

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

Sister Mary Bernard Lansang, OSB

The school year 1950-51 had began. On the second day of the new school year, after the morning prayer, our class teacher, Sister Florencia, OSB, announced: "Class, open your assignment notebooks." In her fine, gentle manner, so characteristic of her, she started going around the desks, row by row, inspecting our notebooks. I looked around; my classmates had their assignment ready. Nervously, I opened my notebook. It was empty. Sister Florencia, seeing my notebook with nothing written on it, spoke in a low whisper, shaking her head, "Consuelo, you cannot study here in this school if you will not do your assignment." I was embarrassed! I was a new student at Assumption Academy (now St. Scholastica's Academy). Coming from a small town, Sta. Rita, I did not know the demands of a school that placed a premium on academic excellence. I thought that the first days of classes were still part of the happy days of a long summer vacation.

The following week, my classmates and I were walking down the staircase for recess, in complete silence. But I was not used to this regimentation, and started talking with my partner. Sister Godeharda, OSB, Directress, clapped her hands and called out "Silence" Who was talking?" Emphatically, she repeated, "Honest! Who was talking?" I kept mum and pretended innocence. Then, the verdict came, "Consuelo, see me in my office."

There, in the Directress' Office, I learned my lesson on honesty. "Consuelo, here in this school, you have to be honest!"

As a boarder, little by little, I learned the art of self-discipline: jumping out of bed at the sound of the bell, being punctual for morning prayer, Mass, meals, study time and many other things.

Then I realized why my parents sent my sisters, Manolita and Purificacion (now, Sister Regina, OSB) to this school some years ahead of me. My mother used to say, "We are not rich but we give you the best legacy: a good Christian education."

Classroom instruction proved very challenging. Sister Florencia drilled us in grammar; past tense, present tense, agreement of verb with subject. She insisted on a logical flow of ideas in theme-writing. Literature classes had a charming appeal to me; we discovered gems in literary pieces. With passion, we recited poems until they became a part of our lives.

Our Benedictine formation went beyond the walls of the classroom to the public schools to teach catechism. On some weekends, Sister Renata brought us, the boarders, to a nearby hospital. Accompanied by her violin, we sang endless "Alleluias" and "Smile, Smile."

Impressed by the Sisters' style of educating us, enraptured by their chanting in the chapel early in the morning and late in the afternoon, captivated by their sense of mission, I told myself, "Someday, I will be a Benedictine Sister like them."

That thought came with clarity and determination. I believed my childhood upbringing at home programmed me to become a Sister. Life, as a child, was full of fun-picking guavas and "macopa", catching dragon flies, playing with frogs, feeding lizards from the palm of my hands. Through our

growing years, my parents showed us the ways of God. Seated on the floor, we would listen to my father teaching us religion with the aid of a big Baltimore Catechism. On Saturdays, my mother would gather us to prepare us for confession. She would read the table of Examen of Conscience. And then, we all went to church for confession.

After high school, I went to the University of Santo Tomas for a college degree. Before graduation, we had a retreat. After reading a pamphlet by Fr. John Delaney, SJ, in the silence of the chapel in Sta. Catalina Dormitory, I made a decision: "I will teach for one year and then, I will enter the convent." I was very definite, "*I will be a Benedictine Sister!*."

I taught for one year in the school that I had learned to love: Assumption Academy. Again, I was a boarder, this time as a faculty member. Towards the end of the year, I decided to inform my parents about my plans of entering the convent. I knew that leaving home would be very painful. I did not dare to talk with my parents about this; I knew I would cry. So, I wrote a letter to inform them of my decision.

Upon receipt of the letter, my father and mother came to the school to see me. It was late in the afternoon...I was glad that the setting sun and the fading light in the school parlor cast a shadow on my teary eyes. Amidst the silence that surrounded us, my father spoke, "Ching, your mother and I read your letter. We are allowing you to enter the convent on one condition: that you go to a priest and make a general confession. Tell him all your sins from early childhood until now. Then, ask him whether you can become a Sister."

Right the next day, after class, I walked to the San Fernando Cathedral. By a masterful stroke of God's design, there was a priest in the confessional box. It was Fr. Roozen, a venerable Don Bosco Priest. I confessed all my sins, the sins of my youth. After having listened to my litany of sins, Fr. Roozen, said, "Young lady, you have a crystal clear conscience. Go, you may enter the convent."

That night, like a woman in love, I went to the school balcony. Beneath the canopy of a star-studded evening sky, I sang that passionate song, "When you are in Love." I knew that the Lord of the moon and the stars heard my song!

The weeks that followed were filled with thrilling tasks: securing the required documents, visiting doctor's offices for medical papers and preparing my convent outfit. My mother and I went shopping to complete the required outfit to the minutest detail.

May 2, 1958 – the much awaited day of entrance came. Tatang Jose and Imang Trining, parents of Sister Pia Lansang, OSB, and good, good friends of my parents, came to bid me good-bye. From the bedroom near the sala, I heard Tatang Jose and my father talking.

Tatang Jose said, "Why do our daughters leave us and enter the convent?" (That time, Sister Pia's older sister, Atching Pilar, Sister Josephine Lansang, RGS, entered the Good Shepherd Novitiate in the USA. My own sister, Purificacion, was already a Benedictine Sister at St. Scholastica's, preparing for perpetual profession.) Tatang Jose continued, "It would be better if they stayed home and teach Catechism to our people."

My father, in his usual slow and paced manner of talking, answered, "Jose, don't you remember how the boy Jesus remained in the temple and how he answered his anguished mother?" Then, my father

quoted Jesus' words in Spanish: "*Porque me buscabais? No sabiais que es preciso me ocupe en las cosas de mi Padre?*" (Why did you look for me? Did you know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?) The NRSV and NAB translation is: Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?

That morning, the whole family brought me to St. Scholastica's College on Pennsylvania Avenue. I held back my tears as I kissed my parents and everyone good-bye. I knew I was leaving home for good; I knew I was leaving behind all the people so dear to me.

But I also knew that "I must be in my Father's house," and that "I must be busy with my Father's affairs."