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SISTER MARY CONRAD (Leona Normandin), *Subject of Jesus and Mary*

BORN: October 21, 1897, Woonsocket
PROFESSED: August 15, 1919
DIED: December 27, 1988, Marieville

Normandin, Parents and Archives

As skillfully as the adventures of Odysseus have been woven into artistic unity, so gracefully have the multiple adventures of Mary Conrad merged into a lived odyssey of faith and faithfulness.

If I may begin its account with a personal note, I would like to mention that during the General Chapter of 1971, I was deeply touched one day by the banner in her bedroom. It bore the familiar quote "For all that has been, THANKS; for all that will be, YES." Knowing that already she was suffering excruciating pain in one of her legs, I began to wonder what her YES would really involve. From then on, I watched in admiration the courage with which she lived it out during her last nineteen years.

But that period was the climax of her simple, yet beautiful story. Reviewing the facts of her life presents no real difficulty, since until 1984 she kept up the autobiographical account Sister Mary Catherine requested of each one when she was Provincial. What is a challenge, impossible to meet completely, is reflecting the spirit of reverent obedience underlying her response to a multitude of assignments, and her generous self-giving, gradually transformed into heroic surrender to the redeeming Savior as she lived out Philippians 3:10, "All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death."

Leona's parents were born in Canada, but both came to live in the United States when they were still young -- her father was 17 years old, and her mother 8 years. At age 22, Algina Girouard married François Laflamme, who died five months later, in an accident at work. The baby born four months later was named after his deceased father. After a few years, Edmond Normandin claimed Algina in marriage, and from this union were born two boys and three girls: Valmor, Oscar, Leona, Yvonne and Aurore.

Leona admits becoming "a problem child" at age 2 1/2, as she wanted to go to St. Clare Academ⁹ with her t⁷o brothers. In vain did they try to avoid her when they left; she would run out to follow them, causing much trouble to her dear mother. One day, in desperation, Mrs. Normandin had the boys ask Mother St. Catherine if they could bring their sister to school for one day, in the hope that she would not want to return, finding it too far from home. For the rest of the year she never missed a single day in the kindergarten! In September, 1899, she became a

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regular pupil, and remained such until she graduated from high school in 1914, the last two years as a boarder at St. Clare's.

At that time, there was no question of college for girls, so she stayed at home to help her mother and "tutor" her younger sisters. In 1916, she responded to an urgent need for a teacher at the Academy, and taught a second grade in the morning and a sixth grade in the afternoon -- her father having given his consent only at Mother St. Peter Claver's suggestion that this would be "a good experience for Leona if she should decide to choose religious life!"

This choice she eagerly made, and all was arranged for her to meet Corinne Houde and six other girls in Boston, on August 14, 1917. After a truly "odyssean" adventure, the group arrived in Sillery at 2:30 a.m., in time to become postulants on the feast of the Assumption. During the postulancy, she was assigned to teach an English class to the Canadian girls "who more or less liked English," she said, and also gave a few piano lessons.

In spite of a terrible snowstorm, her father and mother and Mrs. Houde traveled to Quebec for the February 14, 1918 Clothing Ceremony, which transformed their daughters into white-veiled, long-habited novices, and altered their names to Marie St. Conrad and Marie de la Colombière.

"August 15, 1919," M. Conrad wrote later, "was the happiest day of my life, when I gave myself entirely to God -- for five years, but in my heart really for life."

Soon she was sent to her first mission in Fall River, where she taught third grade in the a.m. and a 5th/6th grade in the p.m., as well as sewing to the boarders after school hours. Moreover, she supervised recreation and dormitory, and gave piano lessons to twelve boarders. "There is no time to be lonesome!" she loved to say.

In September of 1925, she was transferred to Goffstown. In addition to being Directress of the Sacred Heart Section, she taught 7th and 8th grades English, Religion to the freshmen, Algebra I and Latin I.

The years 1929 to 1933 found her again in Fall River, as high school and piano teacher, with, of course, multiple supervisions. Then, as next adventure in her "odyssey," she returned to the Villa for a stay of ten years, as Directress, this time of the older girls, in the Blessed Virgin section, and teacher of a variety of subject.

1943 brought her back to her native Woonsocket, where she assisted M. St. Claire d'Assise in the Blessed Virgin Section, and taught and supervised as usual. The next year she collaborated with M. Mary Cleophas (Julia Forcier) and Mary

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Consolata in the Sacred Heart Section. Although she dreaded the assignment, it turned out to be her "consolation and joy throughout five years."

In '49 she returned to Goffstown, as Directress again of the older girls and Principal of the high school. Two years later, Mother St. Vincent Ferrer transferred her to Our Lady of Lourdes in Providence, where she was appointed Superior and Principal of the elementary school. "Here," she wrote, "I enjoyed three ideal years, unforgettable ones -- where pastor and curate were very kind to us, and the parents most devoted and helpful in all ways."

Still another change awaited her on June 24, 1954. Back to Fall River she went, as Superior, though her term was cut short by a decision to send her, with M. St. Aloysius and M. Martial to Rome for a period of renewal including a 30-day retreat directed by Father Roche, S.J. The morning of November 16, a "break day" of the retreat, the announcement was made that M. Conrad had been named to replace, as Provincial Superior, M. St. Vincent Ferrer, who had died suddenly September 21, in Hyattsville. The retreat was shortened by a few days, and the new Provincial flew to Maryland. "The welcome was warm and encouraging," she wrote, "and I can say that my term of ten years was a happy one. I felt at ease with all my sisters, and I hope all felt the same with me."

At the General Chapter of 1959, she was encouraged and enriched by sharing with Provincials from all over the world. That year, Ipswich reached its centenary, and all the Capitulars were invited to join in celebrating the event in all the houses of the English Province. Thus M. St. Conrad, with M. St. Aloysius and M. Mary Armand spent a most enjoyable week watching formal receptions, Shakespearean and other drama, artistic calisthenics (a strong feature of English education at the time) as well as partaking in "English teas" and getting to know the many wonderful Sisters of the Province, and their great work of education. From there, the three Americans followed the itinerary traced for them by M. Esperanza, General Councillor, including convents in Spain, France and Belgium, as well as Lourdes and Ars, before returning to U.S.A.

The years 1961-65 were marked, for M. Conrad, by important decisions: the purchase of a Brookeville property for the Juniorate and Provincialate, the construction of the added wing to the Regina building for an enlarged Novitiate, the eventual sale of Brookeville and return of the Provincialate to Hyattsville, this time in the new wing section -- all this in addition to the regular Visitations and the administration of the Province.

A side feature of the Brookeville adventure was the invasion of the walls and ceiling of M. Conrad's room by an army of bees that "buzzingly orchestrated" day and night. The only

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solution was to have the walls torn open by exterminators, who in poisoning the insects also rendered inedible the thirty pounds of honey they gathered!

What was to be the next position of the Provincial? Nothing less than that of General Councillor, elected at the Chapter of 1965, with the added responsibility of serving as local Superior for 28 Sisters at the Motherhouse. Of the latter experience, she wrote, "A few could speak French or English; the majority spoke Spanish or Italian. It was surprising how well we could get along and enjoy one another, in spite of the language difficulty." Her stay in Rome lasted six years, during which she also served as Provincial Superior for Montreux in Switzerland and Freiburg in Germany, both convents canonically dependent upon the Motherhouse. In 1969, she was sent as delegate to Lebanon for the General Visitation.

The same year, that of her Golden Jubilee, she and Madre Paloma were sent to visit the mission centers of the American Province, and attend the Provincial Chapter preparatory to the Special General Chapter. On Easter Sunday, she and her dear friend M. Colombiere were among the Province Jubilarians celebrated in Liturgy and banquet and reception at the Provincial House.

The Ordinary General Chapter of 1971 brought an end to her term as General Councillor, thus allowing her to return "home," i.e. to Woonsocket. Though for the next year she could deservedly consider herself "retired," she managed to serve the community in a variety of ways. The following year she joined the Highland Mills Community. At the second session of the Provincial Chapter, this convent received approval of a plan to set up "Bethany House of Prayer," which little by little evolved into its present mission as Retreat House.

M. Conrad's stay at Cornwall Hospital in December of 1973 brought the first warning of an eventual amputation of both legs, because of a serious vascular problem. In fact, the neurosurgeon wanted to operate on the left leg at that time. However, M. Conrad asked to see Dr. Lewis, in Providence, and so was transferred to the Marieville Mission Center. The treatment prescribed resulted in a gradual healing of the ulcers.

In September of 1975, the retirement center in Fall River received her as one of its first community members. The following month, her right foot was badly injured on the pedal of a wheelchair. After seven months of treatment, the resulting ulcer was declared incurable, and the amputation of the leg below the knee was deemed necessary. Because she was a bad healer, the surgery was not a success. Another attempt to save the knee was tried, and yet healing did not follow. As a last resort, she underwent a third amputation, this time above the knee. With the help of a prosthesis, she was able to move about in a limited way. However, the first doctor's prognosis became

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understandable, as extremely painful ulcers multiplied on her left leg. A temporary healing brought relief until February, 1981, when that leg, too, had to be sacrificed. Her autobiography ends with the sentence: "On Good Friday, the doctor sent me home, where I am living as happy as possible, continuing loving and serving the Lord the best I can."

Her ministry the next seven and a half years was that of prayer, courageous patience and loving acceptance of the gradual diminishment that brought to completion the YES of her surrender to the Lord she had served so faithfully. This period was, in many ways, a sorrowful and pain-filled Way of the Cross marked by bouts of depression and loneliness. Still, as she gradually mounted her personal Calvary in union with Jesus, Mary Conrad would write -- with a frail hand but with all the clarity of a youthful, energetic heart:

I wanted to become a Religious of Jesus and Mary...this was my desire all my life. I have been very happy...There were difficulties but I never regretted my decision. God has been good to me, has always been good to me.

That echo of Blessed Claudine's dying words rang in her heart until the end, which came peacefully at the Cenacle on December 27, 1988. Her earthly odyssey had led her into the eternal adventure of LOVE in GLORY, on the feast of the Beloved Apostle.

The typist of Mary Conrad's autobiography added a P.S. which reflects the influence this patient continued to wield, no longer through activity, but through a passivity fully open to the working of the Spirit of Love. This loving tribute is quoted in memory of our cherished Sister:

As one of the infirmiry nurses who have the opportunity to witness M. Conrad's condition, I would like to add that it has been a very special grace and gift from God in my life, to have had the opportunity to come to know and love this woman dearly. She is a living Christ in our midst, a constant reminder of our dependence on the love of the Father, and one admirable source of love, as well as an example whom I hope never to forget...There could be no end to my praises of this Mother Conrad!

M. Agnes Desautels, R.J.M.
Bethany Retreat House
August 31, 1989

