

Remembering Ninety Five Years

A Partial Synopsis

By: Fr. Victor B. Brezik, CSB

Soon after I was born in May, 1913, there came a memorable disaster, the outbreak of World War One. The participation of the United States in this war naturally created a military climate in this country. In keeping with this military climate, when I was about five years old, my mother dressed me up in a soldier's uniform tailored to fit a boy my age. But it happened after several years, I grew up to be not a soldier-in-the-making but only a docile altar boy. It is while I was an altar boy that our assistant pastor, Father James P. McCarthy, for companionship, drove me in his car to Galveston where he went to consult the bishop on a pastoral matter. While he and Bishop Byrne sat on the front veranda of the famous Bishop's Palace, I sat below them on the front steps. Some years later at my high school graduation from the old St. Thomas High School on Austin Street, I was assigned to represent my classmates in delivering a graduation speech, part of which Bishop Byrne utilized in his own address to the graduates on the occasion.

Considering the 1920's, I should mention that a modernistic style of life began to modify the general outlook of society. Call it the flapper age when girls shocked their mothers by cutting their hair short and shocked their neighbors by walking out of the house in mere knee-length dresses. It was the dance age when the Charleston became the mode and ukuleles sounded everywhere and Paul Whiteman's and Ben Bernie's music could be heard even on a transistor radio, together with Sam 'n Henry from WGN in Chicago, who later became better known as Amos and Andy.

At the beginning of August 1931, I departed with a school mate, George R. Lyons, for the foreign country just north of us to enter the Basilian Novitiate located in Toronto, Canada. During these years, a following of the doctrine of Karl Marx developed in Canada under the leadership of a man named Tim Buck and on May Day, that is May 1, for several years a communist rally took place in Queen's Park directly across from St. Michael's College. It was at this time that as a Basilian seminarian I became acquainted with Madame Catherine de Hueck, the foundress of Friendship House in Toronto, which I had permission from Father Carr, our Basilian Superior General, to visit. Friendship House was somewhat of a Canadian version of Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker program in New York City. I even recall attending the lecture of Dorothy Day when she visited Toronto. Catherine de Hueck was thought of as doing some spy work among the Canadian communists. I faithfully read the periodic letters she sent to the Basilian seminarians when I was one of them. We carried on a social studies club at the Basilian Scholasticate.

World War I, as we know, did not solve the world's problems. Things remained unsettled. After Karl Marx came Joseph Stalin. In Germany there grew up a shoemaker's son, Adolph Hitler, with a prepared text for action named Mein Kampf. World War II soon followed.

During my studies in Toronto, two noted scholars came from France whose lectures I attended and whom I later got to know personally: Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, both outstanding Thomist philosophers. They left an indelible impression on my mind. After ordination to the priesthood in 1940, I continued my graduate studies at the Institute of Mediaeval Studies, becoming the first Basilian to receive the degree, and I also continued toward the Ph.D. in the Graduate School of the University of Toronto. My courses in theology were taken while I was pursuing my graduate studies.

Having completed my graduate studies, my teaching career began, tending to have large classes. Eventually, I was asked by Dr. Fulton Anderson at Toronto to teach some courses in the School of Graduate Studies of the University of Toronto.

It was during these years that I was appointed Moderator of Basilian Scholastics residing at St. Michael's College, fifty of them, an overflow from St. Basil's Scholasticate which also housed the same number. Together with teaching and week-end parochial assistance at churches near and outside Toronto, I served as Chaplain at Loretto College, a Catholic residence for college women conducted by the Loretto Sisters. At this time, we started an evening adult education program at St. Michael's College whose attendance reached up to two hundred and fifty people. I spearheaded this program and supervised it, drawing upon teachers both from the College and the Institute. During these years I also participated in writing a weekly column on behalf of Cardinal McGuigan in the Toronto Telegram, one of the Toronto daily newspapers. I was relieved of some but not all these duties when I became the Secretary General of the Basilian Fathers.

In the fall of 1954, I came to Houston to teach at the University of St. Thomas. In my second year here I became the local supervisor of the Basilians at the University. This appointment as superior occasioned my appointment as one of the three Basilians who comprised the Board of Directors of the University of St. Thomas: Father Guinan, President, Father Leonard Rush and myself. At that time, besides the legal Board of Directors, there was a Board of Trustees and a University Senate comprised mostly of laymen.

As a side story, let me mention one episode concerning a person whom a few of you may remember because she blossomed into a national entertainment celebrity for a few years. In Toronto, I became a friend of this young woman taking violin lessons at the Toronto Conservatory of Music. She lived at Rosary Hall on Bloor Street and attended daily Mass at St. Basil's Church. It was there that I first met her. She was from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and had a French name, Gisele La Fleche. I attended some of her concerts at the Conservatory and was attracted by her talent. Besides her ability with the violin, she possessed a second talent, a beautiful singing voice. During summer months, she took a job singing with an orchestra at one of the resorts in northern Ontario. The orchestra leader recognized her talent and obtained an audition for her with the CBC. The radio network gladly engaged her to sing a weekly program of French and English songs. Soon Hollywood became interested in her and she landed on the Jack Benny show. Her last name La Fleche was a little too suggestive even for Hollywood, so they persuaded her to take her mother's family name. Thus she became known as Gisele McKenzie. They also got her to clip her long tresses, after which she sent me from Hollywood a photograph of herself with a short haircut. Before she went to Hollywood, a good friend

of mine, a reputable and respected Toronto lawyer had become very fond of her and proposed marriage but she discerned an opposition between marriage and a career.

A year after coming to Houston I unexpectedly had a short visit with Gisele in Las Vegas where Father Ralph Diefenbach, his mother, his aunt and I stopped overnight on a motor trip to California. I tried to persuade Gisele to come perform at our St. Thomas Mardi Gras but she claimed that her sponsor would not allow it. After the Jack Benny show, Gisele McKenzie became more renowned with Dorothy Collins and Snooky Lanson on the national Saturday night show, *Your Hit Parade*. In the end, I was disappointed in her when she entered a civil marriage with her manager and thus completely shut the door to my friend in Toronto. She is now deceased.

The University of St. Thomas when I arrived in August, 1954, was quite small both as to student body and as to geographical space. I had become accustomed to envision a University as an extensive institution and so I urged Father Guinan to explore the possibilities of a more spacious location. More experienced than I was in attracting financial help, Father Guinan seemed adamant about staying put on Montrose. I then exerted some pressure on buying more neighborhood houses. Father Guinan kindly encouraged me to try my hand at persuading possible donors. But people I approached presented arguments that the University will become walled-in by neighboring residences. One woman assured me that her mother would give money for a new building if the University would move to a larger piece of ground. I then thought of the possibility of a few wealthy donors buying some of the neighboring houses and holding them until the University could absorb the debt.

This difficulty aroused the interest of John and Dominique De Menil who wanted the University to adopt a plan of buildings designed by their favorite architect, Philip Johnson. At a meeting of Father Guinan and myself with Mrs. De Menil, as we were exploring the needed buildings for the expansion of the University, I pointed out that we were planning to locate buildings on properties the University did not and might not ever own. Dominique saw the point immediately and proposed to talk it over with her husband. The result was the decision of the De Menils themselves to engage in buying neighboring buildings.

A couple incidents occur to me that may amuse a few readers. One year a former student at the University of St. Thomas who owned a Mercedes-Benz automobile, worn out from use, and wanting to clean up his yard, donated it to Father Braden since he seemed interested in it. It soon appeared in our parking lot. I opened the door of the car to look inside and observed that the floor board of the car was so rusted out that I could see the ground. To test his mechanical skill, Father Braden undertook to revitalize it, working on it in his spare time after classes and on week-ends. It took a few months. But hurrah! He got it running. To prove its worthiness, he planned a long trip with the outcome that he, Father Joseph Meyers and I drove in the repaired car through northern Michigan to western Ontario, Canada, spending some nights on the way in tourist camps, sleeping in our own tent which we brought along, then east to Toronto and back to Houston. It worked. When the donor of the car was convinced that the car was again in running condition, he bought it back, paying a thousand dollars for it, not an overpayment for Father Braden's expense and work on it.

Another daring excursion I made with Father Braden consisted of driving with him to Chicago, pulling a motor boat behind the car on a trailer. Father Braden launched the boat in Lake Michigan and with two nephews navigated down the Chicago River, the Illinois River, to the Mississippi River, then all the way to Baton Rouge and the inter coastal canal, going west to Galveston Bay and landing at Seabrook, Texas, where I met him with the empty boat trailer which I had driven back to Houston from Chicago. At Seabrook, we hoisted the boat on to the boat trailer and returned to Houston, ending the triumphant excursion.

To try to detail all the developments at the University during my active years on the faculty, board and various committees would be a tedious and tiresome story. Perhaps the outstanding personal achievement is the founding of the graduate program in philosophy which goes under the name of the Center for Thomistic Studies. Even this event which is already somewhat known would take too long to relate. In all humility I will be bold enough to acknowledge that the proposal was entirely my own but I must truthfully and justly affirm that without Hugh Roy Marshall's promise of finances, the program would have remained only an idea. I am grateful for its survival and can only wish and pray for its continued success and expansion, since it stands at the very center of education at the University of St. Thomas where philosophy mediates the vital relations between reason and faith. It remains the sole Ph.D. program at the University.

As to my personal thoughts at this point of my life at age 95, allow me just a few moments more to share with you my reflections.

Pondering my life at age 95, it occurs to me that a long human life may reasonably be divided into three periods. There is first the active period of achievement, the period of developing one's talents and using them for years in various accomplishments. The second period comes much later when one begins to spend part of one's time looking back and recalling one's achievements of previous years, which may or may not be notable. If one lives beyond this second period to the third period, where I am now, one's achievements come close to a halt and it is wise to stop looking back but rather to concentrate with earnest prayer and penance on the future eternal life transcending time, to be spent either in unspeakable happiness with God and the angels and saints as promised by Christ, or, heaven forbid, in the opposite unmentionable state.

Psalm 63

O God, you are my God, for you I long;
For you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you
Like a dry, weary land
without water.