

REFLECTIONS: WAKE of SR. LAETICIA KILZER (Sept. 27, 2017)**by Sr. Marielle Frigge**

Sisters of Sacred Heart Monastery, Sr. Laetitia's family, former colleagues and students, and friends:

We've come together this evening to celebrate the life of a remarkable woman, Sr. Laetitia Kilzer, who graced this world with her presence for nearly a century. How to capture such a person, such a life? Of course, it cannot be done, but we can share a few memories. While Sr. Laetitia's intellectual gifts and teaching skills are well known, we also remember her also as a woman who wore her many accomplishments lightly. She deeply appreciated her family and her religious community, related easily to children as well as adults, enjoyed a good laugh, treasured the arts, and radiated a deep sense of gratitude.

Gertrude Kilzer and her twin Edmund were born in North Dakota 97 years ago, the second set of twins among 14 children born to her Hungarian immigrant parents. The great value Sr. Laetitia placed on faith and education began in childhood. When the family moved about 60 miles from Richardton, which was near Assumption Abbey, there was no longer a church or school near their farm. At first their father brought a priest from 15 miles distant into their home for Mass at least once a month, and hired private teachers to educate the children. Through his continuing efforts, within a few years both a church and a school were established within two miles of their home. Love for the arts, especially music, was also fostered in the children because their family regularly listened to opera and classical music on the radio, and each child was encouraged to learn a musical instrument. When the children reached high school age, they were enrolled in Catholic schools. In her autobiography, Sr. Laetitia remarks on her surprise at realizing later in life that not every North Dakota "farm kid" grew up in this fashion.

After completing high school in three years—Sr. Laetitia reflected that "this was necessary so that the next ones could go"—she entered Sacred Heart Convent (as it was then known) in August of 1938. After one semester as a postulant, she was sent to teach at Fort Yates, replacing a sister who needed to return to Yankton. In her early years of teaching first graders through high school students, Sr. Laetitia taught a great variety of subjects, including music, literature, history, church history, math, general science, and Bible; she also directed a play and a Christmas program. As she stated in her 1996 oral history, that was simply how things were done at that time: if there was a need and you were sent, you went. She added that today "some people would have feelings about being pushed into things." But with a characteristic positive attitude, Sr. Laetitia reflected that in looking back on those experiences, "I got to know something about the learning process. I found out that there is a difference between 'telling' students something and 'teaching' them."

Mother Jerome apparently recognized Sr. Laetitia's learning and teaching abilities and sent her to graduate school to earn a PhD in chemistry so that she could begin a chemistry program at Mount Marty. Of her time at Notre Dame University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, she noted, "In the summer the campus swarmed with sisters. In the winter there were 20 sisters and 6000 men."

What Sr. Laetitia learned about teaching and chemistry came together as she began a chemistry program at the college, the sole teacher of all courses offered at that time. Eventually she built the program into a major and secured numerous grants and internships for students and for herself as well. Her own research took her to Michigan State University, the University of California at Berkeley, and back to Notre Dame. The United States Air Force and NASA also offered her summer internships to work on developing heat shields to protect space shuttles. Recognizing her abilities, NASA wanted to hire her. When she told them that would be impossible because she needed to return to her teaching post in the fall, they assumed she would return to Stanford or Cal Tech or a similar school. Though they could hardly understand her determination to continue teaching at a tiny college in South Dakota, she told them what for her was an obvious fact: "That's where I belong—that's my religious community's college."

A 1972-73 sabbatical brought her to the Institute of Ecological Research in Bonn, West Germany, resulting in eight summers of further research at the same facility. Throughout her many years of teaching and research, Sr. Laetitia lived and worked in many locales, schools, and research facilities. I believe that she was a superb teacher because she was an excellent learner, open to and welcoming new experiences and people of every age or background. This quality also endeared her to many. Recounting many and varied experiences in her oral history, Sr. Laetitia uses this phrase repeatedly: "I made good friends there."

Significant amount of time spent in Germany further led Sr. Laetitia to plan and carry out numerous international travel trips with students. She remarked, "I thought it would be a marvelous opportunity for them to learn about people in other countries. They would learn that although there are differences, people are basically the same." Those students (as well as many others) also learned of Sr. Laetitia's abiding sense of humor. During one of her trips with students, she was quickly leading the group through a German train station, and noticed a number of wide grins on those passing by. Then she discovered that a student had pinned a sign on her back: "*Folgen sie dieser nonne!*" [Follow this nun!]. She simply chuckled and continued on her way, sign intact.

As many here present know, Sr. Laetitia had a special affinity for children. I suspect that was true because she was, in the best sense of the term, childlike herself: endlessly curious, quite oblivious to

external differences, utterly open to and accepting of new people, new experience, new learning. Her grand-niece Danielle recalls, “When I was about 8, my brother and I worked for weeks on building a fort. When [Sisters Laetitia and] Philomene came to our house, we were eager to show them. To our utter astonishment, Sister Laetitia wrapped her habit around her legs and climbed inside. She sat in the fort with us, discussing our building techniques and the source of our building materials. She treated us as if we were licensed contractors working on an important project.”

The Benedictine author David Steindl-Rast has said that “gratitude is the heart of prayer”; if that is true, as I believe it is, Sr. Laetitia was also a very prayerful person. She begins a 1998 reflection, “My retreat ...gave me a beautiful opportunity to reflect on the many blessings God has given me throughout my life.” At a 90th birthday party, her good friend Mary Abbot asked her to share a thought or insight about her nine decades of life. Her first words were, “I am so grateful to God for all the gifts and opportunities I’ve received.” In her years of residing in the monastery Care Center, she would eagerly give a warm hug and a “Thank you” for even the smallest act of care.

While Sr. Laetitia was renowned as an excellent scholar and teacher, she was also known to be absent-minded about some things. Once when someone in our living group, then Subiaco, asked why she didn’t sign up to read the Scriptures at Mass (which she did very well), she responded that she was afraid she’d forget when the time came. Everyone in the group assured her that we would help her remember. On the given day, after Morning Prayer, Sr. Philomene said, “Now remember, Tish, you’re reading for Mass this afternoon.” Sr. Laetitia smiled an acknowledgement. After lunch, Sr. Cynthia gave another gentle reminder, which brought another nod of agreement. On the way into Mass, I repeated the now-familiar phrase, and received her “Yes, thank you!” response. And ten minutes later, when it was time for the first reading, we saw Sr. Laetitia settling into her seat, waiting attentively for the reading to begin....

In her later years, increasing dementia slowly eroded her memory, but Sr. Laetitia still remembered many family members, friends, colleagues, and former students until fairly recently. Their names would often bring a sparkle of recognition to her eyes, or a comment of “Yes, the folks at home.”

And now, Dear Laetitia, you remember everything. You remember everyone you loved and who loved you. I imagine you hurrying up and down the streets of the heavenly Jerusalem, giving hugs to Sr. Philomene, your other sisters, family members, and friends who have gone before you. And *we* remember how you loved us, to your death...and still we celebrate, for you *are* with us here.