

King Had a Dream, What's Your Dream?

I graduated from Saint Michael's College 45 years ago on 6-6-66. The popular song my first year of college was Peter, Paul and Mary's big hit, "If I had a hammer" which was written by Pete Seeger. *"If I had a hammer I'd hammer in the morning, I'd hammer in the evening, all over this land. I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning, I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land."* But hammer as we might, my four years witnessed racial unrest, urban riots, and violent killings.

While Governor George Wallace prevented Blacks from enrolling in white schools during my sophomore year of college, Reverend King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. President John Kennedy was assassinated and Selma's Bloody Sunday occurred my junior year. Despite these tragedies courageous individuals like Father Maurice Ouellet kept "the dream" of King alive.

The lives of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Father Maurice Ouellet as well as the history of the Edmundite Missions illustrate repeatedly that the abiding faith, enduring hope, and untiring love of committed individuals will transform tragedy and death into victory and life. God repeatedly makes a way, when there appears to be no way, by using ordinary men and women to do extraordinary things.

King's life (1929-1968) and Ouellet's life (1927-2011) intersected during the Civil Rights movement in Selma in the 1960s. Their dreams created a vision of greatness that continues to challenge us today. As the hymn says, *"we're pressing on, not looking back, knowing nothing can hold us down, because nothing do we lack."*

King had a dream! Ouellet had a dream! The founder of the Edmundite Missions had a dream! What's your dream?

I.

Maurice Ouellet was born in St. Albans, Vermont. He was one of nine children and witnessed incredible poverty after the Great Depression. In the seventh grade Maurice watched a home movie made by Father Francis Casey who founded the Edmundite Missions in Selma in 1937 – 75 years ago this year. Father Casey's film captured the terrible hardships, the dire poverty and the many needs of the poor Blacks living in Alabama. Ouellet admired the Edmundites. Like Christ and his own father, who were carpenters, Maurice saw Edmundites doing what Christ had done.

Edmundite priests and brothers and the Sisters working with them were building lives and homes, healing the sick, feeding and clothing the hungry, bringing hope, love and

good news. Ouellet's childhood dream was: become an Edmundite priest like Father Casey and go to Selma to serve the Black community. His dream became a reality immediately after his ordination in 1952.

It may surprise you but Father Ouellet only served 5 years in Selma. He served one year as assistant pastor and returned some years later to serve four years as pastor. His pastorate ended shortly after the "Bloody Sunday" in March 1965 and while his tenure might seem brief, his Selma experience profoundly affected him for the rest of his life.

Had he not left Selma and spent most of his active apostolic years in education and pastoral assignments fewer individuals would have embraced a deep concern for ending racism and for fostering social justice.

Maurice would not turn back. He had made his vow to the Lord. He would find new ways and new Jordan streams. He kept his mind stayed on the dream.

King had a dream. Ouellet had a dream. What's your dream?

II.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "*We are not makers of history. We are made by history.*" King's non-violent campaign for civil rights had made Selma ground zero in the fight to gain voting rights for Blacks. That significant moment in history – that haunting Bloody Sunday – made Ouellet a life-long advocate of social justice and an outspoken critic of racism.

Deeply troubled Black Catholics of Selma filled Saint Elizabeth's Church the morning of March 7, 1965. Their hearts were heavy because Jimmie Lee Jackson had died as a result of injuries he sustained at the hands of authorities in nearby Marion, Alabama. Jackson had been part of a dangerous freedom march. The march was more dangerous than most because it took place at nighttime.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference rarely staged marches at night. Too many things could happen. Too many things could not be seen. The group had hardly stepped away from the church before they were stopped by the local police chief and state troopers. The marchers were instructed to turn around. As one of the marchers knelt and began praying suddenly the streetlights went out.

As if on cue, the police and troopers began beating the marchers while a crowd of white onlookers leaped on the press, spraying the TV camera lenses with paint and assaulting the reporters. It was mayhem. The marchers broke ranks and tried fleeing back

through the darkness to the church. There was screaming and blood on the pavement from head wounds. Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was a twenty-six-year-old Army veteran, ran with his grandfather to a nearby café but state troopers followed them in and shot him in the stomach. While he managed to stagger from the building, he collapsed in the street and was left there for a half hour before local police picked him up and brought him to the county infirmary. Late that night he was transferred to Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma.

Jackson was in such critical shape that he couldn't even speak when he was brought to "Good Sam". While the Black nurses and the Sisters of St. Joseph tried to save his life, he was too far gone.

Whatever words Father Ouellet spoke that Sunday at Mass were certainly inadequate to respond to the shattered hopes, fears, anguish and anxiety of the Black congregation inside Saint Elizabeth's Church. An awful silence of uncertainty weighed heavily upon everyone as Mass ended and folks started to leave the church to go home and face their fear of more violence, more beatings, more lynching's.

But the uncertainty and eerie silence gave way to sirens of every kind blaring throughout Selma on that historic Lord's Day in 1965. Something terrible was happening at the Edmund Pettus Bridge where state and local police tear gassed and billy-clubbed 600 marchers who were determined that Jimmie Lee Jackson's death and the beatings in Marion would not be in vain.

Because the archbishop of Alabama prevented the Edmundites and the local group of Sisters of St. Joseph from marching and demonstrating, they tended to the injured at Good Samaritan Hospital and rallied the support of others from around the country.

In Good Samaritan Hospital Ouellet encountered Etta Perkins, a Black nurse tending to the wounded. Maurice remembered her screaming, "Father, they're going to kill us all!" While Etta's son, James, would one day become Selma's first Black mayor, there was little sign of racial harmony on that Bloody Sunday in March 1965.

The Edmundites and the Sisters faced intimidation and death threats from the white community in general and the Ku Klux Klan in particular. The Edmundite residence in Selma still has bullet holes in the front windows and on the front door of our Edmundite residence some bigot had hung a sign: "The K-K-K is watching you!"

On Bloody Sunday many white doctors refused to come to help the injured because Good Samaritan was known as the Negro hospital. The Sisters of St. Joseph carried a

very heavy load that day as they tended to people strewn in the corridors, in the hospital's cafeteria, literally everywhere.

Maurice described a 15-year-old girl lying on the floor. Blood was coming out of her head and she wasn't moving. When he picked her up, she opened her eyes and focused her eyes on his and said, "Oh, Father, I hurt."

Among the many injured on Bloody Sunday was a quiet young student, John Lewis. He led the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. John received a deep head wound that evidenced his courage, conviction and commitment to the cause.

Lewis didn't say anything and it wasn't clear whether he was even conscious. He had been beaten so many times that when he did get beaten, he would just go quiet, which was his way of going into his mode of nonviolence.

John dreamed of being allowed to vote and of being elected to Congress. John Lewis' dream became a reality. Today he is Congressman Lewis from Georgia.

Martin Luther King had a dream. Jimmie Lee Jackson had a dream. John Lewis had a dream. What's your dream?

III.

Some of you may wonder how Fr. Ouellet's life intersected with Dr. King's. Maurice recorded his encounter with Dr. King in his unpublished memoirs entitled: "Share the Wind of My Sail." Here is what he wrote under the heading: "The Prophet and the Student."

It was Selma, Alabama, 1965. I went to Dr. Sullivan's house to see Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We had spoken once before a week earlier.

Thousands of clergy and religious were pouring into Selma. Proud though I was that Catholics, for the first time, were giving mass support to Dr. King's movement, I felt resentment that they had come at that moment when it was the popular thing to do.

Within me was the resentment that for three bitter years the Black people of Selma had carried on the struggle virtually alone under the direction of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Now everyone was getting on the bandwagon.

Dr. King smiled as he shook my hand and said, "Isn't it wonderful, Father, they have come from everywhere."

Bitterly I replied, "It's about time they got here."

A look of shock came over his face. He put his hand on my arm, looked into my eyes and said, "Let's not look to the past. The important thing is that they are here now."

Later, I felt ashamed of my outburst. For ten years he had asked support from Catholics. Finally, it came. He did not reject them for past omissions. He accepted them at their own pace.

Realizing the difference between the prophet and the righteous student, I learned a very large lesson.

Maurice Ouellet's words help illustrate a saying that persists in the African American community today: *"We ain't where want to be. We ain't where we should be. But at least we ain't where we used to be!"* Folks keep on keeping on – pressing on until the dream, the vision, is realized.

The dream of Ouellet and King were rooted with deep spiritual anchors. Ouellet as a Roman Catholic priest; King was a pastor and follower of Christ. Dr. King's spiritual anchor is reflected by his words: *"I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow, but the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever."*

King's "Beloved Community" rested upon that foundation. King had a dream that his four children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Their dignity as human beings was grounded in the fact that each of us is made in the image of God. You and I are the clearest reflection of God. Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all social teaching. Human life is sacred and the dignity of the human person is the starting point for a moral vision for society.

Negroes suffered from segregation as much in the North as in the South. Clearly, Negroes were deprived of rights that other Americans had. This deprivation King and Ouellet saw as a sickness that affected our nation in every phase of living. The challenges were: convert hearts, foster understanding, promote justice, show compassion, evidence love, and make the dream a reality.

King had a dream. Ouellet had a dream. What's your dream?

IV.

Shortly after the horrific Bloody Sunday the archbishop requested that Ouellet be transferred from Alabama.

In 1965 the white people of Selma were scandalized by Ouellet's presence and the Black people of Selma were scandalized by his removal. Truly a great pastoral challenge existed but not only in Selma.

Ouellet came to Edmundite headquarters here at SMC to discuss with the Society of St. Edmund's leadership what his next assignment would be.

While here, Ouellet was invited to preach and celebrate Mass in this chapel of Saint Michael the Archangel. The chapel had just been completed. The crucifix in this chapel depicts a figure of Christ with whom persons of any race can identify. This chapel was designed to hold the entire student body which at the time was around 900 men.

The students filled the chapel to hear Fr. Maurice's account of the Selma events and I was among those present. Gazing at Christ's figure on the cross, Maurice delivered his "Uncomfortable Christ" homily that described Bloody Sunday in 1965.

Some of the words from that homily appear on the photo mosaic that was created from photographs of those helped and the many laypersons, Priests, Brothers, and Sisters, who served over the 75-year-history of the Edmundite Missions.

As Father Casey's images fostered Maurice's dream to join the Edmundites, so Maurice's description of Bloody Sunday stirred me and other students. His words were spoken as the recently issued documents of Vatican II were beckoning us to pursue peace and justice in the modern world.

President Lyndon B. Johnson had even declared a War on Poverty the year before, but, what could any one of us do that would make a difference? President Johnson's dream of a Great Society remained an elusive dream as more and more riots occurred throughout the United States. Surely, King's words reflected what was happening throughout the nation: "*Riots are the language of the unheard.*"

Politics were as challenging in the 1960s as they are today and more and more students were taking courses which were listed in the College catalogue under the heading: *Government.*

Among the first African American faculty of Saint Michael's College was Professor Cleveland Williams who taught some of the "government" or "political science" courses.

I remember the frustration of one of my classmates because Williams had a hard time remembering his name. One day Bill went to see Williams about not being able to tell him apart from another guy in the class. Williams jokingly said, "*You white boys look all alike to me!*"

That memory is another way of underscoring King's dream that we truly come to know one another as unique individuals and move from an "us" and "them" perspective.

King understood the source of our divisions when he said, "*People fail to get along because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other.*"

Two young non-Catholic African American boys, Moses Anderson and James Robinson, lived in Selma when Fr. Francis Casey started the Edmundite Missions in 1937. These two individuals not only became Catholics but also became Edmundite priests who responded to King's dream and racial divide.

In the 1960s Father Anderson was the director Student Life at Saint Michael's College and Father Robinson was the pastor of a Black Edmundite parish in Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

As the civil rights struggle unfolded nationally, Anderson and Robinson arranged to have SMC students tutor and mentor the Black poor in North Carolina. The encounters between the Black poor and SMC students help foster understanding and a commitment to King's dream for a "Beloved Community".

This "project" of the sixties was a practical concrete way to achieve MLK's dream and a precursor of the many contemporary efforts of M.O.V.E. today. Father Robinson also played a key role in bringing about the Selma Peace accord in the seventies.

King had a dream. President Johnson had a dream. Professor Williams had a dream. Fathers Anderson and Robinson had a dream. What's your dream?

V.

So after leaving Selma it was decided that Fr. Ouellet would direct the initial formation of those who joined the Edmundite Fathers and Brothers. I was a chemistry major in

my junior year at St. Michael's when Fr. Ouellet gave the "Uncomfortable Christ" homily. While I had thought about becoming an Edmundite teacher, I had difficulty seeing myself as a civil rights leader like Ouellet and King.

I joined the Edmundites and was among those first trained by Ouellet. A poster illuminated by Sister Corita Kent hung in the classroom in house of formation. The poster used Ouellet's words: "*Youth is a time of rebellion. Rather than squelch the rebellion, we might better enlist the rebels to join that greatest rebel of his time Christ himself.*"

Fr. Ouellet discarded the "retreat from the world" approach. His "rebels" would walk the streets where the Black poor lived in nearby New London, Connecticut.

Surely we were experiencing in our religious formation the opening words of *Gaudium et spes* – the Church in the Modern World – by the Second Vatican Council: "The joys and the hopes, the anguish and the anxieties of persons of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the anguish and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

Our training to be disciples recognized what would later be proclaimed in the Church's document Justice in the world: "*Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.*"

During my religious formation King's dream for a "Beloved Community" and St. Paul's description of the Body of Christ help me and my Edmundite brothers appreciate our interconnectedness and our interdependence.

King had a dream. Ouellet had a dream. What's your dream?

VI.

King once said, "*The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be.*" We are engaged in many wars: a War on Terror, a War on Drugs, a War on Racism and a War on Poverty. What's your war?

What's your passion? For what do you fight? For what do you aspire? What principles, ideals, and values anchor your life?

If your answer is, "WHATEVER", I am not hopeful for our future.

Rapper Tupac Shakur observed, *“We are in the midst of a very dangerous, non-productive, self-destructive civil war and it’s not just about rap. It’s about our ideals. And rap is just bringing it to a head.”*

Rapper Kanye West also describes the present situation as a war: “Yo, we at war. We at war with terrorism, racism but most of all we at war with ourselves.” Kanye knows his priorities aren’t where they need to be – that he needs a different dream.

“Wait ‘til I get my money right. I had a dream that I could buy my way to heaven. When I awoke I spent that on a necklace. I told God I’d be back in a second. Man, it’s so hard not to act reckless. To whom much is given, much is tested. Get arrested, guess until he gets the message. I feel the pressure, under more scrutiny and what’s I do? Act more stupidly.”

Much will be required on you. Your efforts do make a difference. You are somebody. You are somebody special. You’re God’s child. You can change things. You can make life better for yourself. You can make life better for your family and for your community.

As a result of what happened in Selma in 1965 people began to change. Blacks like Sister Thea Bowman began to tell themselves, “I am somebody” and “I can do something that will make a difference.” They came to believe this as it never had been believed by Blacks before.

Some years ago President George H. Bush recognized M.O.V.E. as one of “a thousand points of light”. MOVE’s expanded concept of community service, which embraces social justice and emphasizes our connectedness, has provided compassionate action, education and advocacy in many forums. As Christ was a light for the world, so you are called to be lights of not only the dreams of King and Ouellet but also the new dreams that your gifts and talents will illuminate and make happen.

King had a dream. Ouellet had a dream. Sister Thea had a dream. What’s your dream?

VII.

I end this talk with an excerpt from the words Ouellet addressed to those becoming Edmundites at the end of their year of initial year of formation:

St. Paul said "I live now not I but Christ lives in me." He does not here refer to himself as a simple dwelling place in whom Christ exists... Rather Paul bluntly means -- "I am Christ - as I live - Christ lives"

St. Paul was living the Mystical life of Christ in his own time. He was a cell in the total Body of Christ. He was so because Christ chose to live in Paul.

Christ has chosen to live in you. You are Christ now. Indeed, all of us here are Christ - old and young, lay and clerical, alike.

From now on you diminish, Christ increases. As you learn to live this new life -- by the living of it -- you will find less room for your own identity - you will find that you will act less as yourself and more as Christ would act. And what a tremendous adventure awaits you!

King had a dream for you. Ouellet had a dream for you. What's your dream?

Given at St. Michael's College

January 24, 2012

Rev. Richard M. Myhalyk, S.S.E.

Executive Director

Edmundite Missions