

Reflections given by Sr. Dolores Shortal at the Memorial Mass for Sr. Theresa Marie Schmidt, O.P. at Cure of Ars Parish in Shrewsbury, MO 4-2-11

On behalf of the Dominican Sisters and Associates I want to express my sincere sympathy to Sr. Theresa Marie's nieces Blanche Underwood and Dolores Hartwig and to all her relatives. Thank you for sharing your Aunt Gerry with us for so many years.

I also want to express sympathy to all the friends of Sr. Theresa Marie within our own Sparkill Community both in St. Louis and New York, as well as to her lay friends. She always appreciated your goodness to her and in her later years was so grateful for the cards and notes you sent to let her know you were thinking of her. She likewise appreciated those who visited her in the Infirmary and the Staff members who were so caring.

Theresa gave some papers to me in 1988 and again in 1998 telling a little about her life. Part of my reflections will come from snippets of what she wrote and part from having known Theresa so well for so many years. Her baptismal name was Catherine Geraldine Schmidt. Theresa wrote that when she entered our Dominican Community she took the name Theresa Marie after the Little Flower – because Therese of Lisieux was little and ordinary. Theresa was the youngest of nine children. She outlived all her sisters and brothers and is survived by nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

As I started to prepare these reflections several images came to mind about Sr. Theresa Marie. For those of you who knew Theresa well, can you relate to any of these images? Frank Sinatra singing: "I'll do it my way". Yes! Theresa sometimes did it her way! How about Jonathan Livingston Seagull? Jonathan liked to fly out of formation. Theresa sometimes liked to fly out of formation as Jonathan did...a little free spirited! Yes! At times a little stubborn. Yes! A diamond in the rough - sometimes you saw the rough edges. But if you looked closely you saw a treasured gem on the inside.

I chuckled as I thought of these images. They were a part of Theresa that I knew. The more I thought about it, I said to myself: "Dolores, they are a part of you, too!" I suspect some of these images might be a part of you, yes? Theresa and I knew each other's strengths and weaknesses which was probably why we remained friends since the 1960's at St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Brentwood.

Mostly I remember Theresa as a very kind, caring, compassionate and prayerful woman who loved God deeply. She also deeply loved her family, our community, her ministry and the people she served. She had a tremendous love for the poor; especially those caught in the systems that kept people poor. Theresa rarely purchased anything for herself. Theresa did not have surplus money, but she saved what money she had so that she could give most of it away! Sr. Joan Bartin and I often received donations to help with the needs of the poor on the Flathead Reservation. Always she would add a note: "I want you to keep a little for the two of you to go out to lunch." Then she would tell us what that amount should be! She was also very generous to the Bolivian Missions, Pakistan and other causes.

Theresa taught elementary and Jr. High for many years in a number of parishes in St. Louis, as well as in Monroe City. She also served in several places in New York. She was a very good Religion and Social Studies teacher. Theresa truly enjoyed teaching the youth about the Scriptures and she had a unique way of making the scriptures, history and world events come alive for her students. Theresa was blessed with a special way of working with "Youth at Risk", helping them to see their own goodness and the potential that was within them. There were students who kept in touch with Theresa over the years.

Theresa also enjoyed her years as a DRE working with parents and teachers in the Parish School of Religion, as well as the candidates and catechumens through the RCIA process.

In the 1980's Theresa took Clinical Pastoral Education courses and after certification was a chaplain at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Belleville, IL. That was from 1985 until she retired in 1997. She said these were the best years of her life. She loved being able to share with patients that they were unconditionally loved by Jesus. As chaplain she spoke about Jesus as human who truly knew pain and suffering. She was able to reassure the patients that Jesus was with them with his love, his understanding and that he was always listening to them.

The beauty of God's Creation was always very special to Theresa! She loved flowers, trees, mountains, lakes and especially big white clouds in a deep blue sky. A number of times she told me that the big white clouds made for a more beautiful sunset in the evening. They truly do! One time she told me that when she got to heaven she would ask God if she could bounce from cloud to cloud. She thought that would be a lot of fun! When she first moved to Sparkill Theresa had a room that faced the West and she would look forward to the beauty of the sunset outside

her window with the array of beautiful colors. Each evening like this was a sacramental moment for her!

Yesterday I opened my email to Richard Rohr's *Daily Meditations* as I do every morning. The excerpt from the book *Everything Belongs* read: "When we go into the Presence we find someone not against us, but someone who is definitely for us!" Richard Rohr went on to quote Meister Eckhart: "God is closer to me than I am to myself." The excerpt continued to read: "God is a lover. Prayer is being loved at a deep, sweet level." I said to myself: "Oh, my goodness, this fits perfectly with the readings Theresa chose for her Memorial Mass and it fits with the way Theresa had come to know God over the 83 years of her life - 65 as a Sparkill Dominican. It fits with the way she was able to pray with others and what a blessing that was.

This also connects with a period in Theresa's life when she had four sisters (Mary, Clara, Cora and Dorothy) in four different nursing homes and in four different locations! After working in the hospital all week she spent most of her free days visiting them, praying with them, assuring them of God's love. At times it was very taxing for Theresa to see her sisters so sick and to watch them diminish physically and mentally. She shared with me that sometimes she would go home and cry her heart out and get a little angry with God. But always she trusted in the ways of God. About the last twelve years that Theresa lived in Belleville, IL she had the legal responsibility of her sister Dorothy who lived in the nearby town of Swansea. Theresa visited her often and they did simple things together: played cards and watched the ballgame. They both liked to sing so they would sing everything from *Take Me Out To The Ballgame* to *Amazing Grace*. Blanche (Theresa's niece) shared with me that these were some of the happiest years for Dorothy. It was shortly after Dorothy's death that Theresa retired to Dominican Convent in 2002.

During the last five years Theresa's health began to fail more. At first the hardest part of the memory loss was the aphasia - knowing what she wanted to say but not being able to think of the words. I knew her well enough that when I was in Sparkill (which wasn't that often) I could supply the missing words and we could still converse. But the aphasia also isolated her because it was difficult for most to know what she was trying to say. Gradually the dementia got worse and after she broke her hip in the fall of 2009 she never fully recovered. She was in a great deal of pain. She was living the Paschal Mystery every day.

Last Spring at Chapter time Theresa still knew me. She was delighted to see me but my heart told me time was slipping away. I returned for another visit in August and this was a blessed time for both of us. I simply went to be with her. I would go to the Infirmary about 3-4 times a day for short visits. She knew me. I met the Presence of God in Theresa for the week I was there. The Divine Indwelling in each of us touched. There weren't many words. I would sit by her and tell her that Jesus loved her and I loved her. She would smile in recognition. Then I would ask: "Theresa, do you love me?" She would smile again and say: "Of course!" or "Yes!" Sometimes she was alert enough to tease and she would look at me as if to say, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure!" So I would repeat: "Theresa, do you love me?" One time she made me laugh so hard with her response: "Maybe!" She started to laugh and smile as if to say: "I almost fooled you" and she came out with a big "Yes!!"

These are good memories! Blessed memories! I have funny memories, too, but we would be here all day. I hope after Eucharist and during lunch we can all share our memories. Theresa is in the Arms of God. Pain was difficult but she was not afraid to die. I think that is why she chose *Be Not Afraid* for the Processional Hymn. On one of the papers Theresa left for me she wrote the word: "Death". Next to it she wrote: "The DAWN has come -- a very strong belief!" Theresa had interiorized the words on the cover of our booklet of Anniversaries: "*Death is not a putting out of the Light ~ it is rather an extinguishing of the Lamp because the Dawn has come!*"

Theresa, we give thanks for your deep faith and trust in God during your 83 years of life. Theresa, I checked the sky early this morning. There are white clouds in that sky! So, enjoy bouncing from cloud to cloud! And may the sunset tonight be absolutely magnificent!!!

Note: The Celebrants for Theresa's Memorial Mass in St. Louis were: Bishop Morgan Casey from Bolivia – a friend since the 1960's at St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Brentwood where he was an assistant pastor -- and Fr. Charles Burgoon who was pastor at St. Gregory Parish in St. Ann, Mo. where Theresa was DRE for a few years. Both are friends of a number of our St. Louis Sisters.