

MEMORIAL MASS FOR CLAUDIA BASKIN
December 14, 2013

Many of us who have been at the abbey for several decades well remember how Claudia Baskin and her three daughters would often attend our community Mass on Sundays, and those of you who are oblates well remember Claudia from that connection as well. It is therefore altogether fitting that this memorial Mass be held in the chapel that she so loved—and perhaps loved all the more because it represented a kind of end-point to a long spiritual and religious pilgrimage that began with her Methodist upbringing in west Texas, moved to the Episcopal Church when she was a young woman in Dallas, where sung Vespers at the Episcopal cathedral was her introduction to a more liturgical way of Christian devotion, and eventually led to the Roman Catholic Church once she and her family had moved to this part of the country and she discovered, quite to her surprise, that there is a Benedictine monastery in our nation's capital. Claudia learned of us in a somewhat unusual way: Knowing of the Rule of St. Benedict through a longtime friend and seeking in vain to find a copy at any bookstore in the Washington area, she was advised by a clerk to try finding one here at St. Anselm's.

It was most appropriate that Claudia first phoned the abbey on the feast of St. Scholastica and learned that a copy was indeed available. That first, brief introduction, when she acquired a copy of the Rule but left the abbey grounds at once, was followed a month later by hearing Abbot Alban Boulwood give a talk at a day of recollection at the Episcopal parish of the Ascension and St. Agnes downtown. After his talk, he invited Claudia to come to Vespers some Sunday, and this service was again a turning point in her life, just as a similar service had once been in Dallas. Over the ensuing months, Abbot Alban gave Claudia and her three daughters instruction in the Catholic faith, eventually receiving them into the Church and bestowing on them the sacrament of Confirmation. Claudia later wrote about her religious pilgrimage in an

article for our abbey newsletter and, with characteristic wit, concluded that Abbot Alban and the community had been “more or less stuck with us ever since.”

That this article was very well written should surprise no one who knows that much of Claudia’s working career was spent in the newspaper world, but it was not only articles that she wrote so well, for she also composed some very fine short poems. One of them portrays Christ speaking to his Father, while the lump of coal to which she refers could be any one of us, or any one of the countless persons down the centuries whose lives have been thoroughly transformed by the grace of Christ. The poem reads as follows:

Most High, You gave me coal,
a hard and dusty lump I might ignite.
Again, again I touched it with my Light;
It flared, it flickered, it went out.
And so I hid it, hid it in my Wounds,
And there it lay, my Agony recalled.
Til now, its days at last at end,
I give it back, Most High,
This pure, this clear, this radiant
Diamond.

Such a poem could only have been written by someone who genuinely believed those words we heard from the Book of Job in our first reading: “But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust,” along with those words of St. Paul in our second reading from the Letter to the Romans, with his conviction that all creation will one day be “set free from slavery to corruption.”

This freedom from corruption, from anything that would keep us from true and eternal union with our loving God, is what Claudia sought all her life, finding it in various ways in the Methodism of her childhood, the Episcopalianism of her young adulthood, and the Catholicism of her mature years. Nor did she keep this all to herself. As Courtenay said to me recently, “Mother’s greatest gift to us [her daughters] was passing on her Christian faith, and the outlook it gave us concerning life and everything in it. One manifestation of her faith was a love of all things beautiful and sacred. It brought her to the abbey ... [and] thanks to Mother, and the monks who tolerated us a teenagers, we three daughters are confirmed Catholics.”

What a wonderful tribute to a dear and loving mother, a mother who was not afraid to look death straight in the face and not flinch because she believed in the words of Jesus that we heard in today’s Gospel: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life.” This fearlessness shines through in one of the last poems Claudia wrote, in which we can readily hear how happy she was that the seed of faith that she planted in each of her daughters—Courtenay, Melinda, and Mary Caroline—took root and grew into something strong and beautiful. So let me conclude this homily by reading what can rightly be called Claudia’s valedictory poem:

I’ll not be here at harvest time.
No matter.
Summer is a glorious time
To know
That there and there and there
I planted seed.