

## Eulogy for Sister Ellen MacDonell, OSF

We all know that love is the royal road to peace and spiritual happiness in Christian life, as much for St. Francis as for Christ.

I begin with love in my tribute to Sister Ellen, whom we in her family called Helen, because I think love is the theme that unifies the motives, beliefs and life choices that led her to become the person we all knew her to be. My brother Joe had a childhood exchange with Aunt Helen that shows how clear and focused she was on this theme in her personal vision. In catechetical mode one morning, Sister Ellen told Joe that "Christ taught us many things but he only *commanded* one thing: to love God and each other. His teaching is simple," she said, "but it isn't easy."

No, indeed, it is not easy. But Sister Ellen often made it look easy because she had so clearly absorbed the heart of the Gospel: to be a loving person.

When I think of my aunt what comes to mind are her bright eyes, her warm smile, and her calm presence. In some ways her happy and peaceful nature gave her the air of a nun's nun; that is, she radiated the peace that often emerges from the goodness of a religious life. As I write this line the eyes of my Grade 5 teacher, Sister Marion Quinn, loom powerfully into view. Like my aunt, my teacher's eyes shone with holiness. As long as I live I will never forget the eyes of these two religious women: their eyes were sacraments of their inner grace.

My sister, Margaret, tells of a trip she made once to visit Aunt Helen in Philadelphia where she was working at St. Francis's Table, a restaurant for the poor where patrons were greeted at the door and escorted to their *tables*. Margaret notes that Sister Ellen was living in a house under the elevated trains of Philly's transit system and that the house shook every time the overhead trains went by. Of all the visits Margaret made to see Aunt Helen in the different cities where she was serving, she never

found her happier than in her work at this unique restaurant. This was Franciscan spirituality in pure form and it brought her joy in its wake.

Aunt Helen loved coming home to Nova Scotia and always took great interest in the local people she knew and the doings in the community of Judique where she was raised. The summer's fun in our family never really got into high gear, in fact, until Aunt Helen arrived from the States, often with Sr. Barbara or Roberta in tow. These American nuns cut fine figures in summertime Nova Scotia making the long journey in their own car, laughing uproariously at play with us as children, and speaking so freely and directly in the American style. Indeed, my sister Mary insists that Aunt Helen was a thoroughly modern woman-- highly educated, well-travelled, with wide work experience: a model of the way forward for all of us.

At the same time, my sister Helen remembers how much our aunt enjoyed the simple pleasures of country life as well-- picking berries, an afternoon at the beach, mass at the parish church, and enjoying the famed fiddle music of Cape Breton at local festivals.

Most everyone here this morning knew Sister Ellen well and can relate to the picture I am drawing here of her life. She came from a Highland Scottish Catholic community which, until recently, was steeped in religion. At one level it seems clear that she chose the religious life as a natural outgrowth of the faith and love she received from her parents and the culture she was raised in. But with all these natural endowments things still didn't have to work out as well as they did.

Aunt Helen left Nova Scotia after nursing school and worked first in Montreal. She then left Montreal and went deeper into big city life in Boston and New York, and it was in that setting, which no doubt was both exciting and rather foreign to her, that she first encountered Franciscan

sisters and began to consider their life. In fact she left New York City and worked in a Franciscan hospital in Miami for almost five years as a lay person before entering the order in 1959. So becoming a religious was not as straightforward a product of her family and culture as it might seem but was also the product of a long and no doubt challenging period of discernment.

In biblical fashion the grace of her calling did come, while sojourning in a foreign land, but it didn't come without a struggle for her assent, for her yes to God. Perhaps we will never know the true shape of her self-surrender but, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, grace rarely comes cheaply.

But grow in grace she did. One notable example of her graciousness was the way Aunt Helen engaged people. When conversing with you in a personal way she practiced a gentle attentiveness. She wasn't just talking to you: in now silent, now spoken ways she was also loving you. And such attentiveness was not particularly a trait of the MacDonell family who are inveterate debaters rather than sensitive listeners. No, this was a personal quality that Ellen cultivated, aided certainly by her life of prayer.

This attentiveness was also expressed a hundred-fold in her faithful letter-writing and the birthday cards we all received, along with her signature knitwear gifts at Christmastime bearing the label "knit for you by Aunt Helen". Indeed, Aunt Helen's attention to us was so singular that it was hard to keep up with her, to match her goodness. Uncle Leo and his wife, Yvonne, were the exceptions in their dutiful care, but many of us feel that we didn't give as consistently as she gave.

It was hard to match Aunt Helen because few of us have yet achieved the clarity of vision and practice that she made her own. The trouble with life St. Augustine observes, is that we love too many things and thus our loves

easily come into conflict causing us to languish or to re-think what really matters.

The inner story of Sister Ellen's successful life, I think, is that she learned how to rove in a disciplined way. Her vision was clear, even if it wasn't easy, and it gave her a spirit of peace and happiness that she so abundantly shared with those around her. She learned this from a life of service, in nursing and beyond, but she also received it inwardly as I have tried to show.

We all love you and continue to need your care, Aunt Helen, if possible now only through intercession rather than handknit woolen mittens. Many, many thanks for your exemplary life and may you revel in your new life with God for evermore.

Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Bernard MacDonell, nephew of Sister Ellen