

REMARKS FOR SR LEONETTE'S WAKE

We just heard from Paul, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The over 300 novices who were mentored and formed by Sister Leonette in this community can testify that she indeed live a life worthy of her calling. Her personal mottoe was, "Benedict says bring Christ to the world in which you live."

In Sept 1915, Leonette Hoelsing was born to Elizabeth and Fred Hoelsing of Menominee, NB on the farm where she was raised. She was the oldest living child of 9. They were raised as strong members of the local church and hard workers of the farm. Both parents modeled for them how to love, work and pray in family life. She was taught in grade and high school by the Yankton Benedictines and credits them in inspiring her to be a sister.

In 1933 she joined this community and given the name of Ferdinand. Her early ministry years were spent teaching the upper grades in Tabor, Ipswich, and St. Patrick's in Lincoln, NB, where she was superior for four years. Then in July 1946 she was told by Mother Jerome that she would take Sr. Ida's place as director of the novices. Feeling overwhelmed and not yet 30 years of age, she told Mother Jerome she wasn't canonically old enough to do that. Mother Jerome said not to worry she had already taken care of that. In those days the novice director also supervised the temporary professed so it was a major commitment, novitiate classes were from 16 to 30 in number those years. In 1949, Mother Jerome added choir director to her duties. Although she played the keyboard she was not formally trained in music or liturgy and so she could say as Mother Teresa said in her journal, "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish He didn't trust me so much." These were exciting times in liturgy as Mother Jerome led the community in reciting the office in English, initiated the revised Easter Vigil liturgy, and reinstated the consecration of virgins. Sr. Leonette had much to do but did it all with grace and hard work.

In 2013 we had a reunion of Sr. Ferdinand's novices and we heard many stories of the support and encouragement she gave them. There were funny stories and sad stories but all precious memories. It was clear she was a woman of great humbleness and integrity. She expected much from them and gave much. Many said she corrected them but showed them at the same time that they were loved. She often quoted Mother Jerome that we must be strong women of the Church, and that was her vision for all she directed and mentored.

In 1961 the community elected Sister Julia Hunhoff prioress ending the long leadership of Mother Jerome. Sister Julia asked Sr. Leonette to serve as sub-prioress and a new era in her life began, in 1965 she was asked to help St. Mary's Priory in Victoria, Canada. Bishop Remi De Roo had come and asked for help for this community which was Anglican in origin and then converted to Catholicism, they followed the Rule of Benedict. They numbered about 25 and had many internal problems and no internal leadership. The bishop had asked several communities for help but no one wanted to take it on. After much discussion a vote of the Chapter enabled Sr. Julia to send Sr. Leonette with Sr. Valentine McNearney as her companion.

The sisters in Victoria ran a nursing home at the Priory and Mother Cecilia, their former prioress, had opened a shelter for lost and strayed cats and dogs. This was expensive and controversial among the sisters. The nursing home was near bankruptcy and the sisters there were working extra hard. Community life was virtually non-existent. With her steady and humble approach Sr. Leonette was able to restore some peace and order. In the end the age of the sisters, the lack of a common vision, and few financial resources lead to the closing of the priory. Sr. Leonette faithfully provided for each sister, transferring seven of them to Yankton, and provided for each of the remaining. She was in Victoria for 12 years and said of her time there, "Those years changed my life in a very positive way. Bishop DeRoo was truly a Vatican II Bishop, he taught me many things and I grew to love the people there who were very supportive." In gratitude for her service, Bishop DiRoo conferred on her the medal "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" from the Pope. She said the foundation of Nanaimo by Mt Angel, gave me hope that Benedictinism would stay alive on the island. After she returned to Yankton she visited Victoria a few additional times to put closure on the many things there and providing for Mother Cecilia in her last days.

When I was appointed administrator of Ridgely, she talked to me and shared again her experience, she reinforced that the most important thing is to show the sisters they are loved and appreciated. Every month or so that first year, she would call me and ask how it was going. I so appreciated her interest and support.

Returning to Yankton, also gave her the opportunity to reconnect with her family most of whom lived nearby. She was always proud of each generation and felt close to her brothers and sisters, when she reach 90 the family had a great party in Minominee for her and she was so thrilled. Her nephew, Fr. Paul Hoelsing, said the Mass, and many nephews and nieces participated. When she returned home that night, she said, imagine what mother and father would say if they could see all that gathering, all started by them.

A review of Sr. Leonette's life shows us the challenges of leadership entrusted at a very early age, the maturity that her steadfast commitment to the Church and to the community brought her, the personal characteristics of humility and integrity learned from growing up in a struggling, faith-filled family, and in a community that was growing and taking its role in the leadership of the Church here on the banks of the Missouri. She lived in the best of times and the worst of times and through it all she remained steadfast and strong. She, like Helen Keller, could say, "When we do the best we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life or in the life of another." We, as members of Sacred Heart Monastery, know that a pillar of this community has passed on to her earned reward and that she will continue to bless us. It is now our task to carry on the legacy, to be steadfast, strong and visionary. She will expect no less from us.