

Eulogy for Sister John Francis Coyle, OSF

It is an honor to be invited to share remembrances of Sister John Francis – and I do so on behalf of the Community at St Elizabeth's in Tampa, the Sisters with whom she lived most recently: Mary Ellen Tucker, the Local Minister, Shirley Sweney, Gloria Oehl, and Joan Dawson.

Many remembrances have been shared with me this past week. Sister John Francis' niece Kay spoke about the times she would spend at her grandparents' farm in the summer. A highlight of the weeks there would be when Aunt Phyllis arrived for her annual vacation. Somehow Grandmother's "TO DO" list would get done once Aunt Phyllis was there to insist, "If you can't do something right, don't do it at all." It might sound like there is a loophole in there for children to just not bother. That certainly was not Aunt Phyllis' message. They knew: Do it and do it right! John Francis spoke about her nieces and nephews with pride and love. She looked forward to the phone calls and visits. How she loved to share the goodies that arrived in the "care packages". Her family will miss Aunt Phyllis sorely. She was their information hub for news about each other.

That "Do it and do it right" message certainly was passed on to the nursing students at Our Lady of Lourdes School of Nursing. A former student, Dr Ann Marie Rosavage Neal ('67), had the joy of reuniting with John Francis in 2003 when Ann Marie began coming to the Franciscan Center in Tampa for retreats. She tells of her years at Lourdes being marked by discipline (6 AM Mass; study hour 7:30-9:30 PM with door open, at your desk or in your chair, not on the bed), a fine education with strong encouragement from Sister John Francis that prepared her as nurse in various specialties. Ann Marie credits the foundation she received at Lourdes with enabling her to go on for a doctorate in clinical psychology. Sandra Emerson ('68) recalls, "I would not have finished nursing school without her encouragement. Pat Gilbert ('67) tells of being able to face the rigors of nursing in Vietnam. "I hugged her when I came back from Vietnam and told her how much my time at OLL School of Nursing and the regime kept me going during the dark times!!! OLL AND JF MADE ALL OF US BETTER WOMEN." [Caps hers} And perhaps this one sums up John Francis' way of being as a nurse and being a Franciscan: Mary Forster McNamara ('67) says, "I have never forgotten your words 'every patient is someone's loved one'."

When you speak to the Sisters at St Elizabeth's in Tampa about John Francis, you hear things like "Always had time", "Made the best apple pies", "So kind when you were sick", "Couldn't do enough", "Knew everything that was going on". Every evening she walked around the house to make sure all the doors were locked. There are jars of strawberry jam in the fridge from last season's berries. There is a sign on her door to inspire all who pass by: Life is Better With Chocolate. And she was very observant. A few months back I was driving her to the airport to meet her niece, Pat, on her arrival from Texas. We were stopped at a light with an Amazon truck slightly ahead of us in the next lane. After a few moments she said, "That must be one of their new electric trucks." I looked over and saw nothing that indicated that. "How can you tell?" "No exhaust pipe." Yes, very observant!

But it was her kindness that most people emphasized when talking about John Francis/ Aunt Phyllis. I was with John Francis and some other Sisters when Francis Leo was dying a number of years ago. John Francis' gentleness, compassion, and kindness were genuine and inspiring. As we left the hospital after Francis Leo died, I told John Francis that I want to go before her so that she could be with me when I died. She looked at me and said, "That's not likely." But what an honor that I could be with her. She taught us well how to be there for others when they need us. She was a real Franciscan who made the world around her better because she was truly an instrument of peace, an instrument of love, pardon, faith, hope, light and joy – not by what she said, but by how she lived her life.

These words of St Clare as she left this earth could be your words to your own good soul:

Go forth my soul.
Go forth without fear
For you have a good guide for your journey.
Go forth, for God who has created you
Protects you always
And loves you with a tender love -
As that of a mother for her child.
And blessed be God for creating my soul.

Blessed be God for giving you to us, Aunt Phyllis, Sister John Francis.

Sister Cathy Cahill, OSF
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