

Funeral Liturgy for Rosemary Ferguson, OP
Homily, Patricia Siemen, OP
April 23, 2018

As with all the songs and readings for Liturgy today, the opening song, *“O breathe on me, breath of God, O fill me with life anew...”* was chosen by Rosemary for today. Her sensitive Irish soul loved the words and music as written by our own Sister Denise Mainville. Now Rosemary—mother, sister, aunt, and friend—breathes on us the transforming, mysterious breath of God.

Rosemary radiated graciousness, wisdom, wit and humor. She had an extraordinary ability to touch the hearts of people as she drew out their goodness. While giving up the title “Mother” she continued to “mother” and nurture many. Echoing the words of Shawn Copeland that were read last night, Rosemary “took me in.” For this was Rosemary’s essence: she took people into the deepest recesses of her heart. We could all find a place under her mantle.

Perhaps Rosemary was able to do this because of her early childhood experiences. As we heard last night, Rosemary’s mother died when she was only 2, leaving her father and 8 older brothers and sisters. The family lost the family farm during the Depression when Rosemary was eight years old. Her father died when she was 12, after lingering from a car accident. Early on, Rosemary was put into the care of her sister Margaret. Then they moved to Chicago to be taken care of by her sister Loretto and her husband. Rosemary was imprinted as a child with multiple experiences of being “taken in” and cared for with a home and heart always open to her. These experiences undoubtedly prepared her for other challenging times in life.

“Oh breathe on me, breath of God....”

Rosemary became a public figure among her Sisters at a young stage of life, serving in her 30’s and early 40’s as both assistant Postulant Mistress and Director of Novices. She touched the lives of literally

hundreds of women who entered religious life then—young women with the average age of 17 or 18. I am privileged to have been one of “Rosemary’s novices” myself. Rosemary remained in relationship with many of these women over the years, regardless whether they continued being called to religious life or chose another path.

We know this part of Rosemary’s story. At just 42, Rosemary was elected the fifth Mother General of our community. This role, especially during the renewal years, demanded much of her. But Rosemary’s strong, hardworking, Irish farming roots served her well. Strength and resiliency (and love for Irish music and poetry) were embedded in her as a young girl. Thank God that Rosemary moved to the Southside of Chicago as a teen and met the Adrian Dominicans in school.

“Oh breathe on me, breath of God...”

At 17, Rosemary responded to God’s call to join the Sisters she had come to love and admire, and her sisters and brothers allowed her to come to Adrian. That began the time of Rosemary’s breathing the breath of God on us. Her breath and wisdom mingled with God’s, as she taught, formed, cajoled—and loved us—into a community of renewal as requested by the Church.

We were not the only ones to benefit from her vision, wisdom and courage. Rosemary took on national leadership within the Leadership Council of Women Religious as LCWR navigated the future of religious life in the U.S. Rosemary often expressed her gratitude to those intrepid, risk-taking women who in the late 1960’s and 70’s mentored her into the leadership needed during the days of Vatican II. We heard their names last night: Sisters Mary Luke Tobin, SL, Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN, Theresa Kane, RSM, Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdeN, Helen Garvey, BVM, and our IHM River Raisin Sister-friend, Margaret Brennan. However, Rosemary was also deeply steeped in the history of our own Congregation and had a deep love and reverence for the foremothers. She deeply admired Mothers Camilla, Augustine and Gerald. They were her mentors for pioneering new landscapes in the 1970’s.

“O breathe on me, breath of God...”

All was not easy during Rosemary’s years of leadership. She, and the courageous women who served on the two General Councils with her, faced criticism and rejection from some of our Sisters (and many Church authorities) during the early renewal years. Yet she refused to be deterred from her intuition about the essentialness of renewal and her profound trust in the Holy Spirit. She was vigorously impelled to faithfully implement both the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Chapter Enactments and directives from the three sessions of the Chapter of Renewal. Rosemary knew that as a community we had to embrace living into a radically new way of religious life in the modern world.

“O breathe on me, breathe of God...”

During her leadership years, Rosemary was driven by a desire to see the sisters passionately engaged in the works of the Gospel, to be prepared theologically for their ministerial lives, to be deeply spiritual women of freedom and authenticity who moved to the edges of the society so as to preach according to one’s unique gifts. Today’s second reading from St. Paul could literally have been written by Rosemary to her family, sisters, and dear friends, in her own beautiful, flourishing handwriting:

I give thanks to my God every time I think of you, praying always with joy in my prayer for all of you.... For God as my witness, how I long for all of you. It is right that I should think this way about you because I hold you in my heart.... And this is my prayer, that your love may increase ever more and more.

“O breathe on me, breath of God...”

Although elected as Mother General in 1968, Rosemary dropped the title *Mother General*, and reclaimed the Dominican term *Prioress* several years into her first term. This was to reflect the era of collegiality that the Chapter had mandated. Perhaps you noticed when you entered the Chapel the beautifully carved large chair in the gathering space. We moved it from Holy Rosary Chapel to honor

Rosemary who gave up this imposing seat of honor where the Mother General traditionally sat during liturgy and divine office. Rosemary instead moved to an ordinary chair symbolizing her desire to end the era of hierarchical structures and adopt a more collegial, mutual, and sisterly way of relationship.

“O breathe on us, breath of God...”

Today we will take Rosemary to her resting place. It is good for us to know that she had a special love for these sacred grounds where she will lay. She wrote in 2002,

I look back on my years and know them to be good, very good! I write these [reflections] in the shadow of the Motherhouse, always looking strong and steady to me with its red tiled roofs and white spires reaching to the skies.... Adrian became my ancestral home, a fact I realized within the last many years. Coming home from the many air trips I took during the late sixties and seventies, and coming back here to visit during the 80's and 90's, I knew I was home when I could see the red roofs in the distance and say, “Ah, there, there are the red roofs of home.”

Now Rosemary will lie in her ancestral home with those red roofs and blue sky over her.

“O breathe on us, breath of God.”

As a woman with Irish roots and a Celtic soul Rosemary loved poetry and Irish music. Just recently a few of us gathered to celebrate her 92nd birthday on March 29. Together we shared poetry and lovely strains from Esther's flute. Rosemary spontaneously asked Attracta to share a poem. She closed her eyes and listened while Attracta recited Yeats', *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*.

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

You could see Rosemary being transported to the shores of Innisfree.

Rosemary also loved Rilke's poetry. This verse, which says so much about her, was one of her favorites:

*Aeons have determined our conditions
Much has happened that we could not see
And the future will be nothing less
Than the flowering
Of our inwardness.*

It is the journey into inwardness that Rosemary desired for herself and everyone she loved. She led the way by sharing her own sacred journey. Several weeks ago, in truly vintage Rosemary fashion, she invited the campus community to share in her anointing. As she shared that the doctor told her she was dying, she also said, "I cherish my role in the community." And then *she* blessed each of us as we offered her our inadequate gestures of gratitude and anointing. Tears were flowing as once again Rosemary, ever the wisdom woman, showed her beloved community how to die graciously, unafraid, and with dignity.

"O breathe on us, breath of God..."

In the days following, Rosemary welcomed whoever came to her room for a visit, a touch, a quiet prayer. The nursing and environmental coworkers were as accessible to her as her dearest sisters, family and friends—and many came and sat with her. One grieving co-worker, with her young daughter in tow, wept with Rosemary as she said goodbye. Rosemary was the consummate spiritual companion right to the end, always focused on how you were rather than on how she was.

By now Rosemary no longer needed to ask God to breathe on her for she had become the very breath of God. On Tuesday evening, surrounded by loved ones, she quietly breathed her last as she took the hand of her Beloved, hearing the words, "Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come! Your dear

parents, siblings and the four Mothers, Camilla, Augustine, Gerald, and Genevieve are all waiting for you, along with dearest Mary Phil. All is completed here.” Rosemary then entered the home prepared for her by her Beloved.

Our hearts are filled with love, Rosemary, for you, and because of you. We know you are already beckoning us to journey more deeply into the heart of God—and to do what is ours to do to further communion and harmony in the world. Be with us until we become like you, transformed into the utter breath of God.