

Catherine Roberts, Mass of Christian Burial

I'm thinking right now that I'm an example of the Peter Principle, promoted to something that is just above my competence. I mean, I don't really feel competent to do justice to Catherine, wonderful woman that she was. Fr. Abbot's note on the board about Catherine's passing referred to her as a holy woman, and she certainly was that. He also referred to her in his Ash Wednesday homily. She knew she didn't have long to live, but she didn't react with depression or rebellion or denial as some have, and that is because she was thoroughly grounded in her faith. She knew that the catechism tells us that God made us to know, love, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in the next. She certainly had lived the first part (known, loved, and served) and was certainly ready for the rest: "to be happy with Him forever in the next." The times I was privileged to visit her in those last days, she was as cheerful and as outgoing as I ever remember her being. I can easily believe that she knew that eternal joy was right around the corner, and she was anticipating it. Certainly there was no complaining and certainly no self-pity. She seemed more interested in others than in herself, which was a measure of her generosity--certainly a constant characteristic with her. Her piety was not obtrusive, but she was eager to pray a decade of the rosary each time I was there.

We have to rejoice to know she is now with God, enraptured by the Beatific Vision, removed from all suffering. If she didn't seem unhappy at the thought of leaving us behind, it was no doubt because she knew she wasn't. She might be going to a new kind of existence, but she knew that did not exclude her

being as close to us as she has always been. She may never be formally proposed for canonization (depends on whether or not the miracles come rolling in), but I have no trouble praying to her now.

The Christian life is full of paradoxes, and this is probably nowhere truer than in this Mass of Christian burial: the moment in which we experience a sense of profound loss and sadness, we also find the greatest reasons for rejoicing and thanksgiving. Catherine's passing is indeed a great loss to us and therefore the occasion for sadness, and the same event of her passing brings us both the joy and the gladness. At the very moment we grieve to lose her, we see her being called to God, and thus an occasion for happiness and thanksgiving.

Catherine lived a long life, almost 93 years. It is truly said that there is no point in living long unless you live well, but Catherine certainly did that. She was a devout and faithful Catholic from her early years. She had a fine married life for almost 50 years and raised, with her husband, a family of children that any couple could be proud of--as we can see before us. She worked productively for the federal government for 40 years, but even after retiring from that she volunteered for parish work and, more importantly for many of us here, she volunteered to work for St. Anselm's, working at the desk for many years, and she became a Benedictine Oblate. Even after leaving our desk she continued to attend, especially on Oblate Sundays. Even after set-backs from illness and injury, of which she had her share, she would be back and as cheerful, generous, and loving as ever.

I'm grateful to Terry for the little account of her life that he gave me, especially because it confirmed for me something I

consider important. Partly as a judgment about her life in general. Living in a community, we are sometimes taken aback by the wonderful report we would hear about this or that person--how friendly and sweet and considerate they are; and we might think, "We wish they were that way here." So one could rightly be reserved about expressing judgments about a person one has not lived with 24 hours a day for many years. Therefore it means a lot to have the testimonial of people who have, as in the declaration, "You could not ask for a better mother," and also, "Mom was just a very, very good person," from those closest to her and well able to observe (and remember!) faults and failings. I'm grateful for Terry's report for one specific essential point: I, personally, have never heard her say anything critical about anyone. Criticizing others is a very easy fault to fall into and almost all of us are guilty of it to an extent, so a confirmation from one who knew her well is gladly received: "Mom never had a bad word to say about anyone. She always saw the good in people." St. James says, "if anyone does not fall short in speech, the same is a perfect person."

There are many reasons for rejoicing and thanksgiving: Catherine now goes to the presence and vision of the God she loved so much and served with such devotion, and she goes to join the loved ones--so many of them who were so dear to her heart--who had gone on before her.

To find consolation in this Christian hope requires faith, and those consoling words in John's gospel provide basis for that faith, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever lives and believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-16). I could have chosen that gospel for today, but I thought for Catherine the one I did choose

(Matt 12:25-30) was even more appropriate: consoling words for those who have labored and deserve rest, especially for those who, like Jesus, are meek and humble of heart, and as Catherine was, in imitation of her Lord.

I'd like to close with some beautiful words on dying that I have Alessandra Styles to thank for: she used them for her mother and I have found comfort in them ever since:

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at

my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!"

"Gone where?"

Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at the moment when someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!" there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: "Here she comes!"

And that is dying.