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Father Richardson: Some Incidents in his Early Life

BY

JOHN RICHARDSON, C.M.

In 1913 when James W. Richardson was four years old, his family moved from the cathedral parish in Dallas, Texas, to a new home erected only several blocks away from the newly established Vincentian Center in Dallas: Holy Trinity parish and school, and the University of Dallas and Dallas Academy. This proximity blossomed into a warm association with the Daughters of Charity who were responsible for young James' parochial school education, and with the Vincentian priests who provided his secondary education at Dallas Academy.

The intellectual and spiritual influence of the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians was deep and lasting. In September 1925, a few months after receiving his high school diploma at the age of sixteen, James left home to enter the Congregation's novitiate at Perryville, Missouri. While in later years acknowledging his indebtedness to all the Daughters of Charity and Vincentians for his early formation, he singled out Father Thomas Powers as a special model and source of encouragement of his vocation.

James (as he was always called in the family) was the fourth child of Patrick and Mary Walsh Richardson. He had two older sisters and one older brother, three younger sisters and three younger brothers. The brother next in line after James died in infancy, a tragedy that left such an impression on the two-year old that he often spoke of it throughout the remainder of his life. Within two years of his entry into the novitiate, his two older sisters followed him into religious life, Mary Rose to the Daughters of Charity and Elizabeth to the Ursulines. His youngest brother, John, followed him by entering the Congregation in 1942.

James's mother used to express her surprise and pleasure at the gentle disposition her son developed by the time of his ordination in 1933. During his pre-adolescent years he had the most voluble temper and resolute stubbornness of all of her children.

Although James enjoyed tennis and swimming as an adolescent, he was a stronger student than athlete. One of his Vincentian math-



The Richardson Family, Dallas, Texas, 1925.
James Richardson is on the far right, second row.

ematics instructors at Dallas Academy later in life freely admitted that this student knew the subject much better than his teacher who took advantage of this situation by adroitly asking James to answer tough questions raised by the class which the instructor could not handle. There is no record that James had employed the same stratagem a few years later when he, as a scholastic from Perryville, was assigned for one year to teach high school English and mathematics at the Congregation's minor seminary, Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

Before ordination James had some vague intimations from the provincial that his first assignment as a priest would be to the Chinese mission. Missionary service, which he always valued very highly, was not to be his, however, until he was assigned to the Maralal seminary in Kenya almost fifty years later. Rather than China in 1933, he was sent to Rome where he completed his doctorate in canon law in 1936.

He then returned to Perryville as a seminary faculty member for the next three years. During much of this period he was also pressed into acting as director of students, a position which he regularly reminded his charges that he was filling only as a substitute.

The archbishop of Los Angeles asked the Vincentians to assume direction of his newly founded Saint John's Seminary at Camarillo in 1939. James was not only a charter faculty member there but was also given responsibilities in the richly endowed Doheny Library which was adjacent to the seminary. Librarianship, coupled with curatorship of highly valued rare books and manuscripts, opened a new intellectual challenge to the young priest. During summers and other relatively free times he pursued this new career with great interest and determination. One summer he traveled most of the way across the country to study library science at the University of Chicago.

James's assumption of much greater responsibilities was not foreseen in all quarters. His first superior and rector at Camarillo, Father William P. Barr, who earlier had served twice as provincial of the Western Province, once remarked that the reserve and modesty of this young canonist/librarian were such that it was most unlikely that he would ever be given leadership positions in the Congregation. The reserve and modesty, however, hid a stronger determination, as shown by one of the notable incidents in his life at Saint John's Seminary. Bishop Charles Buddy of San Diego attempted to remove an irremovable pastor, who appealed to Archbishop John J. Cantwell of Los Angeles—San Diego had only recently been detached from Los Angeles. The pastor was seeking an ecclesiastical trial. Cantwell contacted Barr, who asked James to take the case, which he won. Buddy wrote a denunciation of James to Barr, who in a strongly worded letter defended his faculty member. The bishop retaliated by removing his seminarians from Saint John's and establishing his own seminary. Perhaps with a great deal of literary and historical license James could be considered one of the founders of that seminary.

The twenty-nine years he spent in California between 1939 and 1968 gave James the opportunity to assume increasing responsibility, from faculty to seminary rector to first vice-provincial of the Vice-Province of Los Angeles. Perhaps of greater importance, it also enabled him to form the diocesan clergy, to be a valued counselor to priests and bishops, and to develop close friendships with many lay people with whom there was a deep and abiding affection and respect.

Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God but let it be with the strength of our arms and with the sweat of our brows.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Priests of the Mission, undated)

So very often many acts of love of God, of complacency, of benevolence, and such interior affections and practices, although very good and very desirable, are yet to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Priests of the Mission, undated)