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Forum

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Black and Blue Nuns

By Robert J. O'Connell

No I don't mean that they have been beaten with the celestial rod and cane. Rather black and blue refers to the color of their habits and indirectly to their orders. I was inflicted with a parochial education from day one to graduate school. And I must say, in spite of it all I am still very fond of Nuns, but only the blue ones.

My education was very parochial, in both senses of the word. I started at the Holy Rosary School in Syracuse NY, staffed by black garbed Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. We did not get along. To this day I can not fathom what prompted my second grade teacher to pick me up by my ankles and threaten to bash my skull on the floor, I can still see her high top black boots and the hanging end of her long wooden rosary as she shook me up and down. The wooden beads on this rosary were large and intricately carved. They reminded me of a string of shrunken skulls made from very small children who had previously irritated Sister. I made my first Confession and Communion in that church trained in the attendant mysteries deep in a grotto in the sub-basement of the church. It was kind of scary there mostly because of the spiral of stone steps leading from behind the altar to the special windowless classroom which I imagined was just above the crypt.

In the fifth grade my family moved to another Syracuse parish, and I attended the

Cathedral School whose proper name was St. Mary's Academy. This school was staffed by blue garbed Nuns, The Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, a French teaching order with what came to be known as the flying Nun hats. I loved them. But they too practiced strange rituals on us like doing the whole stations of the cross crawling around the Church on your knees and being lined up and marched to the Church for Friday afternoon confession. I still remember my first confession in the gothic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Father Harrison was the priest, He later became a Bishop of Syracuse. I remember the slide of the screen opening and the long pause as I waited to see what would happen. Then his booming voice asking if I was going to confess. I stammered that I didn't know how. This is where the parochialism comes back in. No one had ever told me that the rituals were the same in different Catholic Churches. I assumed that since the Churches were so different in scale and appearance that they must also be different in rite. After being sternly disabused of this thought I recited my pitiful set of made up sins and received the obligatory five Our Fathers and five Hail Mary's

As the first born son of an Irish Catholic Family I suspect that I was targeted, at least by my aunt Kate, for the priesthood. And I must admit that I seriously considered it but rejected the idea when I contemplated giving up girls. Still an impossibility. But Aunt Kate pulled strings in her Lady of Lourdes parish and got me signed up for the next class for becoming a Bishop's Boy. I was not opposed to this as you got to wear a red chasuble at mass instead of the ordinary white ones that the run of the mill altar boy had to wear. I imagined that all the girls would notice me in this snazzy outfit. This job also had the advantage that you only had to serve at the high masses said infrequently by the Bishop. At the time Walter A. Forey was Bishop of Syracuse, a nice man but one with a very pronounced lisp. So Bishop Boys were trained in various techniques to

avoid the spray. For example, at that point in the mass when the Bishop sits on his throne and reads from the missal we were trained to kneel before him and to hold it high over our heads so that he could read it and also to shield our faces from the spray as he spoke. All went well with my initial performance. I had Dominus Cold Biscuits down cold, and I could hold still and look pious. I realized that I sort of liked being on stage, still do. This all came to an abrupt end at the Mass where I was tired and having trouble holding the heavy Missal high enough. I recall looking over the top edge of the Missal just as the Bishop reached the juiciest part of the text. As he sprayed me I made a grievous error and giggled. Following the service I was promptly disrobed and told not to come back. The only small disappointment to this was that the priest did not mean all future Masses only my service as a Bishops Boy.

As I said I was very fond of the blue Nuns. I was the teachers pet in most classes and was regularly sent on errands for them. Since most classes were very boring this was not a hardship for me as I had already read all of the textbooks and routinely got good grades in everything except Latin. For many years I believed that Nuns were required to eat chocolate pudding and fish sticks for lunch every day. This arose because they were the only two items on the list I was given for my shopping trips to the local A and P. I also made frequent repair trips to the Convent. Outside their chapel on the first floor was a stair well that I assume led to their bedrooms. There was a single light bulb hanging in this well with a chain and long string for turning it on and off. The top finial on the newel post was always loose and needed to be re-glued and the string on the light bulb was always broken and had to be replaced frequently. Each sister, when questioned about this repeated problem, denied any knowledge as to how it could happen. I had no doubt. I imagined a gaggle of Nuns released from their services in the chapel sprinting for the stairs and yanking on the string as they sped upstairs to get ready for supper. This they denied but I

knew if I was there it would be what I would do.

In my tenth grade class I set up the class experiment in both physics and chemistry for our science teacher, Sister Cecilia. This too was not a difficult job and got me out of second year Latin class and allowed me to spend a leisurely hour smoking in the third floor science lab while playing with the toys. On one memorable day I decided to make some nitroglycerin. Don't ask. I was not sure of how this would go as the recipe was not in the text book. I do recall adding some nitric acid to a retort already charged with a base and saw the production of a yellowish green gas in the stoppered retort. Sister came on the scene at that moment and I asked if she knew what I had made. She removed the stopper from the retort and appeared to take a sniff followed by a rapid race to the partially opened window. As she stuck her head out for a breath of fresh air she knocked her hat off. I watched from the adjacent window as it helicoptered slowly to the sidewalk. When she pulled her head back in I was astonished to see the most gorgeous head of red hair. Sister was actually a very good looking woman. I am still imprinted on that shade of red. I asked her how come she did not have a shaved head, and she replied that as long as it was kept short and not an object of vanity the Mother Superior didn't mind and it was far more comfortable under the hat. Then she asked me to run downstairs and retrieve her hat. Further, if I would keep the secret of her hair then she would not report me to the Principal (AKA, Sister Ferdinand, the Bull) for playing around in the lab and smoking in the school. This bargain was made and I have loved her ever since. I also learned never to take a sniff of a greenish yellow vapor as it is probably chlorine gas.

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The Windswept Press, Saugerties, NY
davidgriffin@hvc.rr.com