

Thomas Levi

Brother Thomas Levi died on October 14, 2004, at the age of 88 years. His death severed the last tangible connection I had with the Christian Brothers, the Catholic monastic religious teaching order I had been a member of for 15 years. My only other connection, Brother Bede, a classmate and friend, died five years ago.

When we first met, Brother Thomas was the president of St. Mary's College in Moraga, California. I was a freshman Scholastic, the term given to Christian Brothers during their college years of religious and academic study. For reasons I never understood and never questioned, he became my mentor and I his protégé. (I understand your question, especially in these times, but no, there was nothing sexual about our relationship, or if there was, I have no knowledge of it.)

I can only speculate about the reasons why he adopted me. Perhaps it was the result of the battery of aptitude and achievement tests I had taken during my first week at St. Mary's, or maybe it was because I received all A's on my first-semester exams, or more likely, he simply took a paternal interest in a tall, skinny, towheaded kid who looked like he needed some direction. I don't know the answer, but I do know that whatever the reason, I was a chosen one.

After my college graduation, our relationship was interrupted because I was assigned to teach at the Christian Brothers high school in Bakersfield. But a year later, it resumed when I was assigned to teach at Sacred Heart High School in San Francisco, and Brother Thomas was named the principal of the high school and the superior of the religious community.

Brother Thomas was a professed religious monk all right, and I am sure he said his prayers, but he was also worldly. He appreciated fine wine, dined at expensive restaurants, mingled with San Francisco society, served as a patron of the arts, and was well connected with the business professions, the Catholic hierarchy, and the clergy. Brother Thomas was well known in the San Francisco of the 1950's; he had what some would call entrée.

I had never before met a person like Brother Thomas – cultured, refined, well-spoken, confident, thoughtful, gracious, well-tailored, and an engaging conversationalist. I admired him very much.

I attributed his worldliness to the fact that his status as president of a prestigious liberal arts college required it. I viewed his unique role within the religious institution of the Christian Brothers much the same way I did the president and the CEO of Mont La Salle Vineyards, the two Christian Brothers charged with the responsibility for making huge amounts of money in the international world of wines and brandy – a vocation within a vocation, so to speak.

Without doubt, Brother Thomas's favorite restaurant was Jack's, located in San Francisco's financial district. As a matter of fact, he had a standing reservation for one of the exclusive private dining rooms upstairs, and because of my special relationship with him, I was invited to attend the dinners he hosted for his small circle of protégés, all Christian Brothers, I being the youngest of this select group. I was also invited to similar dinners at the Blue Fox, Fleur de Lys, Caprice, El Matador, and Swiss Louie's, all premier restaurants in the San Francisco of the 50's and 60's. But Jack's was his favorite because there he reigned supreme.

Our assigned waiter was Marcel, a small, impeccable man attired in a tuxedo who spoke with a slight European accent. On your second visit, he knew what cocktail you preferred, what kind of wine, and even the entrées most likely to be ordered. Printed new each day, the very extensive à la carte menu listed all daily offerings available, along with the price of each. With the help of Marcel, each diner designed his own unique dinner. He affirmed your choice of this or that with a barely audible "Very good choice, sir." Or he tempered your foolish choice with "But have you considered the filet of sole, or the rack of lamb, sir?" or "A few fresh bay shrimp on top of your mixed greens would go nicely, do you agree, sir?" or "I think the creamed spinach would be in order, sir," or "I don't think the season is quite ready for the Crenshaw, sir, but perhaps the fresh strawberries might be in order." And finally, to Brother Thomas, "I recommend a nice Pommard, Brother, shall I bring one that you would enjoy?" and "Shall I bring an order of escargot to begin the evening? Very good, sir." And so it went.

I, too, have wondered about the cost of these dinners and the source of the funds needed to pay for this life style. I am quite certain that most of the dinners at Jack's were charged to the expense accounts of wealthy Catholic benefactors of St. Mary's College and friends of Brother Thomas himself, because I recognized some of the names he signed on the dinner chits. In addition, I reasoned that any college president must have liberal access to discretionary funds for public relations entertaining. If the vow of poverty has its own rewards, presumably fine dining at the expense of others is one of them.

Brother Thomas also organized soirees to Moss Beach, a small ocean village south of San Francisco on Highway 1. He had unlimited access to a vacation residence built on a secluded promontory overlooking the Pacific Ocean, a setting of such breathtaking natural beauty that it should have been pictured on a scenic postcard touting the wonders of the Northern California coastline. These long afternoons and late evenings were consumed with drinking, exuberant conversation, institutional gossip, steak dinners, and drinking. Then the hour-long trip back up the twisting, turning Highway 1 through Devil's Slide to the Brothers' residence near downtown San Francisco.

Drinking and driving? Not an issue for concern. This was the era decades before Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the .08 alcohol drunk driving standards, and yes, long before seatbelts. I have often wondered how we managed to survive those late-night drives after long hours of drinking, but with one small exception, we did.

The exception could have been tragic, but thankfully, after several days in the hospital with broken ribs and a severely bruised chest, Brother Thomas recovered. It was a Mother's Day, and Brother Thomas had decided to take me and one of his protégés, a Brother several years older than I, to Sacramento so that we could treat this Brother's mother, now a widow, to a Mother's Day dinner. Perhaps Brother Thomas was playing the surrogate father's role, I don't know, but it was certainly thoughtful, and very much in character. Not only did we go out to dinner, but Brother Thomas went dancing with the widow, and dance they did. Brother Thomas was beaming; I never saw him have so much fun. The widow's son and I cooled our heels at one of the tables with little else to do but listen to the music and drink through our boredom.

After a nightcap at the widow's home in East Sacramento, we began our late-night drive to San Francisco with Brother Thomas, as usual, at the wheel. Driving west on J St., Brother Thomas turned toward the rear seat to say something to our colleague, and as he did so, he inadvertently turned the steering wheel to the right. The crash into the telephone pole was inevitable. Fortunately for me, as the car swerved off the road, I threw myself under the dashboard and took the impact lying on the floor. Aside from the inevitable bumps and bruises, the other Brother and I seemed fine, but Brother Thomas took the impact of the steering wheel in his chest and had to be hospitalized. Yes, we were fortunate to survive, but this was also an era when Buicks were still built with steel and engineered for safety, not gas mileage.

All good things come to an end, and so did my special relationship with Brother Thomas. I was assigned 300 miles distant to Bakersfield in 1962, and three years later, I resigned from the Christian Brothers to join Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. I lost all contact with Brother Thomas and the Christian Brothers. Given the commitment of the leadership of the Christian Brothers to Mont La Salle Vineyards, their multimillion-dollar agribusiness corporation, the feeling was mutual, I'm sure.

On a Father's Day 20 years later, I took my wife and five daughters to Mont La Salle to show them where I had attended the Christian Brothers' Junior Novitiate and Novitiate from 1949 to 1953, and whom did we meet but Brother Thomas himself, now retired. When I was in the Christian Brothers, we called the retired brothers the Ancients, but I think the retired Brothers called themselves members of the Holy Family Community. Whatever the proper name, Brother Thomas was pleased to see me again and meet my family, and was as gracious, charming, and suave as I had remembered him. This accidental reunion was a pleasant surprise, a sort of unexpected Father's Day treat.

From time to time since that chance meeting, Brother Thomas and I have been in touch, mostly by email. On one occasion, he asked for my help in finding one of my classmates, who had served 16 years in San Quentin for murder. I was unable to find him, but I thought how thoughtful and caring it was of Brother Thomas to try to find a lost sheep. On another occasion, he called to ask if I had any recent contact with a friend and former colleague,

now a priest in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles but suspended because of allegations of sexual child abuse. I had not and knew nothing about such allegations, but how like Brother Thomas it was to break this unfortunate news to me in such a sensitive manner. And later still, he telephoned to ask if I had any contact with a former Brother who was a close friend and former student of mine. I told him I had received a long and endearing letter from him just a few days ago, why? At this point, Brother Thomas broke the news about my friend's untimely death – a fast-moving cancer, he was told by the undertaker. I was stunned. I did not want to believe it. We talked for some time, and once again I appreciated how much like Brother Thomas it was to handle such unbelievably bad news in such a personable, caring, and thoughtful manner.

The last contact I had with Brother Thomas was by email. I asked for his mailing address so that I could send him a copy of my manuscript of essays. I paid him a compliment by noting that the current financial scandal involving St. Mary's College would never have happened on his presidential watch. He responded with his mailing address and expressed his personal regret that the president of St. Mary's had been forced to resign because of the scandal.

Thirty days later, Brother Thomas died.

I presume he received the manuscript of essays, but whether he was well enough to read any of them, I do not know. At first I was hesitant to send the essays to him because I thought it possible he might be upset with a few of them. I chanced it and sent them anyway, because I truly valued any feedback I might receive from this religious and worldly person. Alas, it was not meant to be. How like Brother Thomas it was to finesse any sort of unpleasantness.

I admire him very much.

