

Little Slipper Street

Fr Leonard Feeney

The Sisters of Saint Pancratius (you may be sure I am inventing them a name) at *Rue de la Petite Pantoufle* in Paris, had the distinction of having me as their chaplain for a six weeks' spell one summer. I was really not a full-fledged chaplain (my French was very much too bad for that); but it was my privilege to say Mass for them every morning, and to go twice a week in the late afternoon for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, which they call by the succinct and majestic name of "*Le Salut*."

Saying Mass in a convent is a consolation and a joy, first because of the attention and inspiration of the worshippers, and second because of the flawlessness of the altar appointments. Vestments are loveliest, amices are whiter, cinctures most delicately braided, chalices most cuplike and golden in a convent. Mass-cards are most artistically scrolled, linens are smoothest and most immaculate, carpets are plushiest and cleanest, marble is shiniest, lavabos glisten, flowers are most fragrant in a convent.

Albs fit you in a convent. The book ribbons of the missal are most colorful, bells give their most ethereal tinkle, candles burn straightest and most purely, Mass breads are baked nearest to the shade of snow, the texture and odor of wine is closest to perfection, even the incense is faintest and most spicesome in a convent. The consummate order of a nun's life and the spotless purity of her heart find their completest outward expression in her chapel, where wood and fabric and foliage and metal and stone are raised to their utmost grandeur, and made as fit as material substances ever can be, to associate with the Sacramental Body of Our Lord, which His love has forged for our sacrifice, our worship, and our food. And nobody but her Guardian Angel knows the hours upon hours little Sister Sacristan put in every day with her feathers, her wax, her soap and her rags, cleaning and scouring and scrubbing and airing and making God's House beaming and bright, and driving the dust and the devil. out the window.

There is something exquisite about every nun, no matter how physically unbeautiful shriveled or sick or old or feeble she may be, because her expression and her movements are bound to assume, in some way or other, the elegance of her aspiration and her desire. But I hope I am not disloyal to the wimpled friends of my childhood, and the best-loved sisters of my

* *The Leonard Feeney Omnibus*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1943.

school days, when I say that a French nun has a rare and almost piquant exquisiteness all her own.. Margaret Mary Alocoque of Lhautcour, Teresa Martin of Liseux, Jane Frances Chantal of Dijon, Madeline-Sophie Barat of Joigny, Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, from the loam of such a garden does she spring, from the pattern of such a spindle is she spun. She is not as versatile in a human and sisterly way as are our American nuns, and I doubt (though let me be subject to correction) if she is quite as serviceable as they are in the hospital, the asylum, or in the classroom. But she is exquisite, continually eager nervous and alert, elusive as a squirrel and sudden as a shadow, more naturally adapted to mystery and the heights of mystic contemplation, always on the point of bursting her bonds and exploding into an angel.

And her quality of other-worldliness is most revealed when she prays out loud. The sound of a French community of nuns singing or reciting their prayers is a low wind of melody, compact and perfect, with a rhythmic roundness and softness that outrivals all music and tests the ear's capacity for esthetic pleasure. There is a common fallacy that the French voice is nasal, because of a series of sounds called "nasals" are recorded in French grammars. It is completely not nasal. It is, if anything, "roof-of-the mouthal," performed with the best parts of the oral structure (parts which we Americans never bring into use) and approximating a state of pure vowelism, wherein consonants are ever so lightly touched, tail syllables often left unpronounced, and negligible e's muted in order to give the throat a full fling at tonal beauty pure and undefiled.

But French is decidedly not a language spoken through the nose. And what are called "nasals" have really been devised because the Gallic ear does not relish the abruptness of an open tone quenched and closed by the lips or tongue. It is for this reason that they have put a-e-i-o-u effects into terminal m and n.

And French voice is loveliest when it is feminine. And it is most feminine when it is virginal. And most virginal when it is cloistered. And most cloistral when it is praising God. You may have your stringed symphony, your operatic ensemble, your extravagant choral society with an Italian maestro beating it into excellence with a baton, but for music give me *Les Religieuses* of Little Slipper Street. In Paris when they are saying farewell to Jesus after *Le Salut*, and I am lifting Him in His gold lunette and putting Him in His silver cradle behind the tabernacle door and the sweet chant of "*Dieu soit béni; béni soit Son Sant Nom,*" in seraphic unison and breathful adoration, thanks Him and bids Him goodnight.

Besides the consolation of saying Mass in Little Slipper Street, there were difficulties and humiliations as well. Especially when one had to read (with an American voice) prayers in French for the First Friday devotions; and especially when one had to say a few words of inquiry to Sister Sacristan (who trembled like a divine butterfly) and that at a time when one is extremely anxious, as I am always before Mass. For it there is one inch of you not at ease, it is impossible to set your body at the proper angle for speaking French correctly. I can do it moderately well if I am if I am not hurried, but if I am hurried I do it slitheringly as on a banana peel. And Sister Sacristan spoke her native tongue with such celerity and elegance, that I forgot

my simplest grammar rules in trying to give swift (*s'il n'y a pas de vitesse ce n'est pas français*) answers to her easiest question.

I remember distinctly the evening when I had to recite the Long Prayer to the Sacred Heart at the First Friday devotions. I wanted to ask Sister Sacristans how many hymns were to be sung at Benediction, and where I was to insert the prayer. Endeavoring to gather speed as I spoke, I bombarded her delicate ear with the following barbarism: "*Ma Soeur, est-ce que les révérends dames chanteront trois chansons pendant le Salut? Et après lequel faut-il parler la prière?*" Which translated from broken French to broken English, would go (and must have sounded to her) something like this: "Sister, is it that the holy girls will sing three songs during the Benediction? And after which one ought I to talk the prayer?"

But my holy memories of six weeks at Little Slipper Street and its consecrated ladies who sing and sigh and suffer for the salvation of the world, are most focused not on the nuns themselves, but on Peter, their inimitable and exotic altar boy.

As everyone knows a nun is not allowed to serve Mass. No woman is. She may, in an emergency, answer the prayers from the other side of the altar rail; but the ritual of the sanctuary and everything connected with it in public worship is hopelessly masculine. There is no such thing as a "priestess" in the Catholic Church, and no such person as an "alter maid." In this usage there is absolutely no question of the superiority of any sex over the other. There is question merely of a liturgical function to be performed according to the prescriptions of Christ, and He for His own reasons, has assigned the role of levite and clerk to us. Women are probably God's best saints, and certainly the Blessed Virgin Mary is His greatest human achievement. But for all that we are runaways at a Crucifixion, the sacerdotal prerogative is one with the sex of Peter, and the Keeper of the Holy of Holies must bear the physiognomy of the fisherman. It was fitting therefore that the Sisters of Little Slipper Street, anxious to have their Holy Mass rubrically (and therefore masculine) perfect, should have scouted the streets and lanes and supplied themselves with a Peter for their daily altar boy.

In choosing Peter (the nuns called him "Pierre," but I called him Peter because it amused him) to be Little Slipper Mass-boy. It was obvious that Reverend Mother Superior and her Council (who are always discreet) outdid themselves in discretion. For of all the wheezy, one-cylindereed, shop-worn and moth-eaten human beings I have ever have ever witnessed, little Paris Peter of *Petit Pantouffle* takes the golden apple.

He had the construction of a ventriloquist's doll, the expression of a snow-man, and the individuality of a suit of clothes on a coat hanger. He smiled as though something were continually hurting him, and walked as though he were riding a bicycle. His hair was the color of dry hay, his eyes the color of dry salmon, and his face the shade of butter-beans. His voice was something terrible and eerie to listen to. It was bass and unnatural beyond his years. He spoke as though he were gargling the low notes of a xylophone. He was fourteen years of age, five

grades behind schedule in school, had flat cheek bones and wide ears and was possessed of that awful accouterment of an over-grown boy, a pre-razor mustache.

Mother Superior, when Peter was made “warden of the cruets” in Little Slipper Chapel, specified that he should come to Mass every morning with a clean shirt, his shoes shined, and his hands and face washed. Peter observed these regulations scrupulously. But anything Mother Superior left unsaid he let undone. And it seems she made no mention of a tooth-brush or that other extreme of personal fastidiousness, soap-and-water behind the ears. He also left his hair uncombed until he arrived in the sacristy. Sister Sacristan was sure to arrange it to her own satisfaction anyhow, when he came (always a minute late) and she greeted him with her usual “*Bonjur. Tsoh, tsoh, Pierre! Toujours en retard!*” So what was the use of a fellow going to a lot of extra bother?

It was a small pageant to see Peter, abetted by the pullings and twistings of Sister Sacristan, getting into his altar clothes. First a big yawn. Then a lurch with your left hand. And, presto! you were inside the gorgeous white cassock which the champion needle-worker at *Petite Pantoufle* had made for the priest’s attendant. Then came the buttoning and unbuttoning of interminable buttons. There were thirty-two down the front all the way from Peter’s chin to Peter’s shoe shine. Peter began at the top, and Sister Sacristan began at the bottom. Theoretically they should have bumped thumbs at Peter’s middle, but Peter wasn’t as fast as a buttoner as Sister Sacristan. His record was ten buttons, to her twenty-two. When he was fairly spry and awake, he did about eight or nine of his share. When he was extra tired (as he usually was) he let her do thirty. I remember distinctly a certain morning when Peter did only one; and that eventually became unbuttoned and had to be rebuttoned by Sister Sacristan, which gave her the score of thirty-two—love, the world’s record in a button contest.

After Peter’s cassock came his investiture in the surplice. This meant another disheveling of hair, and was an added reason why Peter should comb with his fingers on the way to Mass. The surplice was a bit of dream work in lace done by a tubercular nun in the convent infirmary before she coughed herself to eternal sleep. It was riotous with chalices and wheat stems and grapes, with a full figure of Our Lord in the front center, and twelve tiny apostles fringing the edges, a masterpiece of daintiness and devotion. When Peter had surrounded himself with this garment, one almost expected to hear him bark, he looked so much like the wolf playing at Little Red Ridinghood.

But he was not through yet. Next came a gorgeous cape with white ribbons and golden hooks-and-eyes, and fitting Peter (as far as anything could ever fit him) with regal perfection. And last of all, white gloves! (Foolish to wash your hands, but Mother Superior said...). And so appeared half urchin and half angel, Peter squiddled the uncomfortable parts of him, looked seraphically at me, and said silently with his eyes: “*Allez-oop! Hey? Let’s go! Huh?*” We bowed to one another and walked out of the sacristy.

At the Mass proper, Peter was adequate, but no more. He enunciated properly about one tenth of the Latin, and had not the slightest notion why I should wait for him to finish his part in the spoken prayer. He folded his hands unevenly, and seemed fascinated at times by the wavering of a candle, so fascinated that he invariably came late to move the book, and always slipped and juggled it when making the genuflection.

At the Offertory time he sometimes (not often) gave me the water for the wine; and sometimes (very often) went back to the credence table without the lavabo cloth. But one thing Peter could do magnificently was to ring the bell. A good solid substantial jingle came out of the hand chime whenever Peter operated it. And his bell work was always timely and decisive and suited to my word or movement at the altar.

If Mass seemed too long to him (and it invariably did), Peter went over to the side of the sanctuary and sat down. Mother Superior for all her meticulousness never seemed to object to this. I believe the reason was because when Peter sat down, a pillar hid him from the view of the community. In that way the sanctuary was well rid of him while still possessing him rubrically.

When Mass was over Peter gave me a low bow and a nod of approval, whisked off his vestments, dropped them on a chair before Sister Sacristan could come in from clearing the sanctuary, and scooted out of Little Slipper sacristy before the smoke had left the quenched candle tops on the high altar..

You see there was and could forever be only one Peter. I hope I have done full justice and no injury. And now let me crown him with a single laurel and grace him with one encomium. Peter was master of one accomplishment, he was radiant with one divine quality, he had one supreme title to his office; he was innocent. There was in his expression that heavenly sheepishness that smolders in the eyes of the stupid who know no sin. He was the cow who looked at little Jesus in the stall and borrowed enough intelligence to love him.

My blessing on you, Peter, so blithe and baptismal, so dear and dumb. Not I to oust you from your grandeur and your glory. I would I were as little as God' enemy as you are. I would I were as worthy as you to walk into a sanctuary. It was fitting that you should lead me thither mornings when we had Holy Mass at Little Slipper Chapel. It was fitting that you should tell me at the foot of the stairs to go to the altar of God "to God who giveth joy to your youth." It was fitting that you should answer "*misereatur*" to my "*confiteor*." Now it so happened (and this is where my story hopes to beguile you) that during my term at Little Slipper Convent, Peter my curious clerk took desperately sick. It was if I remember rightly, the twentieth day of my term of office at that institution. Altar boys have taken desperately sick before and stories have been written to commemorate the sad affair, but oddly enough it was precisely the occasion of Peter's illness that made his mystic significance at *Maison de la Petite Pantoufle* fully manifest to me.

I heard later that Peter's malady was a combination of fever and colic, caused by eating seven green apples (including skins and seeds) at the *Cirque d'Hiver* where he went one afternoon with a street companion to see *Les Darios*, the funniest clowns in Paris. But whatever was the extent of his indiscretion, Peter came home that night dizzy and in a panic. It did not help matters any, either, when in his mother's absence, he went to the wrong bottle in the pantry (not the essence of rhubarb which his mother always administered for sick headache or pains in the stomach) and blithely swallowed a tablespoonful of furniture polish.

At six that night he was writhing in agony. At seven o'clock he had a chill. At eight he had a chill, a fever and the gripes. At nine o'clock he had the doctor, and that in the life of a poor French family is an event disparate by a hair's breadth from a summons to the undertaker.

Next morning, fully vested, I stood in Little Slipper Chapel sacristy and waited for Peter to come. It was time for Mass, the bell had rung, the nuns had long since assembled, the organ was playing (for oh! The irony of it, it was a feast day), the candles were lit, Peter's altar garments were all fluffed and waiting for him on the vestment case. But the bridegroom tarried, and we listened in vain for the sound of his shuffle on the stair.

Sister Sacristan kept circulating like a bat from the door to the vestment case, trying to control her disappointment and her desperation. When fully five minutes had passed, we realized that Peter was not coming to play his important role in the Holy Sacrifice that day.

At this point Reverend Mother Superior protruded her wimpled head through the sacristy door to see if it was I or Peter who was missing. The two nuns exchanged little silent shrugs of perplexity. Sister Sacristan pointed to Peter's empty clothes on the table; and Mother Superior gave me the signal to go on with Mass alone. Sister Sacristan went speedily ahead of me and transferred the cruets, the dish and the handcloth, from the credence stand to the altar, so that I might serve them to myself, carried the Mass bell to the other side of the altar rail, and when I launched out on my solitary way into the beautiful liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice, it was a strange and feminine voice, soft and indefinite and in the distance, that proclaimed how God to whose altar I desired to go, was a God "Who giveth joy to **her** youth."

When Mass was over and I was back in the sacristy, Sister Sacristan was very much constrained to reveal to me the extent of her anxiety concerning the mysterious defection of her *enfant terrible*. "*Mais vous croyez bien, n'est pas, mon Père,*" she said, "*qu'il soit tombé malade?*" "Nonsense Sister," I replied (and I forget what word I used for "nonsense"), "he has merely overslept this morning, that is all. It is a common affliction with altar boys."

"But no mon Père," she insisted, "he never oversleeps. When first we got him, he used to oversleep, yes. But I taught him to say a prayer every night before he goes to sleep to his Guardian Angel, a prayer to be wakened on time in the morning. It has never failed. He has not been late more than a minute or two since that day."

“Very true sister,” I rejoined with skeptical persistency, “but is it not possible that Peter before retiring last night, forgot his prayer to the Guardian Angel, and so exempted that celestial gentleman of his morning obligation?”

“Even so,” she replied, “our community also says a prayer every night to Peter’s Guardian Angel. We also remind him to wake Peter in time for our Holy Mass, and we did not forget it last night.”

There was no gainsaying this argument. And so I was forced to admit that Peter’s absence must be due to some more serious cause than a mere refusal to get out of bed this morning when his faithful Angel shook him, called in his ear, and tickled his toes with a feather.

The loyal and solicitous nuns were not long in finding out what ailed Peter and why he had deserted them.. After breakfast Reverend Mother Bursar, or somebody equally august and important in the hierarchy of nundom, was deputed to go with her companion to Peter’s home and investigate the matter. It was she who brought back the story of the circus, the seven green apples, and the furniture polish. And it was through her that I was informed next morning of Peter’s serious predicament.

During the next few days Peter’s fever hovered between one hundred and three degrees (the greatest amount of vital activity that had ever taken place within him), Little Slipper Convent was a place sad to visit and pitiful to behold. Big nuns and little nuns, fervent nuns and tepid nuns, nuns ecstatic and nuns matter-of-fact, old nuns in their wheel chairs and radiant young postulants were, one an all alike, cast into the depths of inconsolable gloom.

Their solitary knight, their one virile possession, their lonely Lazarus, their Peter, their rock, was trembling on the verge of another life, and was about to leave them stranded in a dismal world on monotonous femininity. And out of the secret corners of their chaste hearts, the slumbering love they bore their little comrade was discovering itself for the first time, and rising up to plead for him, and asking God to give him pity and protection.

For stupid Peter, slovenly Peter, Peter the mule-eyed, Peter of the slovenly grin and unkempt hair, was linked in their imaginations with the tabernacle. He was part of the furniture of their altar. He was God’s little page-boy who walked in the penumbra of Divine Light. He moved in their memories like a small moth that played and gyrated around the Flame of the Sacred Heart. In his absence everything symbolic and beautiful and ideal about him was remembered, everything un-lovely and ugly and uncouth was forgotten.

In two or three short days Peter began to take on the wonder of s legend in Little Slipper household. Tales were being told of him that never happened. Secrets were being whispered in convent cell and corridors about his prowess in holiness, his gallantry, his sweet expression, and even (God save the mark) his “nice eyes.”

Sister Beatrice of Our Lady's Coronation, whose ailment had hitherto been analyzed by the charitable as "simple-mindedness," and by the literal as "out and out softening of the brain," was beginning to be half believed when she declared that she had been told in a vision that Peter was a heavenly messenger sent to the world in disguise, a Raphael parading as Toby, one of the Seraphim masquerading as a buffoon. At any rate, it was "little brother the ragamuffin," who got tangled up in woman's love, and was eddied and whirled about in its crystal stream as it left its pure source in Little Slipper Convent and started its long journey to the stars.

The longer Peter remained sick abed, the more mythical and alluring became his souvenir. Sister Eloise the convent artist was already making a draft of him for a holy card, and had already schemed him out in her mind as sprouting with wings and aureoled with a halo. Sister Rita Celeste, expert at knitting and embroidery, was threading her needles with yarns of many colors, and preparing to do him in a tapestry for the relics chamber.

Each morning on the top of my vestments I found a note of memento from the community. Monday it was: "*Le révérend Père voudra bien recommander au bon Dieu le petite servant qui souffre.*" Tuesday: "*Prière de ne pas oublier l'enfant gentil qui ne vient plus pur la Messe.*" Each day it was the same plaint, the supplication of Mary and Martha: "Lord he whom Thou lovest is sick!" One morning there was a ten franc note in it and a message (nicely phrased and calculated to relieve me of any simonical scruple) begging that I should offer up the whole Mass on that day for Peter's recovery.

It happened that on that day the *Ordo* allowed me to say a votive, and therefore, if I chose--a Requiem Mass. Only I noticed how scared Sister Sacristan looked when I made a false motion in the direction of the black vestments. The very thought of them made her shudder. She rolled them fearsomely and with dispatch hid them out of sight. And so we had a Mass in white for little Peter, a *Missa pro infirmo*, and when I came to the special prayer in the Collect, I enunciated the words "*pro famulo Tuo Petro,*" with special feeling and emphasis, because I knew that seventy pairs of ears were, with awful attention, listening under their linens.

But I shall keep you in suspense no longer. Peter did not die. Prayer prevailed over the colic. Novenas, votive candles, hours of watching before the Blessed Sacrament, aspirations, promises of greater fidelity to religious discipline, and all that holy artillery that nuns train on the rampart of Heaven when they seek to sway the mighty Will of God, were once more successful. The door post was sprinkled with the blood of the lamb. The avenging angel menaced, but did not smite. Peter got better and better. And finally he got all better. And Little Slipper Convent was spared its most woeful tragedy.

As luck would have it (and I was very restless and in suspense in the meantime), Peter made his reappearance, in Little Slipper sanctuary the very last day of my assignment there. To have been obliged to leave and not to have seen him again is such a withering thought that I shall dismiss it at once with a cold shiver.

Precisely at twenty minutes past six on the last day of my incumbency, the old familiar shoes came shuffling up the pebbled walk. We heard his twist on the door-knob. And in walked our Peter, a little thinner perhaps, and a little paler, but sound and substantial and ready for work once more.

Sister Sacristan swooped on him like a mother bird who has found her stray fledgling under a hedge. She fairly cackled and cooed with delight as she shook him and felt of him and devoured him with her eyes. Mother Superior and her Council had to troop in to see him too and be witnesses to his resurrection.

Never did the summons bell for Mass wring so vigorously as on the day of Peter's revival. And indeed it had no need to toll at all, for the rumor went like wild-fire through the convent that he was seen coming up the gravel walk, and every nun was in her place in chapel a twentieth of an hour ahead of time.

Mother Superior and her whole Council had to assist him to get into his altar clothes. Each one had a little tug at him in her own way. Sister Sacristan buttoned all his buttons. Mother Bursar tied his ribbons, and Mother Superior herself fashioned his golden hooks and eyes.

Then came a solemn order from Mother Superior that he was not to kneel at all during the Mass, except for the few minutes of Consecration. The Bishop's throne and prie-dieu were arranged for him near the credence table. He must be weaned back to the altar little by little, and with no strain on the progress of his convalescence. It was sufficient for that day that he should just be there. The sanctuary must reassimilate him gradually. His physical reality was enough to begin with, after the weeks of loneliness without him. Just Peter and his cassock and his surplice and his cape and his white gloves. On that foundation love would begin again, and fancy would rest her slender ladder reaching to the sky..

When Mass was over (which Peter seemed to weather without any indications of a relapse) he was invited (and this was an unheard-of privilege) to take his *petit déjeuner* with me in the chaplain's dining-room. As you know the French *petit déjeuner* is very *petit* indeed. It consists of coffee and a bun. There is sometimes a little butter and a little jam. On this eventful morning Sister Refectorian made it as fulsome as a *petit déjeuner* is ever allowed to be and still retain its identity. There was a lot of butter and a lot of jam. There were reams of bread and dozens of buns, and the coffee was extravagantly hot.

During the breakfast I had many thing to say to Peter. I was awfully glad to see him again. He grinned. I said we were afraid he would die. He grinned at this too. I said we missed him very much when he was sick, and all the nuns prayed very hard for him. This remark made Peter grin once more. I told him it was lucky he got back on that very morning, because I was leaving Paris in the afternoon, and I would have hated to go and not to have seen him again. Peter gave me another grin and went on eating. Then I told him an American kiddie joke. I proceeded to tell him about the American Indians and Wild West and Buffalo Bill. This set him

grinning again. It was time for me to be up and off, so I shook hands with Peter and bade him farewell. He nodded and grinned me a nice good-bye. I caught his face grinning in the mirror as I went out the door.

I left him in the chaplain's refectory dropping his fifth lump of sugar into his third bowl of coffee, and putting his ninth knifeful of butter on his fourth slice of bread. And it will not be indecorous to mention it, during the course of our *petit déjeuner*, a certain salivary teaspoon made thirteen separate journeys from Peter's open mouth to a bottle of orange jam.

I shall be forgiven for having counted such things accurately. For nothing Peter did ever seemed to me unimportant. And in my memories of Little Slipper Convent I wish no shred or part of him ever to be forgotten.
