dull primary elections. Perhaps this was one way in which he expressed his appreciation of the citizenship he had never wanted to renounce.

If you ever received a letter from Father Slattery, probably you remarked that his handwriting was large, firm and most readable. By the final three years of his life it had deteriorated considerably and, at the end, was almost illegible. By then the considerable correspondence he had conducted had all but ceased. No wonder! Writing had become a task that required considerable dexterity. He would write, magnifying glass in one hand and pen in the other. The glass was employed, not to read what he had written, but to guide his hand as he wrote. Shortly before I left Germantown I had occasion to consult with him about a piece of correspondence to which he had not responded. He produced a partially completed letter. The lines were running together, the writing was almost illegible.

For years, however, he had endeavored faithfully to reply to the letters and greetings he received. All responses were handwritten. It must have been no small penance to stay abreast of correspondence. I am not sure he was successful in the effort. In his room one would see bundles of letters, neatly tied together, the date of receipt neatly written on the envelope. It was always my presumption

that these were letters to which he had not yet responded.

There have been a number of references to his progressively failing eyesight. At times he also experienced considerable pain in his eyes. Over an extended period he had to have drops placed in his eyes several times a day. Though he was not always exact in following doctor's advice, in this he was most faithful. Sometimes I regarded this fidelity as an index to the severity of the pain he experienced. Among the omissions were elastic stockings he wore for only a few days, a brace he admitted to wearing but leaving unlaced, hot packs that were prescribed but applied for only a brief period. The common denominator in these omissions is that they required the expenditure of someone's time to assist him. In the period when these things had been prescribed he was not in the infirmary. Though it would only have required that a confrere rise a bit earlier to assist him, he did not want this. Neither did he want a nurse from the infirmary to leave a post where others might be seeking her help.

One had to be ingenious or lucky to assist Father Slattery. Assurances that you were prepared to assist him with correspondence or to drive him on an errand were never called for redemption. One had to come upon him in the moment when such assistance was appropriate. Philadelphia provides some miserably hot, humid days in summer. It was on such an afternoon that I spied him passing my door, hat in hand and obviously on an errand. I insisted on driving him and this insistence prevailed. He had two small checks to deposit in the bank and, as he explained, he did not want to confuse someone's records by holding these too long. It took no more than half an hour of my time, but his expression of gratitude for this small service was almost embarrassingly profuse. If I had not noticed him, he would have taken the bus. Only in the

last several years of his life, when getting on and off buses was an impossibility, did he stop using public transportation.

One felt concern about this frail, old man moving about alone in an area of the city not noted for safety. He was so stooped that he could no longer see directly in front of him, at least not for any distance. On one occasion some boys snatched his hat from his head. They were about to run off with it, when he looked at them and mildly asked that they return it. They did. It was about this time, possibly because of this incident, that he stopped going out alone on errands. You felt a sense of relief that he had come to this decision.

Occasionally he experienced spells of weakness in the earlier hours of the day. The instances I witnessed all occurred during morning prayer. You would see him get up to leave and, if you looked more closely, you noticed that his color, not high at any time, was ashen. Several times a nurse was summoned from the infirmary and a wheel chair fetched. I felt that he regarded that wheel chair as St. Vincent had regarded his carriage: it was his disgrace. On such days he might interrupt his accustomed schedule for a few hours, but it was rare that he was not back to it by lunch time.

He never discussed his infirmities. If you encountered him in the hall and asked how he was feeling, he invariably responded "pretty good." And even on a day which was manifestly a bad one for him the answer would be "not bad." If you really wanted to know how things stood, you had to go to his room to speak with him. Possibly he regarded such visits as occasions when he had an obligation to be explicit. Then you might discover that the pain he experienced was intense and unrelenting, that there were nights when, unable to sleep because of pain, he spent most of the night in his chair.

It was a rheumatic condition which was the cause of this pain. Doctors described it as generalized osteoporosis and osteoarthritis. The latter was further specified as Marie Stumpell arthritis. This, so I understand, indicates the stoop, the hunching over in which the condition progressively resulted. This condition had manifested itself even before he returned to the States. Its progress, however, was steady and devastating. No cure was available. The most one could hope for was some lessening of the incessant pain.

On one occasion he visited the rheumatology clinic conducted at Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore by the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The day before this visit I suggested that the doctors might want him to remain in the hospital for a time and that it would be good for him to be prepared for this. I recall a desire to supervise what he would bring with him, for I suspected that his clothing might be in sorry condition. I set the desire aside with a thought something like this: "he lives as a poor man and why should I desire him to appear otherwise?" Though the Daughters did not conduct Good Samaritan, there were several of them on its nursing staff at that time. During his stay there, they and the confreres in Baltimore replaced most of the clothing he had brought. Another recollection of that visit is that, in pajamas, he weighed 112 pounds. Fully dressed, however, he had been 122. When I had assisted him in taking off his jacket, I mentioned to him that at least five pounds would have to be allowed for it, for each pocket contained some item he had brought with him.

That he weighed little was no surprise, of course, for he ate sparingly. Breakfast was his largest meal and invariably consisted of prunes, cereal, a roll and a cup of coffee. Seldom was lunch more than soup and a piece of bread and dinner was not much more substantial. Never

did I see him take dessert or eat between meals. At meals he was always cordial and, while not talkative, would join in conversation with those seated near him.

In the earlier years after his return he would occasionally, but rarely, accept invitations to visit other community houses in the vicinity, if another confrere had business there and invited him to accompany him. All in all, however, he appeared to evade rather than to seek opportunities to go out. An exception to this would be the wake or funeral of a confrere's parents, provided this was in the Philadelphia area. The last occasion when I recall his doing this was the funeral of Father Hugh O'Donnell's and Sister Columba's father.

What recreation he took was confined to periods of common recreation. For the greater part the observance of this must have been a matter of rule rather than enjoyment. In the period after lunch he would sometimes be the only one present. And the evening period of recreation at St. Vincent's, as in many houses, has become reduced to watching the evening news on television. Unless someone engaged him in conversation in these periods, his presence was a silent one. He also attended all other scheduled gatherings of the Community. At these, if another took the initiative toward him, he would be an active participant.

Father Slattery was a man of few possessions. Except for the bundles of letters already referred to, a few books and a statue of Our Lady, his room was bare. He seemed to regard himself as the steward of any money he possessed and it flowed freely through his hands to those in need. Others were more mindful than he of his clothing and often it was their foresight which anticipated his needs.

In July 1981 he experienced a severe spell of weakness during morning prayer. This time the doctor sent him to the infirmary with orders that he remain in bed. Though

the bed order was rescinded within about a week, he remained in the infirmary until the beginning of October. St. Catherine's, the new infirmary, is an air-conditioned building and there was something of a conspiracy to extend his stay there until the heat of the summer had passed. He was cared for well. Yes, even better nourished, for he obediently ate what was served to him. My hope had been that the conspiracy would continue indefinitely. Perhaps there was even annoyance that the doctor had acceded to his assurances that he could care for himself.

The illness of the summer had made a pronounced difference. His step was slower. The stoop was so pronounced that he had to turn his head to the side to speak with you. And now it created a new problem, pulmonary complications. It also seemed that often he was recognizing people, not by seeing them, but by identifying their voices. When I said good-bye to him at the end of December, knowing that it would be seven months before I could see him again, it was my belief that the good-bye was a final one.

When I returned to Philadelphia toward the end of July, I visited him in the hospital. My impression was that he had already said goodbye to life and was awaiting the summons of the Lord to come home. He had not long to wait.

St. Vincent teaches us that simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal for souls should be the characteristic virtues of his spiritual sons. Father Slattery embodied these thoroughly and in a consistent manner. And he enhanced them with a graciousness and geniality which made them humanly credible.

