



## CATHOLICS UNITED FOR THE FAITH

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### In Memoriam



It is with great sadness that I announce the passing of Madeleine Stebbins; wife of H. Lyman Stebbins, a co-founder of Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) and its second president (1981-1984) after the retirement of her husband. Lyman himself often remarked how indispensable Madeleine was to the founding and development of CUF in the apostolate's early years. For those who knew her, I pray this tribute gives consolation by remembering in a small way her enormous contributions to furthering the Mission of the Laity in complete fidelity to Christ and His Church. For those who did not know her, I pray this tribute inspires you to pursue a holiness of life fit for a saint. She pursued nothing less.

Madeleine Froelicher Stebbins was born in Paterson, New Jersey on November 1, 1924. Her parents, Victor Froelicher and Helene (nee Stehli), were Swiss immigrants. Raised in Ridgewood, NJ, Madeleine attended high school in the Swiss city of Ingenbohl and the College Jesus-Marie in Quebec City. As her husband would explain in his own writings, she was fluent in English, German, and French, and sufficient in Italian. She was most fond of her studies in philosophy, music, art, and literature. As a teenager, she discovered the writings of Dietrich von Hildebrand. He was not only one of her favorite authors (his work on marriage and the spiritual life were especially influential), she would later meet him, become his assistant, and develop a lasting friendship that embraced his family and hers.

Madeleine's first love was her Catholic Faith, and she was taught as a child to put it into action. The example of her parents had a deep impact on her life. Madeleine's father worked as an executive for a Swiss chemical company. In the 1930s, using resources at their disposal, her parents were engaged in a Catholic network that helped three thousand Jews escape from Nazi Germany and Austria. Many of the refugees were welcomed into their home and given financial assistance by the Froelicher's. In what would be a precursor to Madeleine's activities, her mother wrote for the Catholic periodical, *Voices from the Pew*.

In the late autumn of 1943, while attending one of the many "home lectures" held by Dietrich von Hildebrand at his apartment in Manhattan, she met Alice Jourdain, who was to become her greatest and closest friend for many decades to come. From 1951 to 1959, Madeleine served as an assistant to von Hildebrand on a series of educational tours he led to introduce his students to the great artistic masterpieces of Europe. She deeply shared von Hildebrand's passion for great art and music, developing a special fondness for the works of Fra Angelico and Bach's Saint Matthew Passion, Mozart's Requiem, and Bruckner's *Te Deum*.

It was during this time that Madeleine met H. Lyman Stebbins at one of von Hildebrand's home lectures. On June 30, 1959, Madeleine and Lyman married. They settled in the New York suburb of New Rochelle. Their son John Henry was born in 1962. It was at this time that Lyman retired from his Wall Street career to devote himself more fully to the service of the Church as a Catholic layman. Madeleine and Lyman shared common aspirations, and the founding of CUF in 1968 was no exception. Lyman himself gave tribute to her tireless works in many of his letters and writings.

In 1968, Lyman became the founding President of CUF and Madeleine its First Lady. As Lyman stepped up and accepted the responsibility of CUF, Madeleine was right beside him, never missing an opportunity to use her resources to pursue the common aspirations they held. Lyman himself saw in her an example that gave him great encouragement and hope. As he would write in response to a woman who could not start a CUF chapter because she was too busy at home, *“I understand. As L. Stebbins, citizen, I sometimes wish my wife could spend more time on domestic affairs; but as a Catholic I rejoice that she works many hours each day for the CUF cause. It was encouraging the other day to have Cardinal Seper say that the principle hope for the Church rests on the sense for orthodoxy of Catholic laymen...”* (Letter from 5/1/72).

Due to her expertise in various languages, Stebbins notes in his letters that Madeleine would read philosophical and theological works in French or German before they were translated to English. Occasionally, she would translate so that others could read the great new works too, but eventually she ran out of time for such efforts. *“My wife, Madeleine, is as fluent in German as in English; but she does so much other work for CUF (in addition to all her domestic cares) that often she simply hasn’t time to translate some piece of German writing which we’d like to make available to American readers”* (7/14/72).

By the early 1970’s, Lyman’s health was already in decline, and Madeleine was attending conferences in Rome and Canada when he could not travel. Although he was always sad to see her go, he admitted she was much more useful than him. He once expressed in a letter that her presence with him on a particular trip would be, *“an enormous help, because she is entirely at home in German and French, and gets along well enough in Italian, whereas I’m just a one-language Yankee”* (11/8/72).

On top of answering letters, translating and traveling to various events, she also wrote countless articles. Over 50 of her writings were published in CUF’s original newsletter and later in *Lay Witness* in which she kept up a column. Lyman and Madeleine were extremely invested in spiritual formation for the laity, agreeing that personal renewal and strengthening of faith was the beginning of the solution to the crisis in the Church. He explained the situation once after having to decline to translate some German saying,

*Madeleine was most intrigued by your suggestion that she translate...and would really be eager to do it; but she feels obligated to say that she cannot undertake the task. Our son occupies a good deal of her time and more of her strength. In addition, Madeleine does a good deal of CUF related work involving considerable correspondence abroad. And, to cap it all, she is now deeply engaged in working with me (it would be more accurate to say that I work with her) on the development of a kind of “holy rule” for spiritual formation and growth among the laity in this turbulent time...so she thinks...that it is not God’s will for her to take on anything else just now* (9/16/75).

Madeleine and Lyman particularly loved and promoted the writings and spirituality of Saint John Henry Newman, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Saint Catherine of Siena. In their labors for CUF, they traveled widely across America, delivering numerous talks for local CUF chapters and at conferences. Madeleine possessed a deep personal devotion to her patron saint, Mary Magdalene, and would speak fondly of the ancient pilgrimage sites in France traditionally associated with her.

Madeleine devoted herself to Lyman as his tireless and loving caregiver up until he was called home to God on February 19, 1989. She described his death as the deepest sorrow of her life.

For Madeleine, attendance at daily Mass was a “must.” While living in New Rochelle, she would walk over a mile each day for Mass at the Church of the Holy Family. In 2000, Madeleine moved from New Rochelle to an apartment in Bronxville, just a five-minute walk to Saint Joseph Church. There, as in so many other places and times, Madeleine formed an enduring friendship with a closely-knit circle of parishioners with whom she loved to recite the Rosary after daily Mass. Madeleine’s last words, spoken just a few hours before her peaceful death on September 17, 2021, were a summation of her entire life-journey: “Let’s go to Heaven!”