

Heroes of the Church

Last Friday, I attended a celebration that was both amazingly joy-filled and heartbreakingly sad. It was the funeral Mass for Sister Nora Ashe, a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, who died tragically as a passenger in a car accident. St. Athanasius Church in Bensonhurst was filled to capacity with Nora's grieving family, including her sister Maureen, also a Sister of St. Joseph, many tearful Sisters of St. Joseph, former and present students from the schools where she had served as teacher and principal, as well as many friends that she had touched in her sixty-year years of life.

I came to know Nora twelve years ago when I became part of the Holy Week services for the Sisters at St. Joseph Villa in Hampton Bays. For twelve years or so, Nora would call me sometime in the later Fall and ask me if I would be available for the Easter Triduum in the Hamptons. Since I was a full-time administrator those years, I looked forward to this opportunity to celebrate those beautiful liturgies with the Sisters who gathered at the Villa. Nora was the coordinator of the services and always planned moving liturgies that would give praise to God and help move those of us who attended into the dying and rising of Jesus. She had that rare combination of being organized and flexible, creative and practical. She always made me feel warmly welcome, as did all the Sisters. I always left the Villa on early Easter morning, feeling that I had met the risen Christ through the faith of the Sisters and their joy. The great Easter Vigil would always conclude with the Sisters singing a hymn to St. Joseph. I have the fondest memories of those days in Hampton Bays. I can picture Nora organizing our outdoor stations on Good Friday, wearing a warm sweatshirt and comfy sneakers. She had the spirit and energy of a teenager.

Nora's funeral Mass was truly a celebration of a life well lived as a Sister of St. Joseph. I find the Sisters of St. Joseph have a beautiful sense of liturgy that captures the profoundness of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Nora had lived in one convent for many years and it was clear that those sisters of that community were feeling a deep sense of loss. They were burying their sister. Perhaps, a person who is not a religious woman may fail to see the depth of the bonds that come in a religious community. Like any family, religious communities are made up of people who have their joys and sorrows, their moments of love and times of struggle, mixed in with thousand of ordinary moments, making supper, watching television, and praying together. To look at the members of Nora's community at the funeral was to see a community of love and sisterhood.

Both the eulogy by one of the sisters and the homily by the celebrant stressed how much Nora's life had touched thousands of people over the course of her years as vowed religious. She was a woman of joy, faith, energy, passion, and commitment. As the funeral concluded with that same hymn to St. Joseph that I heard so many times on Easter Saturday Night in the Hamptons, the entire

church rose in applause as Nora's body was wheeled down the aisle of the Church. It was a tribute of recognition and appreciation for a life well lived, a life that blessed and graced so many.

The funeral brought to mind for me two other celebrations I had attended for Sisters of St. Joseph who were called home to God. I thought of Sister Kathy Costello, another woman of passion, joy, faith and energy. Her funeral was also filled with people from many walks of life, poor and rich, young and old, who had the blessing to know Kathy. Sister Kathy worked with the deaf most of her life, while at the same time, having a special outreach to the babies of women who were in prison. I left the Church that day thinking how much God's love had entered into the world through this good woman of faith. Her life was a story of God's amazing grace.

Nora's funeral also brought me back to February 19, 1983, when Sister Geraldine Woods, a Sister of St. Joseph, and my own sister, died at the age of 45. This was a most heart-breaking time for all my family. Still, I was deeply moved by the wake and funeral for Gerry, as I came to know so much more about her life than I had previously known. I was overwhelmed by how many lives she had touched as a Sister, a teacher, a family member and friend. Her funeral Mass was also a bittersweet time of celebrating all God had done through Geraldine, while at the same time, mourning her loss.

Three Sisters, Nora, Kathy, Gerry, who had brought so much of God's love into the world. All three from the parish of the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Brooklyn, a parish that has sent countless men and women into the God's service. I recently asked a young girl if she ever thought of being a Sister. She is a wonderful well-raised Catholic but she has never met a Sister and knew almost nothing about this vocation. I suppose it is not fair to expect otherwise; many communities of women religious, like the clergy, are experiencing severe vocational struggles to recruit members. Some women see the Church as not opening its ministries to both sexes; and vowed life is very counter-cultural in today's society. There are some mean spirited people who make a living out of complaining about the nuns when they were growing up. I can only say that I can read and write because of the Sisters. I can say that the Sisters were instrumental in teaching me right from wrong, and the wonder of God, and the beauty of the Catholic faith.

Today, some many religious women are in the forefront of the Church calling us to see the needs of the poor. Many Sisters are prophets who passionately proclaim the Gospel of working for a fair and just society for all people, especially those on the margins of our society. Pope Francis is telling us to get out among the people, especially those in the greatest need-that is exactly where you will find the many of today's religious women.

Occasionally, I say Mass at Villa Regina for the aging and infirm Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood. After Mass, I go to their cemetery to say a prayer for my sister Gerry and for all the sisters buried there. The cemetery would bring to mind Arlington National Cemetery with row upon row of headstones marking the resting places of generations of great women. I spoke about three sisters: God bless the thousands upon thousands of sisters who have and continue to give their lives for the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the unsung heroes of both our Church and society.