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MOTHER MARY VIRGINIA COLEMAN, R.S.C.J.

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Maritain, in his controversial new book, *Le Paysan de la Garonne*, remarks that we did not have to wait for the atomic age to discover what extraordinary power could be packed in a very small space; the saints, he says, always knew it. But there are saints and Saints. Newton has just lost one of the small letter saints, who will probably never be a capital letter one, but Mother Coleman, a very small — though round — person, also knew what force can be stored up in and projected from a life of humdrum duties, minor frustrations, quiet religious fidelity, hidden suffering, and much love. She came to religious life rather later than most nuns do, and never, I suspect, felt the slightest inclination to look on the other side of the "wall" for the freedom she had happily given up after just as happily exercising it for a long time. You could not ever talk to her, even during her long and painful illness, and carry away the impression that she had missed fulfillment or felt unloved. Probably no one on Newton's campus — certainly no one for so long or so effervescently — poured out so much affection on others. She was so absorbed in loving and serving others that she attracted love like a magnet, and though she had her moments of impatience and irritation, they were quite swallowed up in the flood of her ingenious giving.

The college's #1 Southern gentlewoman, she came of a family who had been in Virginia since the end of the seventeenth century. We have all the details of her ancestry, not because she was proud of it (she certainly never talked about it), but because, as an excellently trained librarian, she had a profound respect for facts and felt they should be on record, with full documentation. So we know just how many acres the Ruckers and Coghills owned in Albemarle County, and east of Tobacco Row Mountains, and how Colonel Ambrose Rucker built the first Episcopal church in the area, on the property where Sweet Briar College now stands. We also know how her Rucker grandfather, in Amherst County, sent wagon trains from Lynchburg with blankets, calico, shoes, sugar, and coffee to Kanawha Valley in Kentucky and got them back loaded with pink root and snake root salt (whatever *they* were), and with other commodities, including feathers.

It was in Lynchburg that she herself was born, and she remembered visiting granduncles who lived in a candle-lit house, and who kept their money in a hair trunk because they distrusted banks. It is again, no doubt, her librarian's instinct which makes her recall that she sometimes found five-dollar bills used as markers in their books; and her librarian's sad experience that makes her comment with mild acerbity that she "imagined there were borrowers who enjoyed using their library." These uncles were on the Rucker side. Her Coleman grandfather was a school teacher. Her parents on both sides were religious people, taught Sunday school in the

Baptist Church, and went to prayer meeting on Wednesday. Her mother sang in the choir; her father, though not a clergyman, sometimes "gave very good sermons," when the local minister needed a substitute. The Coleman children preferred that in these discourses he keep out of the field of sociology and "stick to the plagues of Egypt or even the begot's in the Bible." It was an aunt, who attended a Methodist church (whether out of conviction or because of geographical convenience it is not clear), who first taught Mary Virginia that "God was a God of immense love," and astounded her with the information that He could also count the hairs on her head. At a slightly later age, she learned Old and New Testament stories from "some kind of kit, which could be opened and set up, with a turn key," and which "unrolled scenes" from both Testaments. She notes, looking back, that the art was poor but the doctrine good.

Her own Baptism occurred when she was eight. A revival meeting had been given at her church, and she responded — resolute at even so tender an age — to the preacher's "call" after one of his sermons. He was a thorough man, however, and did not accept his neophyte without putting her through a grilling on the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, original sin, heaven and hell, and other related dogmas. It is characteristic of her interest in sartorial detail that she remembered the "white chemise-like garments" which the little girls donned for their baptismal immersion in "a body of water under the pulpit," from which the flooring was "lifted piece by piece" for the ceremony. Even more characteristic of her humility is her admission that she was very much aware of the watching congregation, and grateful that she managed to be submerged "quietly, without making any noise." It was the way she came to do most things. She was equally humble in admitting that none of her family had especially melodious voices, and that, when she persisted in singing "My Old Kentucky Home" over and over, she once "heard a strong male voice from outer space yell: Sing *one* song of your old Kentucky home and SHUT UP." This, however, must indicate a particularly sensitive ear in her unseen critic, for she always loved singing, and sang whenever she could, without disturbing her fellow choristers, just as she loved listening to music.

Doctrinal and liturgical differences between faiths interested her keenly, and she reports how the Baptist Eucharist, which was only a "commemoration," was celebrated with plates of "white bread cubes on silver trays," and "large circular silver containers of tiny individual glasses of grape juice — not wine."

Her official schooling began in a specially set up group of six arranged by her parents because the public school was too far away. Two of the fortunate scholars were boys, four girls — so inaugurating Mother Coleman's always benevolent interest in the proper meeting of the sexes. She had probably gone on to public school when she undertook, at the age of ten, her first apostolic enterprise. "I thought," she says, " it was my Christian duty to reform" those who seemed to her to be "not living beautiful Christian lives." Preferring the indirect method, she "wrote anonymous letters correcting their evil habits of gambling, heavy drinking and the excessive use of swear words." Close observation of her selected

sinners showed no change for the better, and she admits she was "deeply disappointed that they did not heed my noble injunctions to reform their ignoble lives." Abandoning this unproductive effort, she decided to aim at eventual foreign missions, meanwhile going in for good works like reading to a blind woman. She began with Genesis and Exodus but notes that her mother stepped in just in time to persuade her *not* to go on to Leviticus and Numbers. Other miscellaneous good works included raiding the family larder to carry gifts of fruit to the sick — a custom on which her mother again had to set her right.

In doctrinal matters, she began early to broaden her Baptist mind, accompanying an Episcopalian friend to Sunday School because the class met at a different hour from her own. Devotion to Our Lady and the practice of Lenten sacrifice were two new revelations vouchsafed is this ecumenical study. She did not consider switching her allegiance, however, since "I was still having a lot of fun among the Baptists": bazaars, fairs, cake walks, hayrides, picnics. Straying again, she presently began attending Methodist services, conducted by the clergyman father of a high school friend, but this was only for the "orchestra and singing."

Her high school career was interrupted because, by her own account, she was continually getting her report cards mixed up with those of another student by the same name. This inspired her to change to a Business College, which turned her into a good typist and sent her on to a variety of commercial jobs until, tired of the novelty, she went back to high school. Still thinking of the foreign missions, she consulted her Baptist pastor on the choice of a college. He chose Intermont College in Bristol, on the border between Virginia and Tennessee. Here, oddly enough, she had her first encounter with Roman Catholicism, for she was appointed chaperone to two Mexican students when they went to Mass. Her ever active mind could elicit no answers to doctrinal questions from her ill-instructed charges, but the questions persisted.

"As there was no special call to go on the foreign missions" when she finished at Intermont after two years, she took up teaching, but was presently persuaded by a friend to go on for two further years of college at George Washington University, electing courses in Library Science by the way; and so she was launched on her life work. In Washington, D.C., jobs at the Library of Congress and in the public library followed rapidly, while she pursued an active social and cultural life in her spare time. She also pursued her eclectic church-visiting habits, remaining a Baptist (though a Northern one now) but going to a Presbyterian Church nearby because she enjoyed the sermons. Whenever she and the girl who shared her flat "saw other sermons listed" that seemed "more interesting, we did not hesitate to investigate." Strangely enough, it was not in church but at work that she again made contact with Catholicism through library colleagues. This happened just when her unguided tour through Protestant theology had begun to cause her painful confusion, and after a shortlived engagement to a fervent Lutheran (who was studying to be an organist in his church) had been broken off.

Liturgists will be saddened to hear that a "perpetual novena" was the occasion of her conversion. A friend had given her a form to fill out suggesting intentions. With her customary forthrightness, she checked "conversion," and was told that a candle would be burned for her during nine days. This was in April, 1935. "During this time," she says, "I had no peace of mind." Before the nine days were past, she found herself calling at the Jesuit rectory, which was in her parish. The S.J. who responded had an R.S.C.J. sister. Within a year, she was a baptized Catholic, and she determined at once to give up the secular delights of the nation's capital and become a nun. Her S.J. instructor loyally directed her to the old Sacred Heart house on Massachusetts Avenue, where she was welcomed by that extraordinary woman, Reverend Mother Ruth Burnett, herself a Bostonian and a convert. Soon Miss Coleman was helping pour tea for the French Circle and doing odd chores in the convent library, as well as carrying on her official job at the public library, and taking evening courses in English at Catholic University. After two years more of this brisk schedule, which also included concerts, plays, and visits to art museums, she entered at Kenwood.

Of her early days there, a certain mythology survives. She had brought with her all the accessories of gracious living, and a vast amount of luggage. She herself enjoyed telling of the steps by which she became — very quickly — acquainted with notions of monastic austerity and insisted upon doing what everyone else did. As she continued that excellent practice for the rest of her life, there is little to distinguish her, in externals, from the nuns around her except her always marked individuality, and of that I shall speak only as I knew it. She began her "active" religious life in her favorite city, Washington, where she finished her degree at Catholic University. A few years at Grosse Pointe preceded her trip to Rome for her last months before final profession, which she made at the same time as Reverend Mother Tobin, now the American Assistant General of the Society. One piece of advice she later recalled, given by a priest during the months in Rome: "We must run after Christ and not look back." In the biblical sense of "looking back" to regret, she never did, although she was always willing to look back to count and recount her joys and graces. Among these were the pious excitements of little pilgrimages in Rome, where the lushness of the baroque did not in the least disconcert this erstwhile frequenter of sober Protestant places of worship, though she was shocked by the scrawls of tourists on the walls and pillars of St. Mary Major's. But all these good things: canonizations, beatifications, visit with Pius XII, were over at last, and she set off by train to cross Europe, was put off at the French border because of visa trouble, spent a sleepless night with her companions sitting on their suitcases, and another day straightening out their diplomatic difficulties, before setting off at 9:30 for Calais, where they boarded a Channel boat late the following day. No detail of all this, or of the two days in England, or of the trip home on the Queen Elizabeth, was lost on such a keen observer and scrupulous cataloguer.

Philadelphia welcomed her for a while, but in 1949 she received her last and longest obedience: Newton, first the academy, and then the college.

When I met her there in 1950, she had already lived through some of the early-Newton-legend. She had been house mother at a building on the academy grounds used as a college dormitory, and stories of this brief stay were legion. Her always eager interest in courtship, engagements, engagement rings, and holy matrimony brought on innocent student intrigues, such as the fabricating of quite non-existent romances, culminating in far from authentic diamond rings displayed proudly and disingenuously by heart-whole residents of the dormitory. But this sort of thing was by no means a sign of lack of respect. It took no time at all to discover that Mother Coleman was utterly devoted to her religious obligations, to her work, to her students, and completely forgetful of herself: and the spontaneous trust given her by students and faculty alike attested that they saw enough of this (but how little they or anyone could really see!) to be impressed and won over. In a way, her romantic tendency was intimately linked with, and almost the source of, her vivid faith and rugged courage, which — at first sight — seem such incongruous qualities for a romantic. I myself first had a glimpse of her romantic side on an occasion grimly typical of the minor catastrophes of pioneer years at the college. One day (it was in the pre-Mr. Murphy era) half the community (which then numbered exactly twelve) were stricken with food poisoning: a "light" case by medical standards, but bad enough, as someone put it, to make Mother Coleman afraid she was going to die and make me afraid that I wasn't. In the crowded conditions of the time, it was necessary for me and Mother Coleman to share a room as we rapidly convalesced. She beguiled the hours by reminiscing for me in detail about the two close escapes she had had from contracting marriage. The moral was not her own fatal charm but the mysterious luck (or Providence) that had preserved her for her religious vocation. She had the pleasant memories of the (now no longer) young men whose hearts she had temporarily bruised, but felt a wondering gratitude that she had not missed her real "call."

The library, when she came to Newton, was in Barat House, and — far less extensive that all Gual — was divided into only two parts. The first was what is still the tiny "reference library" on the first floor. The "main" part was on the floor below. What is now the large classroom was then the chapel, with the altar at the tunnel end. The upper level, where the two small seminar rooms have since been constructed, was an open space, and here the exiguous "collection" was housed. Shortly after her arrival, Mother Coleman supervised the moving of the books down the hill to what is now the Art Building, where she was given the whole first floor and the basement, though the two upper floors remained for some years a dormitory. Since there was no space left for a private room, she slept in the tiny workroom which had been the pantry, concealing her bed behind a door during the day. Once, on a day of social or other upheaval, the bed was removed, and she did not discover, until she was ready to occupy it, that it was not there. I have forgotten by what method she retrieved or replaced it. She must have been ready to sleep anywhere or on anything after her laborious days. The descent from the upper to the

lower level of the campus was not then so pleasantly graded as it is now. An almost perpendicular road, hacked out of the slope, precipitated one down. In winter even an experienced skier might have hesitated to face that slope, but Mother Coleman, day after day, climbed up it to Mass, down again for her morning's work, up again for lunch, down again for the afternoon, up again for dinner, down again for the evening. And she was never physically strong; she suffered severely from asthma; but with all this, she was the sunniest and most cheerful person on campus.

People were her passion. If she regretted that, like many librarians, she rarely saw deeper than the cover of the books, she made up for it by going to any length to find for others the books they needed. You hesitated to ask her for something, because you knew she would give herself no peace till she unearthed it for you. On the other hand, it was always a temptation to persuade her to make exceptions to library regulations because, reluctant though she might be, she found it almost impossible to say no. Most of those who came to the library merely to do business left it as friends — of the librarian and of the college. The devotion of her staff was proverbial.

I was not at Newton when she first learned of her illness, which took her away permanently from her library. That was last April, and when I returned in August she had already lived through a third of her last painful year, in which she demonstrated so simply that the stubborn courage that had kept her working was the basic quality in her. It had been less spectacularly shown in the routine of daily life. It was still concealed beneath a matter-of-factness that faced death as just another step in the spiritual search which had occupied her from her childhood. No one saw her now but the community, except when she made a brief appearance in her wheel chair at Mass, or in the parlor to see old friends or her beloved "staff" or an occasional student. She still wanted music, and she had time now to read the books she had looked yearningly at before. When I brought her the paperback series of C. S. Lewis's children's books, she went through them methodically, loving them, and returned them with a sheet of paper noting in what order they should be read. Her last musical joy was listening to Tony Newman's Art Week Bach concert over a carry call rigged up in her room. The next day she went to the hospital for the final, and this time losing, struggle.

Alumnae will remember her better than present students; but she deserves to be remembered. Everything in her was a protest against the softness and self-interest and conformism which are the college-age temptation; a protest also against the chip-on-the-shoulder aggressiveness which is an equal temptation. She was a seeker and a fighter, but she knew how much the seeking is within and how much the fighting is against oneself as well as against powers and principalities no matter how defined. She never asked that "attention be paid to her," and perhaps that is why so much of the right kind of attention *was* paid: the kind that consists of love and gratitude, and a feeling that it might be nice to be like her, and that you could be if you tried.

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