

Reflections on Madeleine's Inquisition

July 24, 2021

To: Paul

From: Joe

You may remember the message painted over the stairway at the Providence College (PC) bookstore: "Men who do not read good books are no better off than men who cannot read them." *Madeleine's Inquisition* is a good book—a very good book. And I am better off for having read it.

The time invested in the research alone had to be prodigious, and the care in creating a gripping story within its historical framework was masterful. I could have read it three times and still not have absorbed the depth and significance of some of the history presented, which laid a strong foundation for a story that both informed and surprised the reader along the way. Some specific thoughts follow.

Organization.

With multiple plots, a wide variety of characters, numerous events of historical significance, and a quick moving pace, your presentation through many (67) short chapters, rather than fewer but much longer ones, was welcome. It helped to prevent characters and events from merging into confusion. This also made it easier to appreciate the events and the characters as they developed within the historical context. And from a very practical standpoint, I appreciated the large type, especially since I was awaiting, and then recovering from, cataract surgery at the time I was reading it.

The Church of Rome vs The Teachings of Jesus.

As a practicing Catholic, I had some initial concern that the story would be an attack on my Catholic faith. This concern was eliminated early and often. The book graphically uncovers men's misdeeds against women in the claimed pursuit of saving souls, but it is equally fair in presenting the teachings of Jesus on such

things as love of God and love of neighbor, tolerance, patience, forgiveness, dignity and compassion, which form the bedrock of our faith. This was fairly presented in the words and thoughts of several characters, including Madame Le Blanc (pages 94, 156 and 211); Sophia (p.167); Fr. Thomas in exchanges with Fr. Martin (p.216, 224 and 226); Madeleine (p.14, 267, 275 and 343); Luc (p.311); and Major Paulo Thomaso (p. 219). In short, the novel impressed me as masterfully and graphically exposing the wounds of the Church of Rome caused by its inhumane treatment of women, while simultaneously reminding the reader of the teachings of Jesus, for which He ultimately experienced equally inhumane wounds on the Cross.

The Horrors of War.

The descriptions of the military campaigns and battles and their aftermath, as experienced by Jean Marc Moreau against the Russians and Michel against the Prussians and British, vividly and graphically revealed both the physical and emotional toll of war. I could not escape the feeling that those scenes could only have been described with such effectiveness by a writer who had experienced both the immediacy and the after effects of war --physical and emotional and short term and long term. Several times I was convinced that, while you were describing battles occurring in Europe in and around 1812, the words reflected your own Vietnam experiences in the late 1960's. It saddened me to think of what you and others like you experienced during and following those years.

While any number of episodes in the book could be drawn upon as illustrative of the above, none is more compelling than the thoughts of Sergeant Moreau immediately following the slaughter of, and by, the Cossacks (p.253):

A field that moments before had been tranquil was now scarred by war, carpeted by dead and dying bodies. The Cossacks were routed, but at the cost of many lives. It was a scene that memorialized the bravery of men but also symbolized the folly of war, as so many other fields did throughout the history of civilization. Wars fought for money, honor, land, politics, and religion—and always at the cost of the lives of brave young men!

Many young lives might be spared if every U.S. President, Vice President, congressman, senator and secretary of state had Sergeant Moreau's words framed on their walls, and actually studied them at the start of each day.

And lest they think that a return from war removes the memories, they should also contemplate Sergeant Moreau's reflection upon his return to France (p. 270): "...He knew now, that he could set aside the weapons of war, but he wondered if he could ever set aside the memories of war." A single sentence that speaks volumes!

And then there are the "forgotten ones" as spoken for by Michel (p.254): "We will become the forgotten generation abandoned by the country that asked us to sacrifice so much!"

The above scenes and others paint with unmistakable clarity the horrors of war.

Some Unexpected Twists and Turns

Just when I felt like I knew where things were going, an unexpected twist would appear. In such cases, I not only enjoyed the surprise but felt myself cheering things on. They are mentioned below.

The nameless, but quick thinking Mother Superior who interrupted the Monsignor's attempted encounter with young Marc (pp.76-78), came through as a woman of courage, ingenuity (fire in the trashcan) and utter fearlessness in confronting a wrong and protecting the young student. She could serve as a model for every grammar school, middle school and high school in the country. What parent would not rest easier knowing that their child was protected by such a woman of courage!

The arrival of Major Paulo Thomas on the scene in time to aid the return of Madeleine and Jean Marc and the follow-up encounter with the Inquisitor was unexpected but dramatic, especially as Madeleine raised the questions that revealed to the major the death of his brother, Fr. Thomas, in prison. I could feel

the Inquisitor tremble and Major Thomaso boil with each question. The scene was short but very dramatic.

For pure courtroom drama, Madeleine's testimony in defense of Madam Le Blanc's last will and testament was hard to beat. Not only did she capture the judge's full attention (and mine), but the coup de grace was the unexpected pronouncements by the King's representative: "...there will be no cross examination"..."there will be no closing arguments from the plaintiffs..." and "there will be no appeal..." I could feel the Monsignor and Plaintiff's counsel wither, and wither and wither with each "there will be no..." Right out of Hollywood! Best courtroom closing scene since the closing testimony of Marisa Tomei in My Cousin Vinny!

The Personification of Irony and Hypocrisy

How ironic and hypocritical to promote and defend the practice of torturing women in unspeakable ways, sometimes even to the point of death, as a means to save their souls, prevent their excommunication and "ease their way to heaven", all the while ignoring such fundamentals of our faith as love thy neighbor as thyself and "thou shalt not kill." The novel's message is clear!

The Multi-dimensional Madeleine Moreau

In Madeleine Moreau the author has created an unforgettable woman: resilient in the face of poverty; fearlessly protective of her young children; loving but conflicted wife of a husband away at war; faithful and appreciative friend to Madame Le Blanc; unwavering when confronted with false and bullying accusations; courageous and unbowed while experiencing unjust and unspeakable torture. Quite a woman! And on top of that, her knowledge of grape farming and wine production enable her to imagine blending various grapes "to make the finest of red wines" (p.341) as she begins a new adventure with her reunited family. Hopefully, some of the latter skill has rubbed off on the author so that he can counsel his Friar brothers and sisters on the proper wine selection as we dine happily together in Maine this September!

A Return to PC?

And now a word to my friend Paul. In the event you wish to share your royalties with PC, I will be happy to represent you and I have every confidence we can persuade them to cash your check. I have less confidence, however, that we can persuade them to invite you to campus to lead a discussion entitled, WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT AUGUSTINE AND THOMAS AQUINAS!

A Return to Bradley's Café?

I envision a trip to Brads by the author, his Friar brothers and sisters and our new friends: the bigger-than-life Emile, the bawdy Stephen and the reliable and measured Luc. After a lively evening, we conclude by raising our glasses with a salute to the author and a hearty, "WELL DONE PAUL."