

Reflections for S. Alice Retzner's Funeral Liturgy

February 14, 2020

S. Michelle Corliss

Alice chose the song, *On Eagle's Wings*, which we sang at the beginning of today's celebration as a symbol of her life. For her it was a sign of strength and freedom. On the occasion of her jubilee Alice wrote, "When watching an eagle soar I could sense my spirit within wanting to be released, to go beyond myself. In moments of quiet prayer my soul has the freedom to soar, to rest in the Lord and be renewed in strength." This woman of strength and freedom is the person all of us knew to be Alice.

Alice was a strong woman in whatever circumstance she found herself. She approached each facet of her life with courage, resiliency and a good dose of humor. In her family she was known as Boots. An affectionate term she earned as a child when trapesing after her older brothers with her boots on the wrong feet. Her family was a lifeline for her, from the wonder of her early birth to the daily rosary, morning and evening prayers in which they all engaged growing up. This close knit family gave her a deep sense of belonging and experience of being loved which influenced how she would approach the rest of her life.

Alice approached this life with enthusiasm whether it was in teaching during her early years in her ministry as a Sister of St. Francis or as a parish minister. She loved teaching children and was known as an excellent teacher. One of her students recalled Alice's kindness and dedication when she took the city bus to and from the hospital to visit her during her two weeks in the hospital. That was just who Alice was.

Eventually Alice moved into parish ministry, and it became the love of her life and a vital part of her identity. She said she was blessed to minister in several cultures unlike her own. Whether it was with the African American community, the Native American community or in Appalachia, she found the freedom to be herself and share her belief that all people in all cultures are connected together and loved by the same God in whom she had an enormous faith.

This faith, strengthened by a deep life of prayer that was obvious to everyone with whom she came in contact, had long-ranging effects in whatever community Alice found herself. One person in Beatyville, Kentucky, where she served as parish minister, remarked: "Because of who she was in her heart, she touched others' hearts and called us out of ourselves to be our best selves." It was one of Alice's gifts to challenge people to become people of generosity and service to others. No matter who she served, Alice was an advocate for empowerment working to bring about the dignity innate in every

person whether children, women or those without power. In this she found fulfillment and strength.

That strength was tested a little over a year ago when Alice was diagnosed with ALS. The reality of this disease called forth every bit of the faith she had. With a body which gradually would not cooperate, she lost the ability to “do” for other people as she had in her ministry. Alice underwent a tremendous transformation of body and spirit in which she had to rely on “being” instead of doing. With the inevitable roller coaster of emotions and physical limitations, she approached her disease and its demands with a faith in a God whose love was so great it was beyond her understanding. When possible Alice wheeled out to the Sisters’ cemetery for alone time with God where she said she came to understand her suffering, others’ suffering and God’s. It was in these moments of prayer that she began facing the failing cooperation of her body with great courage and a sense of humor.

It was my privilege to walk with Alice through the ups and downs of her journey. We spent long hours talking about God, her life and her dying. On one particular day when we were talking about dying I asked her what she hoped for in her death. She said to me, via her writing tablet, that she was hoping that Jesus would come and take her so that she could be peaceful and clam. This threw me for a moment until I remembered that Alice was a very bad speller. She meant peaceful and “calm”. Although this was a very serious moment, it became both an inside joke and a touchstone between us. From that time on when I would visit I would ask her if she was peaceful and clam. She would smile and give me a thumbs up or thumbs down. There were many thumbs down during those months until a few weeks ago when she indicated to me that she was “ready”. At this time Alice told me that all the support of her Sisters, her family and the friends, and the people she had served had helped her realize with what blessings God had graced her. She indicated that who she was at that moment was the culmination of those relationships and she no longer had to do anything other than be in the presence of God.

Those last few weeks were more difficult for her family, friends and those who cared for her than they were for Alice. She was at peace with her God and that’s all that mattered even as she was trapped in a body that would not respond. Her sister, Jo Ann remarked that it was about time for her to get her wings. I think Alice agreed. It was during these moments that one of her favorite passages in scripture was appropriate. The words of Isaiah state: “They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar as with eagles’ wings.”

The tears we share today are because we miss Alice; the laughter we share because her spirit is alive in us now. We rejoice because the power that raised Christ from the dead has loved Alice into life so that today she is whole and complete...peaceful and calm.

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