

Homily for Sister Kristin Funari, CSJP

November 16, 2016

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The Constitutions and Statutes of the Sisters and Associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace begin with the following words:

“Peace is God’s gift to us, given in Christ, a gift we experience and enjoy now, though not in completeness. ... Christ is our peace the source of our power. United with him we engage in the struggle against the reality of evil and continue the work of establishing God’s reign of justice and peace.” (Constitution 1 and 2).

To all who knew and loved Kristin and to all those who knew Kristin and wanted to run from the room screaming and pulling their hair out, there can be no doubt that she embodied and lived out these constitutions to the fullest – and then some.

As Sister Susan shared with us during the welcome to our celebration today, Kristin “burned with a passion for everything that is good.” As a 20 year old she “wished to bring myself and others to God.” Decades later she would say to Jan Linley, “seeking God and seeking truth is why I stay and why I entered. You know, really wanting to know God.”

Kristin’s passion would lead to a lifetime dedicated to living, working and ministering to the poor and neglected, the outcast, the marginalized, and the “throw-aways” of our modern society, especially with women and children. In her own words, from a video made about the inner city ministries of Jersey City, Kristin said, “We are called to stop the nightmares of women and to stop the tears of children, with the graces that we have received in this life.”

Kristin was an educated woman, degrees in Sociology and Social Work – but she credited the people she served and ministered with as providing the most crucial part of her education. One article from a NJ newspaper that crossed my desk was of this loud, boisterous cigarette smoking nun who was not afraid to get in anyone’s face if the need arose. We all know the need arose on more than one occasion. She didn’t always get her way but she put up one heck of a fight along the way.

She loved the people of St. Boniface in Jersey City and rolled up her sleeves behind the scenes making pasteles or empanadas and slugging back a few beers in the process. She was approachable, she was strong, she was opinionated, dedicated, tenacious—and yet on my tour of the Grand Street House and the children in the day care center she proved to be warm, loving, concerned and yes, she’ll hate me for saying this, even motherly as she wiped a child’s nose or hugged a mother that she hadn’t seen since her last visit.

Constitution 24 reminds us: “In recognizing the dignity of all persons, we commit ourselves to education and action that seek to eliminate discrimination in all its forms, within the congregation, in those places and institutions where we minister, and in wider society.”

A few years back when the spirit of her community called her into a Congregational Leadership position, it was, as several people mentioned last evening, not an easy transition for Kristin to make. She, along with others, saw a blank slate and dreamed big, and that dream gave birth to the York Street Project, and now it was time to set the project free and trust its future to the people Kristin knew would do a fantastic job. After the last election, after being chosen once again to remain in a leadership role, she told me, as soon as my term in leadership is over, I’ve got so many other things I want to do. She would have been in her mid 70’s by then, but still the fire and passion of a future of possibilities was there.

Kristin took her call to Leadership very seriously. It must not have been easy. As you know, Kristin was an extremely private person, she preferred behind the scenes, but that did not prevent her from throwing herself 110% in what she was called to do. The recent years of CCP Meetings, Finance Meetings, establishing the Board of Peace Ministries and so much more, Kristin took it all very seriously.

Sister Bridget called me that night Kristin dies and said she noticed a beige tote bag on the desk in Kristin’s room with what appeared to be a homily of some sort on top. Maybe Kristin wrote her own funeral homily and left it for me to read. Doesn’t that sound like Kristin? Organization up until the end!

The day after her death I went into her room at the Villa. It was just like it was the day before but Kristin and the large crowd of people were now gone. The bed empty, her cell phone on the bed stand, a container of Nicorette gum along side. It felt very sad, very surreal, and yet somehow, very holy.

On the desk a beige tote bag and yes there was a homily—not written by Kristin but a beautiful reflection on Suffering—written by Sister Mindy McDonald. Mindy spoke about the loss and suffering she witnessed as a nurse in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. In her reflection, Mindy echoed the words of the prophet Habakkuk: “I see ruin, misery, and destruction God. Why don’t you do something?” Perhaps those words gave courage to Kristin as she pondered over them. “Where are you? Why don’t you do something?” If we are honest with ourselves, I’m sure that those words have been on our lips and minds since we first learned of Kristin’s illness just a few short months ago.

Thinking that maybe somewhere Kristin had taken the time to write her own homily, I continued to look through the ream of papers. No homily, no sermon notes, no spiritual treatises or even her famous recipe for Sister Mary Robert’s favorite Black Russian!

Lots of papers, contracts, letters from lawyers and architects. Kristin carried these papers with her to Holy Name Hospital and back again. I was told that even though she had trouble speaking and breathing, she attended meetings and planning for the future of the community at St. Michael Villa, up until the last week of her life. That was Kristin—literally up to her dying breath, working for the good of the congregation, participating in decisions that will affect the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace well into the future, way beyond her death and the death of many of us here. Kristin looked out for her community and there is no doubt she will continue to do so.

Of course you know Kristin is hating all this right now. Early on in her illness and more recently she told me, “Jim I want you to celebrate my funeral. Keep it short, and use lots of incense.”

Well I found out from Fr. Emmett that there have been occasions here when the use of incense has set off the smoke detectors and the fire department has come and evacuated everyone during the funeral. Now wouldn't Kristin love that? The fire department and police department certainly came to our rescue a month ago at the Villa but I think it's best to go easy on the incense, knowing Kristin will understand.

When Kristin was diagnosed with cancer, she chose to walk through that experience on her own terms. She surrounded herself with her closest friends and life long companions, she chose who would accompany her on the final journey of her life. To Margaret and Harriet and Nancy and Mary—how blessed you are to have been with Kristin on her journey.

While the St. Michael Villa community prayed and supported Kristin with our love and prayers and visits, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Mater Dei community of Sisters Sheila, Susan, Margaret and Mindy. They cared for and surrounded Kristin with a circle of love and I know that their hearts are heavy during these days.

Kristin lived with cancer, yes, but she also lived with a fierce determination to enjoy every moment that was given to her. Last week when she came back from Holy Name Hospital she asked the nurse to call me. I went over and we have a beautiful holy visit. After praying and being anointed, she asked me if it was ok to go and I said absolutely. I told her that I felt so disappointed that we had been praying to Blessed Francis Seelos for her intercession and healing. Her response: “I'll give him a piece of my mind!” God help Francis Seelos! As Sister Sheila said last night, “our prayers were answered, a miracle happened, Kristin died in peace and that was God's gift to her and to us.”

My experience of Kristin is not as long as many of you. Just three short years. At liturgies I would see her sitting in her pew like this—I knew she was hearing and analyzing every word coming out of my mouth. She was one of the most affirming people I have ever met. “Jim,” she would say, “I never quite thought about the gospel in that way before. You really give me something to ponder and think about.”

Ponder and think and search and question is what Kristin did, and did well. We heard that about her last night. She had to “sit with it,” “reflect on it,” “Ponder it,” “dissect it,” “deconstruct it if necessary,” and then put it back together again. I began to appreciate this deep sense of wonderment and searching that was Kristin. I never really gave much thought to her relationship with her God—our spiritual journeys are so private and personal, that is until I was given the readings that Kristin selected for today’s celebration.

Certainly the vision of Isaiah and the new world order to come played a part in Kristin’s passion for life and all of creation. And the Gospel promise of our future life with our Creator should bring comfort to all who have ears to hear it.

But what a surprise: Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new. Late have I loved you.

The Confessions of St. Augustine, probably the second most read book in the Christian world after the Bible! Augustine who spent so many years running from the presence of the Lord—who is finally swept up by God’s love in that one defining moment when Augustine realized that in all his effort to run from and avoid the presence of God, cried out from the heart, “And behold, YOU were within me and I was outside and there I sought you.”

YES! This was Kristin. All of us at 20 want to experience the presence of our Creator. Or do we? Yes, God, I’m passionate and searching for you, but not yet. Remember this is the same St. Augustine who prayed, “Lord, make me chaste, BUT NOT YET.” He was having too much fun.

But God still pursued Augustine and in the end Augustine would surrender: “You called and cried out to me and broke open my deafness; You shone forth upon me and you scattered my blindness; You breathed fragrance and I drew my breath, and now I pant for you. I tasted hunger and thirst; You touched me and I burned for your peace.”

No wonder Kristin loved this reading. I’m sure she saw herself in this prayer of Augustine.

I believe this is the passion she spoke about in the article in the NCR that Sister Susan shared earlier. “I’m passionate about the Gospels, passionate about the economy, passionate about the poor, passionate about the suffering in the world, passionate about the Beatitudes, passionate about the truth being the way.”

If we had to summarize the life of Sister Kristin in one word, I guess PASSIONATE would be a good one. She knew that God was PASSIONATE about her and rather than keep that passion to herself—she spread it around everywhere she went. And from the stories that we heard last evening, she did it very well indeed.

The prayer of St. Augustine doesn’t stop where our reading left off today. I think the following words can also speak to us of Kristin –

“When at last I cling to you with my whole being there will be no more anguish or labor for me, and my life will be alive indeed, alive because filled with you. But now it is very different. Anyone whom you fill you also uplift; but I am not full of you, and so I am a burden to myself. ... And I do not know who will with the day. This is agony Lord, have pity on me! It is agony! See, I do not hide my wounds; YOU are the physician and I am sick, You are merciful, and I in need of mercy. On your exceedingly great mercy, and on that alone, rests all my hope.”

We love you Kristin. Enjoy the mystery that is your God and our God.