

Hope

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

“A vain hope for victory is the horse; despite its strength it cannot save.”¹

IN THE 1950S FATHER ROACH said an early Mass for the Sisters of Saint Joseph in their motherhouse on Wellesley Street. The seminarians from Saint Basil’s used to serve, and I remember feeling a little daring crossing Wellesley in my cassock. Father Roach was old and devout, and his voice would take on an additional tremor as he recited the prayers said after low Mass for the conversion of Russia: “Holy Michael Archangel, defend us the day of battle; be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil. . . .” The chapel, as big as a church, was filled by the community: novices, retired sisters, high school and college teachers, the generalate. There were many rows of communicants. As Father Roach and I moved along the rail I would wonder how the hosts stayed in the ciborium, almost horizontal in his trembling hand.

I made my religious profession on 15 August 1955. The ceremony was presided over by Father, later Cardinal Flahiff, at that time Superior General of the Basilian Fathers. The theme of his sermon that morning was the pious belief that religious profession was like a second baptism. He pictured us novices nineteen years before being presented for baptism in our mothers’ arms. Like baptism, so theologians opined, the vows could cancel the punishment due to sin, so that the newly professed began his religious life with a slate as clean as that of a newly baptized infant. Such was a topic of interest to Catholics fifty-five years ago. A year later Father Flahiff addressed us again. It was 14 June 1956, the feast of Saint Basil, and the entire Toronto Community of the Basilian Fathers had gathered to celebrate. In his remarks after the meal he complimented the scholastics, as we were called, who were students at St Michael’s College. It *had* been a fine academic performance. Most of us had obtained a “first,” i.e., an A-standing, and a few had stood first of firsts in their section. He expressed the optimism we all felt about the promise for the future represented by such a large number of intelligent young men preparing for the priesthood. The seminary and our scholasticates were full, and applications to join our community

¹ Psalm 32/33.17

were so numerous that special accommodation was being constructed to house them.

Saint Michael's was a remarkable place in the 1950s. Among the devoted lay members of the College the most famous was Marshall McLuhan, but others were equally committed to the academic and religious purposes of the institution. I remember in particular a young couple that came to the College a few years later. The husband was extraordinarily talented. His books and articles earned him an international reputation virtually overnight, and we anticipated in him some of the highest expectations we had of a new era in Catholicism. His wife too found time to begin graduate studies despite her obligations to their children. She and I were once the only two students in a class on the sacramental theology of Saint Augustine. Years of singing chant had given me fluency in pronouncing Latin, although my comprehension lagged far behind my tongue. She had the advantage of understanding what she more hesitatingly read. Eventually she completed her doctorate, already on the staff of Saint Michael's and, later, of the Toronto School of Theology. That she, with her common sense and deep Catholic faith, could become a feminist reassured those of us who were a little uneasy at some of the excesses associated with that new branch of theology.

The Saint Joseph motherhouse moved to Willowdale, to a giant of a building that has become too difficult for a diminished number of sisters to maintain. It has been sold to an Evangelical Protestant college. Many of the seminarians who were my friends and religious brothers in 1956 left the Basilian community and not a few abandoned the faith altogether. The buildings that were confidently constructed to house our increasing numbers have been sold or more or less successfully adapted for new purposes. The admirable young couple that symbolized for us a new age in Catholicism eventually divorced and left the Church.

“Only God is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;
I shall not be greatly moved.”²

² Psalm 61/62.2