

A Narrow Time

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Jean McCall Oesterle was 90 years old when she died on March 7, on the old-calendar feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose name she added to her own when she entered the Church more than 60 years ago. She and her husband, John, who died in 1977, belonged to that generation of converts who came into the Church during the 1930s and, in quiet or flamboyant ways, had a lasting effect on Catholic culture.

By and large, this generation was converted on campuses; the University of Chicago was a seedbed of conversions, as it is becoming again with *Lumen Christi*, the lay Catholic organization so ably directed by Thomas Levergood. It was the revival of the liberal arts and the great books programs at Chicago that proved to be the catalyst back then. Chicago's great books luminary, Mortimer Adler, who was instrumental in so many conversions, including those of the Oesterles, turned 100 before he himself made the big move to Rome.

The Oesterles came to the University of Notre Dame, where I teach, from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1954. They were both graduates of Laval University in Québec City, and their mentor had been Charles DeKoninck, a brilliant and charismatic Thomist whose students fanned out over Canada and the United States. Although they were quintessentially teachers, both Oesterles served as editors of the *New Scholasticism*, a Thomist Review. John wrote several books and many articles, while Jean increasingly devoted herself to the self-effacing task of translating.

A few years ago, *On Evil*, her translation of Aquinas's massive discourse on evil, appeared in print. That this devout Third Order Dominican and daily communicant, wearing her trademark black mantilla, should devote decades of her life to translating a work on evil seemed delightfully incongruous. But if you said that to her, she would instruct you on the difference between *malum ut verum* and *malum ut malum*, knowing about it and doing it.

She was translating another text of Aquinas when illness struck a year ago. After that, she began serving her purgatory in a nursing home, her memory going gradually, dementia clouding her brilliant mind. Visiting her, one was reminded of Emily Dickinson's deathbed poems:

We waited while she passed,
It was a narrow time.

Scholars of the ages of faith kept a skull on their desks to serve as a memento mori; for ours, we can visit nursing homes. One passes among the wheelchairs, down corridors where aged men and women stare listlessly at nothing. *Their ancient glittering eyes*. The first time I wondered about it, I asked, "Jean, do you know who I am?" She looked at me for a moment and then said, "Don't you know?"

The Oesterles were two of the best people I knew. When John Oesterle died, it occurred to me that I had never heard him speak ill of anyone. That disqualified

him as an Irishman, of course, but much the same could be said of Jean, with the qualification that she was Scottish in origin and had to be allowed a few Celtic asides. After John's death at age 65, she continued to come daily to her campus office, where she sat smoking Benson & Hedges cigarettes and turning Aquinas into elegant English. She had become a Catholic, but she still had her Protestant work ethic.

What could be more purgatorial for such a person than to lose the capacity to read and the knack of knitting together the moments of time, to have vague memories of duties to be done and not remember what they are? Jean sometimes reminded me of the shoemaker in *A Tale of Two Cities*, who sticks to his last long after the effort makes sense.

Jean prayed for the grace of a happy death. I doubt that she ever dreamed how her prayer would be answered. She accepted the death she was given. Perhaps for many of us, our flame will flicker and grow dim until it finally gutters in a nursing home. Young or old, sick or well, our lives are in the hands of God.

Jean lies next to John in Cedar Grove Cemetery at Notre Dame, home at last. She outlived most of her generation. The quest that led her as a young woman to the Church, the life-long journey animated by the grace of faith, and the days of prayer and study all passed through the final test of a nursing home. It was a single, uninterrupted journey. May she rest in peace.