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Georges and Pauline Vanier

Mercy within Mercy

Mary Frances Coady



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For Pat Halpin FCJ

Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child?
Mercy within mercy within mercy.

—Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*

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Foreword

I can well remember as a young nun, reading that the new Governor General of Canada, Georges Vanier, was a Catholic, a devout practicing Catholic, as was his beautiful wife, Pauline. The half was not told. To be a “practicing Catholic,” even a devout one, may only mean that one goes to Mass on Sundays, keeps the law of the church, supports the parish and is generous to the poor; is in other words, a good person. But all of this can be relatively superficial. To be truly a Catholic is to surrender to Our Blessed Lord with complete love—to want only Him, to live, as St. Paul says, “in Christ.” Although I was happy in 1959 to know that the Vaniers were good Catholics, I cannot express the joy with which I learn now that they were real Catholics. They both lived always in the presence of God.

Moreover, it seems to have been a perfect marriage, each supporting the other and bringing the other to a fullness of life that might not otherwise have been possible. They were very different in temperament and in background. Georges was a stern man of duty, Pauline a charming but anxious extrovert. He gave her strength through his unshakable love; he believed she was necessary to him in his diplomatic work. It was her warmth and sweetness, her open-armed approach to people that drew him out of an introverted loneliness.

Pauline, on the other hand, for all the joy that she gave those who knew her, was always racked by a sense of failure and inadequacy. Only in Georges's love and confidence, his palpable need of her, could she feel affirmed and free. Perhaps the loveliest evidence of the closeness of this marriage is the way Pauline brought Georges to a deeper understanding of the fatherhood of God. Stern and unyielding in virtue, he had been raised in a Jansenistic tradition of human sinfulness. He did not dare to go to Holy Communion more than once or twice a year. He saw God as the Supreme Judge and shrank in awe before Him. To his astonishment, Pauline went joyfully to Holy Communion every day, sometimes after a night of champagne gaiety. She had no doubts about God's tenderness and his longing to keep her holy through his love and his sacraments. It was only after seventeen years of marriage that she persuaded him to come with her to listen to a priest she thought spoke with power the message of God. Rather reluctantly Georges came and was bowled over by the discovery of the depth of God's love. So they complemented one another here too: her calling to prayerfulness balanced and reinforced by his calling to duty; and his awe of God set in the context of divine love.

I knew nothing of the deep spiritual life of the Vaniers but I can remember noting that there were two extraordinary contemporary apostles, Jean Vanier and his sister Thérèse who had the same surname. I did not then know that they were son and daughter of the Governor-General Vaniers, but it did strike me as both unusual and wonderful that two such God-driven people should come from the same family. What were their parents like, I wondered. Up till now the most striking example of saintly parents producing saintly children had been the Martin family in nineteenth-century France. All five daughters became nuns, one of

whom is now known as St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Modern attention is being directed to her father and mother, showing how the shy and anxious Adele Martin (rather like Pauline Vanier in fact) who died young and heroically and her gentle, unobtrusive husband, who gave up his watch-making shop so as to give all his time to his daughters, deserve concentrated study. It was from them Thérèse learned to be a saint. This seems to be equally true for the Vaniers. Jean Vanier has given his life to L'Arche, a community that devotes itself to offering self-supporting homes to the mentally disabled. It is an extraordinary work of charity. Thérèse Vanier gave up a prestigious profession as a hematologist to work with these same "least of the brethren," those whom the world ignores and rejects. The Vaniers, like Jesus, cherish and respect those whom society would cast aside. Surely, one thinks, such a passion for the poor of Christ must have been learned in the home.

This moving book shows that it was indeed learned in the home. Georges and Pauline spent at least half an hour in prayer together every evening. They tried to be totally aware of God's presence. Anybody who has taught in schools knows the sorrow of finding children who know nothing of God or even of morality. Inevitably, it turns out that they have parents who do not know God either. Somewhere the rot must stop, and it can only be by teaching young people the truth about God and preparing them to have true marriages with homes in which the importance of love and truth and responsibility are fully accepted. There is very much about which we need to pray here, but such a book as this gives one great hope.

Sister Wendy Beckett
April 2015

Acknowledgments

My biography, *Georges and Pauline Vanier: Portrait of a Couple*, followed the lives of the Vanier couple in the public service they rendered, both singly and together, during the many upheavals of the twentieth century. The present book has attempted to illuminate the contemplative inner life that formed the spiritual impetus of their actions and involvements.

Thanks are due first of all to the various archives where much of the material in this book was found: the Georges P. Vanier Fonds at Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, ON; the Ware Carmel Archives, Ware, Herts; the British Jesuit Archives, London; the Robert Lax Archives, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY.

Short sections of this book were published in an earlier form in *Mount Carmel* (January–March 2014) and *Spirituality* (January–February 2013, July–August 2014). I am grateful to the editors of these publications.

The book was given structure and form during the fall 2013 semester when I was a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute in Collegeville, MN. I would like to express my gratitude to the Institute for the enriching environment and community provided there. Many thanks as well to the Access Copyright Foundation for financial assistance.

I am also grateful to Monsignor Roger Quesnel, who, shortly after the death of Pauline Vanier, was asked to open an investigation process into the lives of Georges and Pauline Vanier with a view to the possible introduction of their cause for beatification as a married couple. The present volume is not related to that process, but Monsignor Quesnel nevertheless shared with me his own material on the Vaniers, and I thank him for his generosity. I would also like to acknowledge the kind assistance given to me by Deacon Eugene Margeson of the Archdiocese of Ottawa. Anne McCarthy, as well, has been an ongoing source of help and encouragement.

Many thanks to all the staff at Darton, Longman and Todd and at Liturgical Press who have worked to make this book see the light of day.

The late Benedict Vanier OCSO and the late Thérèse Vanier, who died within five weeks of each other in the spring of 2014, had before their deaths given me their full trust as I went about the task of writing about their family. I remain deeply grateful to them.

Finally, I extend my profound gratitude to Jean Vanier and Michel Vanier, for their generous cooperation in the preparation of this book.

Introduction

On 23 June 1945, Pauline Vanier, the wife of the Canadian ambassador to France, set out from Paris with her husband Georges and daughter Thérèse, to the town of Lisieux, most of which they found reduced to rubble from the Allied bombing of a year earlier. After they received greetings from the town's dignitaries, they were ushered to the Carmelite monastery, one of the few buildings still intact. There they were told that Mother Agnes of Jesus, the eighty-four-year-old prioress, would see them.

Mother Agnes, the former Pauline Martin, had been the first of the Martin sisters of Lisieux to become a Carmelite. Marie had entered the monastery a few years later, and then, most famously, their fifteen-year-old sister, Thérèse, had joined them. After their father's death, a fourth sister, Céline, too, had become a Carmelite in the Lisieux monastery. Therese died in 1897 at age twenty-four and was canonized a saint twenty-eight years later. Marie died in 1940, and so the only other Martin sister still in the Lisieux Carmel, besides Mother Agnes, was seventy-six-year-old Céline, now known as Sister Geneviève.

Of the Vaniers' four other children at this time, son Jean was in England and the others in Canada. In a collective

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letter to them, Pauline sets the scene at the Lisieux Carmel as she, her husband and daughter prepared to meet Mother Agnes: “We were all very *émotionnés* at the thought of meeting this woman, a sister of the saint and a saint herself! Daddy saying, ‘You’ll do the talking because I’m too frightened,’ and I saying, ‘Oh no! You must, I’m terrified.’ Thérèse saying, ‘Well, I know that I shan’t say a word.’

“We walked over to the Carmel with Msgr. Germain who left us at the door. We were taken by a ‘turn’ sister to a parlor. Like all Carmel parlors, it has the grille with the spikes. But those spikes have no more terror for me now! I know them too well to be frightened. We waited, the three of us very nervous and wondering what we would say. Suddenly we heard a door handle turn, the door opening, a voice said, ‘Deo gratias’ and we none of us knew what to answer, which is disgraceful as far as I am concerned! Then to our great surprise and great relief we saw the shutter open and there we saw this grand woman, old in years but young in spirit.”

Mother Agnes had brought her *conseil* with her, including—to the Vaniers’ surprise and delight—the only other surviving sibling of St. Thérèse, Sister Geneviève. The prioress was slightly deaf, and so voices were somewhat raised, “but otherwise there was no difficulty whatsoever in the conversation. She took it in hand and we followed on.” The sisters told the Vaniers “what a character” their young saint was, adding, “*Il n’y avait rien à l’eau de rose en elle*” [“There was nothing sentimental about her”]. At another juncture, when Pauline Vanier asked them to plead to St. Thérèse on her behalf, Sister Geneviève waved her off: “You know how younger sisters are—she never listens to me!”

“Then,” Pauline adds, “I told [them] about Ganna [Pauline’s mother] being Père Pichon’s spiritual daughter. . . . I

told her about Hitchin and how privileged I had been. . . . She said that they would pray for our family very particularly and added, ‘*Vous êtes de la famille maintenant.*’ [‘You’re part of the family now.’]”¹ By this time, “we spoke on cheerily and without any more fear. Even Daddy launched himself in conversation about a parallel to be drawn between St. Thérèse and St. Jeanne d’Arc, which they all approved and Mother Agnes asked one of the Sisters to read out of a passage of the last words of St. Thérèse in which she says that she wishes that she were a soldier.”

Pauline ended the collective letter: “We came away feeling that St. Thérèse was more than ever the protector of the family, more especially after the assurance of Mother Agnes’s prayers. The whole thing is so closely linked.”²

With this visit, Pauline Vanier had in a sense come full circle. The Jesuit Almire Pichon, whom she referred to in her letter, had become close to St. Thérèse’s family, and the saint herself described him in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, as “a director such as St. Teresa desired.”³ Père Pichon was sent to Canada as a retreat Preacher in November 1888 (“hardly had I been numbered among his children when he left for exile,” the saint writes).⁴

In Montreal, where Père Pichon landed, he soon met another young woman, who was a year younger than Thérèse Martin. Her name was Thérèse de Salaberry. The Montreal Thérèse was an orphan who lived at a convent school called Pensionnat d’Hochalaga. The exact circumstances of the meeting between Père Pichon and Thérèse de Salaberry are not known, but in some way he took on the role of “spiritual father” to the girl, and she in turn became devoted to him. As a young Jesuit he had come under the influence of the spiritual writing of St. Francis de Sales, who, in

Introduction to the Devout Life and other works, advocated a gentle trust in God.

Père Pichon became known for encouraging an affectionate attitude toward God, advocating a personal love of Jesus rather than a stern doctrinal approach or an overly judgmental view of one's own unworthiness. ("Take Jesus by the heart" was an exhortation he liked to use, and St. Thérèse would eventually echo it.) He also encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart, which he regarded as a means of discovering God's infinite love through the heart of Jesus.

The parentless Thérèse de Salaberry, a young woman in need of affection, was ripe for the kind of guidance that Père Pichon offered. The Jesuit may have tried to steer her toward the life of a nun, but she suffered from fragile health and an anxious temperament and probably would not have withstood the rigors of the cloister. At any rate, when she reached adulthood she married a man by the name of Charles Archer. When the Lisieux Thérèse died of tuberculosis in her Carmelite monastery on 30 September 1897, the Montreal Thérèse was three months pregnant. On 28 March 1898, she gave birth to a daughter, Pauline.

Thérèse de Salaberry Archer remained close to Père Pichon as her spiritual father, and as a young child, Pauline made her first confession to him. After his return from Canada to France in 1907, they kept in touch with him through correspondence and transatlantic visits until his death in 1919. His letters to Pauline's mother contained echoes of the advice he gave to thousands of other correspondents, sounding the same themes of God's mercy and trust in adversity: "I ask you to be kind to your soul . . . Jesus is as kind toward it, as indulgent, as merciful, as you are sometimes hard and severe. Look after my daughter with tenderness, as a good mother looks after a suffering child.

No vinegar! Pour on the honey.” “Jesus is never more loving toward you than when he appears to be cruel. What a misfortune it would be if even for one day he suspended his merciful pursuit of you. Undoubtedly you have to walk like a blind person through thick darkness. But an invisible hand is leading you, supporting you, holding you, protecting you.” “The path that God is making you follow is mysterious. But, even more, it’s a path of mercy.” “It seems that your heart’s distress isn’t over yet, that you still have something to learn from it. Jesus is busying Himself in completing the lesson, and I see only a loving plan in it.” “Against all appearances, believe in Our Lord’s love *for you*. I can never emphasize this enough.”⁵

Pauline Archer was twenty-one years old when she met thirty-one-year-old Georges Vanier, recently returned to Canada from the war in France, who, on 28 August 1918, had lost his right leg in battle. They were both natives of Montreal and were married there in 1921. Pauline had grown into an extroverted young woman, with a need for affection and a tendency to anxiety similar to her mother’s. Because of her health, her formal schooling was curtailed, and most of her education was conducted by governesses. As she grew into adulthood, she felt, from her mother’s influence, a deep spiritual thirst and a desire for Christian service.

“You and I are going upward hand in hand toward the Light, because God is drawing us to Himself,” she wrote to her future husband a few days before their wedding. “Our ambition must be to always set our sights on this summit. Nothing else matters. We mustn’t forget that we were created for Him, and we must always show this with our lives. It will be our particular form of the apostolate.”⁶ Georges’s war wound had already taken a central place in their

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relationship: as an engagement gift he had given Pauline a small bottle, the size and shape of a perfume bottle, containing mud from the boot of his amputated leg. Each year on the anniversary of the date he was wounded, she would write him a letter of love and admiration.

But already, in the flush of youth and romance, she had set the tone for a lifetime of Christian service. Most of this service would take place in the world of diplomacy, in which the couple would become increasingly prominent. For nearly fifty years they would grow together in discovering God's love. Singly and together they would find a spiritual path that would take them deeper into their relationship with each other and with God.

By the mid-1930s Pauline, having come through a miscarriage and shaky early years of motherhood, would be open and ready for the spiritual adventure that would form a prayerful underpinning for the changes and turmoil ahead. During the coming years the Vaniers would be close to many of Europe's historical events and they would see their own children's lives unfolding in remarkable ways. Pauline would be led along a path remarkably similar to her mother's, one familiar to the Carmelites of Lisieux, and in his own time Georges would discover this path as well. Pauline's first guide would be an English Carmelite prioress, Mother Mary of the Cross.

Not surprisingly, the prioress's letters to Pauline can be seen to strike some of the themes that are to be found in Carmelite literature, and in particular those of St. Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*.

In the second part of *Story of a Soul*, known as "Manuscript B," St. Thérèse writes of her discovery of "the science of love" pouring out from God's mercy. The road leading

to this discovery is the path of “the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arms.”⁷ In a missive addressed to Jesus, she describes a dream in which Anne of Jesus, the founder of the Carmel in France, tells her “He is content.” St. Thérèse takes this as confirmation that the path of trust and sacrificial love she has been walking along—which eventually will be called the “little way”—is acceptable to God, and this assurance is proof that she is loved. The dream is also a prelude to the many graces she asks for: elaborating on the various vocations that make up the Body of Christ (which she finds in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians), she enumerates warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr.

Then she moves on to “the more excellent way,” that of love.⁸ This will be her vocation: to be love at the heart of the church. She goes even further, offering herself as a “victim” of God’s merciful love, echoing the act of oblation she had made a year earlier. She declares herself as weak and powerless, and so her love will be proved by daily small sacrifices which she expresses to Jesus as the strewing of flowers (some of which will have thorns, she acknowledges) as if she were a child.

When one thinks of St. Thérèse’s affectionate nature, of her need to be loved and to give love, and her discovery that her vocation was to be love at the heart of the church, one can see how Mother Mary of the Cross, perhaps more personally inclined to the loftier prose of St. Teresa of Avila, is guiding Pauline Vanier. There is no mention of “flowers” in the nun’s letters (she refers only once to the younger Carmelite), and perhaps the floral imagery, cloying to modern sensibilities, does not appeal to her. Also, Mother Mary of the Cross is keenly aware of the Vaniers’ circumstances: Pauline is not cloistered, but living through the joys and

travails of marriage, motherhood and the vagaries of world events. Her days are lived against a larger immediate canvas than that of St. Thérèse. She is very much in the world in a way that the saint, living in a cloister, was not.

But in their own way, in their particular time and place, Pauline and Georges too have a vocation at the heart of the church. They may say with St. Thérèse, quoting the Book of Wisdom, “For to him that is little, mercy will be shown,”⁹ but instead of offering themselves as victim of God’s merciful love, they can add, “You do not ask for holocaust and victim; instead, here am I.”¹⁰

This open desire for God permeates everything that the couple sets out to do, and it can be seen in the letters Pauline writes to her children during the war years when the family is separated. (On May 9, 1944, she writes from Algiers to her eldest son: “We are certainly living in interesting times and there is much for you young ones to do. You will need all the science of the knowledge of God that you can possibly have and you will have to have strength that alone He can give. . . . It is in prayer alone that one can find our needs. Not prayer of words, but prayer of the spirit. It is the awareness of God, as Fr. Steuart calls it, that is essential. It is all the more difficult in these days of continuous agitation to stop and listen to Him and yet—how are we to reach Him if we don’t listen? I find that the best time is just before going to sleep to try and do what Fr. Steuart calls ‘pointing the spirit towards Him’.”¹¹) Always, against the backdrop of tension, anxiety and devastation, there remains the presence of God.

Throughout the whole of her long life, which will span most of the twentieth century, Pauline has both Martha’s open-hearted spirit of generosity and Mary’s longing to gaze upon God with love. Her temperamental anxiety, however, and the tendency to slide into depression, threaten to drag

down her trust in God. She often feels unworthy—that her spiritual life is “wrong” whenever her prayer seems nothing but a fog. She feels useless much of the time, as if her ambition to be of Christian service has frittered into nothing. As for her spiritual life, she can only often say with the psalmist, “I have sought you with all my heart; let me not stray from your commands.”¹²

Mother Mary of the Cross’s letters to Pauline span a period that is, in a sense, a time of exile for the Vaniers. By the time of the first letter, January 5, 1939, the couple have already passed an important turning point in their marriage and in Georges’s spiritual life. In the midst of the tumult of war, the family, though escaping the tragedy met by millions of others, will eventually find itself scattered on three continents. Through all the daily upheaval, Pauline’s Carmelite director exhorts her to loving abandonment, to letting go in recognition of God’s mercy, to rejoicing before God in her weakness.

In the first part of *Story of a Soul* Thérèse says that Carmel was the desert where God wanted her to hide herself. Pauline’s is a particular twentieth-century desert: her life and the lives of her family and all she comes into contact with are uprooted and in upheaval (though less tragically than millions upon millions of others) because of war. Her need for spiritual comfort finds a response from her Carmelite director who writes to her of simplicity and littleness. The prioress paraphrases the great St. Teresa, but could equally be echoing the little St. Thérèse: “His Majesty loves to show His power in frail souls because in them His goodness meets with the least obstacle.” She repeats more than once the original Latin meaning of mercy: “*Miseri-cordare*”—to give the heart to a wretched one.

In place of Thérèse's thorns, Mother Mary of the Cross refers to "a zero temperature," which will recur in other images: dryness, darkness, the inner "desert" when all is bleak and nothing seems to be happening in prayer. Accept this state, she exhorts; do not shun it, but keep on acknowledging God's love through the aridity.

The way of daily prayer and contemplation is not an easy one for Georges, either. He cannot confide in a spiritual director with his wife's openness, but eventually he, like her, will find a way through the frustration of dryness and distraction. The married life of Pauline and Georges Vanier will become, in its own way, an act of oblation to God's merciful love, and certainly the heart of St. Thérèse's act will beat in the whole of their lives and in their desire to do everything for God. For Pauline's part, Mother Mary of the Cross has a deep understanding of her needs, and she cautions Pauline against extraordinary practices, such as depriving herself of what is necessary in fulfilling her obligations. In fact, in response to Pauline who accuses herself of being self-indulgent when others are suffering, the prioress reminds her sternly of her "positive duty" in her diplomatic role. The sacrifices required of Pauline are already real enough.

As the years go on, Pauline and Georges will deepen their relationship with God and with each other, and like St. Thérèse, they are living more and more deeply at the heart of the church. During the postwar years, the couple will find spiritual support at the Carmel of Nogent-sur-Marne, a short drive from Paris. Pauline will become a Carmelite tertiary there. The couple will embrace prayer and service in the way that Carmelites through the centuries have chosen: the way of simplicity, trusting in God's loving mercy, acknowledging their own weakness, and echoing St. Thérèse as they say with St. Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong."¹³

Along the way, they will meet a Dominican priest, Thomas Philippe. He will become a guide for Pauline, helping her to deepen her understanding of God's merciful love. The Vanier children will gradually move into adulthood following spiritual paths that Pauline, without realizing it, has opened for them. The oldest son becomes a Trappist monk named Benedict. He will be ordained a priest two weeks before Mother Mary of the Cross's death in 1952 and will be regarded by his parents as the family's spiritual rock.

Seven years later, Georges Vanier will be elevated to prominence as the Governor General of Canada. His fellow Canadians will come to recognize the inner strength that lies beneath his wise words and friendly simplicity. They will note the patience with which he bears his increasing infirmity. Only after his death will they discover the rich sources of his spiritual life.

During Georges Vanier's time in office, son Jean, with Père Thomas, will found a new small community which they call "L'Arche." Georges Vanier, the mainstay of Pauline's life, will die in 1967, and as a widow, Pauline will find a new vocation. She will be educated in what she calls "the school of L'Arche." As she moves into advanced old age she will rely increasingly on her son Benedict whose gentle transatlantic messages will echo, in the language of a new generation, the spiritual counsel of the Carmelite prioress. Saint Thérèse writes in her Act of Oblation, "In the evening of this life I shall appear before You with empty hands."¹⁴ For Pauline, it is a lifetime's courageous struggle to hold her hands open in trust.

St Thérèse found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians a signpost on her little way. Likewise, Georges and Pauline Vanier, both singly and together, strive to live out Paul's injunction, "Now you are the body of Christ."¹⁵ As they

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navigate their own path through their own particular time and place, they can remind themselves at every step, “Now you have received mercy.”¹⁶

CHAPTER ONE

The Door of the Heart (1938–42)

By exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven. In this way they can make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.

—Second Vatican Council,
Dogmatic Constitution of the Church
(*Lumen Gentium*), ch. 4 on “The Laity” 31.

Although Georges and Pauline Vanier were both from Montreal, by the spring of 1938 they had spent ten of their seventeen years of marriage in Europe.

Georges Vanier turned fifty in 1938. He was a lawyer by training, a wounded veteran of World War I, and after the war he had become the commander of Canada’s francophone regiment, known as the Royal 22nd Regiment. His posting as a military advisor at the League of Nations in Geneva had led to a diplomatic career, and he had been sent as second in authority to the Canadian High Commission in London in 1931. Temperamentally he was reserved, highly disciplined, exacting and idealistic, with a dry sense of humor and a penchant for English nineteenth-century poetry.

He had been brought up in the atmosphere of a heavily Jansenistic Catholicism, and as a result his practice of the faith was governed by a rigid fear of God's punishment and an exaggerated sense of unworthiness. He received Communion only once or twice a year, and then only if he had been to Confession immediately beforehand lest he be in a state of sin a few minutes later. (He had made a retreat as a young man to determine whether he had a vocation to the priesthood. Among his thirteen retreat resolutions: "To keep guard on myself for the sin of sloth and . . . to make a note of the times I am idle and to think, at least once a day, of the number of times I have been slothful and to examine the causes of it" and "To think once a day of Hell and its torments.")

Pauline, ten years his junior, was his exact opposite in temperament and outlook. As the only child of a Quebec Superior Court judge, she lived within a well-to-do milieu. Although she was intelligent and learned easily, her schooling had been conducted mainly by a succession of governesses of limited ability. Her extroversion and spontaneity went hand-in-hand with a streak of anxiety and a tendency to slip into depression. But from her mother she had imbibed a spirit of trust in God's love. In later years she would speak of Georges's shock at the idea that, as a daily communicant, she could drink champagne and dance all night, and then receive communion the next morning without any feeling of guilt.

In early 1928 the Vaniers moved to Geneva, where Georges became Canada's military representative to the League of Nations. By this time, the strain of motherhood to three children (Thérèse, Georges—nicknamed "Byngsie" after his honorary godfather, Lord Byng—and Bernard), as well as the expectation of diplomatic entertaining, had taken its toll on Pauline. Pregnant with her fourth child in the spring of 1928, she was threatened with a miscarriage. After

the child, named Jean (and given the nickname “Jock”), was delivered safely that September, she suffered an emotional breakdown and was hospitalized.

The stock market crash followed the next year, and shortly afterward Georges was named First Secretary to the Canadian High Commission in London. The Vaniers found themselves in a diplomatic milieu where they were expected to keep up appearances without sufficient means. By the mid-1930s, with the family’s finances back on an even keel, Pauline began to feel healthy again. To help her move out of herself, her doctor suggested that she visit young miners who were dying of lung disease. In doing this, she added a dimension to her life that, in one way or another, would continue for the rest of her life.

At this time Pauline also felt the need to pursue spiritual help. This she found at the Jesuit church on Farm Street in London, where she met a Jesuit in his mid-sixties by the name of Roger Clutton, who was in poor health and had deteriorating eyesight. He was known to be a spiritual director of gentleness and kindness and was described after his death as “one whose strength was made perfect in infirmity.”¹ She began receiving spiritual counselling from Father Clutton.

Pauline also began to attend a series of talks known as Wednesday Conferences, given by another Jesuit, Robert Steuart, who was one of England’s best known preachers at the time. Father Steuart had come through his own periods of suffering. His family belonged to the landed gentry of Scotland, and his youth had been one of indolence and lavish living. As a young Jesuit he continually castigated himself for being lazy, self-centered and vain. He had bouts of depression and struggles with his prayer life, and eventually in frustration he sought help in prayer from the prioress of the Notting Hill Carmel. From his own experience, he spoke

of prayer as not so much following a rote formula, but rather of presenting oneself before God, with an act of faith that it is God who takes the initiative in prayer. He exhorted his listeners to accept dryness, depression, and feelings of alienation just as they are and not as obstacles to prayer. Pauline became a devotee of Father Steuart and his Wednesday Conferences.

On Good Friday, April 15, 1938, Father Steuart was scheduled to preach at St. Ignatius Church in the London borough of Hackney. Reluctantly—perhaps having heard his wife enthuse over this priest once too often—Georges agreed to accompany her to the service. The Good Friday afternoon service of the 1930s, known as “Devotions of the Three Hours’ Agony,” consisted of a sermon on the last words of Jesus on the Cross. Father Steuart was known to speak energetically on the love of God, often using down to earth language and gentle humor (“Some people seem to think of God as if He were in a chronic state of irritation with them”).² He himself also was said to be especially drawn to the Passion as the entry to God’s love (“What was the last appearance of Christ before He died? On the Cross with His Arms stretched out as if He would say, ‘Such has been My Love for you; nailed, so that I cannot withdraw if I would’”).³ Whatever were his specific words in that sermon on Good Friday 1938, when Georges Vanier heard them, they marked an important spiritual turning point for him, having the effect of finally opening the door of moral and spiritual rigidity that had gradually become unlocked during his seventeen-year marriage to Pauline.

In August of that year, in her annual letter commemorating the anniversary of Georges’s wounding in battle, Pauline wrote, “If I’ve always admired and loved you tenderly, never before this year have I felt such communion of soul and

heart with you.” Georges replied, “Yes, *mon cheri*, this year there is something new, more beautiful and greater in our love. This change is due to you, to your example, to your prayers, and I thank you for it with all my heart.”⁴ Not long afterward, he began to accompany Pauline to daily Mass and Communion, and at some point during the turbulent years that followed, they decided to spend an additional half an hour each day in prayer.

Toward the end of 1938 Georges Vanier learned that he had been appointed head of the Canadian legation in France. In a speech at the Savoy Hotel, he paid tribute to Pauline: “I owe much to her inspiration, much to her advice and criticism in which for my good she is not always sparing. Without her by my side, I would not like to face the task in Paris.”⁵ His tone was lighthearted, but the message was real: he was aware of how much he owed to his wife.

As for Pauline herself, another door had opened up for her. The Jesuit Father Clutton was a friend of the Carmelite monastery in the town of Hitchin in Hertfordshire, a short train ride from London. He recommended to Pauline that she visit the prioress there. The prioress’s name was Mother Mary of the Cross. She was only seven years older than Pauline, but she carried the wisdom of a woman much older. She had been born in Ireland and had known tragedy at a young age, having lost two brothers in infancy, followed by the lengthy illness and death of her mother and the death of another brother in World War I. She had been named prioress at the relatively young age of 34. For the rest of her life Mother Mary of the Cross would provide a spiritual lifeline for Pauline Vanier.

Georges and Pauline prepared to move to Paris in early 1939 amid a shaky uncertainty throughout Europe. For

herself, Pauline was not so sure about the move into the unknown, with none of her usual supports. Early in the new year of 1939, Mother Mary of the Cross wrote:

I write to say “Courage. Sursum corda [Lift up your hearts].” Keep your eyes on Him and be His very little Child so that in all He may hold and guide you. . . .

. . . He wants *peace* in your soul, my Pauline—He works in peace. And He must be free in you to work the plan of His Love. “A Child is born to us.” And He wants to take new birth in your soul, to use just *you* to live again His Life before His Father and so to use you to radiate Himself into His Mystical Body, the Church.

Make your weakness your very pleading to Him, that He may give His Love to you all the more. “Misericordare”—to give the heart to a wretched one—is just the meaning of mercy. So weary not to remind Him how much you need Him.

Every struggle has its blows, its falls, its hours of utter weariness. But with Him all is easy. By faith and love let Him live more and more within you, in unshakeable confidence. He knocks at the door of your heart—open wide to Him & let Him come in, and hold Him fast in joy and confidence, and so let Him find rest in your soul.

Here I am, holding you in my prayer. *He* is waiting for you in Paris so fear not—but make the move in peace and surrender to His Blessed Will. Accept it. Will it.

Father Clutton wrote as well:

Be assured you are all right. God has a hold on you and you would have to push Him off if you would be free from Him—which please God you will not do.

Be faithful to prayer and realize that you must depend on Him for all things. You cannot do without Him. Pray

in the way you find easiest. You say it is easy now, but it won't always be so. The sun is shining but it won't always be fine weather.

You are in a rush of social duties etc. Try always to take God with you. Remember He is there in you even if lunching or at dinner or a reception. But you must fulfil your social duties to the best of your power. Don't mind your vanities—laugh at yourself.

I am glad you have found a confessor. I hope he won't try to lace you up too tightly. Be cautious what you say about your prayers. Many good priests do not understand. You could always say, if he is too inquisitive, you have a director in England. I expect you will be over before too long and you can have a full talk.⁶

In Paris, the Vanier couple continued to be daily communicants, and for their daily half hour of prayer and meditation they discovered the tranquil Blessed Sacrament Chapel, which was tucked into a narrow street of townhouses called rue Cortambert. The chapel was open day and night, and it was possible to slip inside at any time, leaving the busy sounds of the nearby Place du Trocadéro.

They had decided that their four children would spend the remainder of the school year at their boarding schools in England—sixteen-year-old Thérèse at Mayfield in Sussex, fourteen-year-old Byngsie, and the two youngest, Bernard and Jean, twelve and eleven, at St. John's Beaumont, near Windsor. In June, 1939, the rector of St. John's informed them by phone that Byngsie had taken dangerously ill as a result of a burst appendix. A serious infection threatened his life. His parents rushed across the English Channel to his side and sat by helplessly until it eventually became clear that the crisis was over. In later years Pauline would recall the days of anguish when Byngsie's life hung in the balance.

As she wept, the Jesuit rector told her she must accept the will of God regarding the boy. She would remember that in response she stammered a “dead or alive” offering of her son to God.

The Vaniers returned to an increasingly fraught Paris, where extra trains were mobilized for evacuations. The atmosphere was tense as everyone waited to see what the next international move would be. In August, Pauline, her mother and the four children went for their annual holiday to the seaside town of Varengeville, on the Normandy coast, where they would be safe if bombs were aimed at Paris or London.

They were still at the seaside when Germany invaded Poland on September 1. Britain and France declared war the next day. Canada’s declaration of war followed a week later. It was decided that the family would stay together for the time being, and they found rental rooms in a section of an old chateau in the countryside, while Georges remained at the legion in Paris.

For Pauline, it was a time of intolerable waiting, in an unfamiliar place amid tension and fear, close to where war had been declared. Her anxiety flared as day after day there was no telling what lay ahead of them. Mother Mary of the Cross wrote on September 21:

I am so sorry to hear that you are in the Desert . . . or rather I should not say “sorry” for I know Our Beloved Lord is by this means preparing your soul for closer union and asking you for a deeper surrender of your will.

Turn to the Blessed Trinity within and just get fresh strength in the sanctuary of your soul. Unite your suffering with Our Lord’s in every Mass at which you are Priest and Victim with Him—so that He can use you as a life in which He continues to adore His Father.

It is your present cross, Child, to bear this darkness—but Our Holy Father St. John of the Cross speaks so wonderfully of carrying our cross with Him as the means of sanctity (*Ascent*, Book II Chap 6 & 7).

All your sisters join me in sending their love. We often speak of you.

I must end with a big blessing and devoted love.

News began filtering through about the amassing of troops and atrocities committed in Poland against Jews and people of Slavic origin. Pauline spent day after day in distress, her fragile temperament near the breaking point. On December 4, the prioress wrote,

Your dear letter was a great pleasure to me, and though Our Beloved Lord is leading you by a “tractless waterless” way with dull grey clouds about, yet He has one only purpose as you say, to secure your will for Himself alone and to have the mouth of your desires open towards Him in all.

Smile to Him at His strange way of loving—and give Him that WILL more & more & more, my Pauline, with joy. “*Gaudete in Domino et Verum dico vobis gaudete.*” [“Rejoice in the Lord, and truly I say rejoice.”]

Yes, you are ever in my prayer and love—and I am happy that this can bring comfort to you.

By the beginning of 1940 nothing had changed in the Vaniers’ circumstances, and it was unclear what their own next move should be—either to move back to Paris or to return to Canada. Domestic tension increased. Although the three Vanier boys attended the local school, they became restless, with little outlet for their boisterous energy. The strain of their living conditions wore on Pauline’s nerves,

and it was a small relief for her to escape the oppressiveness of their situation by spending a few days with Georges in Paris. She wrote of her irritability and her spiritual darkness to Mother Mary of the Cross. The prioress replied on January 26:

I am so glad Georges has you with him a bit. But what an anxiety about the boys. . . .

Your spiritual life is *right*—despite a zero temperature. Yes—the ever tranquil Trinity dwells within & even when we are not conscious of it, it is there, a fact of God’s out-pouring love to help & balance us.

The irritability is a big trial. But that is mainly physical. Your life has been a big strain in so many ways since June. The best use we can make of it (those of us who suffer from it—hush! hush!) is to humble ourselves very entirely before God and thank Him for forcing us to see our misery and nothingness and our joyous need of *Him*. . . .

All join in sending much, much love and ever our loving prayer. They all love you too. And my Pauline, yes, I think I know a little what God in His Love has put in your heart for me—bless you. I am so happy to have it.

In April of 1940, with matters in France still seemingly at a standstill, the Vanier family, along with others, moved back to Paris, tentatively optimistic that life might return to normal. On May 11 the German army charged into Belgium, and then Holland. By the end of May, the tanks had reached France’s borders. A quick decision was now needed. While Georges remained in Paris to close the Canadian legation, Pauline, her mother and children left in a legation car for the port of Bordeaux, on a road filled with cars, carts, bicycles, and people on foot, all desperate to flee the coming enemy. After several months during which nothing seemed

to be happening, events were taking place so quickly during these days that it is a wonder that the prioress's next letter, written May 14, reached Pauline.

My dearest Child,

A word of love and instant prayer in this big crisis both for you in France and in your own little family circle.

Is Byngsie better again?

The news is staggering but much as I feared it would come about.

We can only one and all trust in God's actual grace to meet each crisis as it comes with calm & determination.

May Our Lady hold you very close, my Pauline.

At the coastal village of Le Verdon-sur-Mer a British destroyer picked up the family, along with a handful of others, and they steamed into the Bay of Biscay, maneuvering around German U-boats as explosions sounded in the distance. The boat at last reached Milford Haven in Wales, and the exhausted family went on to London, waiting for news of Georges's whereabouts. Mother Mary of the Cross wrote on June 23:

Only prayer can be the comfort I offer, for words just fail in this flood of anguish and grief and pain.

You must be exhausted and weary in soul and mind and heart and body. . . .

I would love to have you for a few days in the Lodge—is it possible? You must just keep as silent about it as possible. But come if you can. I know it is hard to get here and that you may have duties but I think it would do you good.

I will wait to have a line—and to know if you have word of Georges.

My big enfolding love—I trust you to Our Lady's care.

Pauline remained frantic with worry about Georges's safety until he arrived in London a few days later, having escaped from France on a sardine boat. The Vanier children and Pauline's mother left almost immediately by ship for Montreal. Georges and Pauline were recalled back to Canada by the Canadian government the following September.

In Hitchin, daily life had become increasingly deprived for the Carmelites as the war raged. They lost a portion of their income through the loss of a benefactor. As part of their war effort, they gave some of their garden produce to the navy. When the German bombing raids began in the autumn of 1940, younger nuns were occupied in all-night fire squads, and air raid alerts threatened the monastery's daily routine. Prayer begun in the chapel was sometimes completed in the cellar. "The spirit here is great—no flinching—'grim and gay' is a real description of it," Mother Mary of the Cross wrote to Pauline in an undated letter. And in another, indicating the new state of things, "Let us keep our souls in His Peace, amid life's variations. We had an incendiary bomb in the Lane last week."

The Vaniers gave the Carmelites a cow, and the milk helped to make up for the general food shortage. They also kept goats and chickens at the monastery, and with money donated by the Vaniers, they followed the general advice to British citizens to lay in a small stock of food as provision "in case of invasion."

In Canada, the Vaniers settled into their new wartime reality. Thérèse, who had finished school, took a secretarial course, and the three boys enrolled in Loyola College in Montreal. Georges Vanier was sent to persuade people in the heavily French province of Quebec to support Canada's war effort and to recruit volunteers for the army. He and Pauline were shocked to find that in Quebec there was indif-

ference to the bombing of Britain and, in many places, outright support for the return to “traditional values” of Marshal Pétain’s puppet government in Vichy. Pauline gave talks to Quebec women about their harrowing escape from France and the terrifying experiences of the French people.

Amid the upheaval of the family’s life, Pauline discovered in the late autumn of 1940 that at the age of 42 she was once again pregnant. She wrote to Mother Mary of the Cross about her “shock” and her spirit’s “numbness” and the worry that always faced her: that she failed as a mother.

On February 21, 1941, the Carmelite prioress replied:

And now for the big and holy and happy secret. Just Magnificat together. Indeed I realize in some little manner the shock: and the difficulty it must have seemed. But it is surely not only a grace from God but a special grace and trust. May Our Lady be very near you all the time and her own loved Mother, St. Anne, caring and guiding you in all. Let me know how you are in health from time to time. I have told just the ones you knew best here, and you know it will go no further. . . .

Raids have not been so bad . . . Of course the London fire raid was terrible and the ghastly attacks on Coventry etc. But the spirit of the people is more amazing than one could say—it really takes seeing to believe it. Just ordinary folk, bombed out 3 & 4 times, making far less fuss than they might have done if the milkman had not delivered their morning milk!

. . . Pauline, child—accept to be numb at Mass and even at Holy Communion. Mass is Calvary numbness, pain, agony—so suffer with Him, giving Him the ready union of your will with His own will in this supreme act of loving adoration of His Father which He perpetuates in His Priest, and in *you* through your royal priesthood. I am sure, sure, sure He is pleased with you. Keep more & more in

His Peace. And let not your failures trouble you. Your children are ever sure of your loving goodness to them. And He is waiting, as the most loving Mother.

I love Dame Juliana's setting out of Our Lord as our Mother (in "The Revelations of Divine Love")—"God Almighty is our kindly Father; and God, All-Wisdom is our kindly Mother; with the love and the goodness of the Holy Ghost: which is all one God, one Lord."

In the early spring, fourteen-year-old Bernard was taken ill with rheumatic fever and spent several weeks in the hospital. After Pauline wrote that the worst of the illness was over, but that she still worried about her unborn baby and her own maternal failings, Mother Mary of the Cross wrote:

How comforting for you to have him better. I have had rheumatic fever, so I know its horrors. Yes, take every wise precaution over the heart. I had "compensation" for the valve affected, so it left no serious result.

Pauline dearest, the little one on its way is truly God's gift to you—and both you & Georges will remain young for many extra years. You have our prayer indeed and I like to feel that you can say that you are serene. You must be very busy. . . .

Someone has, I believe, summed up the Hess affair in the following:

1. "It is the mell of a Hess."
2. "Hess's opinion of Hitler Has clearly grown littler While Hitler's opinion of Hess Is probably less."⁷

Pauline, the people here are *amazing*. The spirit beyond understanding. A surgical instrument maker spoke to me the other day of being three times bombed out, in the way he might say he had three times lost a bus ticket. They just go on, however bad it is. And it has been pretty bad.

Though in the West End there is not really much to see. Sr. Josephine was up in town last week for the first time since the blitz, and though she was all 'round the Oxford Street and Strand part, she was astonished that, save on the actual spots where bombs and mines had fallen, everything looked so ordinary.

Poor God—amidst it all, what peace to know He loves us all the time and even when His children fight, that we humans are His children still. And how a childlike spirit in us must rest Him. One can almost see His point of view about St. Teresa of the Child Jesus. She certainly had simplicity of intention—the single eye for God that sounds so easy but is really in itself a loving practice of all the virtues. Do you know the Holy Father's wonderful sermon at the Mass of her canonization?⁸ If not, do read it, but read it slowly and prayerfully. I had, about 6 years ago, felt very specially drawn to her and his words came as a confirmation of that drawing.

Michel Paul Vanier was born in Quebec City on July 29, 1941. No sooner had he arrived in the world than two other Vanier children were making moves to leave the safety of Canada and cross the Atlantic. Thérèse, turned nineteen in February 1942, and having completed her secretarial course, decided to join the Mechanized Transport Corps, which was recruiting young Canadian women to become motor mechanics and drivers for the armed forces in England.

At the same time, the Vaniers' third son, Jean, barely thirteen years old, asked his father's permission to continue his schooling at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, England. The prospect of sending her children—especially young Jean—across the deadly Atlantic, horrified Pauline. The Carmelite prioress commiserated with her grief at the leave-taking prospect, and exhorted her in an undated letter,

“Do not bother as to what is coming—live with Him in the *present*—give all and rejoice.” Pauline may have needed above all the blessing expressed by the prioress in a further letter: “May Our Lady wrap you round for me—and remember, the humdrum of life lived with her for Him is the ALL He asks.” Of all the partings in Pauline’s life up to now, letting Jean go at such a young age may have been the hardest.

In the autumn of 1942 Georges received the news that he was to be named the Canadian Minister to the Governments in Exile in London. This meant that another upheaval was in store for the Vanier family. In the meantime, after Michel’s birth, Pauline had resumed speeches in aid of the war effort to Quebec’s women’s groups. The prioress wrote for Christmas:

Now He must joy [sic] to know that you are ready and happy to sit at His feet and wait—your will in His: a real secret of holiness. Yes: I am sure it is Our Lord loving His Father, through us, using us still to love Him.

My Pauline dearest, the lack of prayer seems terrible, the lack of understanding of the need. Bravo! Do talk about it, placed as you are, I mean: 1. By your own attractive personality, 2. By your own social position you can reap a rich harvest for God by your nice insistence on this point of prayer. And do it when you get to England too. And I hope you will be ready quietly to continue your public speaking here—you are the right type. Oh the criticism matters not at all, as you say. I was so very pleased to know that you were doing all this.

As Georges was all set to leave for London, he took sick and was hospitalized with pneumonia. Christmas of 1942 was bleak because the family was so scattered, and in a note to his two oldest sons, Georges exhorted them to “look after your Mummy and be thoughtful with her during these holy

days,” noting that their family was at least intact, unlike some others that the war had touched.⁹

But by the early spring of 1943 he would be recovered and Pauline would find her family once again geographically splintered.