

December 1, 2011

Eulogy for S. Ann Ronin

S. Rose Marie Hennessy and *S. Ann Ronin*

Recently I saw a most touching segment on CNN News that featured “Freedom University” in Georgia. This university consists of four (4) teachers from the University of Georgia, one donated classroom, and the admissions requirement that one BE “undocumented”. This university has no money, no budget, and no space to call its own. The conclusion is: “The University of Freedom” operates totally out of the PASSION of the four teachers!

This segment could have been about the English Second Language School Sister Ann started at St. Elizabeth ten years ago with approximately 12 students and continues today with close to 200 students, no space to call its own, and all volunteer teachers ! Ann’s passion for life was life-giving to so many marginalized in our society.

This passion was directed outward! In Oakland Ann became a public figure seen through the years as a “volunteer missionary” of “street preacher” to individuals and at service agencies. Today, World Aids Day, has annually been a day that Ann’s passion for life has taken external form through volunteering with Mother Theresa’s Missionary Brothers of Charity at their Aids Center, very soon after the disease was diagnosed, and every year there after assuring herself that it was prayerfully celebrated in our community liturgy.

As the author Richard Rodriquez writes there is a “public self and a private self”. In some ways we celebrated Sister Ann’s public self last night with testimonies from

colleagues in three of her current volunteer areas: Docents at the Cathedral of Christ the Light, Servers at St. Vincent De Paul Dining Room, plus Founder and Administrator of *Las Casas* English Second Language Program .

Tonight we move more intentionally to a private persona. Ann was in many ways a very private person—so private she didn't want anyone else writing her eulogy. She wrote her own! Yes, you heard and read correctly. She wrote her own eulogy.

I can verify that Ann will be the first of our sisters whose cremated remains will be buried in God's Acre. Also, from my experience she is the FIRST to have written her own eulogy! A few weeks ago when I opened her sealed envelop labeled: *cremation request, liturgy, eulogy* there it was! Or rather, there they were: hymns, readings, and WRITTEN eulogy. As far as I can tell, her last entry was 2002. Let me read it to you, with a few editorial deletions that I know Ann would have made had she reread it in the last few years!

Dear Friends,

Thank you for coming to this glorious event---and to think I won't have to write any thank you cards.

I guess I should begin "in the beginning" I made my first appearance in San Diego in 1930. I was most cooperative (maybe for the last time). My parents were living in Coronado—an island—with no bridges at that time. You got there by ferry boas which stopped running late at night. It was my Mother's prayer that I arrive at the time the boats were running. As I mentioned, I cooperated.

My father was in the military, and so we moved fairly often. (My Mother and Father separated when I was eight,

so I really never knew my Father.) My Mother suffered from multiple sclerosis from the time she was in her twenties. She was a most gentle and compassionate person. She cared for all people in general and well as for each individual. She could never leave a little tip—it always had to be lots. I could go on and on, but in the interest of time which I don't have any more, I'll continue.

Because of family circumstances I went to boarding schools—7th and 8th grades at a school run by the Holy Child Sisters in New York. I move to California and had to find another boarding school. The Holy Child Sisters had a school in Pasadena but it wasn't a boarding school—BUT there was one in Pasadena called Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy so I was introduced to the Dominican Sisters. I could never express enough praise for the love and devotion of the Sisters there—Sisters Benigna, rosemary, dolorosa, Mother Dolorosa, Maureen, Thomasina—and everyone. They cared for each other and those entrusted to their care.

In my Sophomore year I felt called to cast my lot with the Sisters who formed a Sister Benigna and Rosemary.

I graduated in June of 1948 and entered at the Motherhouse on September 8th. (I remember it well. On our walk from the parlor to the chapel we were told, "We don't talk here and then another "We don't talk here" –turned out we didn't talk anywhere.)

I'll skip the litany of places I taught—Flintridge, Marycrest, St. Elizabeth and others. I was most fortunate because I taught a subject I dearly loved—history.

For a time God put me in company with Job—hosopitals, group sessions, doctors, a period of sanctification for me as well as for those who had to live with me.

I spent my last years at St. Mary Magdalen—1203 Milvia Street. My assignment was to cook—a great leap of faith for Sister Mary Thomas. For all Sister knew, I cooked with a can

opener. I have very happy memories of my years there. I lived through the year at 2155 Ashby and our glorious return to 2004 Eunice St!

So we come to the volunteer days—St. Vincent de Paul Dining Room and the Center for AIDS services.

Some time has lapsed since I mentioned my “last days at Mary Magdalen. Come one visitation and I was told that the Council felt it was time to “move on”. (I didn’t realize I had been there 18 years!) For many reasons I chose to go to St. Elizabeth—my home of some thirty years before. Let me tell you about grace—I was at peace and never looked back. At St. Elizabeth I continued my ministry of feed the poor and answering the phone.

Thank you, Sister Mary Paul, for the privilege of teaching the Lovers of the Holy Cross. Their great courtesy and earnestness were sources of inspiration for me.

This is getting too long. But I should mention what wonderful care I got in St. Martin’s when I recuperated from my broken hip. I got another infusion of grace. This was God’s will for me!

The Lord better take me soon because this eulogy is getting longer and longer. One last thing—please tell some jokes over the wine!

Thank you all for your love and support.

Your Sister Ann

There is so much about S. Ann Ronin that can be said! As I read her personally written eulogy I hope you heard the pain—absent father, sick mother, period of “Job”, and I’d add her final month of life experiencing body diminishment following surgery, but still there is so much more!

For many, many years Ann suffered—physically, mentally, and in community! Even during the many extended

periods of pain and her daily pain Ann was always ready for a good book, a good drink, an intelligent conversation, not just for herself but for and with others. Ann loved to be hospitable, the way she described her mother: hospitality to guests for dinner, men and women hungry on the street, guests at St. Vincent de Paul Dining Room, sandwiches at the door, Sunday Parish dinners at St. Mary Magdalen's, and especially dinner with her sisters in community.

If you were signed up for cooking she was there to not only help but to encourage. She'd say, "You know how to do that or do you want me to help you!" She knew each sister's moods, their likes and their disappointments. Ann said I love you with preparation of your favorite foods, trips to the library and ½ price books for your favorite read, and cards—any card you needed she would purchase three and encourage to take your pick and keep the other two for your next needs. Every so often when I opened the kitchen refrigerator down on the bottom shelf, on the left, there would be a UNO bar—I knew that was for me! Every person and every animal she encountered knew her touch, her voice and the many ways she extended herself!

Ann's love for good liturgy was "nurtured" and "expanded" during her summers at St. John's University in Collegeville. It is ironic that she would die one day prior to the use of the revised Roman Missal. Although she was not a fan of its introduction, as the days got closer she became more and more encouraging. Every time the topic came up Ann would say, "You know, it really isn't that much of a change!" She had frequent opportunities to say that!

The little woman who everyday walked up and down 34th Ave., (sometimes with those different looking woolen knee

high socks that she must have gotten as a gift from Tibet) headed for Walgreen's on foothill; for a rotisserie chicken on Saturday night at Foodvale on International; for the bus to take her to book stores in Berkeley; or to BART for the trip to Cathedral of Christ the Light; she walked everyday in varying degrees of pain.

In the midst of this pain, through grace, was born the Missionary to believers and nonbelievers; the washed and the unwashed; the educator of children, youth, and immigrants; minister of hospitality to her sisters; to invited and non-invited guests, to the street people, the hungry; the sick; the depressed; the lonely; and the marginalized in need of compassion. Out of this pain was also born the sharp tongue; the fiery spirit that knew how to start fires and how to put them out, *most often with some creative form of apology*; the intellectual curiosity; the civic community activist; the political commentator; the preacher for justice and mercy; and the congregational critique and loyalist!

“The mystery of God’s design calls us to a faith response that recognizes the validity of pain as a ministry of service in the Church. For us all—fulfillment is His will.” This quote of Sister Mary Thomas, Ann loved and determined “Very comforting!” It is appropriately placed on her memorial card.

In Rainer Marie Rilke’s poetic words I close:

“Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower”
Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower

and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
Be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
The meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
Say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

Out of pain and love, Ann lived Boldy Awake! May her
memory awaken us to Bold Service!