

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER LEO MARY BICKERT

June 30, 1929—October 7, 2013.



Several years ago, we started our custom of having one of us prepare a eulogy for each deceased Sister. Shortly after we did this, I received a letter co-signed by four or five of our retired Sisters. These Sisters presented a joint request that no eulogy be given at their respective funerals. I wrote in reply that I could not grant the request, since the eulogy wasn't for them; it was for us who remained. (They didn't write a rebuttal.) When Sister Mary Ann asked me to do the eulogy for Sister Leo Mary, I said yes, and for some reason the memory of that request came back to me. Sometimes, I think we can divide our Sisters into two groups: those who are introvert, reflective, and quiet, who patiently put up with the rest of us who are extrovert, expressive, and noisy.

"Eulogy means "a good word" or "a word of praise, usually about a deceased person." Perhaps the group who made the request was of the first type and didn't like the idea of being noticed before or after death. On the other hand, perhaps they were of the second type and were afraid nobody would! In any case, our dear Sister Leo Mary was definitely one of the introvert, reflective, quiet group. However, I think she might actually appreciate the definitely "good words" about her we want to consider as we say goodbye.

Reading through some of Sister's files to prepare for this reflection, I was definitely struck by her sense of purpose that wove its way through her life. Catherine, a native of New Kensington, met our community through our Sister Mary Anna, who was an acquaintance of her mother's. On the four-page application for entrance into the Sisters of Charity that Catherine Elizabeth Bickert filled out August 30, 1950, she gave telling answers to some important questions. "Why do you wish to become a religious?" Catherine's response: "To do the work of God." "Why do you wish to enter this particular institute?" Her response: "Because of its works of charity." And finally, "What priest(s) recommended you? Please furnish their names, addresses, and indicate how long they have known you and what opportunity they have had to observe your qualifications?" In clear, small, block print, Catherine answered: "No priest recommended me. I made my decision alone."

Born June 30, 1929 in New Kensington, the daughter of Leo and Freda Bickert, Catherine was baptized at St. Joseph Church, where her parents had been married. When she entered the community on September 8, 1950, she left two brothers, Leo and Joseph, and a sister, Mary Louise—all younger than she—at home. After graduating from New Kensington High School in 1947 until she entered, Catherine had been an employee of WearEver and then at the Aluminum Company of America. Who would have thought that among her papers Catherine had saved a souvenir booklet of her high school graduation, in which she recorded that her favorite band was Xavier Cougat! On one page, she filled in a column labeled "Comments" alongside a list of her teachers. These seem to be her memories of each teacher, and what she remembered about them helps us to know her. One teacher called her "Katie." After other names, she wrote, "You'd better do your work" and "Speak louder." And next to the name of the gym teacher, "No excuses."

Catherine received her new name, Sister Leo Mary, along with the habit of the Sisters of Charity on March 19, 1951. Beginning her college education as most of us did, at Seton Hill College, Sister Leo Mary completed her Bachelor of Education degree at Duquesne University, majoring in special education. She took many additional courses at Wayne State University and Smith College to prepare her for teaching children who were hearing impaired. She also completed a long series of courses specifically designed and offered in the De Paul Institute Training School to prepare for using the aural-oral methods in deaf education. After twelve years as a teacher at DePaul, she then used her background working with the children at the readiness level and helping in food service.

Certain words get repeated when we speak of Sister Leo Mary. Quiet, unassuming, gentle, kind. People who met her along the way, however, remembered her. And even when she herself was aging and experiencing loss, she could still reach out her hand to comfort and support another resident in Elizabeth Ann Hall.

So, we see again the importance of “the good word,” this eulogy we share to celebrate a Sister’s life. It gives us the opportunity to look again at a Sister’s life, and to see that life, perhaps, as God sees it. It gives us a chance to witness how God has called and assembled our community from such diversity, and to thank him. In Sister Leo Mary, we see a woman committed not just to doing something, but to being someone. She knew from the outset that she was setting her life “to do the works of God.” Sixty-three years ago, she joined with us “In the works of charity,” and she did so with faith, a quiet smile, kindness, and determination. “I made my decision alone.” When residing at Doran Hall, she wrote a thank-you note to the Council at Thanksgiving. “Thank you for all you do for me as a member of the Sisters of Charity. (I love our name.) . . . Thank you for all the hours of prayer you say before making a decision that will affect me as an individual Sister of Charity. Thank you! Thank you!”

Now it’s our turn to say thank you, dear Sister Leo Mary. Thank you for walking the long road with us in fidelity and in community. Thank you for “fighting the good fight.” As you were sure he would, may God bear you up on the wings of his love, keep you warm, and may the angels hear you say with joy, “I am home!”

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
~Gertrude Foley, SC
October 9, 2013