

THE STORY OF MY VOCATION

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My original name was Daniel Cooper. My parents were Job and Elizabeth (formerly Scally) Cooper. My father was a non-Catholic and by trade a potter's jiggerer. There were eleven children to this marriage - seven boys and four girls. I was the fifth child, so I had three brothers and a sister older than I and three brothers and three sisters younger.

I was born at No 36 Windmill Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, England, the 16th May, 1909. I was baptised Daniel in the Church of the Sacred Heart, Hanley, by the Parish Priest, Revd. Mathias O'Rourke, the 30th May, 1909, my god-parent being Mary Shemelt, my mother's cousin. I made my First Holy Communion on Passion Sunday 1915 when I was six. I was later confirmed in the same church by Archbishop McIntyre of Birmingham on 7th November, 1921. I attended the Hanley Catholic Boys' School from Infants to Standard Seven, the highest class in the school and I left when I was thirteen, the minimum age for leaving school. I was employed for about nine months in a toy dhop; one of the curates, Fr. McCormack, told me one morning after I had served his Mass that he had seen me arranging the shop window and he thought I was the finest toy in it. From the age of eight I was a member of the boys' choir and sang at High Mass each Sunday as well as at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament every Thursday and Sunday evening and at the Stations of the Cross in Lent. When I was ten I began to serve Mass each morning. The Parish Priest, Canon O'Rourke would have no one else but me to serve his Mass.

In my last year at school, early 1922, Br. Lucien, Recruiter for the District of Nantes, being on a recruiting tour, came to Hanley. The P.P. brought him to school and he spoke to the boys of the top class. I had had the desire to become a priest from the time of my first Holy Communion. My eldest sister in fact, insisted that I become a priest. However, all sorts of difficulties arose to prevent this happening. Urged by the P.P. I had an interview with Br. Lucien and thereafter I wrote to him regularly for about twelve months and he would write to me. At last I received a letter from him saying that I had been accepted into the Juniorate at Lembecq in Belgium if I was prepared to go to the Missions. I jumped at the idea in spite of the fact that I still didn't know what the Brothers really were. Having written to him that I would be delighted he wrote back telling me that he would meet me at Euston Station., London, on 23rd April at 4 p.m.

In most stories the remark "the rest was easy" was not true in my case. There were several hurdles to jump. While my mother and the P.P. were most encouraging, I knew it would be hopeless to ask my father's consent and, in fact, not a word must be breather to him about it. This created all sorts of difficulties. Where was I to get the clothes I needed? Who would pay my fare to London and to Menbecq? Who would pay me fees? But Providence came to the rescue. The good P.P. stepped in. If my mother gave her consent, which she did willingly, although the consequences for her would be very unpleasant, the P.P. would pay all my expenses. A few days later, I served his Mass, at the altar of St. Joseph, for the last time. It was the feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph, 23rd April, 1923.

I had never before travelled farther than the fifty miles to Manchester but London is 150 miles from Stoke-on-Trent. I was to travel alone, but was I? On the same train a school-mate of mine was being accompanied by his mother to the seminary at Hastings on the South Coast. I too, travelled under her care as far as Euston Station where Br. Lucien was waiting for me; only, he was not alone; there were three other boys with him, also destined for Lembecq. Two were from Newcastle-on-Tyne, Patrick Gill and Lawrence Foster, the latter at present Bursar at Kingsington, London, and the other from Walsall, Birmingham, his name, Charlie Dickens. Later four boys from my own school went to Les Vaubelets. Br. Lucien took us by cab to St. Joseph's College, Beulah Hill, where Br. Chrystantian welcomed us and where we stayed a couple of nights. The next day we were taken to see the sights of London including Westminster Cathedral and the Abbey. On the following day we travelled to Dover where we caught the ferry to Ostende and thence by train to Bruselles where we caught a local train to Lembecq. At Lembecq we were met at the entrance to the Maison St. Joseph by quite a welcoming party; Br. Anacletus, Assistant, Br. Athanase-Emile, at that time Director-General and later on to be my sponsor when I received the Habit, Br. Ricardien, Director of Juniors and several English-speaking Brothers. For the first time I experienced the "accolade" on both cheeks, mine both so tender and the others having at least a day's beard growth. I could still feel my cheeks smarting several days afterwards. The reason for such a welcome was that we were the first English boys to go to Lembecq and as such it was quite an experiment and we were the "guinea pigs". I did hear that some Irish boys had been tried but the experiment hadn't worked. They probably thought the same thing would happen with the English. It nearly did. Indeed, six months later, when Br. Lucien called again at Beulah Hill and told Br. Chrystantian that the four English boys were still at Lembecq, Br. Chrystantian declared that it was a first class miracle. And it was a most extraordinary experience. English, Italian, Spanish, German, Polish, Czech and Slovaks and several other nationals including French boys who spoke Patois were supposed to speak French whether they knew French or not and were penalised for not doing so. I remember Charlie Dickens, when accused of speaking in a foreign language, he stoutly denied it saying that he had been speaking English, and this language was his own. Let it be said that two of these four English boys are still, in this year of grace 1981, Brothers of the Christian Schools, as well as others who followed them to Lembecq; one was until recently, Director of De La Salle College, Amman, Jordan. Many pages about my Juniorate, Novitiate at Lembecq, Scholasticate at Dover, and Missionary work in Sri Lanka, but as this is only the story of my vocation, I must conclude with an account of the trouble I left behind me in Stoke-on-Trent.

I must mention that my father whose name was Job, and this name is significant for he belonged to a Primitive Methodist family, was totally opposed to my becoming a priest or a brother or anything of that sort just as he had opposed, unsuccessfully, my eldest sister's going to the convent to become a nun. My father and mother were married in the Registry Office since he wouldn't hear of being married in the Catholic Church. However it was a true marriage in the eyes of the Church, for it took place in 1900, long before Ne Temere. He wanted all the boys who would be born to be Protestants; all the girls could be Catholics. This did not work out according to his wish for all eleven children were baptised Catholics and went to the Catholic School. When he failed to win on this score, he wanted them christened with Biblical names like his own. He also failed in this, for they were all baptised with Saint's names, Joseph, James, Wilfrid, Mary, Elizabeth, etc. I was the one exception. My father's only brother, my uncle, was Daniel, and because of this and because she said it was not such a bad name, my mother agreed to my being christened Daniel.

It was some weeks before my father found out that I had gone away. Periodically I used to go and stay with my maternal grandparents in Manchester for weeks at a time, so there was nothing unusual in my being absent from home. However, eventually, he had to be told. Then it was as though all hell had been let loose. Not only had I left home without his permission, but I had left the country. He would go to the police and say I had been kidnapped, he would move heaven and earth to have me brought back! It was not a happy home for several days. Eventually, my mother persuaded him to go and see the P.P. Yes, he would go and he would play "merry hell". It is often said that in England "the March winds come in like a lion and go out like a lamb". So it was with my father's interview with the P.P., Canon O'Rourke. He returned home satisfied and reconciled. Such was the kindness and skill of this Irish priest. Twelve months later my father was received into the Church and received the Sacraments. He agreed to have the marriage blessed by the Church and four years later in 1927, he came with my mother to Dover to see me off when I was leaving for distant Ceylon. I was just turned 18. My father died in 1941 as a result of a fall while fixing the blackout on the windows. By this time I was in Australia. My mother died soon afterwards. So 17th October 1927 was the last time I saw my parents on earth; I have every confidence, that in God's mercy and kindness I shall see them again in heaven.

Gratitude is expressed to Br. Michael for putting this unusual story into print at the request of the Visitor of Ireland. It is a genuine "truth is stranger than Fiction" piece and was printed in the Irish District Newsletter of June 1980. Few have sagas like this to relate but you may like to share why you are with us. It would help others.

Generous Donations of Time and Typing Expertise by Mrs. Pat Waters, Mrs. Robyn Whelan, Mrs. de la Torre and Mrs. Maree Haigh have made this edition possible. Please remember them in your prayers.

To our contributors we also express gratitude for your interest and the trouble you have taken. It is hoped that all find their efforts helpful. Reactions of any kind would be appreciated.
