

Sister Catherine Courtney

Funeral 21.12.2016

Phil 4: 7-11 Jn 15:11-17

It seems fitting somehow that Catherine should leave us in Advent, this time of joyful hope, of great expectation, of new life. So even as we mourn the passing of a dear sister and friend, a beloved aunt, we do so knowing that here today we are celebrating the joyous homecoming of this great missionary. For her Advent is fully realized. For her the waiting is over and she meets the Lord face to face, friend with Friend. "I have called you friends," Jesus said, "because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."

Catherine, from Annascaul in Co Kerry, came from farming stock and grew up with a love of the land and the people. Hardworking and thorough in all her undertakings, these were qualities she brought with her to the Novitiate in Cahiracon in 1950. *Cuireas m'agaid ar an bother romamh*, goes the old Irish poem: 'I set my face to the road before me,' and this is exactly what Catherine did. With strong faith and a big, big heart she set out on her missionary journey. After making her vows in 1953 and training as teacher she was sent to the Philippines in 1957, where she was to flourish, with a few breaks, for nearly 40 years.

Education was a priority in the country and the Columban Sisters were intent on providing the best schooling for the young, especially those, and they were many, who were scraping by. Catherine thrived in this environment despite the lack of resources, the poverty, the climate. She taught in Ozamis, in Olongapo, in Malate, in Labrador being Principal many times. She realized her dream of opening a Pastoral Centre in Lingayen, after much planning and hard work. As Dean there she inspired generations of young, eager students who became a vital force in the diocese. The outreach programmes she initiated equipped them to become leaders in their barrios, to spread the gospel. Catherine gave retreats and trained the college students to lead High School students in prayer exercises and faith sharing.

During the Marcos regime many of the students Catherine knew were apprehended and thrown into prison. Greatly concerned, Catherine became a visitor to the prison, pleading for the release of these young men and women. Years later she would still weep recalling the brutality they were subjected to. One young man, for example, told her of how he had been forcibly restricted and water poured down his throat. Then a sadistic guard jumped on his hugely distended stomach, "squashing me like a cockroach." Catherine, like that widow in the gospel, never stopped entreating, even badgering the authorities, often to have the door slammed in her face, but sometimes with good results. She told of one poker-faced governor who made it plain that she was a pest and to get out. Catherine, always courteous, got up to go, and in an inspired gesture produced a rosary from her pocket. "Maybe you'd like to give this to your wife." In an instant the man was transformed as he took the rosary, his faith stirred by this intrepid woman. In two days the young prisoner was released to the amazement of all – except of course Catherine who knew the power of the Mother of God.

When the time came to leave her beloved Philippines and the great friends she had made, it was not without pain. But her wonderful family, with whom she had always kept in touch, and who visited her regularly in the nursing home, eased her transition and, unobtrusively, helped her to adjust to Irish life again. It is good to see you here at this celebration of your beloved aunt and though you grieve, you are also at peace with her going to God. The presence here in Magheramore of many of her co-workers, sisters who had been with her in the Philippines, was an added richness. Catherine gifted all of us with her bigness, her practicality and the gentleness of her manner. Far from sinking into a soft retirement she took up her pen, contacted Amnesty International and continued her ministry to prisoners as long as she was able. In her soft voice she would urge us to pray for these men and women who were often tortured and held behind bars. She did not and will not now forget them.

It may be that Catherine had something of the indomitable spirit of her relative, the great Antarctic explorer, Tom Crean in her make-up. She never spoke much of him, but like him she overcame obstacles, cheerfully helped others with good humour and persevered to the end. Tom Crean is known to have made one of the most amazing journeys in Antarctic exploration, over 32 miles, across the snow and ice to get help for a colleague. Catherine's journeys may have been less spectacular but they were made with the same strong and generous spirit. Her motto says it all: Through Him, with Him, in Him. Because she believed and trusted, she could and did travel new highways and byways on her great missionary journey.

Catherine was a missionary to the end, a religious woman who loved God, her family, her community, her students and most especially the prisoners. A woman of prayer and vision, practical and hard-working she knew that the Lord would take care of things, and he always did. In our nursing home, she was grateful for the kindness of the staff who looked after her with such care these past years. When, in her final months, she was without energy, and sometimes without speech, one knew that a deeper communication was taking place. Tom Crean, at the end of a remarkable and extremely dangerous journey with Shackleton and another man, years later told a friend, "The Lord brought us home." Here today we too can say, with confidence, "The Lord brought Catherine home." May she rest in peace.

Redempta Twomey