

July 31, 2010

Dear Sisters, Associates, Family, and Friends

Sister Melanie died peacefully at 11:15 P.M. on Wednesday, July 28, 2010. At the time of her death, Melanie was in a comatose state. Her sister Helen had been at her bedside during the evening, and some of the sisters had come to be with Melanie and to pray quietly at her bedside. At 11:00 P.M. the Nurse came to check on her. She seemed very peaceful and in no discomfort. At 11:30 P.M. when the nurse returned Melanie had gone home to God.



In February of 2009 Melanie was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. With this diagnosis, a long painful journey began for her and all who walked with her and loved her. After several attempts at treatments, and a very strong will to live, Melanie decided to stop chemotherapy and make the time that God was giving her as life-giving as possible. Her sister Helen came in March and was a constant companion and compassionate support for Melanie until God called her home. Melanie went through a long grieving process as she experienced loss in so many ways. Most significant was the loss of her ability to participate in a new venture among the poor in Arkansas, in which the Congregation was embarking upon. When asked to take on this mission she said “yes” with enthusiasm. She had to let go of this dream, but was happy when others embraced it, and that they have plans to open this mission in the Fall. In addition to the pain experienced with this disease, Melanie would suffer from the loss of energy, physical strength, and independence. In the last months of her illness, she could no longer do the beautiful

artistic things she loved to do including sewing, needlepoint and basket weaving. Melanie was an avid reader and this too was no longer possible. Her sister Helen and all the sisters experienced grief and loss as we walked with her. Melanie was very grateful for the love and care she received and expressed this many times.

Sister was born in Yugoslavia on January 15, 1941 to George Persche and Aloisia Hoefflerle Persche. Two brothers Gus Persche of Moneta, Virginia, and Steve Persche of Bath, North Carolina, and one sister Helen Gallagher of Bedford, Texas survive Sister Melanie.

When Melanie was one year old World War II broke out in Europe. Hitler ordered all German-speaking people to move from their homeland. Her family packed up all they could carry and left the rest behind. They moved to Untersteiermark, on the borders of Austria. Hitler ordered all non German-speaking people who lived there to leave their homes. Melanie’s family was given one of these homes. After the defeat of Hitler, the original owners returned and demanded their property back. Her family was now considered displaced persons. Their

hometown had been bombed during the war and they could not return there. They headed towards Austria proper. It was a long difficult journey, walking for hours, sleeping in makeshift shelters, and eating when they could. At one point Melanie's father was separated from them. He found them three days later on the outskirts of Vienna in a refugee camp. Melanie was four years old at this time. The family settled in a small town in the Alps. Her father found work and life became much better. A Benedictine Monastery was in the middle of the town and the Monks became their religion teachers. Melanie, Helen and her brothers Gus and Steve would hike in the mountains in the summers and ski in the winter. In 1952 one of Melanie's uncles in New York sponsored the family to come to the United States. The government gave them priority as displaced persons. They moved to New York City, and lived in Brooklyn for a few years. Melanie was eleven years old, and began to learn English with the help of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the parish school. It was through her friendship with these sisters that the seeds of her religious vocation were sown. A job opportunity for her father caused the family to move to New Jersey. They lived five miles from Flemington where Melanie attended high school. It was in Flemington that she first met the Victory Noll Sisters. Melanie volunteered to teach in the CCD program. She got to know Sister Regina Foppe and other sisters. Sister Melanie's attraction to religious life returned and grew stronger. After visiting Victory Noll, she entered in 1960.

Sister Melanie entered the Congregation of Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters on September 4, 1960 She made her First Profession of Vows on August 5, 1963, and Perpetual Vows on August 5, 1968 at Victory Noll. Melanie received her BA Degree from St. Francis College, Fort Wayne, In. and her Masters in Theology from Aquinas Institute, School of Theology, Dubuque, Iowa.

Melanie served in the fields of Religious Education as a Pastoral Minister, and D.R.E., and later as a Pastoral Associate in the missions of Indiana, Texas, California, Missouri, Arizona, and New Mexico. In 1979 Melanie was asked to go to Bolivia as part of the Formation Team and to minister in Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. Melanie never held back her "yes" response to whatever God called her to do. She studied Spanish and became fluent. She also studied Quechua, the dialect of the people with whom she would live and work. Melanie returned to the States in April of 1990, and began pondering her next move for her missionary ministry in the States. In 1998 Melanie was again called to minister in Bolivia as part of the Formation Team. Again she responded wholeheartedly, and entered into life and ministry in Bolivia with enthusiasm. This was a short stay because at the 2000 General Chapter Sister Melanie was elected to the Leadership Team as Vice President. She served in this capacity until 2008. In 2003 she took on the role of General Secretary and continued in this role until the end of her term. During her term as Leadership Team Member, Melanie was active in works for justice; she was a member of the Board of Partnership for Global Justice. This group works with the United Nations. They sponsor annual conferences related to justice on topics such as, Immigration, and creating a just Economic System. She also was a member of the Home Mission Leadership Conference. This group assists dioceses in creating opportunities for the preparation and formation of Lay ecclesial ministers, especially in rural areas to meet the needs of various cultural groups. Melanie often went to Fort Wayne to protest the Iraq war with some

of our sisters and other concerned citizens. We have a news clipping of her all bundled up on a cold, snowy, winter day protesting the war. The Team wanted a Memorial Book created outside the Chapel remembering our deceased sisters with a picture and a letter. Sister Melanie offered to undertake this task. She created four books recognizing every sister from the beginning until now who had died. The books turned out beautifully, and are treasured by our sisters. They stop before going into Chapel to look at the sister to be remembered that day and pray for her.

After Melanie finished her term on the Leadership Team, she went on a Sabbatical. As part of the program she learned another art form, basket weaving. After her diagnosis, she initiated teaching basket weaving to any sisters or staff member who wanted to participate. Despite her own condition, she was a model of patience, and tried to make the classes fun for all. The baskets turned out very lovely and the first group of baskets was used as a fundraiser, and the money donated to the Cancer Society.

After an inspiring Vigil Service expressing God's nearness to us as the God who shepherds and cares for us, we went to the dining room for refreshments and the sharing of our memories about Melanie. Several sisters, family, and friends spoke of Melanie's giftedness and generosity in placing her gifts at the service of others. Wherever she lived, though it be a very poor place, she would create a beautiful environment. She would use the simple things at hand such as flowers, woodcarvings, materials or pictures. She also did beautiful artistic things such as painting, crocheting, knitting, needlepoint and sewing. Sister Jeanette said that, "Melanie was gifted with many talents. She worked hard and completely and gave her heart and soul to it." She was generous in sharing her musical gifts, mostly the guitar, to bring joy to others especially at the community sing along on Holy Family third floor. Her smile and sense of humor was mentioned by her brother Gus and by Sister Carmela. Her cousin Heidi thought of Melanie as a courageous woman, an Indiana Jones, but also experienced her as very humble, living a simple lifestyle. Melanie's cousin Frank spoke of the joy of God in Melanie's heart, which he sees in all the sisters when he comes to Victory Noll. Helen Gallagher, Melanie's sister, shared the following story she received from Sue Foster who is a dear friend of Melanie.

One sultry December morning Sister Melanie & Fr. Paul drove to El Hondo, one of the dozens of remote villages in the Buena Vista area in which they ministered. There was going to be Mass, baptisms, a special dinner, and a game of soccer. In the middle of the festivities, storm clouds gathered. They jumped in to their jeep and raced towards home. They raced toward the "main" dirt road. They had to cross an arroyo as it filled with rushing rainwater. Knowing about a concrete crossing platform, Fr. Paul drove the vehicle across. But the force of the water swept the jeep off the platform & the engine died. Fr. Paul pushed the door open & Sister Melanie slid up on the roof, followed by Fr. Paul. They jumped to the embankment in the nick of time. They began their five-kilometer walk to the nearest village, barefoot and in pitch darkness. They were found just as they reached a paved road – exhausted, cold and hungry. A similar story was shared by Sister Mary Ellen. While in Bolivia she and Melanie went out to visit families one day. They had to cross a river and the jeep failed as they crossed. Melanie was driving and asked Mary Ellen to go for help. Mary Ellen walked in the water across to a home of a family they knew. Before she could tell them her plight and ask for help, they greeted her,

asked her to sit down, and provided her with something to drink, and began conversation with her. Finally she had the opportunity of telling them the reason for her visit. They were very willing to help pull the jeep out of the river. When she returned Melanie asked, "what kept you so long"? Mary Ellen responded, "you know". Melanie smiled. Sister Rose Ann Kaiser described Melanie as a woman of integrity, committed to community life and the mission of Jesus. She said Melanie was light in the Lord, and prays she will continue to guide us into the future. Millicent remembers Melanie carrying the world in her hands during the offertory procession at the closing of La Providencia.

On Monday August 2, 2010, we celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial. Members of Sister Melanie's family were present. Her sister Helen Gallagher, her brother Gus Persche and his wife Barbara, her brother Steve Persche and his wife Carol, her nephew Stephen Persche, and her nieces Christine Belby and Melanie Towne, children of Barbara and Gus. Also her cousin Maria Meister and her husband George, her first cousins once removed Frank Hein and his wife Debbie, Fred Hein and his wife and Joann, Irmgard Crumpler, Heide Budner and her husband John. After the Sprinkling with Holy Water Steve and Carol placed the Pall and Helen placed the Crucifix on the casket. Alfred Hein proclaimed the first reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Barbara and Gus Persche presented the gifts. Sister Lucille gave a very beautiful and meaningful reflection, which is being sent with this letter.

After the mass, we processed to the cemetery where we laid Melanie to rest with the final prayers, blessing of the casket, and singing of the hymn "Tu Eres La Victoria". A delicious dinner to celebrate Melanie's life followed.

Melanie we thank you for your life among us, we rejoice that the battle is over and you have won the race. We hear Jesus say "welcome home good and faithful servant receive the rewards God has prepared for you from all eternity".

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sister Betty Anderson, O.L.V.M.".

Sister Elizabeth Anderson, OLVM
General Secretary

Mass of Resurrection for Sister Melanie

August 2, 2010

Scripture readings: Roman 8:28, 35-39; Mt 5:1-12

REFLECTION:

Today as we celebrate our final despedida (farewell), we are reminded over and over again in our scripture readings and in the prayers of the Mass of Resurrection, that life has not ended, only changed. In the reading from Romans, St. Paul reminds us that we are loved and have been called. He also tells us that nothing, not even death, will separate us from the love of God.

For all of us, especially those who have walked closely with Melanie these last few months have experienced a litany of losses. Ours has been a long journey of grieving. On January, 2009, when Melanie found out that most likely she was afflicted with pancreatic cancer, we her friends, her support group and all her Victory Noll sisters have walked with her as she begin to experience the many losses in her life that would eventually lead to her untimely death. In many ways, we have been grieving with her and for her as she experienced less energy, the loss of her hair, her independence and the inability to maintain the energy needed to enjoy the things she most loved to do – read. Yes, our grieving started back in January 2009 as we witnessed the progressive losses that impacted Melanie's life.

The Gospel chosen for today's Mass is very appropriate. Matthew sets the stage for the Sermon with three simple sentences: "Seeing the crowds, he went onto the mountain. And when he was seated his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak" Remember Moses came down from the mountaintop. Matthew's message is clear: This is the new Moses going back to the mountaintop, re-proclaiming the truth, bringing down the new law. This is a very important context. The Beatitudes are eight attitudes based on faith and hope. These attitudes are guidelines or a road map that can lead us to become people of God's reign. The Beatitudes depend on faith and hope because they call for a positive view not only of life's present confusion but also of the uncertain future. They tell us what kind of person we ought to be. They help us see the road to happiness as it really is, not as we think it is or ought to be.

Fortunate are those who have the spirit of the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I think that Melanie lived this beatitude in her life because the poor in spirit are those who are humble and place all their trust in God because they realize from the circumstances of their lives that they personally are powerless. She was definitely powerless in the last months of her life but I think she learned how to be poor in spirit from the Bolivian people whom she loved and served for 13 years.

The attitudes of meekness, gentleness, and mercy were exemplified in Melanie's life as she tried to faithfully live out her call to mission. She was always willing to share her God given gifts by responding generously to the call from the community to be formation director back in the 70's. Then came the call to experience a new culture and cross unknown borders by serving the Bolivian people and once again she said , Si, Senor – Yes, Lord. Her ministry in Bolivia included being Formation Director in the late 90's.

Those of us who knew her well, know that she was a perfectionist. She never did anything without preparing herself to give the best to whatever was being asked of her. Before going to Bolivia she went to MACC to learn Spanish and do cross cultural studies. In order to serve the Bolivian people and to be able to communicate with them in their own dialect, she studied Quechua at the Maryknoll Institute in Cochabamba.

Fortunate are those who mourn, they shall be comforted.

Those who do grief work have said there is a therapeutic, healing meaning to tears. Jesus is describing the state of those who weep, who have something to mourn about. They feel the pain of the world. In this attitude, Jesus praises those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world. Being moved to tears was very characteristic of Melanie, especially in her last months. One of the Syrian Fathers – St. Ephraim goes so far as to say until you have cried you don't know God. Fortunate are you, Melanie, for you have mourned and are now being comforted.

Because she did embody these attitudes Melanie always rose to the occasion. If we needed someone to help in the schola, she was ready, if we needed someone to play guitar, she was willing. After serving on the Leadership Team for eight years she went on a 3-month sabbatical. She returned from her sabbatical experience ready to teach anyone willing to learn how to do basket weaving. She was always willing to share her time, her talent, herself.

Fortunate are those who make peace. The Kingdom of God is yours.

Melanie was a peacemaker. In the Scriptures peace is first of all a gift from God that comes through a life of prayer and commitment to doing the will of God. Prayer and reflection allow us to face and accept our limitations and our need for physical and emotional care. The challenge of peacemaking lies in being at peace not only with ourselves but also – our enemies. At the heart of peacemaking is the willingness to forgive and to work with the other. It involves seeking out the other rather than waiting for the other to come to us. It requires courage, openness, trust and patience. Peacemaking takes time. This too was very much part of Melanie's journey during the last 50 years as a Victory Noll Sisters. She took the words of Jesus seriously as she grew as a woman of prayer and faith. Her journey here on earth has come to an end but now she is among the communion of saints and enjoys the eternal love of the God who called her by name and continues to love her for all eternity.

Vaya con Dios, Amiga. Go with God. Until we meet again.