

Reflections for Sister Aurea's Wake 09-16-16

Reading at the Wake:

1Cor 13: 4-8a

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

On behalf of our community, I would like to welcome Sister Aurea's relatives and friends as we recall and celebrate her life among us and commend her to her heavenly home.

Sister Aurea was my Care Center Buddy for several years and I think we found companionship, at least in part, because we both came from Colorado, and we felt that we Coloradans had to stick together.

I'm sure you all know that Sister Aurea was a nurse, and served in Yankton, Pierre, Canon City, Colorado and Parkston, but did you also know that she was a shepherdess in her youth? Part of last Sunday's gospel included the parable of the lost sheep, and in her autobiography, Sister Aurea said that her dad, who raised sheep, would always bring any orphans home for the children to graze and feed. Sister says: "We always had at least one lamb which we named and called our own. We used to fight over the black ones or the ones with white silky wool which resembled little goats".

Another of Sister's hats was that of being the mother of the family for two years after their mother died when sister was 10 years old. This responsibility was rotated in such a way that each child was able to complete high school while one of the other siblings took charge of the household.

Over the years Sister wore many other hats – besides nursing in another culture, she was a linguist (learning the dialects of several native Indian groups in Guatemala), and she also worked at the men's prison in Coban, Alta Verapaz. Sister admitted that the dialects were not easy to learn, and Sister Valerie told a story that one day, a gentleman came to the clinic for medical help and Sister told him to sit on the chair while she got some

supplies (at least that's what she thought she said). When she turned around, the man was STANDING on the chair – oops!

From what I read and heard from many sisters, Sister Aurea found her experiences in Guatemala some of the most rewarding in her life despite the poverty of the people and the scarcity of pharmacological resources to treat them. Also there were traveling hindrances – while they had a jeep, sometimes the road ran out and they needed donkeys to continue up the mountain to reach the people. Despite all these hardships, Sister said: “One of my greatest satisfactions was working with the really needy and poor. Guatemala was a place where the sisters (those from Ferdinand, Indiana and ours) and the Blue Cloud fathers had some good times together. We formed a real community. It was just beautiful. We had the best times! I have never had such good times as I had in Guatemala. Time there doesn't mean what it does in our country. So we were very relaxed and enjoyed one another.”

More hats! When Sister left Guatemala in 1975, she attended MMC and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with an emphasis in Social Work. She then was employed at St. Thomas More hospital in Canon City, Colorado doing outreach in Social Work, Home Health, and Hospice. She loved being in Colorado as that was her home turf and she much enjoyed the beautiful and majestic mountains. At one point she studied pastoral care at Colorado State Hospital and earned two units of training. Sometime during those years in Colorado, sister developed a concern about driving in hazardous conditions and decided to seek a position at Madonna home, where she would not have to drive. She spent one year there as a nurse and one year as a pastoral care assistant.

Sister's last mission was in Parkston where she lived with Sister Jeanne Marie Dunn and Sister Corrinne Oberembt (stay tuned for a story about Sister Corinne). At Parkston, she was the first sister to hold a position in Pastoral Care and in Mission Effectiveness. When she returned to Yankton because of health problems (I believe that she first developed asthma in Parkston), she helped out in the dining room and visited the sick and elder sisters at our Care Center. She wrote that she missed not being able to be present at special family gatherings as well as social and educational events away from the monastery.

At some point she became a resident of St. Joseph Care Center herself, and many of the staff told me what a beautiful person she was to care for, and that they felt her motherly touch even as she was being given cares by them. Sister would share her meditations from "Give us this day", she was interested in the lives of their children and grandchildren, she had many things to talk about – and always had a library book that she was reading.

Shalom group remembers her love of playing cards and that she had quite a competitive spirit (in her own gentle way) – if she would make the wrong move, she might say: "Oh, shucks, or Oh shoot". And Sister Aurea herself said (taken from the 2006 update to her autobiography): "I belong to the Shalom group where we spend time playing a variety of games. We have fun, and I like to win **(exclamation point)!**

She also said: "I collect jokes – I don't think St. Benedict would approve of my hearty laughter. I even laugh at myself, especially when I do foolish things. Perhaps my sense of humor has helped me cope with my limitations and the not-so-easy situations that I have encountered in my life." Many sisters have commented on her wonderful smile as well as her laughter and sense of humor. I can't possibly tell you all the stories I heard, but I hope you will all share those memories of her after the wake.

Although sister was generally quiet and unassuming, she clearly was her own person and stood up for things of importance. She also valued her independence. As her buddy, I would come to her on special occasions to arrange to accompany her to the chapter room or dining room or wherever (as a note on our communication board directed the buddies to do) only to be met by a very gentle, but firm: "I'll meet you there". Ditto for mail – "I can get it". She also insisted on reading her own letters up to the very last, when she could barely hold the papers up.

One of the most prominent items in Sister's rather Spartan room in the Care Center was a Painting of St. Joseph and child Jesus done by her blood sister, Ramona. It was prominently placed where Aurea could see it from almost any location in her room. Aurea mentioned how precious the painting was to her and how grateful she was to Sister Ramona for giving it to her. This painting was also very much appreciated by Care Center staff, a number of whom asked to purchase a copy for themselves.

Sister suffered from asthma for many years, and that condition limited her activities considerably, especially in her later years. Once we went to Dairy Queen for Blizzards, which she thoroughly enjoyed, and she seemed to tolerate the trip just fine. But several days after, however, she told me that she had a real flare-up of the asthma due to exposure to the outside elements. So, when Culver's opened, there were coupons for their concrete ice cream. So I asked Aurea if she would like one, and she said yes. Well, the coupons turned out to be for medium-sized concretes, which seemed big, even for me. She took one and I said: "Sister, if this is too much for you, we can put the rest in the freezer for another time". She said, "I think I can eat it", and eat it she did, down to the very last spoonful, even scraping the sides of the container for the very last delicious drop.

I had not realized that Sister had back problems and a back operation already when she was in Guatemala, but some degree of back pain was more or less a constant companion for her. Several years ago she fell and broke a hip, but she was very faithful to a PT routine and eventually she could be seen walking around the monastery with a simple walker. Many sisters commented that they met her in ever so many places as they took their own walks. At some point, however, the back pain became very debilitating, and she was given stronger pain medication to reduce her discomfort. Unfortunately, she had a reaction to the pain medication which resulted in two hospitalizations, after which Sister asked to be placed in Hospice care. I think, because she felt so miserable, she expected to die rather quickly, but the Lord had other things in mind for her.

As sister began to visibly fail, many of us were hoping that she would be able to celebrate her birthday on September 11th. I had been at table one day shortly after one of the other sisters had celebrated her 90th birthday, and someone said: "Sister Aurea is next", which I took to mean she would also be 90 years of age. So, when I would visit her, I would say: "Your 90th birthday is coming up!" – to which she replied: "89" – I thought: "Isn't that cute – she wants to hold on to being 89 as long as possible". So this went on for some time, and eventually she permitted me to read some of her letters to her, the last of which was from Sister Ramona, who said: "Happy 90th birthday, dear sister", to which Aurea replied, "89". DUH – I didn't get it until some of the Care Center staff took me aside and told me they had looked up her birthday and she was born in 1927, which would make her 89, not 90! It was the Care Center staff who really listened to Sister Aurea, bless their hearts.

The day before her 89th birthday, Sister was alert and very talkative. Sometime in the afternoon, while the Care Center staff was providing cares, Sister told them that she had seen Sister Corrine Oberembt going back and forth past her room and peeking in, and Aurea wondered why she didn't come in and chat. And a bit later that day, Sister was seen looking up at her wall and smiling and laughing and the staff asked what was going on. She said: "Sister Eileen O'Connor is smiling at me". So Sister had some heavenly visitors preparing her for her final journey to God.

This is a quote from Sister's 2006 update to her autobiography:

"Every day that I live is a day closer to eternity. I have already experienced some close calls. I look forward to the day when I will breathe new air without allergens and lung irritants. It is then that I will breathe celestial air and it is then that I will know that I am home!"

Sister Aurea died very peacefully on Tuesday, September 13th, at 2:20am, the day after her mother's anniversary of death.

Sister Aurea, you are now breathing the purest air imaginable – given to you with love from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We will miss you dearly, but you will not be forgotten. **Love never fails.**

Reflections composed by Sister Michaeleen