

SISTER JANE KLIMISCH--- REFLECTIONS FOR WAKE: by S. Eileen Neville OSB

We gather here this evening to share our memories and to celebrate the life of a wonderful woman, Sister Jane Klimisch—a woman who has brought many blessings into the life of each of us, a woman whom we love and shall dearly miss. Each of us cherishes special memories of her.

Last Thursday morning, when I entered her room in the Care Center, Sister Jeanette was bent over her bed listening as Jane was humming softly. When Jeanette asked her, “Are you thinking of a song?” Jane increased her volume, and S. Jeanette, recognizing the melody, gently sang along with her, “The Lord is my shepherd, nothing shall I want; He leads me by safe paths, nothing shall I fear.” (Think about these words for a moment-- courageous words on the mind of a woman nearing death.) Sister Jeanette later told me she had also sung these words for Jane earlier that morning. They seemed to have special meaning for Jane as she neared death.

As I thought about this incident, I realized that here are some of the key components of Sister Jane’s life: her trusting faith strong to the end (“nothing shall I want, nothing shall I fear”), her special bond with her twin, her using beautiful music to express what is deepest in her heart, and her sharing and receiving love. I thought, this is the Sister Jane I’ve long known. But to be really sure, I re-read her autobiography. She wrote it in several sections over a span of forty-six years. It tells with beauty and grace how faith was the foundation of her growth and development over these years. (It can also remind us of how we too develop over our own lifespan.) Especially it reveals what being a Benedictine Sister meant to Sister Jane, what motivated her to choose and stay committed to God in this Benedictine way of life.

I will now share with you some excerpts from her recollections of each stage of her life as she saw that life at the time she wrote about it. Writing her first section in January 1959 when she was 38 years old, she began with these words:

On the day that I was born, Aug. 22, 1920, God put a beautiful birthday gift right beside me. In the bundle from Him He had placed my baby sister, a twin, a half-pound tinier and a few minutes younger than I. This little jewel was destined to be my childhood playmate, my visible angel,—in short, a constant reminder to me . . . of God’s good gifts and His love.

Sister Jane goes on to write lovingly of their parents Anton and Martha Klimisch, the twins’ three older brothers Martin, Isadore, and Roger, and their three older sisters Josephine, Evelyn, and Susan, all happily living in their farm home in the Sigel community, not far from their St. Agnes Church. She tells of her two earliest memories: of her mother singing the twins to sleep, and then of the twins laughing heartily when Jane stood beside their swing that Jeanette was sitting on. She wrote that this moment

made her cherish the verse, "One can play alone in the sun, But it takes two to have more fun." Faith, love, and music were important in the twins' lives from their earliest years.

But there came sorrow along with joy. The year of their Confirmation, 1932, brought sorrow with the death of their sister Josephine. The young Sister Jane wrote that she will "never forget the beautiful way in which my mother came to me and told me the sad news" of my twenty-nine year old sister's death. "She put her arms around me and said, 'The angels came and took Josephine this morning.' . . . Despite her natural sorrow, Mother spoke of God's will as an 'angel'." There were more hardships to come in this decade of the Great Depression. Sister says, "We really experienced poverty in many ways." She writes of going to her aunt's house to help with ironing, wanting to do this as an act of kindness, but her aunt often paid her in some way.

During these years the twins completed their elementary education in a nearby rural school and then spent their freshman year at Lesterville High School. Their mother then determined that the twins should finish high school at Mount Marty Academy. Despite the unexpected academic rigor, Jane said the two enjoyed life there, and already as a second semester sophomore the future Sister Jane was hearing God's whispers of "come." The two entered Sacred Heart Convent after graduation in 1938, even though this step was extremely difficult for their father to accept. They made their final profession in 1943.

The 1940's and 50's were a time of great personal and professional growth for Sister Jane. She earned a bachelor's degree from St. Mary of the Woods College and then, in summers, a master's degree from the American Conservatory of Music. She said this period was "broadening in so many ways . . . I came in contact with Sisters of many other religious communities, and God gave me many new friends, both lay and religious." This personal and professional enrichment she was soon investing in those she taught and lived with once she was home again in Yankton. Here is what she said about her life in those decades: Blended with the events of ordinary life,

a Benedictine Sister's life is also a rich life of prayer and constant union with God through Holy Mass, the Sacraments, the Divine Office, private prayer, spiritual reading, meditation, and retreats. I am convinced that the hundredfold which the Lord has promised to His chosen ones is understatement.

Then she lists "a few of the things for which I am exceedingly grateful in my religious life thus far. . . .my vocation (which is a daily calling by God)," "the Benedictine way of life," "fellow religious who help us by their good example and interest," cultural and spiritual opportunities, formal education, and even "sufferings of mind, soul, and body to sort the chaff from the wheat of Christ." She concludes this

first (and the lengthiest) section of her autobiography by thanking God for all He has done for and through her in her first 38 years of life.

The next two sections of Sister Jane's reflections on her life cover the early part of her busy middle years from 1959 to 1975. Then she was teaching at Mount Marty, serving as organist for the religious community, being active in a number of professional organizations, earning a doctorate at Washington University (during an extended sabbatical), publishing books and articles, and, yes, living through the implementation of Vatican II. She begins her observations this way: "It is difficult for me to put on paper the abundance of these years. How deep have been its sorrows, but only, it would seem, so that new spaces would be made for joys too, joys beyond telling. One of the greatest joys of this period has been a new opening of Scripture for me. . . . For with this book (the Bible), when we have finished, we have always just begun." These were also the years when S. Jane began sharing more widely her own spiritual wisdom, notably in her book The One Bride, but also in articles, lectures, and retreats. She speaks of "a new dimension of love in my relationships" with family and of "loving life with all its ups and downs and all its complexity."

The later 60's and early 70's, she wrote, were both "immensely abundant" and "very painful." Her father Anton died just two days after she arrived in St. Louis to begin doctoral study. Then several months later, her mother had a severe stroke, which left her confined to nursing home care for the rest of her life. But there was great success too: several years as academic dean at Mount Marty College, establishing the Sacred Music Resource Center to preserve important works of Gregorian Chant, composing new music, and of course sharing her music with students. She writes of these experiences:

I have found these years very challenging While I appreciate very much the newness and growth in responsibility which Vatican II unleashed for us, I did not find it simple to say farewell to some of the features of pre-Vatican II life which were in my bloodstream. . . . Yet, once there was no looking back, once I opted to proceed, . . . I found a new dimension of joy and freshness in life, which I interpret as a gift of the Spirit.

Through these years I am growing in greater confidence in the Lord in a quiet and faith-filled way. God is very real. . . to me when I take time to look for Him. . . in myself, in the persons with whom I live, in all of life.

The third section of Sister Jane's reflections, in which she deals with her later years of professional ministry, 1975-89, opens with mention of her mother's death in 1975, which she said "colored all the events of 1975." In 1978, Sister made her first trip to Europe. She finished her service as academic dean of the college and, in her words, "a new light went on" when she became associated with the Benedictine Musicians of the Americas, soon presenting some of her compositions to the group. "Doing music again," she said, "felt like water falling on parched land. . . .What a period of

refreshment.” As well as composing music, helping with monastery celebrations, and teaching, she also became increasingly involved in spiritual direction and leading retreats. She said of this period: “Life continues abundantly.”

During the 1980’s Sister began to experience some physical challenges, but these did not deter her from experiencing what she calls “the peak of many peaks in my life,” a trip of 14 Benedictine Musicians to Europe where they performed concerts in five countries. Two years later, in 1984, Mother Jerome Schmitt’s sudden death brought Sister unexpected pain; she comments, “So many of my experiences of being a Benedictine are linked with her presence among us as our Christ-figure.” Sister Jane also organized the college archives at this time, which involved the “thrill of learning to use a computer. “ Because of hearing loss, she discontinued teaching in the college. She concludes this section in this way:

In the midst of all, I am trying to savor the Sabbath-rest a bit more by slowing down on the brink of our Golden Jubilee and entering our decade of our 70’s. Each day I am awed at the abundance of God’s blessings which are ours as Yankton Benedictines. May we continue to share these blessings which are, in reality, the promised Hundred-fold.

In the final section of her autobiography, 1990-2005, written in her 85th year, Sister Jane concisely sums up her life and its meaning for her. She begins: “Happily I have been able to continue what means most to me in life—being in the communities of my family, my monastic Sisters, and the world-wide Church of God for word and sacrament.” She then mentions that she has still been teaching part-time and says, “I love teaching and have learned so much in the doing of it.” She also mentions that she still participates in activities of the Benedictine Musicians and comments, “Friendships among us have continued to nourish our lives.”

Sister Jane concluded her autobiography with a brief reflection based on the celebrations of her vow class’s 50th and 60th jubilees. She recalled that two of the six Sisters in their class, Sisters Christina and Julia, had since died (as later would a third, S. Audrey) and, as also had family members, fellow Sisters, relatives, and friends. She wrote:

They are deeply missed and remembered with love. Their departure reminds me that we, too, are nearing the completion of our life’s journey as “with eager longing” we await our welcome in the place God’s love has prepared for each and all of us together.

We will greatly miss you, Sister Jane, but we are happy that you are now in the company of your dear family and friends in the place which God’s love has prepared for you. Thank you for being such a beautiful friend, teacher, and bearer of God’s love to each and all of us.