

HOMILY
FUNERAL LITURGY FOR SISTER JEAN ROSARIA FISCH, OP
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At this point in our history, we are no strangers to loss and grief. We all know how important it is that we acknowledge this and deal with it. We also have learned, however, that every time one of us crosses the threshold to the next life, there is more than loss and grief involved. There is also a wonderful invitation to review the life of the one who has gone before us, and to find there the unique goodness, beauty, and richness that she brought to our lives. We've experienced this again and again, and today is certainly no exception.

Sister Jean Rosaria was a beautiful woman inside and out. Her gentle graciousness and outgoing spirit never flagged, even in her last days when ordinary communication was becoming difficult. She met everyone who crossed her path with a smile that said to each of us simply how happy she was that we were alive.

Those of us who "grew up" with Jean in the Novitiate, recall that she always managed to stay clean and well groomed. I don't remember for sure, but I suspect her obedience was either the sacristy or serving in the priests' dining room, because she always looked nice, unlike people like me, whose headgear never looked the same twice and whose scapular and rosary flew out in different directions.

And why do we have such fond memories of Jean? All we need to do is look at the readings selected for this liturgy celebrating her life. It's clear to us that there could not be a better match for her than the text from 1 Corinthians (12:4-13), naming the multiple gifts that the Spirit scatters so generously among us. Jean had many gifts herself, but, as we heard last night, her real genius was her capacity to see gifts in others, to help others believe in themselves, to cultivate their gifts and to

use them generously and lovingly for the building up of the Body of Christ . She did this for her students and staff as an educator and administrator, and most especially for the laity in the two parishes where she spent years – even as her own health was declining – identifying and establishing ministries, and empowering God’s people to carry them out.

Jean reminds us that God never stops giving us gifts to grace the lives of those around us. Even unto “old age and grey hairs” as Isaiah 46 reminds us, we are never so poor that we are without great love to bestow on one another.

And that leads us to the wonderful text from John (15:9-17). We could read this all day every day and never exhaust its riches. Sometimes, of course, a text becomes so familiar that it loses its power to touch us. If this is the case here, we can ask God to help us to perceive the staggering beauty and mystery of John’s message, and to keep it fresh and alive for us.

We can sometimes be so facile in speaking of the love of God. We can say so readily, “God loves me; God loves you; God is loving; God is love.” But when we hear that Jesus loves us with the same love that the Father bears toward him, we learn that we actually share in the inner life of love of the Blessed Trinity Itself. Think of it! That love is divine, boundless, fathomless, tender beyond description! Each one of us is the object of that love. No wonder Isaiah says, speaking for God:

You shall be called by a new name
which the mouth of the Lord will give.
. . . You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem. . . for the Lord delights in you.

(Isaiah 62)

And in the prophet Zephaniah:

God will rejoice over you with happy song,
God will renew you by His love,

God will dance with shouts of joy for you,
as on a day of festival.

(Zephaniah 3)

Then Jesus says, “Live in my love.” That’s what Sister Jean did, and reflecting on her life gives us confidence that we can do the same. Jean not only gave lovingly. The Sisters and staff who cared for her in her last days tell us that she received lovingly as well, accepting help patiently and finding ways to express gratitude. Those surrounding her knew that whether Jean was giving or receiving love, what they were experiencing was the love of God made manifest in her.

As the passage goes on, Jesus describes the extremity of his love in “laying down his life for us.” We are the objects of this extreme love. And we are the agents of it as well, helping others to know something of the depth of God’s love for them as we lay down our own lives in our every day endeavors to be loving people.

What follows is the “not servants but friends” line, in which Jesus tells us that he has confided to us all, everything he has heard from the Father. He’s held nothing back. We don’t often think of ourselves as confidants of God, but that is what we are. And God, like us, confides in those God trusts. Despite all our weakness and sinfulness and blind spots, God trusts us by revealing His/Her very Self to us. God has shared with us everything but the Godhead itself, which is unshareable.

Next, Jesus reminds us of the primacy of his call. None of this is our own doing. All that we are and all that we have learned, all that we have done – our life, our work, our hopes, our dreams, our successes, our health, our death – all are grounded in the loving initiative of God, not in our own efforts alone.

And finally, Jesus tells us the reason for God’s choice of us – that we might bear fruit, fruit that will remain. Jesus guarantees that God will help us in this holy work, that God wants our success in loving one another to greater life and joy.

As we look at the fruitfulness of her life in faithful, loving service, I think most of us would agree, that God received a wonderful return on his investment in calling Sister Jean Rosaria. As we lay her to rest today, let us ask her to pray that some day the same will be true of each of us.