

Brother Misfit

Alexius, Leon, Damian, and Henry came to mind last night. How odd. These names belong to Roman Catholic religious brothers whom I knew in an earlier life but have not seen in 50 years or more. And with two of them, Alexius and Leon, I have never had a conversation, not even a word, and yet I write their names here because they were present last night in my thoughts.

Why do you suppose this happened? I am 71 years old, and more than 70% of my life has been spent apart from these men I barely knew in the first place, and here they come to the fore as if I were still a teen-ager. Surely, this must be the result of long-term old-age memory randomly dredging up glimpses of people and places from long ago, but why Alexius? Or Damian? Why any of these four? Why not classmates or teachers or family members even? Why Leon? By any commonly accepted definition, this person was completely unknown to me except by sight and by religious name.

In the late 1940's and early 1950's I was a teen-ager studying to become a Catholic religious teaching monk. Such training was deemed essential prior to assuming the mantle of lifelong service to the religious teaching vocation. For young male adults, this rigorous and ascetic religious preparation was expected to take at least four and a half years and included a college education. In my case, because I entered religious life at age 15, it would take a total of seven and one-half years, including my high school education. The purpose of this training was to test the depth of one's religious vocation and assess the candidate's suitability to accept and live under the restrictions of the sacred vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, teaching the poor gratuitously, and stability in the religious institute.

In 17th century France, a cleric from a noble family took it upon himself to organize free schools for impoverished boys, most of whom were street urchins. In the process of recruiting and training male teachers for this charitable enterprise, he formed a religious organization, which he called Brothers of the Christian Schools, later commonly referred to as Christian Brothers. These men lived together in community and were strictly regulated by a code of conduct promulgated by their founder. His rule governed every aspect of their lives: spiritual, educational, teaching, good manners, physical and recreational activity, management, and living in community. In the 19th

century, the Christian Brothers sent missionary brothers to the United States to expand and foster their educational ministry there, and by the mid-1900's, they operated high schools and colleges in all regions of the U.S. In the West, St. Mary's College of California was – and still is – the premier educational institution of the Christian Brothers.

Some decades after the death of the founder, the financial costs of the Brothers' educational ministry became much greater, and the original purpose of the religious order – teaching the poor gratuitously – was mostly abandoned in favor of charging some tuition. At this juncture, religious superiors began to interpret teaching the poor gratuitously to mean teaching the poor in spirit. However, the sacred vow taken, which committed each brother to teach the poor without charge, was never modified or rescinded even to the present day. The promise, once a cornerstone of the order's commitment to the poor, has become something of an historical religious artifact.

It was in this historical religious context that Alexius, Leon, Damian, and Hank (of course his name was Henry, but everyone called him Hank), and I were related. We were all Christian Brothers, subject to the same Founder's rule, pledged by vows to the same mission, trained in the same ascetic monastic regimen, and committed to serve out our lives teaching the poor gratuitously – or the poor in spirit, if you prefer.

The location of the Christian Brothers (California branch) monastic educational center was high up in the steep foothills seven miles west of Napa near Mt. Veeder – then and now, some of the world's finest vineyard properties. Indeed, the monastery complex, surrounded on all sides by vineyards owned by the Christian Brothers, housed one of the several wineries they owned and operated in California. Truly, Mont La Salle, as it was called, was picturesque, bucolic, peaceful, inspirational, remote, fragrant – a perfect setting for training young monks.

The four large two-story buildings, all built in California mission style, were interconnected via spacious walking arcades, also covered with mission tile roof. The buildings and arcades subdivided the entire monastery compound into three distinct areas, all adjacent to the centrally located monastery church. The center building directly west of the chapel housed the community of the

Ancients, that is, brothers who lived in retirement, now too old to teach, along with Gregory, John, and Timothy, who were known to us at the time as the Winery Brothers because they managed the wineries, the vineyards, and the international marketing programs of Christian Brothers wines and brandy. Alexius and Leon were also part of the Ancients community, but much younger, still in their prime, as opposed, for example, to old Brother Fredrick, well into his 80's, who at the drop of a hat would recite from memory all the counties and county seats of the state of California. In all, this diverse collection of brothers formed a religious community of eight or so.

The Novitiate department, located on the north side of the chapel, was housed in an L-shaped building that, taken together with the edifice of the church, formed a large outdoor semi-cloistered garden area. Novices 18 years and older spent 18 months in the novitiate living the life of contemplation, prayer, meditation, study, and manual labor. Each brother lived in a small, cell-like bedroom with a sink in the corner of the room. The shared bathrooms and showers were located midway down each hallway. The day began at 5 a.m. and lasted until the Great Silence and lights out at 9:30 p.m.

On the opposite side of the church – on the south side – was located the Juniorate, or the pre-novitiate high school religious training program. These teen-agers lived in two large dormitories, with a dozen toilets and sinks located in a separate room adjacent to each dorm. Gang showers were located in the basement of the building, as part of the gymnasium and the laundry facility. The daily regimen began at 6 a.m. and consisted of college preparatory courses, chapel prayer three times a day, manual labor, physical recreation, and study hall until lights out at 9:30 p.m.

In addition to the monastery church, the common facility used by all departments was the large commercial-sized kitchen and scullery. Three separate dining rooms, called refectories, surrounded the main kitchen. The smallest refectory was used by the Ancients, the next by Novices, and the largest by the Juniors.

From August of 1949 until August of 1953, this monastery located on the steep hillside vineyard properties west of Napa was my home. For the first two years, my only contact with the world outside was a monthly visit in the monastery garden picnic area with my family and a three-week visit home in

August; for the last two and a half years, only a monthly visit on the monastery grounds. Regardless of the section of the monastery to which we were assigned, Christian Brothers-in-training were expected to be in the world but not of the world, and the reality was that unless one walked the seven-mile mountainous road down to the town, it was a world separate and apart.

Alexius. Tall, perhaps as much as 6'4" in height, Brother Alexius was in charge of the monastery vegetable garden. An acre or more of vegetables, depending on the season, always ready for the planting, the weeding, or the harvesting. Our pathway route to the Juniorate swimming pool, situated on a hillside terrace, wound through the vegetable garden, followed by a steep climb. Sometimes Alexius was stooped over, apparently weeding or harvesting; other times he would be sitting upright on a stool with his hands folded in his lap, apparently taking a prayerful leave from his work. He never acknowledged our transitory presence. He seemed totally caught up and consumed by the spiritual exercise of his vegetable ministry, which provided the kitchen with our daily fare.

When, early each morning, we Juniors filed into the monastery church to take our appointed positions to attend the daily Mass, Alexius had already been in his pew at the rear of the church for at least 90 minutes. His meditation exercise began at 5:25 a.m., first with a series of publicly recited psalm-like prayers, followed by the reading of a short meditation piece, and then by 45 minutes of silent meditation.

During the private meditation period, Alexius stood tall and ramrod erect, full height, arms locked across his chest, eyes tightly closed, with his face contorted in concentration. He looked as if he might have been up all night — unshaven, hair flying off in all directions, his black full-length robes food-stained here and there, and his rabat, a distinctive starched linen collar piece (a piece of clerical neck fashion dating back to the Founder's 17th century), was tied at his neck with a safety pin. One side of the collar hung limp while the other stayed erect but was positioned at a right angle to its desired position. During some meditation mornings, Alexius would assume another distinctive posture. Sitting down on the pew bench but still very erect in the upper body, he would bend over in a right angle position and place his forehead on the rounded edge of the wooden pew in front of him. He might assume this position for the entire meditation period.

Alexius was not an unhandsome person, quite the opposite. Ever erect in his flowing and food-stained black robes and with a glazed look in his eyes, apparently seeing nothing, he glided along in his work boots, taking very long strides but in a decidedly unhurried manner. It was impossible to divine the expression on his face, sad or smiling, satisfied or not. He never spoke a word, at least that I ever observed. He lived in his own world, a spiritual world filled with vegetables and contemplation.

While never explicitly stated, our superiors, whether of the Juniorate or the Novitiate variety, seemed to suggest that Alexius was a living example of holiness. Unkempt perhaps, a little odd or eccentric perhaps, but beneath it all here was a man dedicated to and consumed by the rapture of God's presence. Some of our teachers spoke to us about St. Benedict Joseph Labre, a mendicant beggar who lived for many years in the downstairs closet in the stairwell of his parents' mansion. He lived a life of abject poverty because he was consumed by a dedication to God's presence. I cannot say my religious superiors went so far as to say that Alexius was a modern-day Benedict Joseph, but the implication was there. For my part, I had no doubt that Alexius was a holy man, because he never spoke except in prayer and lived the austere life of an ascetic.

Leon. Brother Leon occupied the pew behind Alexius at the rear of the chapel, but he neither sat nor knelt, he did both at the same time. Short of stature, with a compact body and slumped shoulders, he was forever slouched. I never saw him stand full height or completely erect. When he walked he did not look forward but always stared at the ground in front of his next step. None of us knew much about his history, but for some reasons we all believed Leon to be a Christian Brother of German descent. On the other hand, I never heard him speak a word, either English or German

If Alexius was the vegetable man, Brother Leon was the pig man, and that's what we called him: Brother Leon, the pig man. I often saw him in his oversized rubber boots and slicker jacket slowly trudging up the hill, lugging his pails of slop to the pig barn. Head down, shoulders hunched, he did not look right or left. If he was not in the chapel, I presumed he could be found at the pig barn.

For those of us Juniors who were regularly assigned to clean up the Ancients refectory after their noon meal, we could tell where Leon's seat was located because of the heavy cloud of odor he left behind. Whether this was due to his lack of personal hygiene or his workday presence with the pigs – or both – we did not know, but he certainly left his mark and caused us to work much faster than we normally did.

Damian. Brother Damian came into my life in the second year of my teaching career. My first year of teaching in Bakersfield (1957-1958) was such a dramatic change from the sheltered hothouse luxury of the monastic intellectual religious training of my previous seven years, it almost caused a meltdown. A rocketing roller coaster experience of learning to control a teeming classroom of male teen-agers, interacting with girls in extracurricular activities and during monitoring duties, including high school dances, living in community with seasoned older men entrenched in their own views about survival in religious life, and thrown into social situations that I could not possibly have imagined and for which I was unprepared. I survived the year but was relieved to begin my second year of teaching with a clean slate because I had been assigned to San Francisco. Here I was to live with Damian.

Brother Damian was a short, thick man who wore glasses. He possessed a puffy round face with a friendly and almost easy smile. He was perhaps a dozen or more years older than I but still a youthful looking man. Damian was thick of body – neck, shoulders, upper and lower torso – not muscular or athletic looking, just thick looking. He lived in this teaching religious community but he had been given no teaching assignment, he just lived there. No official explanation was ever made – or even expected, I think – about why he was not teaching. Certainly, he was far too young to be retired, but it seemed slightly odd at the time because the whole purpose of this religious community was to teach and manage nearly a thousand high school students in downtown San Francisco, and yet a longtime member of the teaching order had no school assignment. In truth, he had no assignment whatsoever. He attended the morning and evening religious exercises, he was present at the morning and evening meals, and he attended the weekly Sunday morning community meeting. If that was his assigned schedule, he certainly followed it.

Damian was a radio-surfer. The community did not yet have access to television, but there was a community radio in the community recreation room. Damian played the radio, but he never allowed any popular song to come to a finish. He selected the station and listened for a few seconds to make sure it was a song he enjoyed, then after a minute or so, he dialed the radio to another station and another song, but it, too, was never permitted to finish. Several nights a week, prior to the evening meal, the community assembled in the recreation room to enjoy a glass or two of wine – Christian Brothers wine. The room would be filled, hardly an empty seat to be found, but Damian would be on his feet pacing about, surfing the dial on the radio from unfinished song to unfinished song. After 15 minutes of this, one of the older, hard-bitten veteran Brothers would speak up in a loud voice, “Damian! Stop fooling with that radio!” Smiling sheepishly and shaking his head, he would stop – but only for a few minutes, and then he was back surfing the radio dial. But by then it was time for dinner, and everyone’s attention was diverted. Day after day, week after week, surfing the radio seemed to occupy Damian’s workday schedule.

Brother Damian was also a movie buff. He loved to attend the movies. Many days he would leave the house about 11 a.m. and walk to the movie theatres. Plural. In the course of a day he would attend three or four movies. I don’t believe he ever stayed through the entire movie, because he would tire of it, just as he tired of the songs on the radio, or he had seen the movie many, many times before, so he would exit at some point and walk on to the next theatre. In his conversations back in the community, he loved to talk about the movies he had seen that day. I remember being puzzled about where he obtained the money to see so many movies in the course of a semester. No religious brother was permitted to have money of his own and any need for money had to be cleared with the religious superior, who was the only person who could dispense the needed money. Whether Damian had access to other monies or whether the superior provided the money so that Damian would have something to do during the day, I cannot say. Religious brothers were great beggars; perhaps he was given free movie passes by the theatre owners, I do not know.

From time to time, Damian exhibited a darker side to his normally sunny disposition and this was often manifested late at night. Damian was a pacer; he paced up and down the community room, the recreation room, up and

down the stairs, and he paced to and fro, up and down the hallways on the three floors of the residence building. If he sat down, it was just for a minute or two, then he was back up pacing. And when he was out of sorts or agitated and perhaps angry for some reason, not only did he pace but he would open and slam doors shut with so much force that the shock waves would reverberate down both hallways of the L-shaped building. Not one door only, but a few minutes later another door, and then on the floor above, yet another door. Gradually, his mood passed or subsided and all that could be heard was muttering. Damian audibly muttered to himself. And that too would pass.

I lived with Damian for five years, and it was always the same. He was very nice to me, seemed interested in me as a person, and we often engaged in conversation, though I found it difficult to follow his train of thought. But just listening to him seemed to satisfy his need for socialization, and I was happy enough to do so. It has now been 33 years since I have seen or heard anything about Brother Damian, but for some unfathomable reason he came calling last night.

Hank. Brother Henry was an historian, a baseball addict, and a drifter. He was also one of the most engaging and approachable human beings I have ever met. Surely, he must have been assigned to a religious community of the Christian Brothers, but I cannot tell you where that might have been. Every time I met him, especially during my years in San Francisco, he was passing through. He stayed a few days, attended the morning and evening religious exercises and all the meals. Then he was off, perhaps for months at a time, until he found himself in the neighborhood of a Christian Brothers religious community and would make his appearance.

An historian, yes, I'm sure he was, but his specialty seemed to be state roadside historical monuments that marked an event, a building, or even a person in California history. Hank studied his history on the roadsides of California.

He carried no rucksack or suitcase as I remember; he traveled light and wore a hat, sometimes a baseball cap and other times a stylish straw hat. Where he stayed, what he did for money, how he made his way from place to place, I cannot say. Whenever he appeared, just off the road, even though a little worn at the margins, he looked to be in good shape and well kempt. As I said, he was a most engaging person. Soft-spoken, he could talk about anything, but

he especially loved to talk baseball. He was a walking encyclopedia of baseball; he visited major and minor league clubhouses, he seemed to know most of the players and coaches, and invariably he would bring with him a glove, a bat, or a baseball given to him by a baseball star or at least a future would-be star. Hank did not collect this baseball paraphernalia for himself, he happily gave it away soon upon his arrival – a sort of arrival gift, if you will.

I did not know Hank well nor did I see him frequently, but whenever I did, he knew my name and something current about me. He was genuinely interested in me. I liked him immensely. Everyone liked him, and I'm sure for the same reasons. No doubt people on the road liked him and helped him finance his historical research. Exactly what Hank did or what his role was as a member of the Christian Brothers religious teaching order in California, I cannot say; I do not know.

These are the men, all members of a monastic religious teaching order – Alexius, Leon, Damian, and Hank – who visited with me last evening during a long, protracted semiconscious sleeping state. What were they doing there? What did they want? How am I to respond to their presence?

This simple essay, a composite of impressions from a teen-ager more than 50 years ago, is certainly not an adequate response to their dream-like arrival. Perhaps the archivist for the Christian Brothers could provide more information about these religious men.

Alexius. Family name is Dougherty, born in 1923, now 82 years old, still living at the Mont La Salle monastery in what is now called the Holy Family Community. He still tends his 60-year-old vegetable garden. Alexius has authored a book, title and subject matter unknown, but I have written him asking for a copy, which I will share with future Easy Essay readers. Alexius was 26 years old and I was 15 when I first saw him in the monastery chapel.

Leon. Family name Adole Brunel, born in France in 1887, died at Mont La Salle in 1965 at age 78. I wrote that I never heard him speak a word of English or German; please add French. Leon was 62 years old when I first saw him in the monastery chapel.

Damian. Family name Ralph Gillick, born 1915, died 1991 at age 76, buried at the Mont La Salle Christian Brothers cemetery. Damian was 43 years old when I met him in 1958 in San Francisco; I was 24.

Henry. Family name DeGroot, born 1913, died 1992 at age 79, buried at Mont La Salle. Hank was 45 years old when I first met him in San Francisco, when he came off the road for a short stay. I was 24.

The original title of this essay – in fact, the first words written – were Brother Misfits. For obvious reasons, I have rewritten the title: Brother Misfit. Five young men entered the teaching religious brotherhood, all received the same training and guidance, all were bound by the same rule and the same sacred vows, but only one of them has left his calling, and only one will not be buried in the Mont La Salle Brothers' cemetery. He is Brother Misfit.