

December 6, 2012

Reflection (S. Henrika's Farewell letter to M. Clara; Matt 7: 21, 24-27)

S. Margaret Gremppka

Today we remember and celebrate the life and death of our five Sisters who died in the wreck of the Deutschland off the coast of England in 1875, 137 years ago. We honor Sisters Henrica Fassbender, Barbara Hultenschmidt, Norberta Reinkober, Aurea Badziura and Brigitta Damhorst. These five Sisters were young women, between the ages of 24 and 32. The morning of their departure from Germany to America, four made their final vows and one made her first vows. We also remember Mother Clara (whose birthday we celebrate today). In the young Congregation, Mother Clara knew these young women personally, received their vows and missioned them to serve in America.

There were already 19 Sisters in Missouri and Mother Clara had recently decided to unite the existing American houses into a Province. In The Burning Seal, Sister Brunilda Probst described how Mother Clara discerned who might be the first Provincial for the new Province. She chose Sister Henrica for her "intelligence, prudence, motherliness and piety." This was at great personal cost for both of them because "they were truly devoted to each other." However, for the sake of the future of the Congregation and the spread of the gospel, Mother Clara courageously sent them, as she had already sent so many from Germany to other countries, with her blessing and a deep trust in God's love and care.

It is in this context that Sister Henrica wrote her farewell letter to Mother Clara. No wonder she can pour out her heart. She so clearly is in touch with the difficulty of leaving her homeland, her Sisters and Mother Clara. In this leave-taking, she is experiencing a real death, the loss of all that is familiar. Her words touch us as she writes that her "heart throbs with fear ... in bitter pain." However, we notice that as Henrica allows her tears of pain and loss to flow, she is consoled. With that consolation, she is then able to depart. She feels Mother Clara's "precious blessing" surrounding and protecting her. She knows that God will heed the blessing. She has moved from fear to absolute trust in the love of God to protect her on her journey.

We can imagine how this moment of grace becomes the rock she stands on as she makes her journey and that she lends her strength and confidence to her four Sister companions. We can also imagine that this same trust and confidence strengthen them when the Deutschland runs aground on the Kentish Knock off the coast of England during a fierce and stormy blizzard.

We can also imagine that our Sisters were sustained by each other's love and encouragement during the many frightening hours when the ship was stranded on the sandbank. We hope that words of a loving and faithful God, similar to the following ones from scripture and our communion hymn, steadied them: "Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine." Home suddenly has a new meaning.

We know from many accounts that our Sisters refused places in lifeboats, offering them to children and their parents. Having already let go of all that was familiar in leaving their homeland, they were ready to let go once again. They had turned their faces and hearts to their souls' home. I am reminded of Francis words in the Canticum "Blessed are those who endure the first death, for the second death will do them no harm." As Illia Delio reflected in her article in the LCWR Occasional Paper, "... we need to develop a consciousness of life that includes letting go; death – not as a finality – but as a transformative process." From the life of Jesus, we can add it is the ongoing process of life, death and resurrection –the paschal mystery!

We know from various accounts as well as Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland" that Sister Henrica remained faithful to the end. She was heard calling "O Christ, Christ come quickly!" Praying, our Sisters faced death together. They not only listened to Jesus' words, they acted on them through their surrender to the waters and to the call of their God.

But that was not the last that was heard of our Sisters. Although initially their identities were unknown, it was clear they were Franciscans. Their funeral was presided over by Cardinal Manning at St. Francis Church in Stratford, England. The church and vestibule were filled to overflowing. Thousands of people lined the way from Stratford to St. Patrick Cemetery in neighboring Leytonstone. And Gerard Manley Hopkins was so moved by the entire experience that he wrote the poem which has memorialized this tragedy, spreading the word of our Sisters throughout the world!

The entire experience of finding the Sisters' bodies and a Cardinal arranging for their funeral is already a resurrection, a transformation. Women who never set foot in England are considered heroes and laid to rest with great ceremony. Their lives are transformed by their death. They become "bigger" in death than they were in life. Their goodness, virtue, and love are now available to all in ways no one could have imagined.

Some of us have been blessed to visit the places where our Sisters were laid to rest. I was there in 2003 with Diane, Mary Ellen, Bea, Alice and Gabe after our General Chapter in Rome. We visited the cemetery first. A caretaker met us and, when I said we were Franciscans, he immediately said "you're here to visit the Sisters who drowned." He took us to their grave. It was hard to grasp that we were actually standing at the grave of our Sisters.

We read the weathered engraving:

"Pray for the repose of the souls of:  
Barbara Hultenschmidt  
Henrica Fassbender  
Norberta Reincober  
Aurea Badziura  
Brigitte Damhorst  
Franciscan Sisters from Germany, who lost their lives

Near Harwich in the shipwreck of the Deutschland.  
December 6, 1875.  
Four were buried here December 13.”

We were overcome with awe. Silence ...and tears were our initial response. We prayed together, took some photos, walked around, quietly talked with each other, trying to take in the immensity of their sacrifice. I felt humbled to be there and grateful for all they had given. When we went into the office at the cemetery, they showed us the burial records. I again felt humbled as I touched the record of their burial and was so sad when I saw that next to each entry was the word “unknown” because at the time of burial, they had not yet been identified.

We also went to the church and, as it happened, were met by a Franciscan Friar who has met many of our Sisters through the years. He took us to the hall where our Sisters were laid out – and again we were filled with a deep sense of awe, feeling that we truly were on Holy Ground. When we went upstairs to the church, the fragrance of incense met us, for there had been a funeral that morning. Fr. Francis offered a spontaneous prayer asking that the spirit of our Sisters who had been buried from there would live on and continue to bear much fruit. We, in turn, blessed him by singing the blessing of Francis. We lit some candles and gathered around the altar to remember our Sisters.

Our final stop was at the harbor in Harwich where our Sisters’ bodies were brought ashore. As we looked out in the direction of the Kentish Knock, we were all aware of S. Henrica whose body was never found. We pondered and prayed and gave thanks. (Shortly after our return to Wheaton, Mary Ellen wrote an article for News Chips sharing our pilgrimage that day in greater detail. I’ll have copies of that article in the back of chapel for anyone who is interested in reading a fuller account of that blessed day.)

As I was preparing this reflection, I continued being struck by the words of today’s gospel. These were wise women who built their house on rock – our Sisters Henrica, Barbara, Norberta, Aurea and Brigitta as well as Mother Clara. Their faith did not collapse in rains, floods, snow or waves. Neither did it collapse in loss and grief and unbearable heartache. In many ways, our Province was born out of the deaths of our Sisters and the related suffering in Germany, England as well as the States. Our Province has come to flourish because of the early sacrifice of their lives. The paschal mystery is deeply embedded in us as a Province and Congregation as well as our souls.

The spirit of our five Sisters, as well as Mother Clara, lives on in us. It is as if the memory of their lives and their deaths have been “splattered like sparkles” over all of us. May we, with open hearts, willingly catch the sparkles and let them light our way! Their spirit lives on! Thanks be to God.