

# St. Joseph and the Rationalist



Gerrit van Honthorst, *Childhood of Christ* c. 1620

**T**he great Revolutionary War hero, Ethan Allen, was renowned for his bravery, energy and leadership. Exemplifying the intense prejudices of 18th century Vermont, he was a devout Rationalist who detested Catholicism and all organized religion. He even self-published a book entitled, *Reason, The Only Oracle of Man*. It didn't sell well. Overall, in many respects, he was a great man. But what he should be best known for — and what very likely he is best known for in Heaven — is his daughter Fanny, who was only 5 years old when he died.

Born in 1784, she was described as having “inherited much of the energy and decision of her father’s character,” and of being “uncommonly beautiful” and possessing “the dignity and ease of ... manners [which] gave quiet evidence to the refinement and loveliness of her character.” From her early childhood, Fanny’s family trained her to be a Rationalist and skeptic like her father.

At the age of 12, however, she had a staggering

experience — one that no secular oracle of reason could explain. She described it:

*“... I was walking one day on the banks of the river which flowed not very far from our house. ... Suddenly I beheld emerging from the river an animal more resembling a monster than a fish, for it was of extraordinary size and horrid shape. It was coming directly toward me and sent a chill of terror through me. What aggravated my peril was that I could not turn away from this monster. I seemed paralyzed and rooted to the ground. While I was in this torturing situation, I saw advancing toward me a man with a venerable and striking countenance, wearing a brown cloak and carrying a staff in his hand. He took hold of my arm gently and gave me strength to move while he said most kindly to me: “My child, what are you doing here? Hasten away.” I then ran as fast as I could. When I was some distance off, I turned to look ... but I could see him nowhere.”*

Her mother sent a servant to find the man and thank him, but he had disappeared — never to be

seen again in the area — though Fanny continued to look for him over the years.

At the age of 21, she asked her mother and stepfather for permission to study French in Montreal. Surprisingly, she found herself interested in learning about Catholicism. Her mother and stepfather warily agreed to let her go, but insisted she be Baptized as an Anglican beforehand to prevent her from “crossing the Tiber.”

“I was at this time an infidel”, she later said. “I had read only novels and the writings of rationalists, and had heard nothing but evil spoken of the Catholic Church.” She treated her Baptism like a joke, laughing throughout the Rite, and received a sharp rebuke from the minister.

In 1807, Fanny became a student at the boarding school of the Congregation de Notre Dame in Montreal, a community of nuns living among and serving the poor and destitute.

There, she had another wonderful and mysterious experience. One of the sisters asked her to place flowers on the Altar and to acknowledge in some way the Real Presence in the tabernacle. She readily agreed to arrange the flowers but did not intend to acknowledge

something she did not believe to be true. Yet, when trying to enter the chapel and approach the Altar, she found herself physically but invisibly blocked, until when — there and then — she was given the grace to believe in the Real Presence, and fell on her knees, and adored Him.

After two very mysterious events in her life, that defied any natural explanation, it became clear to her that the only rational explanation was that they were of the supernatural order. And, that the only rational response was conversion.

Thus, a true daughter of the so-called Enlightenment, and the most unlikely covert in Vermont, found herself becoming a Catholic. She received instruction and was re-baptized. On receiving her First Communion, she decided to become a nun. She went home to announce her conversion and her intention to become a religious sister.

Unsurprisingly, her family objected. Her mother and stepfather asked her to wait a year before making a decision. They tried to change her mind with suitors and big parties. They threatened to cut her off financially. She, however, remained steadfast. At the end of the year, her parents relented and allowed her to return to Montreal in the company of her mother.

As Fanny hadn't yet decided which religious community to join, she and her mother visited various churches. At the city's oldest hospital, the Hotel Dieu de Montreal, her decision was made — or rather had already been made for her. Stopping in wonder before the painting of Jesus, Mary and Joseph above the altar, she pointed to the figure of Joseph and told her mother that he was the man who saved her from the monster she had seen as a child. “Oh great St. Joseph,” she exclaimed, “it is indeed you, the foster father of Jesus, the husband of Mary, who came to save me from that monster, to preserve me from death that I might enjoy the benefit of knowing, loving, and serving my God. It is right here, mother, it is with the sisters of St. Joseph that I wish to spend the rest of my life.”

Fanny, now Sister Frances Margaret, took her vows on May 18, 1811, in a chapel filled with American friends coming to see the bewildering sight of Ethan Allen's daughter becoming a Catholic nun. Spending



Sister Frances Margaret (Fanny Allen) 1784-1819

the rest of her life working as a nurse in the hospital's apothecary, she cared for American soldiers wounded during the War of 1812 and interpreted for English-speaking patients. She died of tuberculosis in 1819 at the age of 34.

After her death, several family members and friends, inspired by her witness, became Catholics. Her former fiancé helped build the first Catholic church in Burlington, Vermont. One of her brothers-in-law, and a longtime family friend, also followed her into the Catholic Church. The Anglican minister who had attempted to Baptize her also converted as did his married son, Victor. Victor joined the Society of Jesus, Jerusha, his wife became a Visitation nun, and eventually all their children joined religious orders.

We live in times where we can often sense mysterious, menacing shapes moving beneath the surface of current events — monsters ready to burst to the sur-

face to wreak havoc. Fanny's story is a gift to us, indeed a revelation of our need to seek St. Joseph's patronage, his spiritual fatherhood. Pope Leo XIII, Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Francis as well as many saints all exhort us to do so and consider his assistance as absolutely crucial for the Church today. He stands ready to help us in our great need to defend the Church, to defend Fatherhood and Family, and to inspire the re-evangelization of our beloved nation and the world. Let us go to St Joseph and pray:

*St Joseph, "Most beloved father, dispel the evil of falsehood and sin. ... Graciously assist us from heaven in our struggle with the powers of darkness. And just as once you saved the Child Jesus from mortal danger, so now defend God's holy Church [our nation, and us] from the snares of [our] enemies and from all adversity."*



## Transformation During Great Lent

Throughout our Maronite Season of Great Lent, there is a movement within the liturgy towards conversion and reconciliation with our Heavenly Father.

The theme is introduced with the first Sunday of Lent, Cana Sunday, which focuses on our Lord's first miracle at Cana where He changed water into wine. That this is a strange way to start a penitential season should tip us off that there is more here than meets the eye. We are to approach Lent as a time of transformation through our Lord's grace working within us.

The following five Sundays leading up to Hosanna (aka Palm) Sunday and Passion Week are a series of meditations on our Lord's various healings, all allegories of the destructive power of sin and the mercy of God. Indeed, His mercy is especially highlighted in the central Sunday of the Season: The Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the only Sunday in Lent

dedicated to a parable.

On the day preceding the great feast of the Resurrection, the Maronite Church invites us to pause for a moment and ask for forgiveness. This is at the heart of the Prayer of Forgiveness, celebrated on the Saturday of the Light, only hours away from the Easter Vigil.

With the Prayer of Forgiveness, intentionally placed the day after Great Friday of the Crucifixion, we complete the theme of transformation. After 7 weeks of meditating on the bondage of sin and the mercy of God, after 40 days of fasting and penance, we come to the crucial step before God's grace can transform our lives: asking His pardon and the pardon of all whom we have offended. It is a fitting end to the season of Great Lent and the beginning of a renewed life in Christ.

