

Sister Marie Yvonne Armstrong

Of The Precious Blood



October 12, 1940 – August 13, 2009

Eulogy

“A life poured out in love of God and neighbor”
(John Henry Newman *In His Time* edited by Phillippe Lefebvre, p. 255)

Who was this 4’10” woman who used to be 5’6”—the one that we became used to seeing in that ungainly, cumbersome body brace with not a grey hair in her head nor a wrinkle in her beautiful, peace-filled face with the serene smile? The one who only 6 weeks ago trained and conducted from her wheel chair a bell choir in music she had composed (along with S. Mary Diane). She was in such excruciating pain that day that she almost backed out of conducting. But who would have known? We saw her pushing her geri-chair to chapel for Mass and Office, prayerfully participating. Where did her gracious, loving, shy yet stubborn ways come from?

We are once again at the heart of the mystery of the human person. Let’s see if in between the lines of the dates and events we can come to discover something more of this beloved sister, sister-in-law, aunt, great aunt, Dominican sister, teacher, musician, dear friend, great cook, seamstress, patient and so much more.

Sister Marie Yvonne of the Precious Blood was born Diane Elaine Armstrong of John and Adele Armstrong in Los Angeles on October 12, 1940. Librans are known for their balance, their love of beauty and their sense of justice, all traits she would develop.

Diane was baptized at the age of four October 14, 1944 along with her Mother and brother George at St. Elizabeth's in Altadena. Her godparents are listed as Forest and Margaret Madison who became life-long second parents. Good friends of the Armstrongs, the Madisons attended the 50th wedding anniversary of John and Adele celebrated at Flintridge Sacred Heart. There is a lovely photo of the Armstrong family sitting/standing in the patio there. It had a prominent place in Sister's room.

The eldest of nine with four brothers and four sisters, Diane has been deeply devoted to her family throughout her life. John, David, George, Daniel, Jane, Julie, Dorothy and Margaret: you and yours meant the world to her. Just as she held your hands when you were little, count on that same care and protection as the months and years go by.

Diane's memories of family life, of childhood and school were very happy. The oldest usually develops a heightened sense of responsibility, which can be mistaken for "bossiness." Certainly the Diane, who became Marie Yvonne, was very responsible and meticulous, looking out for the other-- one of the gifts of her place in the family.

She had a marvelous model in her mother who was a stay-at-home mom, devoted to her husband, her children, her garden, a true "homemaker," a great cook and a wonderful Mom. The family moved often because Mr. Armstrong was with the Standard Oil Company.

Mr. Armstrong had been in the army and was coming home. Mrs. Armstrong was getting the children ready so they would look good for Daddy. Diane was about 4 ½ and Johnny about 2 1/2. Mom had combed Johnny's hair when big sis came by and told him to sit on his training potty because she was going to fix his hair. Diane took the scissors and whacked away. Mom was horrified when she saw Johnny with big hunks of hair missing. Welcome home, Daddy!

Just before this at their home on Lake Street, Altadena, four year old Diane began her career as a gourmet cook. She decided to fix breakfast. Having observed her mother innumerable times, she got out the eggs and broke them in the bowl, added salt and pepper and just the right amount of milk and stirred. Then she got the pan, put it on the stove, added butter and poured in the mixture. Being a bright girl she went to wake her mother and tell her “hambled eggs”. Mom understood, got up, turned on the stove and they enjoyed delicious scrambled eggs. This was the beginning of a life-long passion for cooking—our own Julia Child (I think she wanted to see this movie). From a four year old scrambling eggs, Diane became a gourmet cook delighting her Flintridge community at Thanksgiving with the best cinnamon breakfast rolls and a fabulous sweet potato casserole among other delights. In fact it was over an argument about fixing Jell-O that she and Sister Glenn Anne McPhee became such good friends. Yvonne did much the same at her annual set reunions. For 33 years she planned the menus and was the chief cook, much to the satisfaction of her set. She even tried her hand at a wedding cake for her sister’s wedding.

The family moved several times and ended up in Taft on a Standard Oil lease. This was not an exciting place to live, rather isolated. One day the children decided that they were bored and should run away. Diane cooked up the plan and Mom fixed them a good picnic lunch, knowing that they were perfectly safe and could only go a small distance to the next lease. The kids had a great time and Mom finally had a couple of hours to herself which she relished. It was from Taft that Diane went to Flintridge Sacred Heart for her four years of high school.

She loved these years as a boarder on the hill. Her senior yearbook describes her with sparkling blue eyes, blonde curls and an aptitude for science. She was artistic and daily Mass was a must. There is no mention of music but there is of sewing. In the second semester of her senior year, Diane was asked to take over for the sewing teacher. She would not have to teach but just help the girls finish the projects that they were working on. This delighted her because she would have plenty of time to work on her own sewing projects. At the end of the year, the sisters gave Diane a silver thimble as a token of appreciation. This was one possession she never gave away. She was such a good seamstress that over the years she made her own patterns. It was at Flintridge that her vocation was nurtured. Sister claimed Sister Benigna Krug and Sister Margaret Hewelcke as having the greatest influence on her.

Diane entered September 7 of 1958 following her graduation. She received the habit June 13, 1959 and the name Sister Marie Yvonne of the Precious Blood. She made her first profession on June 24, 1960 and final vows June 24, 1966. Sister received her BA in Music from Holy Names and her MA in Music with a major in Organ Performance in 1974, also from Holy Names. A year later she received her secondary teaching credential. Sister Mary Bertha Rehers recognized musical talent in sister and nurtured it. Sister Marie Yvonne listed herself as a music teacher at the Motherhouse from 1962-1963, at St Anthony's, San Francisco from 1963-1965 (an assignment she loved) and at the Motherhouse from 1965 to 1970. She then went to Flintridge, her alma mater, in 1973 until 1990, serving as music teacher and prioress. She tried her hand as classroom teacher for two years at San Gabriel Mission High school before returning to the Motherhouse and to the Queen of the Holy Rosary School of Music from 1992 to 2001 as its principal. It was during this time that she served as First Chantress, a role she relished since it had an impact on our prayer life.

I had the good fortune to spend several years with Yvonne at Flintridge. The music cottage is a bit isolated from the high school building where most of the action is. Wanting to make her feel at home and get to know the staff, I asked Sister to take a homeroom (15 minutes three times a week is all that it was). She politely refused. Using what I consider to be fairly strong powers of persuasion I persisted but had met my match in her equally stubborn refusal. I tried each year but met with failure. However, God does have great plans and God let Yvonne have it. The senior Kairos retreat program was introduced and Marie Yvonne became a true believer and entered into this powerful program as one of the adult leaders, setting her shyness aside and letting her strong faith shine through as she worked with student and adult teams. So much for 15 minute homerooms! Needless to say Yvonne was an integral part of the staff, much loved by faculty and seniors, not just an isolated music teacher. Her last six years on the hill she was also the leader of the sisters' community. It was while at Flintridge that Yvonne found a marvelous music teacher from whom she took regular lessons for several years. This was where she became the master organist, as well as composer.

One of her lasting accomplishments was her collaboration in the development of our Dominican Praise. In her own words:

“I have had many opportunities to travel, but my last traveling was done between 1999 and 2001. During that period I flew several times to the Adrian Dominican Motherhouse in Michigan to work on a

Committee in collaboration with Dominican Sisters from some of the other Dominican Congregations. Our goal was to create a new prayer book for Dominican Sisters to use when praying the Liturgy of the Hours. The book eventually came to be called *Dominican Praise*.” (See p. xxiii for the list of contributors—hers is the first name, along with Sisters Renilde Cade and Mary Diane Scott.)

Sister Gloria Marie Jones brought a note for Yvonne from Sister Honora who worked with Yvonne on *Dominican Praise* in which she says “Your singing spirit echoes in our prayer book...I promise you my prayers and love as you sing now in—perhaps--a new key. You are ever a part of us!”

Sister’s last assignment was at St Martin’s care center and her ministry had been suffering and prayer, though she certainly kept up with her music, her composition, her relationships. But just as with Kairos, God had another path on this journey. In her own words:

“In 2001 I was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma which is cancer of the bone marrow. That year I underwent serious back surgery to remove a malignant tumor and one vertebra in my lower back. Two more surgeries followed to clean out infections. After the third surgery the doctors gave me a year or less to live. I began giving away my possessions and preparing for death. For five years I was dying of cancer. Finally, I made up my mind that I didn’t want to do that anymore, so now I am living with cancer instead. The cancer’s in remission and I’m trying to live each day to the fullest. However, the illness has left my neck and spine somewhat deformed and caused me to shrink about eight inches. For the most part I’m pretty independent.”

One of the treasures she did not give away was her father’s easy chair which Yvonne used in her room. It was a way of connecting with her beloved Dad.

And live each day she did knowing that this is God’s moment and this is where God is present—the Sacrament of the Present Moment. Most of this time she has been in pain, though most never guessed the extent of it. When asked on a scale of 1 to 10, she would respond 8 to 10 and sometimes 13 to 15. She never showed it by impatience, facial expression, or isolation. She welcomed anyone who came to her door, always asking how they were.

In the early part of the year 2009 she was in excruciating pain. Sister's doctor decided to remove the hardware in her spine and fitted her with a different brace. After physical therapy Sister came home and was able to be in a regular wheel chair which made her happy. Things seemed to be going okay. A few weeks later she complained of numbness in her legs. Sister was hospitalized for a procedure to restore the flow of blood to her legs. The doctor took a sample of her lymph nodes to send to Stanford. The day she went to the hospital, August 13, he received the report. Later that evening with Doctors Mehigan, Martin and Chalma present, Sister was told that she had a rampant lymphoma throughout her system. She was offered a choice of chemotherapy, steroid treatment or hospice. She said: "Hospice and I want to go home." At 11:00 p.m. she did indeed go home, home to her God. Her body had taken all that it could and she knew it several weeks before.

We have been blessed to watch a saint in the making. Yvonne was so faithful to people and very loving when she got to know you. The McPhee's, her second family, can attest to that as can her countless music students and their parents. Yvonne had a fine sense of humor and did not take herself seriously, something that helped her greatly these last years. She was meticulous, sometimes compulsive and a great putterer. She could spend hours "neatening." When she was treasurer and we had three colors of the forms, she not only had "white out" she had it in the three colors of the forms!

Her thoughtfulness is legendary. Even her last evening she sent the sisters home, saying she would see them in the morning. She was grateful to Tera Shoonenberg, St. Joseph Priory nurse, for accompanying her in the ambulance.

Yvonne never wanted to be a bother or to put anyone out. She would not tell Sister Glenn Anne how much she was suffering because she did not want her to worry. Sister gracefully and lovingly said her final goodbye to Sister Jennifer Daniels, Prioress of St. Martin's, as she left for the hospital.

This is a woman who never complained but accepted her path. She chose to accept death, then chose to embrace life, and then again welcomed death. She embraced her pain and was not going to make anyone else carry it. Many know how independent she was, even to fixing her own food when she could. It may well have been this stubborn independence which kept her alive so long.

Her love of Mary followed her all through her life as did her love of the Blessed Sacrament. She spent a quiet daily Holy Hour in the chapel. She loved her doctors. And we are all grateful to you. We now have a good friend and former patient in heaven.

In the end Yvonne was stripped of everything. She knew it was time to go. And she did with tremendous courage, equanimity, joy and patience. Here is the good and valiant woman!

On the back of her door she had this at her eye level:

Let Your God Love You

by Edwina Gately (from a recent retreat):

Be Silent
Be still
Alone
Empty
Before your God
Say nothing
Ask nothing
Be silent
Be still
Let your God
Look upon you
That is all.
God knows
God understands
God loves you
Within an enormous love
And only wants to look upon you
with that love.
Quiet.

Still.

Be.

Let your God – Love you

At the end she was living this. Let us go and do likewise. We love you, Yvonne.

--Sister Ramona Bascom, O.P.