

## Homily by Sister Felicia Wolf

December 30, 2009

As I was leaving Roberta the last time I visited her, she said that we had better start working on the homily for her funeral. I agreed and told her I would visit with her this week when I would be in Milwaukee for retreat. When I got the message that she had gone into hospice, I told myself, "I had better get working on this." I knew I had to get up to Milwaukee fast, and that I could not count on a long conversation. I started looking for scripture passages that I thought were appropriate. I picked out a section from the book of Wisdom, which describes Roberta as "intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, mobile, clear, keen ..." Then I went to St. Paul and found, "We are afflicted in every way but not constrained; perplexed, but not given to despair."

The next day the message came that Roberta had died. I thought the readings must be OK because she left before we could talk about them. No, that wasn't it. Marion Verhaalen, one of Roberta's housemates, sent me the readings and songs she had picked out. It seems Roberta had made up her mind and that was it. She saw no further need for discussion.

What I noticed about her selections was that they were so different from mine. I selected readings that described her. She picked out readings and songs for us, the people she loved. She is telling us not to be afraid.

Listen to Isaiah in the first reading: "Trust in God and we will rejoice and be glad." Irvin Yalom, a much-published psychologist, says that the fear of death is the greatest motivator for human actions. He says that the purpose of death is to have us know how precious life is. During the 13 or so years that Roberta engaged in a slow ritual dance, her Adagio with death, she really did become more and more precious to me, and I saw how she realized more and more the preciousness of life.

She once wrote, "We do have much to be grateful for in spite of the state of our country and the world and the Church. We have each other and many friends and family. Our health could be a lot better but we're still here!!!! And until we're ready to cross over we might as well enjoy our time here."

Another time she wrote, "Today I went and played bridge. I enjoy Tuesdays for that reason. It is always nice to look forward to being with seven other people and using my head to play cards. Oh, and I often come out as one of the three winners, that makes it more fun, too. Not that I'm competitive!"

In the Revelation reading Roberta picked, we can see how she also thought of us by picking short readings; and in it she tells us that death will "let us find rest from our labors, for our works accompany us."

During her last years, Roberta's labors were with pain and suffering. I often told Roberta how I admired how gracefully she dealt with pain and suffering. I was afraid that I would be too much

of a coward to face what she faced. I would just curl up and die. Once I sent her a quote from a wise woman, Sister Joan Chittister. Part of it is:

“When struggle comes, as struggle does to every life, it’s never easy to go on. It often seems that not going on at all would be the better thing. The easier thing. The only possible thing. Pressures from outside us, pressures from within, hang heavy on our shoulders, weigh us down, and dampen our hearts....And yet we sense that the way we deal with struggle has something to do with the very measure of the self, with the whole issue of what it is to be a spiritual person.”

Roberta responded, “Understanding the reason for pain and suffering is hard. All I know is that as long as we are alive we need to live fully. When we can’t do that it is time to fly the coop!”

She knew it was time to fly the coop when all that was left of her life was pain. Sister Theresa Engel talked to Roberta on Christmas Eve. Tess said that Roberta was in great pain and was having trouble convincing the nurses that she was sick enough to get the good pain pills. Sometimes being Iowa bred and born works for a disadvantage because the Iowan always looks healthy. Roberta told Tess that she was looking forward to meeting those who had gone before and that she would be there to greet others when their time came. Tess goes on, “What a valiant woman, continuing to pour herself out for others amidst her own diminishment! If ever risen life rushed into an emptying, it must certainly have flooded Roberta, right there with Jesus on the cross. May her legacy of this outpouring of self, flow through us to others.

That brings us to the Gospel. Roberta picked Luke, the shortened version of the road to Emmaus. A scripture scholar once said that most of Luke was a description of how Jesus was either going to or coming from a celebratory meal. I am sure Roberta is busy right now working on the heavenly banquet. When we were both Area Coordinators, we would talk about how we thought that the most important part of area community meetings was the sharing of food. That is where the real sharing of our lives is. The story of Emmaus makes this observation even more potent. It tells us that it is in the sharing of the food that we share God’s life.

One of the most important reason’s I entered religious life was because I liked nuns. When I am with them I feel/see/touch an energy that seems like golden non-sticky honey. It is resilient; it is there when we are happy, when we are sad, when we are angry, when we are working on a project together. Roberta exuded this warm, durable energy always. We are all precious to her and she is to us. It seems to me that she is even more precious because she is no longer tangible, but she is real. If Roberta is anything, she is real. Let us all now continue with our prayer of gratitude for the life Roberta has given to us and be grateful that she is preparing a wonderful meal for us when we see each other again face-to-face.

Books cited:

*Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death* by Irvin Yalom

*Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope* by Joan D. Chittister

*Dining in the Kingdom of God: the Origins of Eucharist according to Luke* by Eugene LaVerdiere