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The Early Years

Frederick J. Easterly, C.M.

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will”

Hamlet, Act V, Scene 2

When Shakespeare wrote these words he had Hamlet give expression to a principle which has a deeper and truer spiritual significance than is ordinarily recognized in every day life. Thousands of years before, the writer of the Book of Proverbs expressed it in this way:

Like a stream is man’s heart in the hand of the Lord;
wherever it pleases him he directs it. All the ways of a man
may be right in his own eyes, but it is the Lord who proves
hearts.

Proverbs 21:1

The author of Sirach puts it well when he writes:

Like clay in the hands of the potter, to be molded
according to his pleasure, so are men in the hands of their
Creator to be assigned by Him their functions.

Sirach 23:13

The masters of the spiritual life — and among them must be included St. Vincent de Paul — have described God’s providence as a sure and undeniable plan by which God, as the Supreme Ruler of the universe, regulates the lives of His creatures, directing all things to their proper and ultimate end, in order that the Will of God finds its fulfillment in all of man’s actions.

In reviewing the life of the Very Reverend William M. Slattery, C.M., many spiritual principles are recognizable. But one stands out prominently above all others. His life was dominated by Divine Providence as he sought to know the Will of God in every action of his life; and having ascertained the Divine Will, then living in accordance with it according as human frailty would allow.

From his earliest years, this Divine Providence touched the life of William Slattery. It directed him along a path that was marked by many Vincentian touch-stones, all of which made a profound influence upon his life, showing the simple, humble, and yet profound life of St. Vincent de Paul, which in turn was modeled on that of Jesus Christ.

The first Vincentian influence on the life of Willie (the name by which he was known to his family and close friends) Slattery came through his mother's sister who became a Daughter of Charity. Sister Rose (Agnes Elizabeth Smith) entered the Company of St. Vincent during the year following the birth of William Slattery. Over the years of Sister Rose's services to God's poor at St. Rose's Technical School for Girls in Washington, D.C., at St. Joseph's School and Asylum in Richmond, Virginia, and at St. Vincent's Asylum in Albany, New York, accounts of her activities on behalf of the orphaned and abandoned girls delighted the Slattery family back in Baltimore, who recognized in her the spirit of St. Vincent as he lived it in the 17th century.

This inspirational Vincentian attitude was further enhanced by Willie Slattery's uncle (his father's brother), who entered the Congregation of the Mission in 1897 as a lay brother. Brother Thomas (John T. Slattery) pronounced his vows on November 27, 1899 at the Motherhouse in Germantown, Philadelphia, where he remained for more than twenty-five years, serving the

needs of the Confreres, at the same time that he was a spiritual inspiration to priests, brothers and seminarians alike. On frequent occasions Father Slattery referred to Brother Thomas, whom he admired greatly, as "a very holy man." There are many who have said that Brother Thomas and Father Slattery were cast in the same mold. Both were very holy men.

Another Slattery family association with the Vincentians was the entrance into the Congregation of the Mission of Thomas G. Devereaux who pronounced his vows on June 1, 1917 and was ordained a priest on August 15, 1921, just two years after his cousin William's ordination.

All of these influences made of William Slattery the truly Vincentian priest that he was during the sixty-seven years of his Community life.

William M. Slattery was born on May 7, 1895, in the Vincentian parish of the Immaculate Conception in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the only child of Timothy and Catherine (Smith) Slattery. His early schooling was under the tutelage of the Daughters of Charity and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He felt a lasting obligation to the Daughters of Charity for his early education and endeavored to repay that obligation to these Sisters in his later positions as Vincentian Provincial and, more especially, as the Superior General of the Double Family of St. Vincent. As the Superior of the Motherhouse in Philadelphia and as Provincial he strove earnestly to repay the Christian Brothers in Philadelphia and Baltimore whenever the opportunity presented itself.

In September 1910, William entered St. Vincent's Apostolic School in Germantown, the first phase of his preparation towards the Priesthood. Three years later, on June 10, 1913, he entered the Novitiate of the Congregation, under the direction of the Rev. William F.

Likly, C.M., his Master of Novices. He pronounced his vows on June 11, 1915, a day on which he dedicated his life to Christ by the practice of Poverty — living a life style in which “nothing should be detected . . . which connotes the slightest intimation of ownership;” Chastity — “preserving this virtue unblemished in body as well as soul . . .;” Obedience — sacrificing his will to the providential Will of God so that he “shall strictly obey each and every one of his superiors and regard their authority as God-given;” and, finally, Stability — the promise to work for the salvation of the poor “during the whole time of his life in the Congregation.” It was his day of total dedication of himself to God.

This phase of his preparation also included four years of theological studies at St. Vincent’s Seminary, culminating in his ordination to the Priesthood on June 8, 1919. Along with thirteen Confreres, he was ordained by Dennis Cardinal Dougherty, D.D., Archbishop of Philadelphia, in the Chapel of St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, Philadelphia. His ordination was by way of a dispensation because of age, being slightly under the age required by Canon Law for ordination to the Priesthood. The matter of age was one which was evident on other occasions in the future. His assignment to various positions in the Community were occasioned by his sanctity and piety rather than age.

Following his ordination, Father Slattery was sent to Rome for graduate study at the Collegio Angelico, along with three of his classmates. The original assignment was to obtain dual doctorates in Philosophy and Theology. At the end of the first year he was awarded the Ph.L. degree in philosophy but was advised by the authorities at the Angelico to concentrate on a single doctorate. After approval by his Provincial, Father Frederick J. Maune, C.M., and with the usual acceptance of Providence, he

pursued the program in theology, receiving the S.T.D. degree in Spring of 1921.

The second phase of his career began with his first priestly assignment in the Province as the Master of Novices, an indication of the esteem in which his Superiors held him since he was still a very young Confrere, only twenty-six years of age and only two years in the Priesthood. But their confidence in him was not unfounded during the six years that he served as the spiritual director to the aspirants to the Congregation in the Eastern Province. So successful was his direction of the Novitiate that in September 1927 he was appointed Superior of the Motherhouse of the Province, a position which in previous years was usually reserved for older Confreres with wider experience in the work and traditions of the Community. Again, a spirit of sanctity and pious devotion superceded both age and experience.

The responsibilities which fell to Father Slattery as Superior of the Motherhouse included the Rectorship of St. Vincent's Seminary, embracing both the theologate and the Novitiate; he supervised the work of the Mission Band, provided spiritual services of the Confreres as chaplains and confessors to nearby convents and religious houses, and parochial assistance to parishes in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, as well as caring for the sick and aging and the semi-retired Confreres living at the Motherhouse. It was a task which he seemed to enjoy because it was a means of being of service to others.

The year 1932 marked the beginning of Father Slattery's term of office as Visitor or Provincial Superior of the Eastern Province of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States. The appointment was made by the Very Reverend Francois Verdier, C.M. (1918-1933), then serving in Paris his fourteenth year as the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of

Charity. The assignment was received by Father Slattery with perfect equanimity, seeing it as the Divine Will despite his tender years (he was then thirty-seven years old) for such a heavy responsibility.

During his years as Provincial, Father Slattery's dependence on Divine Providence was evident on various occasions. An incident worthy of note was that on those days when the Novices enjoyed a "free" day he would use their services as typists, enabling him to keep abreast with routine correspondence. When the Novice would report to his office, it was not uncommon to find him in the Tribune Chapel opening his mail in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This was not an empty gesture; it was his way of seeking Divine guidance as he sought the answers to problems or decisions he was called upon to make, many of which would be contained in his daily mail. He walked and worked in the path of Providence.

For the next fourteen years (1932-1946), Father Slattery served in the capacity of the Major Superior in the Province during a most difficult period. The 1930s saw the worst economic Depression ever witnessed in the United States. And that Depression was never resolved — it was merely succeeded by the outbreak of World War II in Europe in September 1939 and the entrance of the United States in that war in December 1941.

The poverty and unemployment that resulted from the Depression became a great concern to Father Slattery. His immediate attention was directed toward matters directly related to activities within the Province. However, these were intimately associated with conditions visible everywhere throughout the country, especially in those areas where the Vincentians served in parishes, schools and institutions; in the home missions in parishes and the foreign missions in China and Panama where the effects of the economic situation were deeply felt. Out of a truly

Vincentian devotion to the spiritually and materially poor, Father set about initiating a program to advance the various apostolates in which the Confreres were engaged, despite the hard times.

During the early years of his Provincialate, one of the most important activities was his concern for the expansion and development of programs for the education of young men for the Priesthood, a concern which he accepted as a cherished heritage from St. Vincent. The seminary in Germantown had long ago outgrown the facilities available at the Motherhouse. The building had been constructed in various stages dating back to the coming of the Provincial headquarters and the Seminary to Philadelphia from St. Louis in 1867; the most recent addition had been built shortly after the turn of the century. With the assistance and cooperation of Father Joseph A. Skelly, C.M., the Provincial Procurator, Father Slattery purchased a large tract of land at Northampton, Pennsylvania, in the Lehigh Valley, where he built and established the Seminary of Mary Immaculate, which replaced the former St. Vincent's Seminary in Philadelphia in 1939.

During the same period of the 1930s, he authorized the construction of the Queen of the Miraculous Medal Chapel at St. Joseph's College, Princeton, New Jersey. This beautiful structure, regarded by many as one of the finest examples of English Gothic architecture in the United States, replaced the small one-room chapel in the original building at St. Joseph's which was built in 1914—again the former chapel was inadequate physically, but more particularly it did not allow for the fullness and the beauty of liturgical celebrations which one would expect at an institution preparing students who were to serve subsequently as ministers at the altar of God.

Father Slattery looked upon these two seminary

projects as necessary procedures. But he also regarded them as opportunities to provide employment and a livelihood for many hundreds of workmen at a time when jobs were unavailable in other areas of the economy. He looked upon these projects as God-given means of meeting the needs — at least temporarily — of the poor of that troubled period. But he also regarded them as an enhancement of the spiritual formation of the seminarians, giving them a more exalted appreciation of the high calling for which they were preparing.

In the area of Seminary Formation, he authorized a re-organization of the scholastic program at St. Joseph's College and also that of Our Lady of the Angels Seminary, a unit of Niagara University, where improvements were introduced in the educational and administrative operation of both institutions.

Regarding the area of higher education, Father Slattery was responsible for the purchase of more than one hundred acres of land in Jamaica, New York, for the new campus of St. John's University, which was then located in Brooklyn. This was achieved in cooperation with Father Edward J. Walsh, C.M., the President of St. John's, and Father Thomas J. McCallen, C.M., the Treasurer of the University. At Niagara University he worked effectively with Father Joseph M. Noonan, C.M., President of the University, to provide a physical development which resulted in improved courses of studies for the increasing student enrollment. He accomplished this work despite the fact that it occurred during the time, as mentioned above, of an economic depression and the beginning of World War II. His purpose was to provide opportunities for development of Catholic leadership to young people who might otherwise have been deprived of a Christian education.

Father Slattery's personal devotion to the Mother of

God was reflected in the encouragement which he gave to Father Joseph A. Skelly, C.M., Director of the Central Association of the Miraculous Medal in the spread of the devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. This was accomplished by the introduction of the Miraculous Medal Novena, in December 1930, which grew quickly to a nation-wide devotion springing from the Perpetual Novena at Mary's Shrine in Germantown, a devotion which continues to the present time with ten services celebrated every Monday throughout the year. It is now going into its fifty-third year. From the time of his retirement from the office of Superior General to the end of his life, Father Slattery attended the novena faithfully every Monday. The novena was further aided when Father Slattery appointed Father George I. Frey, C.M., as the Director of a Novena Band, composed of Confreres of the Province, who travelled to all parts of the United States preaching this devotion to Mary. The success of the spread of this devotion greatly gladdened the heart of Father Slattery as he received reports of people everywhere turning to Mary, the Mother of God.

He also, during his term of office, expanded the mission of the Eastern Province in China (which he visited once) and in Panama (which he visited several times), as well as in the southern part of the United States in Alabama and North Carolina. His tenure in office as Provincial was indeed a most notable one.

The Very Reverend Charles L. Souvay, C.M., Superior General of the Congregation, died on December 18, 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II in Europe. It was not possible to convene a General Assembly to elect a new Superior General, so Father Edouard Robert, C.M., the Vicar General, headed the Community until an election could be conducted.⁵ At the termination of the war, Father Robert called Father Slattery to Paris to serve temporarily