

# Pay What You Can When Money Becomes a Sacrament

BY ADELE AZAR-RUCQUOI

**W**HEN MY FATHER passed through the gates of Ellis Island as a boy, the life that awaited him would be new and exciting yet fated with a grinding scarcity. For decades, all Dad had to show for it was hard work, more hard work and very little money. Still, before he knew it, this once faceless immigrant, like so many before him and since, was raising a family and directing the fruits of his labors—in his case, in his own little grocery store amid the lush orange trees of Mills Avenue in Orlando, Fla. The belly laugh that greeted us all when he would bank the profits from our store's tiny cash register was pure American!

When Dad enrolled me in the local Catholic school, St. James, back in the 1940's, his slim bank account was sure to suffer. Not that we were Catholic; we were baptized Greek Orthodox. But there was no nearby Orthodox church for my parents at the time. As for "Catholic," why that was almost a swearword! These two traditions had been fighting theological wars for centuries. So in addition to his money quandary, Dad had to push through one very thick wall of prejudice to reach that venerated steppingstone for his New World children.

As my father drove us to school that first morning, we could hear his stomach churning. Was he really going to go through with this? Could he afford to send us here? He parked, then pressed through the knot of parents and kids surrounding a tall man in black. "How much is the monthly tuition, Father?" Msgr. John Bishop looked long at my father before extending his hand. Dad had never before shaken hands with a Catholic priest. Then,

as if on holy cue, clouds separated and a warm sun streamed onto those hands gripping each other, enough to rattle the bones of the long dead in Rome and Constantinople.

"Don't worry, Mr. Azar. Pay what you can."

Later on, while bagging groceries, my father couldn't restrain himself. "You Catholics are a voice for the poor." Whether or not it was sheer coincidence that more Catholics were now coming across the threshold, the lesson was not lost on us. My father, who always loved quoting from his dog-eared Arabic Bible, had more than once commented, "How you spend money shows God what you really believe is important."

Soon it was my turn to shake the monsignor's hand each month. Dad trusted me to deliver the tuition check, and the nuns never objected to my leaving class for that errand. In performing that task, I treasured feeling apart. My classmates watched in silence as I grabbed my little brown purse and marched out. I almost skipped down busy Robinson Ave. past shimmering Lake Eola and up the four stairs to the rectory. I knocked loudly, pressing on my purse as if it contained the sacred key to admittance.

There she stood, always with her apron pulled tight around her ample middle, always crochety. The Irish housekeeper scowled as if I were the orphan kid who had no business disturbing the peace. It didn't seem to matter how many times she had opened that door for me, the greeting was always annoyance. "What do you want?" Suddenly my rescuer's invigorating voice would faithfully come from somewhere behind her: "Katie dear, let the child in."

The parlor contained one sofa, two stiff-back chairs and a crucifix on one wall. There were no pictures. I sat across from the broad-shouldered man draped in black, his one hand laid over the other, amuse-

ment in his eye and with all the time to give me. I felt so safe. "How is your father doing?" he would ask, or "How are you doing in school?" I could not have imagined then how that man's simple kindness was to flower in me, how it would bond me to the church and eventually to a religious calling of my own as a Sister of St. Joseph.

Years have slid into decades. Orlando is no longer a sleepy town. I drive along Robinson Avenue past a revitalized Lake Eola to Orange Avenue, where the old clapboard church once stood. It is St. James Cathedral now, home to the diocesan bishop, and it covers every inch of what was once the church's thriving green lawn. When my memory visits that old parlor, I thank God for allowing that lucky child to meet a wise money mentor there.

Today, when I give a talk anywhere, I delight in telling this story and sharing what I've come to believe is money's genuine and holy purpose. Money links people, both in giving and receiving it—whether in a vast and otherwise impersonal marketplace or in a little family business. Or in a tiny blue-walled church parlor.

We are linked and we are changed. **A**

