

Chul-yessssssssssssssssssss

The young novice almost glided into the room, arms folded and extended into the opposite arms of the robe. The slight smile he seemed always to wear was genuine.

“Novices” in Roman Catholic religious orders are a probationary class of hopefuls. Hopeful for what is the essential question, of course, but Brother Julius was a more enigmatic hopeful than most. Novices are allowed to have all the accoutrements of real monks except that they aren’t accepted yet. Julius would be unacceptable ultimately, but in the meantime he was Brother Julius, black robe, little starched white dickey called in French a “rabat,” around his neck and in front, the perfectly garbed teaching monk....and, as God is my witness, the most amazing shoes.

The Brothers of the Christian Schools of the French variety were founded by a wealthy cleric in the mid seventeenth century in Rhiems, France. Saint John Baptist de la Salle was nobility. There was no need to dedicate his life to children of poverty, but he did. He pioneered classroom teaching paradigms instead of individual instruction, because poverty made it impossible to teach in that manner. He used his wealth and social stature to found schools throughout France and Italy during his lifetime. He is almost never mentioned in the rarified pantheon of educators, Piaget, Skinner, Bruner, Vygotsky and Dewey but we owe the foundations of public education to his innovative approaches to instruction. De la Salle was a motivated organizational genius.

Brother Julius was a descendent of this lineage of Christian teachers. His real name was Joseph Longo, certainly a genetic descendent of the great Aztec nation. He was built like a weight lifter, short, squat and strong looking. Reddish complexion. His slow smile seemed to indicate that he understood things that people didn’t think he did. Perhaps he was very smart, but I never found out for sure. He never talked.

The Christian Brothers is not a contemplative order like Carmelites, Capuchins or Benedictines. They do not take a vow of silence. There are times of silence, to be sure, after evening prayers until after breakfast the next morning, but this is a talking order. Teachers have to talk. Teachers demonstrate, teachers remonstrate, teachers teach. In a way, talking is their profession. Julius never talked.

The high school students were allowed to mingle with the novices on special occasions, usually on holy days such as Easter or All Saints Day. We shared movie time. The kind of movies that novices were able to watch did not include women unless it was “The Song of Bernadette” or “Going My Way.” Murder and betrayal was much more acceptable in the choice of films that novices were allowed to watch than anything involved with the opposite sex. I presume that the operative algorithm was to be sure that masturbation was not the objective of the cinematic episodes.

I always sat with Brother Julius. Being with the novices was a big deal in my little Catholic boarding high school. They were what we would become. Everyone talked, especially the novices because they didn’t have many chances to talk at all. Julius would take my two hands in his, smile, sit next to me and silently watch the movie. I would ask about his family. He would say the minimum. “They are good people.” I would ask where he came from. He would say, “Fresno.” Did he come from Fresno originally? He would say, “No.”

One Thanksgiving evening was a movie night. The movie was “Treasure of Sierra Madre,” no girls endangering the chastity of novices this time, for certain. Richard Delgado, my best friend, and I sat with Julius. He took each of our hands in his and sat down. Delgado asked him about his health. “Good,” said Julius. Finally “Kado” as he was nicknamed asked the question we all wanted to ask.

“Where did you get the tractor shoes?”

Julius smiled his enigmatic smile but didn’t answer.

Julius always wore enormous shoes with red rubber cleated soles. Wherever he went in the dusty red dirt of the Napa Valley, the cleats went with him. It seemed that Julius was everywhere. The tractor shoes, one imagined, took him wherever he wanted to go. He only needed to place his feet on the ground and they would grind him to Mass, to the garden, to Lake Muscatel, to the town of Napa. The tractor shoes were omnipotent. They took on magical qualities in our imaginations. The tractor shoes were the reason that he seemed to glide. We decided that the tractor shoes moved by themselves.

After that, Kado manufactured a whole mythology about Brother Julius. Because he didn’t talk much, and when asked his name, he pronounced it with a little lisp. It came out something like “Chool-yesssss.” Once Kado figured

that out, he would always say in a low voice as the novice would enter the room, “Chool-yessssssssssssssss.” Soon everyone called him “Chool-yessss.” As he rolled into the room on his mobile treads, you would hear a long succession of “sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss” rather out of synch as everyone pronounced his name at different times. It was never meant in a bad way. In fact it became a kind warm greeting when he came to visit us.

Julius always smiled when he heard the “sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss-sssss.” It was as if he knew it was meant with affection.

One night, expecting the novices for a movie, Julius didn’t come with the others. After eight months of being in the novitiate, he suddenly disappeared and we never saw him again. This disappearance phenomenon among novices was not uncommon and was always explained as, “He didn’t have a vocation. Many are called but few are chosen.” I always had the feeling that Jesus’ comment in the Gospel according to Mathew was a nice way of saying, “we didn’t want him.” I never got to say goodbye.

I wish he had left me his tractor shoes, though. They were wonderful.