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*From
The Shamrock
the Shield by
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sister margaret power, R.S.C.J.

Sister Margaret Power was born and educated in Montreal. She entered the religious life and spent many years as a Sacred Heart educator in schools both here in Canada and in the United States. At the age of sixty-five she became a social activist and moved with two other nuns to Little Burgundy where she worked for many years with welfare recipients. Sister Power was the recipient of the Bishop Crowley Award in 1987 for her many years of work as a welfare advocate with ODAS (Organisation d'aide aux Assistés Sociaux).

I was born on May 16, 1908 in Montreal. We lived on McGill College Avenue and belonged to St. Patrick's Parish. My father was the manager of the City and District Savings Bank on the corner of McGill College and St. Catherine. It was a new branch when he was sent to it and as manager he had a two-storey apartment on top of the bank so that's where we lived. Later we moved to Kensington Avenue in Westmount, but I was already at McGill so I lived most of my early life on McGill College Avenue. I was one of seven children. We were four girls and three boys. I had an older sister, Ruth, who was born exactly one year before I was. She died when she was thirty-three years old. She was walking on the sidewalk and a car drove up on the sidewalk and killed her.

All my grandparents were Irish. The Powers came from Wexford and Waterford and we were always so proud that my mother's family was related to Cardinal Vaughan from Tipperary. My grandfather Power lived on Coursol Street and owned another property on Murray in Griffintown which my father inherited.

My mother used to go to mass every day. My father didn't but he was the most charitable man I've ever known in my life. I don't mean in the sense of almsgiving although he did his share of that; I mean in his attitude to people and the way he talked. He never criticized or put people down. He was always supportive and neither of my parents would impose anything on us. They never said that we should become nuns. I remember when we all had the flu in 1918 except my mother and father. Billy was only three years old and he had double pneumonia as well. Father Singleton from St. Patrick's came to bless him because they thought he was going to die. I was ten years old but I still remember my mother coming to me while I was sick in bed and asking me to pray that Billy would be cured and that if he were cured that he would become a priest. That's the kind of faith that we had and absorbed. When he got better, he had to learn to walk all over again. He did become a priest and he knew that that was what he wanted from the time he was twelve years old. My mother never said, "Oh,

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we have to have a priest in the family." There was none of that. The same with us. There was no pressure about becoming nuns.

I went to elementary school at St. Patrick's Academy which was on St. Alexander Street right opposite the church. We were taught by the CND nuns. My sisters and I went to the Sacred Heart Convent which, at that time, was also on St. Alexander. The convent was a bilingual school. The English girls and the French girls were in separate classes but we mixed together for dinner, recess, sewing class and singing and I made friends with many of the French girls. My brothers Walter and Billy started at St. Patrick's School for Boys and then Walter went to Loyola. Billy went to the Collège de Montréal. By the time Kevin went to school we had moved to Kensington and so he went to St. Leo's and later to McGill.

When it was time for me to go to college I decided to go to McGill. All kinds of people told me that I should go to a Catholic college. The Sacred Heart nuns, however, did not pressure me. They were not the kind of people who would pressure you. In fact, one of the reasons I entered was that they never pushed me or told me I had a vocation and should enter. The alternative to McGill was the English department of Marguerite Bourgeois College. The English had a wing there and when I was about to begin college the girls were still wearing uniforms. I couldn't balance going to university with wearing uniforms. To me that wasn't university so I said that I wasn't going there. I asked my father about going to McGill and he said he would always find the money for whatever education I wanted. The attitude and atmosphere in the family was that you had to be improving yourself and learning. Also McGill was just at the top of our street because we were still living downtown then. When people told me that I would lose my faith at McGill it never for a moment occurred to me that I would. I was so sure of my faith, though I have to confess that when I was there I did have my doubts. The thing that saved me was reading G.K. Chesterton—I have the greatest love and respect for him. I read his *St. Francis of Assisi* and *Orthodoxy*, which was a discussion of the Church. At any rate, that settled me.

After McGill I went to the CND's business school, the Mother House. By Christmas time we were supposed to be practicing typing a couple of hours a day and Stephen Leacock, whose courses I had taken at McGill, advertised for someone to type a book for him. So I said I might as well practice on Leacock and type his book. I went to see him and he never asked me a single question. He just said I should meet him at his house at such a time. He lived on Côte-des-Neiges across the street from the convent. I typed a book for him on the British

Commonwealth and I had to do a little research such as phoning to get statistics on how many immigrants there were in certain years. He put a typewriter in the living room downstairs. When I went to his office I could see why. He had piles of papers that went literally to the ceiling on one side of his desk and the other side was almost as bad. I used to think that he would knock the whole pile down if he ever wanted to take one paper out. It was interesting work and it was fun. Sometimes I would go and work for half an hour or two hours and other times there would be no work at all. So I made money by practicing on Leacock. I had to do six copies because he was sending the book to five publishers and, of course, he kept one copy for himself. I liked him. First, because he never bothered me and because he was fascinating. I loved his classes although he wasn't humorous when he taught. He opened the door with his hand through an opening in the gown that professors wore in those days, and from the minute he opened the door he started teaching. He was a very learned man and I still remember the other students borrowing my notes because they couldn't follow him.

I worked for two years as a secretary in an engineers' office. I never found it interesting being a secretary and I never was a perfect typist even with practice. I also had a serious boyfriend and nearly married. When I realized I had a vocation I considered the Carmelites. I wrote to them in Three Rivers because I didn't want to enter a convent in my home town. They told me I would have to enter in Montreal so that was the end of my Carmelite vocation. Then I entered the Sacred Heart Novitiate in Albany, New York and I was there for two years. I didn't enter the order to teach, in fact I had no desire to teach, but once I began I just loved it and was very good at it. I taught and then became Headmistress for about twenty years. I was Headmistress at the two schools in Montreal, in Halifax and at Eden Hall in Philadelphia. Then I was Superior in Vancouver and then at the City House and I left when I was sixty-five years old. I also taught when I was the Superior but the Order doesn't want you in a classroom when you're sixty-five and mostly you don't want to go into a classroom either. (laughs)

In my fourth high religion classes I used the social teachings of the Church and did a good deal of reading on the subject. I had a great desire to do something along the lines of what my episcopal brother Billy had done working for many years with the Young Christian Workers. When I was cloistered I couldn't go out to do anything in the way of helping the poor. After Vatican Council II when cloister was lifted and I learned about the 'avocats populaires' who were helping welfare people, I became interested. I talked to Father Guy Bouillet who was

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the pastor of St. Cunegonde. He had been our chaplain for five years and I'll be grateful to him until I die for encouraging me to get involved in working in Little Burgundy. Sister Annette Archambault was an austere woman who thought that we were getting 'embourgeoisées' so I asked her if she would be willing to come and live in Little Burgundy with me. She accepted and then Sister Alice Amyot joined us so we were three. I took a course with the 'avocats populaires' on Bill 26. It was the law which came out in 1969 that gave welfare people the right to a subsistence. They asked me to work with them and so things came together. I also read a good deal about Liberation Theology and felt that, though God is everywhere, He is particularly where the poor are, and I wanted to be where God was. I'd spent many years of my life working with the rich and the super rich. I used to encourage giving to charity and many of our students and their parents gave money to help the poor but I never said that we have to change the world and not have all these poor people. What I teach now is that we've got to change the world so these people don't need our handouts. What bothers me is not individual selfishness but the structures that are in place which exploit people. Pay low wages—fire as soon as you're losing a little profit—fire all kinds of people who then have no employment.

There were many people who opposed my plans. Many felt that I should have stayed and helped the Sacred Heart School but you know, I'm not Irish for nothing, I've had the luck of the Irish all the way. I was the elected delegate from Canada to the General Chapter in Rome in 1970. The Major Superiors go but there's an elected delegate from every province. We are present in seven Latin American countries including Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba. These sisters were already involved with the Medellin Document. The bishops of Latin America met in 1968 in Medellin in Colombia and they realized that they were aligned with the rich and they had to change and align themselves more with the poor. This became known as Liberation Theology. Gustavo Gutierrez from Peru was a great support to me. "There's no way that I can tell the Sacred Heart nuns that they should be going to the poor," I said. He said, "You have to begin. You have to begin." At the Chapter in 1970 we took 'options' and one of the options was greater solidarity with the poor, the second was greater solidarity with the Third World and the third was to maintain our mission of education even in our private schools. We've been so lucky because we've had Superiors who were listeners. Concha Comacho who was the Mother General at that time, saw clearly that we had to go more to the poor. We had free schools from 1800 when we were founded which was extremely prophetic because then no one

was teaching the poor. St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, our founder, established free schools which were attached to every boarding school or private school. In the process of history, public schools were established everywhere and by 1970 we confronted the fact that we were founded to work with the poor but we had largely abandoned this work.

The movement I'm in is called ODAS (Organisation d'aide aux Assistés Sociaux). Our aim is to help welfare people run their own lives. We teach welfare recipients the law and what their rights are. We used to go to the welfare office with them because they were often too scared but now it's a rare case when we have to go. We don't do any formal education in the sense of training them for jobs or anything like that. That's somebody else's work. What we try to do is make them realize that they have a right to a job, a right to respect, a right to be heard and listened to like anybody else. They are 'inferiorized' by all kinds of experiences. One of the worst examples was a woman on welfare who went with her cheque to a caisse populaire and the teller said to her neighbouring teller, "C'est un autre parasite de la société." I asked this woman if she reported them to the manager? "Oh, non. J'avais trop besoin de mon argent." They're so frightened. People on welfare don't live; they survive. We have meetings every Thursday and we average about eighty people. We organize workshops where they learn to express themselves. We are also fighting Bill 37 which is the reform of welfare law. There are more than thirty groups with us now fighting this Bill. We are partially funded by Centraide and we get some money from religious communities and foundations like the Alexandre de Sève.

I'm a nun because I was seeking God in an absolute kind of way and I think that in my life I've always tried to follow where I thought I would find God. I've been here now since 1973 and I have not changed my ideas. Being here is not as consoling as being able to go to a nice, quiet chapel with flowers which is more conducive to prayer than demonstrating on a street saying, "La taxe d'eau, on la paye pas." It's not a contemplative life but since it's in solidarity with the exploited and the poor, it's of God. Alice and I were talking about how we have to learn to find God in daily life—to be able to find Him in cooking a meal, in being tired shopping, in having a cold, you know, the nitty gritty of life. You have to have the faith, the contemplative capacity to find God there and not only in church and in the sacraments. I want to be doing something that will help to liberate people on whatever level I can.

James C

The Irish love to sing. I was a singer and master of ceremonies. Being a professional musician, I had numerous concert engagements but I was never able to say I was a professional. I began singing when I was 10. During World War II, I went together to entertain. Frank Shuster who married Lola Valiquette. Jimmy worked to make interesting things. I also included as the best when entertainers

The name 'More' came from Muir. My grandfather was a heavy burden. I was Canadian, primarily, my culture was Elizabethan.

My mother's brother. When he and my father were at two o'clock in the afternoon to play the piano and sing at that hour. I was a pianist who left with his wife and children at the Montreal Arena events in Pittsburgh. I was a ball park and with GENTLEMEN, I was him all over the place.

I was born in St. Louis when I got married. The French got along the Street. It was all the director of music.