



Brother Robert Lavoie, SC

On March 17, 1933 Lucie and Théophane Lavoie welcomed their seventh child and fifth son, Robert Lucien, into their home in Fall River, Massachusetts. Robert's father, Théophane, was a French Canadian immigrant and a master weaver in the textile industry that drove the economy of the region at the time. Lucie, born in Massachusetts of French Canadian immigrant parents at the dawn of the 20th Century, had also worked as a weaver.

Robert joined his older brothers Arthur, George, Henri, Wilfred and Phillippe and his sister Claire in the family home. By 1940, two younger sisters, Lucille and Yvette, rounded out the family which had moved into a recently-built four bedroom house on Fall River's Kennedy Street. The house was almost certainly a busy place, with nine children ranging in age from one to seventeen in residence. For the introverted Robert this hectic environment was challenging, but he took refuge in quiet moments with his dad.

Robert and his father developed an especially close relationship. He often recalled the happy childhood memory of times spent with Théophane fishing and digging clams at the nearby seashore. Those experiences were likely the roots of Bob's love of the outdoors and activities such as baseball, fishing, cycling, swimming, and hiking. Later in life, Robert recalled long bicycle rides, even to places as far away as Providence, Rhode Island.

Robert's first teachers were his parents. As he grew, he attended elementary school in Fall River and eventually came to know the Brothers of the Sacred Heart as a student. Entering the community in Sharon, Massachusetts on April 1, 1951, shortly after his 18th birthday, he graduated from the Juniorate in Pomfret Center, Connecticut with a high school diploma in 1952. Robert made his first religious profession at Mount Saint Charles Academy on August 24, 1953. In honor of his father, he took Theophane as his religious name.

In preparation for a teaching career the young Brother Theophane studied for two years at the Sacred Heart Scholasticate in Pascoag before being assigned to his first teaching assignment at Saint Louis School in Nashua, New Hampshire. Two years later, he moved to Sacred Heart Academy in Central Falls, Rhode Island, where he taught for five years.

During his time at Sacred Heart, Theophane furthered his spiritual formation and education. In the summer of 1959 he attended the Grand Novitiate in Andover, Massachusetts and on July 15 professed his final vows in Harrisville, Rhode Island. The following summer he earned a B.A. degree from Saint Michael's College in Winooski, Vermont.

A fluent Francophone, Theophane was assigned to Cormier High School in Edmundston, New Brunswick, Canada in 1962. In addition to his teaching duties, Theophane continued his own studies, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Pedagogy from Saint Louis College in Edmundston in 1967.

Returning to the States in 1971, Robert served as a teacher at Notre Dame High School in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. He got his first taste of the American Southwest in 1972 as a participant in the Fall program at Sangre de Cristo Renewal Center near Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Renewed, Robert returned to New England and embarked upon a career of over thirty years in ministry at Mount Saint Charles Academy in Woonsocket. As a history teacher, he became

well-known for his particular interest in the Visigoths. When students would misbehave he would often admonish them: "Don't be a Visigoth". At some point his students bestowed upon him the name "Brother Vizzy" and the name stuck.

Moving from the classroom, Robert served from 1978 to 1986 as the Dean of Students at Mount. According to Brother Clifford King, "the kids knew that he meant business; he was no nonsense". He acted as a mentor to the younger teachers, especially in areas of classroom management. Brother Clifford recalls that during his first year of teaching, the students in one of his classes decided to occupy the desks at the back of the room. Brother Robert came by, assessed the situation, and directed the students to move into the desks closer to the front. Bob also had an uncanny knack of being present in situations where students were congregating where he would pre-empt any inappropriate activity.

During his last nineteen years at Mount, Robert was assigned as the school's business manager. In that capacity he was responsible for several major building projects, including supervising the construction of the new gym and the renovation of the old one into classrooms and theater space. When the brickwork on the four-story school building was being re-pointed, Bob would climb the scaffolding after the workers had left for the day to inspect. If he thought the workers were being sloppy or not using sufficient mortar he would let those in charge know the next day. Bob also worked alongside legendary MSC hockey coach Bill Belisle, among other things ensuring that the team's locker room was always in pristine condition.

After his tenure at MSC, Bob was once again called upon to exercise his fine attention to detail by supervising renovations of the New England Provincial House. As before, Robert was very "hands-on," checking after the workers each day to ensure that the job was done properly.

At 73, Robert answered his community's call to be part of a new community focused on parish ministry at Sacred Heart Parish in Bloomfield, Connecticut. There, he took an active part in many aspects of parish life, and had a role in maintaining the physical facilities of the parish as well. He made many friends among the parishioners who remember him and the Brothers fondly.

In 2015, with the closure of the house in Bloomfield, Bob was asked to relocate to what would be his final ministerial assignment - to Saint Anne Mission in Klagetoh, Arizona. His experience in building renovations quickly came to bear when he was tasked to supervise with the installation of new windows in the 60-year-old Mission House on the Navajo Reservation. As visiting high school groups arrived, Bob was always on hand to greet them and often assistance with special projects. Almost as a synthesis of his life's work, Bob returned to teaching. But instead of teaching history in a classroom he was teaching skills like carpentry and cement work to students visiting the Mission. They quickly came to respect and admire his knowledge as well as his quiet and gentle demeanor.

Robert assisted with the spiritual and liturgical life of the Mission parish, volunteering to prepare coffee every Sunday morning for the social after Mass as well as preparing and lighting the fire in the Mission's hogan on cold Sunday mornings. He came to know and respect the Navajo people, admiring their close relationship with the land and their livestock. He once remarked after visiting a parishioner and her niece at their homesites: "Those are the strong women of the Bible."

Throughout his religious life, Robert remained close to his siblings and their families. To his nieces and nephews he was the uncle who would swim, hike and ride bikes with them. Pauline Warren, Bob's oldest niece, cherishes the photos she has of him with her family: one holding her as a newborn and another of him carrying her young son out of the swimming pool. After

learning that Bob had acquired an iPad, one of his nephews set him up with an app that enabled him to easily share photos with his family.

Robert was quiet, gentle, and compassionate. He liked to play cards and watch sports, especially the New England Patriots. He was a talented violinist, even playing the part of the fiddler in a Mount Saint Charles school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. In community, he was well known as a “fix-it” man, with a particular compassion for ailing vacuum cleaners. When others were ready to throw a vacuum cleaner or other appliance out, he would often take the device, examine it, and give it a new life.

In early 2021 the first signs of Bob’s final illness appeared as small specks of blood he would cough up every morning. Medical tests were inconclusive. In mid-February 2022, during a scheduled visit to his pulmonologist, Robert was diagnosed with pneumonia and very low oxygen levels and was admitted to hospital. After five nights he was discharged with portable oxygen cylinders. Soon thereafter a decision was made to transport Robert to the Brothers’ house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where he could more easily receive care. Unfortunately, Robert’s chronically low blood oxygen levels prevented some necessary medical treatments. After four months in the community in Baton Rouge his condition deteriorated to the point where he was admitted to hospice care at Saint Clare Manor. He received many visitors while there and passed peacefully into immortality on Saturday, August 13, 2022.

An excerpt from brief essay on gentleness by the German Benedictine Anselm Grün found on Bob’s computer is an apt summary of his approach to life. Grün writes of gentle people: “They don't have to convince persons of different faiths of their orthodoxy; they have no need of proselytizing. Their gentleness is sufficient testimony for Christ. Anyone who encounters that gentleness meets Christ and will recognize him in it.”