

The Original Cover Letter

December 6, 2001

St. Nick's Day

Dear Clarence Fans,

As Christmas approaches, the time of year when we all return as children to the stable with awe to marvel at the mystery of God's infinite Love made a Child, somehow this year it strikes me in a different way. Perhaps it's the way Advent is celebrated here in Germany, with lots of candles and its rainy darkness. Maybe it's just the melancholy felt by the pilgrim in a distant land during these holy feast days. It could be just getting used to the fact that this is the year 2001, when the world became a more serious place.

Along with these things, for me, Advent this year means waiting for the Christ Child here our Tertianship, which involves a lot of digging into our Schoenstatt and personal history. Added to that is the fact that Jesus' call is made more concrete by my ordination looming in the not-so-distant future. This makes Advent a time of longing and inner struggles to be able to give my 'Yes' in total freedom.

We have a tradition in the Schoenstatt Fathers' community that when the time for ordination approaches, the Course works together to create a common stole. Normally, this stole has two symbols, one for the course and one for the individual person.

Personally, I had not given much thought to my symbol until this fall. When the different elements started to come together that expressed my personal history, it dawned on me how all this history does not belong just to me. The many people who have shared my journey came to mind. Then the crazy idea... Why not give the different parts of this symbol to different people? They are the ones who have supported me all these years with their prayers and love, and whom I want to serve as a priest. Great! I thought, but I just can't go giving people something I can't physically give them. How will they understand it? Symbols are hard to understand, let alone give away... Then the Holy Spirit gave me a little nudge, and a plan was born.

If you follow the instructions in the following sheets, you will be introduced to my symbol by a simple, unassuming character... Clarence. The intention is a child's story. Please forgive the author if his clunky, theologian brain leaves some things out or befuddles you. He is counting on the active imagination and innate optimism of a child-audience to smooth the rough edges. This is my Christmas gift to you, which brings along with it a wish. Gifts are tasks, and my wish is that you help me prepare for ordination and the ministry that God has in mind for me with your prayers and sacrifices. All this so that I can serve you and the Blessed Mother in the best way possible.

May the Christ Child bring you much joy in this Christmastide and a most blessed New Year.
With love and united in the Shrine,

Mark Joseph Niehaus
Schoenstatt, Germany
Advent 2001

Chapter 1: The “far out” flock

Once upon a time, right out there along the edge of the desert, where the dusty mountains begin, there lived a flock of sheep. Now, mind you, this was not your ordinary flock of sheep. Oh sure, they were fuzzy and fluffy, a herd of cotton puffs trying to find a bit of green to fill an empty stomach, but yet this flock was different.

All the rest of the Master’s flocks stayed far away from this group. Between Bahs and baahhs, they would tell you that THEY were “far-out”.

Why, you ask? Because, even lambs know that **ALL GOOD SHEEP FOLLOW THEIR LEADER**. When the Boss goes one way, the rest follow. If the leader stops for a bite, so do the rest. But not these far-out fellows. Oh, no. Can you believe it? Each wanted to go their own way. Even the lambs, as soon as they could walk, wandered wherever they pleased. So the other flocks stayed far away from them... they didn’t want their young-uns influenced by such new-fangled ideas.

Well, this particular flock, the Far-outers, as they were called, lived up to their name. They lived on the farthest edge of the Master’s dominions. They could do as they pleased as long as when HE came around, they would come and give up their wool to him.

And so, once a year, mounted high upon Bamm, his ill-humored camel, the Master came leading a caravan of protesting mules, each being coaxed along by one of the Master’s many daughters. Then, right there in the shadow of the mountains, they set up their red and yellow tents. Once the fire was blazing and the soup started to gurgle, the daughters would gather around the flames and start to sing. From the squeaky little voice of the youngest to the warbly soprano of the eldest, their song rose and danced through the stony valleys and dusty ravines. All the sheep, wherever they were, would hear this and start off on their way. Even the Farouters knew that it was time to go down to their Master.

Then at daybreak, the Master would start calling them by name.

“Greystone, there you are! How many burrs will you have in your wool this year?” he’d banter. “And this little one? Could it be Tumbleweed’s lamb? Aha, only his relative would roll around like that in the dirt!” And so it went.

The Master would call, and each would come forward to be relieved of their wool sweater. All the while, the daughters worked nimbly, shaving and cutting, teasing and caressing the

lambs.

Of course, the Far-outers would have ignored the Master had he not known their secret. The Master was wise and had spent years raising all types of wool-bearing creatures, from the common fuzzy Powder Puffs sheep to the elusive but dangerous Brill-o-Pads, who used their steely coats to smooth the mountain passes. HE KNEW that even the Far-outers could be tempted by a treat. A salt popsicle or a crab apple worked on most normal sheep, but then the Far-outers were not normal. They were STUBBORN. But the Master knew them, as he had known their fathers and their fathers' fathers. Far-outers could not resist acorns. The prize for giving up their wool was a handful of acorns. That doesn't sound like much, but out on the desert's rim, you never "just find an acorn". This was a noble treat for them. And so, despite coming in grudgingly to give up their wool, the thought of getting acorns made them giddy. When the shearing was done, it was quite a sight to behold. The Far-outers would be everywhere, all bright pink from their recent haircut. Neighbors, friends, and even important sheep personalities would be frolicking about, telling stories, laughing at silly jokes, playing pin the tail on the camel—Bamm usually ended up kicking one or the other disoriented souls who got especially dizzy and tried to pin the tail on THE CAMEL—and so on. Such was the annual Acorn Fest among the Far-outers.

One such Acorn Fest had been long-awaited by a certain Far-outer. Most lambs dreaded their first shearing—mostly because their older brothers and sisters tried to scare them into giving them all their acorns. But not this particular fellow. This unhappy lamb had the unhappy name of Clarence (No Far-outer in their right mind would name their lamb Clarence). Even unhappier was the fact that he had a cowlick.

Far-outers are known for being most vain. They like nothing better than a nice wavy coat of wool and polished hooves. Clarence, had neither. And worse, he was cursed with this incredible tuft of abominable black hair that stuck straight out of what should have been his immaculate white coat (he was not fond of baths, so his coat was greyer than whiter). This unruly tower of wool was absolutely untamable. Now he hoped that it would be shaved off and the neighborhood bullies—Lightening and Midnight—would leave him in peace.

"Oh ho, and who might this little fellow be?" asked the Master when Clarence's turn came. "Clarence, how big you've gotten! Adella, Stella, and Brumella! Look at this cute little guy with the tremendous cowlick!" The Master bellowed while Clarence's ears started to burn. He looked around and saw Lightning and Midnight doubled up in laughter... he wanted to escape, but Stella grabbed him, caressing his cowlick and sighing all kinds of cute things... "Argh... this is terrible!" thought Clarence.

When the daughters had finished shearing him, they left his cowlick, brushing it and putting a big green bow on it. It was the worst day of his life! He couldn't run away fast enough. Not even an acorn treat would have tempted him to stay. His mind raced as he ran, clopping over stones and banging into shrubs, that he would stay out in the wild until some of his wool had grown back. They would not laugh at him forever.