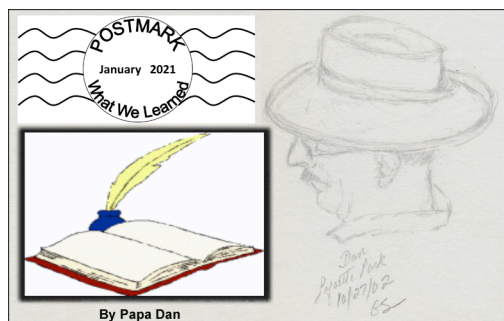


Sister Bernadette and The Bully

By Dan Sapone



**Sister Bernadette did her job back in the day.
Now, we must do ours, as she taught us.**

What We Learned: 'The Way It's S'posed To Be'

I grew up in Antioch, California, where my parents sent me to an excellent elementary school starting with the first grade in 1956 through the eighth grade in 1964. There, I was well prepared to become a good student, a basketball player, and a leader in high school. I was encouraged to become especially serious about reading and writing. Most of my teachers at Holy Rosary School were Dominican Sisters — I have enduring memories of Sister Marilyn, Sister Bernice, Sister Dymphthna, Sister Emily, and Sister Bernadette. At the 50-year reunion of our graduating class, our eighth-grade teacher Sister Bernadette (she was also the school principal) was there to congratulate us. I am proud that, on that day in 2014 (she was 89 by that time), I told her "I am nearing the end of a long successful career as an Editor and Writer and YOU taught me how to write fifty years ago." She seemed pleased.



← Left: Sister Bernadette

- Holy Rosary School Principal
- My 8th grade teacher (1963-64)
- Assistant God

← Right: Sister Emily

- My 7th grade teacher (1962-63)
- Dodger fan (we loved her anyway)

I have always been grateful for that academic preparation, but also for something else. I was also taught to expect that some things constituted "the way it's s'posed to be." We were taught to tell the truth and follow the rules, to be fair and honest in dealing with other people, to be serious about our schoolwork and athletics, and to respect our classmates and our elders (even those who were Dodger fans). Most important — she taught us these things by her example. We saw her live up to the values she taught us. After these many years, three moments stand out in my memory as examples of "the way it's s'posed to be," as taught to me by Sister Bernadette. These moments speak to me as illustrations of the power of her example to make sure "the right thing" happened. The third of these three examples make me wish that Sister Bernadette could be here in America today to wield the kind of authority she had on the playground at Holy Rosary School more than half a century ago.

One memory is an example of the power she had that enabled her to have an effect on my life. One afternoon, I was walking out of school, happily carrying the leather briefcase my father gave me to carry the books I enjoyed (Mark Twain and others). Gene Banti, who unbeknownst to me was the 7th and 8th grade basketball coach, passed me on his way into the building. Without any introductions, he stopped dead in his tracks said, "You're tall!" I felt like he had accused me of something. "What grade are YOU in?" I didn't like his tone of voice.

"I'm in the 7th grade."

"You need to be on the basketball team. Practice is Wednesday after school and I want you out there." This was turning out to be a very uncomfortable moment in the bright afternoon sun. I didn't like where this conversation was going.

"No ... I'm sorry ... I can't." I made up some excuse about Wednesday, which apparently was unsatisfactory.

"Oh, no. I'll speak to Sister Bernadette about it. You'll be out there on Wednesday." That's how Junior High basketball coaches talked in the early sixties. Sure enough, through the awesome power and influence of Sister Bernadette (she called my mother), I found myself on the basketball court on Wednesday afternoon. The fact that I had no basketball skills didn't matter. It turns out that Sister Bernadette wasn't though with me yet.

After a month or so of that first basketball season, Sister Bernadette walked up to me on the playground during recess carrying a basketball. She said, "The coach tells me you can get rebounds and score, but when you try to dribble you're an embarrassment to you and to me." She instructed me to spend every recess dribbling the basketball up and down the convent driveway "until the coach says you can dribble." I had been given an assignment, and I learned that part of my responsibility on the basketball court was to make other people proud of me.

After all that I learned that season, basketball got me started on a long career as a "regular kid" who developed enough skill on the court to play varsity basketball in high school and, later, to become a basketball coach myself. Once again, Sister Bernadette displayed the awesome power and influence she had to make things turn out 'the way it's s'posed to be.'

So, my third example is the one that I want to apply to the world as we know it here, in America today. This one goes back to the Spring of 1960. The scene takes place on the Holy Rosary School playground. I am in the fourth grade, standing in line, waiting my turn at the tetherball court, when our well-known playground bully — he was a fifth-grader — cut to the head of the line. When someone yelled something like "Hey, the line starts back here. You need to wait your turn." He replied through his powerful smirk, "And who is going to make me?" Everybody in line knew better than to reply to that question; so the bully kept his place at the head of the line. ***BUT ... then it happened.***

Sister Bernadette regularly spent the recess time patrolling the playground. She happened to be strolling right behind the tetherball line when the bully pulled his stunt. Right after his "who is going to make me?" question, Sister Bernadette grabbed the bully by the ear (as my 4th-grade memory recalls) and hauled him off across the playground to her office — the Principal's Office.



His question had been answered. (Now, I grant you, it is possible that, in reality, she gently held his shirtsleeve and guided him across the playground to her office, but ... my 4th-grade sense of justice stands by my original description.) What we learned is that she called his parents, they had to come and take him home, and we didn't see him for the rest of the day. So, that is the clear authority and swift justice that Sister Bernadette represented. Doing the right thing was required and enforced. The rules had to be followed. That is the lesson we were taught in the classroom and on that playground; and, when necessary, that lesson was demonstrated.

So, here we are today, sixty years later, in an America that claims to be a nation of laws. A nation that claims to lead the world in support of recognized values for the common good. A nation, we were taught in Sister Bernadette's classroom, where a constitution governed the rules and the rules were enforced by legitimate authority for the common good — just like they were enforced on our playground at Holy Rosary School. "It's who we are," we are told. Yet here in America, over the past four years, we have found ourselves burdened under the painful weight of a bully — a presidential bully — who regularly violates what we have been taught about telling the truth and following the rules, about being fair and honest in dealing with other people, about being serious about our assigned responsibilities, and respecting other people (even those who are Dodger fans). Our constitution and our institutions are tasked with the responsibility to grasp the bully by the ear and drag him off the playground, when necessary. Today, America needs that same kind of enforcement of our common values. When confronted with 'The Bully,' President-Elect Joe Biden, warns us: "That's not who we are." Our institutional "Sister Bernadette" — our Constitution, as reinforced by the will of our people, as expressed by their votes — must step forward and do its job. We have responsibilities to make that happen. Sister Bernadette did her job back in the day. Now, we must do ours, as she taught us.

Sister Bernadette passed away peacefully on November 5, 2019 at the age of 94. Her obituary revealed more things to admire about her life that I didn't know.

(<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/SFGate/obituary.aspx?page=lifestory&pid=194456421>)

But — Since Then, We've Learned Some Other Things:

'The Way It Is' and 'Who We Are'

In Sister Bernadette's classroom, we learned a lot of things. We learned about the founding of our nation and its history. We learned that America was founded on some important words:

**"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."**

The words were written by Thomas Jefferson; and the 56 men who signed the document are widely considered to be among our founders. What we learned later: 41 of those who signed our founding Declaration owned slaves, including Jefferson. Among those who were not slave owners, John Adams unsuccessfully insisted that the Declaration condemn slavery and announce the end of slavery in America. He lost that battle. It was reported that, on July 2nd, 1776, he warned, "If we give in on this issue, there will be trouble one hundred years hence." The "trouble" that happened a century (85 years) later was the Confederacy and the Civil War in which eleven states seceded from the union and went to war against the United States to preserve their "States Rights" to own slaves. Americans killed each other in this "trouble."



We also were taught that the Union defeated the Confederacy and ended slavery in America. What we did not learn in that classroom: 620,000 Americans died in that war; about half of them were soldiers. In that classroom, we did not learn about the Jim Crow laws that made it impossible for former slaves to exercise their “inalienable rights” as free Americans, nor did we learn about the pervasive segregation that kept African Americans separate and not equal to their white fellow citizens well into the days we sat in Sister Bernadette’s classroom. That truth contributed to the fact that no African Americans lived in our town at that time.

So, it turns out that, “We The People” of the United States of America include a significant number of people who do not support the inalienable rights of people of different races. That same “We” includes people who do not believe in free and fair elections and it includes the 73 million Americans who voted for the current Presidential Bully. So, one of the great challenges facing America going forward is to face the tragic reality of who “We” are and decide what to do about it. The answers to that challenge were not taught to me in Sister Bernadette’s classroom.

