

Grace Wrapped in a Black Shawl

Seventy-five years ago Dad sold his car for \$25 because he couldn't afford the ten cents a gallon for gasoline. "The Great Depression" was upon us; people everywhere fought against the discouragement, despondency, even despair accompanying severe financial distress. My family was no different. Dad lost his customary good humor, eventually sinking into frustration and bitterness.

After years of hard work and sacrifice, Mom and Dad had invested in a small corner store because Dad had not been happy working in the dark, foul-smelling factories of Detroit. Mom had encouraged him to dream, to hope, to reach for a better life. "Fishers' Grocery" was the answer to their prayer, they thought.

It was a happy little place, with our living quarters—barely adequate—in the back. I, the oldest child, found excuses to run into the store just to see what was going on. Of course, if I managed to coax a few pieces of candy from Mom or Dad, that was a bonus.

But the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and its consequences shattered their dreams. Struggling to make ends meet, staying up late into the night planning how best to survive, Mom and Dad felt fear sit like a dark cloud on the horizon of their lives. What could they do, they wondered, to take care of their children and run the store successfully? Despite their worries, however, they responded with typical kindness and concern when customers asked for extensions on settling their accounts. Little green-covered books recorded hundreds of dollars' worth of credit given. Years later, my brother Tom and I practiced our addition by computing the amounts owed.

"Dad," I asked as I fingered the pile of books, "why did you let them run up such big bills?"

He answered gruffly in an effort to hide the lump in his throat, "I had food on the shelves, and they had none. I couldn't send them away hungry, could I?"

Although Mom, always deeply religious, maintained her trust in God through the heartbreaking loss of the store, the shattering of his dreams made Dad angry and bitter. Morosely he cleaned out the store and hauled a pitiful

collection of furniture to my grandmother's house, into which we moved, to stay "until times got better." Every day Dad went out looking for work; on good days he returned home with fifty cents after spending hours painting someone's house, wall-papering rooms, or cleaning attics and basements. No work was too menial, no job was beneath him as he put aside his pride, begging for a chance to support his family by honest work.

The one thing lacking, however, was his former joyous Catholicism. His boyhood and early adult years had been marked by regular and fervent attendance at Holy Mass, Benediction, and Sunday Afternoon Vespers. Later, a valued, well-liked member of the Young Men's Club, he participated in religious and social activities, bringing smiles and good humor with him. But now, he seldom smiled outside the family; he was too dejected to associate with former friends, who had nothing to offer except pity and empty clichés. And the Church, he thought, was no better.

One day after Sunday Mass, my sister Barbara, prompted by Mom, climbed up on Dad's knee and, with all the sweet

innocence of a five-year-old, asked him, "Daddy, did you hear what Father Cox said? He reminded everybody that next week we have Holy Name Sunday, and all the men of the parish should sit in the front, then receive Holy Communion together. Will you, Daddy; will you, huh?"

For once he didn't smile at his favorite, the baby of the family. Instead he growled, "I'll go to Communion when **I want to**, not when someone else tells me to!" And that was that!

I remember one December I accompanied Mom as she went Christmas shopping: new underwear for everyone. On the way out of the store, she stopped and "Ooo-ed" at a twenty-five cent table-top tree. Hopefully, she counted the coins in her small purse to see if she could afford it, and smiled ecstatically when she could. Then, happy with our meager purchases, we sang Christmas carols all the way home.

(It's strange, but of all the other Christmases to come—"better days" marked by gifts of toys, books, candy, etc. I

remember that Christmas best—the one with gaily wrapped packages of underwear, along with an orange, under a scraggly little tree.)

By this time my brother and I were going to school—to a Catholic School, Mom insisted, over Dad's objections. Somehow we had scraped together nickels and dimes to pay the tuition. In case of a heavy snowstorm, Tom and I took turns going to school because we had to share the only pair of boots. One day during a particularly cold spell, Tom came home with a big black woolen scarf wrapped around his head and shoulders.

"What in the world--?" Mom wondered.

Tom told her that Sister Aquinata had wrapped her own shawl around him, lest he become too cold on his way home.

Mom's eyes filled with tears as she and I carefully unwound the precious coverings from my brother. "God bless her!" Mom breathed in gratitude as she draped the knitted scarf over a chair.

Later that evening, when Dad returned from his daily search for work in the neighborhood, Tom greeted him with an exuberant, "Guess what, Daddy? I wore Sister's shawl today!"

After Mom re-told the whole story, Dad could only stare, fascinated, at the big black scarf, still carefully arranged in neat folds. The Shroud of Turin could not have been revered more.

Then his eyes glistened as he swallowed hard. "Boy," he said, "someone must love you to be so concerned about you!"

That seemingly insignificant incident was enough to melt his heart. Knowing that his son had been cared for by one of the Sisters, that she had faced the cold herself in order to protect a child, broke down the wall of bitterness and resentment against God that had been tormenting him.

He wiped his tears with the shawl, then turned a smiling face to his family. "Let's say a prayer of thanksgiving," he said.

(This true incident from her childhood deeply affected the writer, and she was inspired to become Sister Mary [Thaddeus] Fisher, a member of the Dominican Sisters in Racine, Wisconsin. Retired from teaching after 53 years in various classrooms, Sister has published a book, [My Heart in Hiding.](#))