

The Sacramental Life of a Catholic Worker

By Liza Apper, Obl. OSB

“Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the daarknesss. . .” sang Elizabeth, her beautiful alto voice harmonizing with the other Catholic Workers and volunteers every Friday evening during Vespers, the evening prayer of the Divine Office, at the St. Benedict Catholic Worker House.

Elizabeth’s whole being, as she sang that song, resonated with the love of Jesus. She had come to know, receive, and give the love of the risen Christ in right relationship (between God, self, and others) through the people she encountered in our Catholic Worker community--people who are committed to embodying the spirit of the risen Christ and to putting, as Karl Rahner wrote, “the saving presence of Jesus in history,” people living and becoming the good news of Jesus and spreading the good news of the risen Christ (life, death, and resurrection) through the Catholic Worker in that continuing, unfolding mystery known as the Church.

Elizabeth, who had previously lived as a homeless alcoholic for 15 years on the streets of downtown Fresno, was a member of the St. Benedict Catholic Worker community. Elizabeth shared life with our Catholic Worker community for almost a year and a half, journeying home to her Lord on December 30, 2001 after a battle with lung cancer. During the time that Elizabeth lived in our community, she became for me the presence of the risen Christ, Christ’s light in my life. My friendship with Elizabeth gave me an experience of the risen Christ mutually present and active in relationship. Through this mutual friendship, I became more aware of the presence of the risen Christ and of that presence working in me through my ministry as a Catholic Worker.

Elizabeth came to the Catholic Worker community so damaged by life on the streets that she was at first unable to boil water to make tea. Eventually she began to heal through the unconditional love and acceptance of everyone in our community. She became famous for her “Okie Breakfast,” as she called it—making a full southern breakfast (biscuits, gravy, sausage, and eggs) from scratch. She also taught our youngest child, Francesca, to make banana smoothies, grilled cheese sandwiches, fried chicken, and corn bread. On many a night, Elizabeth and Francesca blessed us with their edible creations. Elizabeth, who was loved unconditionally in right relationship by those of us in the Catholic Worker community, now could give that love to others—transforming everyone she encountered as she had been transformed. Elizabeth and her relationships within our community became a “word,” as Bernard Cooke would say, that was constantly created by God. We all were experiencing, personally, the presence of God in friendship.

Elizabeth taught me many things about life and death. One of her favorite songs was, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Your Life*, from the Jack Nicholson movie, *As Good As It Gets*. It became a sort of theme song for the months ahead. Every time we traveled to and from her chemotherapy, she and I would be singing that song. St. Augustine once wrote, “singing to God is like praying twice.” Well, whenever we sang that song it was during a time of need (help with depression, dealing with the effects of the cancer, nausea

from the chemo, tiredness) and we were literally calling out for the intercession of God. We sang it in hopes of reaching God—and we did. At those times we both experienced the loving care of our God and the assurance that God-is-for-us.

As Elizabeth lay dying, lovingly encircled by members of her beloved community, we sang some of her favorite “Jesus songs,” as she called them. Francesca kissed her forehead and told her how much she loved her. I held her hand and prayed aloud asking God to bathe her in his radiant light, making sure her path straight toward him. The last faces she saw were the ones who had given her unconditional love and acceptance and with whom she had returned that love, the Catholic Worker community.

Since the founding of the St. Benedict Catholic Worker in 1997, we have learned the sacramental meaning of the words, “serving all in front of Fresno County Jail.” That following Jesus, being God’s presence, and facilitating God’s spirit means service—service for all and by all. Everyone, from correctional officer to homeless person—all are members of that inclusive Body of Christ and all are transformed by the sacramental ministries (soup line, shelter, detention ministry, pastoral counseling) of the Catholic Worker.

The sacramental ministry of this Catholic Worker was facilitated in the unconditional love and acceptance of friendship that Elizabeth and I shared. It was a relationship that began as an encounter between a homeless alcoholic woman and a Catholic Worker in front of Fresno County Jail. And it became a relationship that spoke of the presence of God that allowed both of us to live, love, and walk in the confirmed belief that *Christ is our light!*