

A Reflection on the Interment of Brother Victor Serna

By A. Hachoun

It is a bright and blue day, crisp. I ride with Brother Michael Williams to the Marist property at Esopus -- a bluff across the Hudson; not far from Poughkeepsie, but a world away. The Brothers have owned the land and buildings since 1942, the year of Victor Serna's profession. A decade later, they began to bury their own there. The seminarians dug the graves in simple straight lines. It is a rural cemetery in a sun-dappled field.

The gatehouse to the property is a fanciful Italianate building, in blunt contrast to the stone farm building that is residence to eleven Brothers. A winding lane leads there, past an ice house. The Brothers just put to use and re-purposed the several structures already at the property. Among them, there is an elegant Carrere and Hastings mansion, which the Brothers sold after many years of service as the novitiate. Recently, with the most recent owner's death, the mansion was willed to Marist College. It sits grandly by the farm buildings. Marist College and the Marist congregation parted ways long ago. The disposition of the main farm building and the mansion parallels the relationship of the College and the Congregation. The College is now the employer of a few Brothers and former Brothers.

Brother Brice Byczynski, the Province's archivist, has been my contact all along, and offers a welcoming hug. Brothers from Long Island arrive soon after, and resident Brothers gradually join the group. There are sixteen or seventeen of us, plus two caregivers who assist elderly Brothers.

The small talk, chit-chat and conversations are easy. We talk about Victor, but also about Brother Henry Sawicki who at the moment is teaching Biology to Katherine, our daughter. So we then talk about generations, and about time in general, and about time passing. We also talk Marist-talk. I know already a couple of the Brothers and meet a few others, but I cannot hold on to their names. All want to know about Victor's old boys from Cuba.

I meet Brother John Herrmann, Victor's colleague at his last post, St. Mary's High School in Manhasset, Long Island. Brother John was also class- or roommate to that young group of Brothers from Cuba sent to Poughkeepsie in 1961 to study English. He has stories, but that means other conversations.

Brother John had spoken at the burial mass and has anecdotes from his days with Victor and about Victor's funny hauteur. He tells of being unnerved about the placement of adverbs in his eulogy for fear that Victor would spring out of the casket with corrections.

Soon it is time to bury Victor Serna. The Esopus burial tradition is to walk to the graveside or ride there by golf cart, if needed. It takes three rosary decades prayed aloud to reach the cemetery. Ambulando with Hail Marys and bird calls, we encircle Brother Victor. Two elderly Brothers lead us in new prayers and Brother Brice reads from

Mathew. His words come into the sun as if they had just been thought. Then a Salve Regina rises strong, on pitch, second nature from these old boys--in perfect unison, sincere and fervent above all. I can only listen, but want to clap encores.

It is over now --and it is not. The sun warms us all nicely, the grass glistens. Nothing more is said; a lot more is thought. We disperse slowly. I stay and watch two groundsmen lower Victor's coffin. A Brother with a mustache thanks them, then comes over and tells me that he worked with Victor in Brownsville, Texas, back in the sixties. A good guy, he says.

After a bit, I walk back, thinking of Victor's sixty-odd years in the classrooms and try reckoning the number of students he taught. Where are all of them, some of them, any of them, today?. But it matters not. What matters is that what he taught -- dutifully, deliberately and not-- is with them, with us, consciously or not.

A frugal lunch waits ready back at the farm building. We sort ourselves around a few tables, and then rearrange our sorting when cookies are served. There is no script. The conversations meander about Marist topics and Marist people, about Cuba days and Cuba now, about Brother Victor, Brother Hugo, Brother Julio and the all-popular Brother Eladio. The mood is convivial. Somehow, all of us feel at home in this world apart.

Brother Michael brings me back home. On the road, we talk teachers, teaching, students, studying. He looks forward to his coming visit to Miami, to talking to Hugo and to spending time with Eladio who may be back from Italy.

Later, I look up the website of St. Mary's alums. Victor Serna's death was just posted. The comments have started to come in. Victor's last students say the kind of things we have been thinking all along.