

## **Homily for Sister Christine Stevens, F.M.I.**

Queen of Apostles Chapel, February 21, 2009

*Texts: Job 19:1.23-27. Psalm 23. Romans 8:31-35. 37-39. John 6:37-39.*

Dear Marianist Sisters, Marianist vowed religious, and Marianist laity, it is with sadness and yet with our Christian faith, hope and joy that we come together to mourn the death of Sr. Christine and also to celebrate her participation in the Resurrected life of the Lord Jesus whom she loved so much.

Though she died alone in her sleep on February 13, 2009, there was a peaceful look on her countenance, a small opening of her lips, and her palms were open parallel to each other as if she were saying her last prayer, "Lord, Jesus, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Sr. Mary Louise and my interpretation).

Christine lived out her life to the fullest within the spirit of a beautiful song. Her whole life was enveloped in music and this is the way she moved through the various stages of her life. One of her friends whose children were taught music by Sr. Christine said this and told me how Christine was so patient with the children at Precious Blood Grade School, and then with the students at Chaminade-Julienne where she really went all out with them for band and for individual training in music. She had immense patience and knew how to get the students to perform. She shared her talents in music with her sisters, with her brothers, and with everyone she met. Her ministry was music among many other ministries; but her passion was music and sharing it with people even to her last weeks of life.

For this Eucharist Christine had prepared all the music as well as the choice of the texts used for the liturgical readings. Her songs in this liturgy mirrored her life and are her way of telling us about herself. In a way they parallel the Scriptures she has chosen. They are her swan song, her sermon to us, so to speak. She lived out these words and these sounds of music in a deeper way and level than most would be able to comprehend.

She chose the difficult book of Job to express some of her thoughts and feelings in the spiritual realm. She probed as deeply as Job into the mystery of suffering but went deeper than Job because of her absolute belief in the Resurrection and eternal life. Job

was not speaking about God as a Redeemer but was asking for a defender of his innocence. God was a problem for Job. The word Vindicator is closer to what Job was saying. He needed a person who would be that to overcome the traditional religious way of the thinking of his three friends who really were not too much of a support for him. Christine did not believe this way. She believed that God was somehow there in the midst of all the suffering, the fears, the horrible nightmares. Her spiritual intuition of what she saw in this text actually goes beyond Job's complaints and misery. She did have a Redeemer in the Person of Jesus and she saw this text definitely in the light of the Resurrection.

She did not reach this insight by reading Job but through her own suffering and her Marianist faith of the heart. This kept her going in the last decades of her life when outwardly she could pose as Job. Job, however, was plaintive in his words, whereas, Christine made of her sufferings a song of triumph over any suffering, any misery, temptation, and over death and sin. We need just recall how she died with her open palms in victory over death.

I had the privilege of helping her choose the name Stevens. We thought and thought and we finally settled on the name Stephen as we recalled his story in the Acts of the Apostles. Stephen was the first martyr whose name means "crown" stephanos in Greek. For the ceremony Christine wore a paper crown on that day when she solemnized this name in the chapel of the Marianists at Chambers St. Like the Proto-Martyr Saint, Christine lived up to surrendering all to Jesus at the end of her life without any regrets..." Into your hands, Lord, I commend my Spirit."

Within the last decade and a half of her life she had the sad situation of losing her sight. It constantly diminished to the point of her being legally blind. She told me, however, that she came to realize a grace was given her through this for she started to have a deeper spiritual vision in seeing things and relating them to God.

Anyone who chooses Chapter 8 of Romans does well for it is the most consoling part of Paul's legacy in inspired writings. Karl Barth in his great commentary on Romans says that no exegetical commentary is necessary—it is pure inspiration from the Holy Spirit directly given to those who ponder it over. The whole chapter is about life in the Spirit. It gave Christine the courage to cope with her many illnesses and to continue in her great love of ministering to people in so many ways. She realized that love conquers all

and that nothing could separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus her Redeemer. "Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Christian soul, is born anew of God and destined for the glory of God's eternal intimate presence. " In choosing this section of Paul's letter she entered into the hymn of the musical outburst of the Apostle Paul in his own song of triumphing over suffering, evils, and death. None of the dangers and troubles of life could make Christine forget the love of Christ made known to us in his death and resurrection.

This love of God was the unshakeable foundation for her life of faith, and hope and love. All of her personal difficulties became insignificant as soon as her spiritual eyes turned away from them to contemplate the great act of love of God in which Jesus' own life was not spared for the sake of our salvation. John had also said what Paul was inspired to write: "God so loved the world that God gave Jesus not to condemn the world but to save it." (see John 3:16).

Sr. Mary Louise told me that Christine would talk and complain about what she was going through, but once Mary Louise mentioned, "Oh, come on, Christine." Chris would then smile and then break out in laughter. The beat of life thus went on. Her deeper spiritual vision made her realize God's love is seen in Christ's sacrifice and is the most cogent proof of God's presence within her.

I link this to her great love for the Eucharist and the Eucharistic presence of Christ. She always sought permission to have the Eucharist in her home, in her apartment. She prayed within the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. She loved the Eucharist, was faithful to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the Holy Anointing, and was faithful to spiritual direction.

Finally she loved the Gospel of John and chose words from the Eucharist chapter which is both a discourse about the Bread of Life and the Wisdom of God. In the passage she chose she learned that nothing that Jesus claimed would ever be lost. All that had been given to him would be returned to his Father. Jesus had accomplished the will of God in all of his actions and words. God's love could not allow anything entrusted to the Son to be lost. Anyone who believes in Jesus as the Son of God has eternal life now and in the hereafter. Christine was convinced of this. This passage was also an invitation for all to come to the Bread of Life and to believe in Jesus as a Person who is the Bread of Life. God's initial call to her in her Marianist vocation as a Daughter of Mary was a gift.

It was her free choice that she made with all her heart in unconditional love and trust and faith in Jesus her loving friend and savior.

Christine, we thank you for your many years of loving service given to all of us who are here present. We thank you for your art, your poetry, and for the beautiful prayers you composed for retreats with your sisters and for so many others. Your dedication to both counseling and just being with others when they needed someone to hold their hand, your journals and your desire to write a book, and your photography all these will be living memories of your presence among us. And we are most thankful for showing us how to love one another and how to just BE. You will remain with us in so many ways and we thank you for your example of showing us a life worth living at every moment.

“Behind each suffering there is a blessing...Find it!” (Words of Sr. Christine).

Amen.