

Wake Reflections
Sr. Stephanie Weber
July 1, 2015
Sr. Jeanne Weber

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:4-7). Sr. Stephanie was a woman of many spiritual gifts, who delighted in using them for the common good. First was her being gifted by God to her family as Marie Josephine, the fourth of eleven children born to Frances and Stephen Weber. Stephanie was devoted to her family, taking care of her mother in her old age, and delighting in time spent with her siblings and their spouses, and with her extended family of nieces and nephews.

Stephanie’s next gift was her call to Benedictine religious life, which she credits to the prayers of her mother and her great aunt, Sr. Modesta. Stephanie related in her autobiography that her mother prayed for each of her children as they were born, that they would be called to the religious life or the priesthood. Little Marie’s near asphyxiation as an infant prompted her mother to redouble her prayers, offering her to God if she would survive. Stephanie also enjoyed telling the story of Sr. Modesta praying fervently for forty years for a relative to take her place in the community—and that it took her, Rosemary, Theresa, and then me to accomplish that feat. Stephanie felt a call to religious life for as long as she could remember, no doubt the result of the prayers of those two faithful women. Prayers and personal conviction aside, she and Sr. Madonna shared an apparently reasonable doubt that they’d be accepted by the community for final vows. They were good friends and, as young sisters, shared a fair amount of mischief and riotous laughter together. Sr. Madonna relates that their “Plan B” in case that they weren’t accepted was to live as spinsters on a farm owned by Sr. Madonna’s father with Madonna teaching piano and Stephanie mending the one horse shay.

The next gift which Stephanie shared with the people of God was her gift for teaching, a career she determined to pursue even before she entered the community. Her versatility as a teacher was shown in her aptitude and even joy as she taught at every level, from kindergarten

to high school home economics and chemistry, to college level religious studies, to adult bible studies and religious education. At one point, she was teaching kindergarten and high school chemistry—at the same time. She loved children and delighted to tell the story of a kindergarten student who informed her that if they weren't going to learn to read, he wasn't coming back. Stephanie thereupon decided that she would indeed teach the kindergartners to read, something that was unheard of in that era. Overcoming the objections of Sr. Juanita, and getting some tips from her, she proceeded to do just that. Her success convinced the school administration that from then on reading would be taught in kindergarten.

Stephanie was obviously well loved by the little ones, who she says would come into the room early in the morning and fall into her lap. In her retirement years, she got her daily “baby fix” by volunteering at the Mount Marty day care. And though it might not take much to be beloved of little children, it's a bit harder to gain the admiration and respect of high school students, which she also obviously did. Her chemistry students at Hartington insisted to her that she couldn't leave there because she loved teaching chemistry so much. Which brings us to something that not many people probably know about Stephanie. In her oral history, where she related the above story, she shares that she knew that the student was right, that she really did love teaching chemistry, when she reflected that so many times she would come into that end of the day class with a headache and leave without one. Stephanie suffered from painful headaches virtually every day. I've known of them for at least 15 years. From day to day the only change was whether the headache was tolerable or severe and debilitating. She didn't even let on about the former, but often, especially in these later years, she was unable to hide the latter.

Stephanie's next gift was a spiritual re-awakening that came about as the result of a retreat experience at Pecos, New Mexico in the early 1970's. During this retreat, she states that “the Lord showed [her] some really beautiful things,” resulting in a much enlivened faith and experience of the nearness of God to her in prayer. Her subsequent involvement with the Charismatic Renewal movement enabled her to share that faith and her deep love of God with others—something she positively loved to do.

Stephanie states that this retreat launched the second stage of her religious journey—which was followed by a corresponding shift in her area of ministry, beginning with her involvement in the RENEW program in the parish at Hartington, and leading to subsequent ministry at the Newman Center in Vermillion and in various parish ministry positions. Her lively faith and cheerful, extroverted personality made her beloved of the adults she worked with—to the point that they would beg her to continue to work with them when she was to move on. Members of Cedar Catholic Parish in Hartington went so far as to chip in and pay her salary so that she could minister with them when the parish didn't have the funds to pay her. Of her Newman Center Ministry she states that her initial nervousness about being accepted by the college students at her advanced age of 50 was quickly dispelled by the students themselves.

Another gift that Stephanie shared with us was her human frailty. She had a tendency to worry and a very meticulous attention to detail, both in her own work and in any work she supervised, that was both strength and weakness and could be hard to bear at times, probably for herself as much as for us.

Stephanie's last spiritual gift was the way in which she received her increasing frailty, and especially her memory loss and difficulty finding words. I'm not going to say that this was easy for her. It wasn't! There were times she would get frustrated and even downright angry over her increasing limitations and the need to accept help. I remember that both when we told her she needed to move to the Care Center, and again when she needed to start using a walker, she initially accepted it with seeming grace, then the next day chewed me out royally, then the next day, was totally okay with it—and not because of a failure of memory. She just needed to get it out of her system, and then she could move ahead with grace. Her times of frustration were far overshadowed by her ongoing love of and trust in God, and the love, affection, and playfulness she showed toward others, often breaking out into singing, or saying 'Let's dance!' with a twinkle in her eye that would light up the room. She was so grateful for anything that we did for her, and especially for Rosemary's faithful, loving presence to her: taking her to morning coffee each day, laying out her clothes at night, doing her laundry . . . Rosemary relates, "She was always thanking me and telling me how much she appreciated our coffee times together. She would often say, 'How can I repay you?' or 'How much do I owe you

for all you do for me?’ and I would usually respond with, ‘Say a prayer for me.’ Or sometimes I’d say, ‘\$500,’ and then we’d have a good laugh.

At the end of her oral history, Sr. Stephanie says, “In looking back I can see my life has been very full. I can’t help but say, ‘I am deeply grateful.’” We too are grateful for her, for her faith filled life and for the generosity and love with which she shared her spiritual gifts with us. May she rest in peace in the arms of God in whom she put her trust.