

Reflection on the life of Sister Scholastica Joyce

November 6, 1927–April 7, 2013



We know that, for all of us, our story began as a love story – God’s love for us – His desire to have us live with Him forever. And for most of us God uses a human love story to accomplish His purpose. And so with Sister Scholastica, God used a human love story to open heaven for her.

This story might have a headline like: Pretty Pennsylvania Dutch girl falls for and elopes with handsome Irish tenor! They give their lives and meager fortunes to each other. The Pennsylvania Dutch girl becomes a staunch Catholic so she could hear her husband, Richard, sing “Panis Angelicus” in church on Sundays. She converts to Catholicism and raises eight children – four of whom became religious at some time in their lives.

Sister Scholastica was the second child, and first daughter of this union. She was preceded by a son, Floyd, whom she called “Brice” after he became a Benedictine. She never went back to calling him Floyd. Sister Scholastica was the Dorothy in this story, born on November 6, 1927 in the midst of a snow storm. As “first daughter”, she got to learn how to make all her mother’s delicious recipes, especially the Pennsylvania Dutch specialty, boiled pot pie. Sister Scholastica’s comment on her mother’s cooking: “Mmmmmm – she could really cook!” Dorothy learned how to babysit, too, taking care of the brood that followed her: Francis, her Sister, Richard, Jim, Dave, Patricia, and Ted.

In her autobiography she told how her father provided for the growing brood as a superintendent of a coal mine – which necessitated that the family move frequently. So the children were educated in many different schools. But when their father died, at age 40, there was no worker’s compensation for the families in those days. The Joyce family was forced to live on the bare minimum and there were times when the Pennsylvania Dutch recipe for boiled pot pie couldn’t stretch far enough.

This is when the Sisters of Charity at Scottdale, Pennsylvania, came into the picture. Sister Scholastica remembered fondly Sister Ferdinand and Sister Leo Vincent using a tin altar to teach the parts and actions of the Mass. She remembered Sister Rita Catherine, her sponsor in religious life, helping her with the things necessary for postulants at that time.

As her first mission, Sister Scholastica was sent to DePaul Institute, now known as DePaul School for Hearing and Speech, founded as one of the first oral schools for deaf children in 1908. At that time, DePaul was known as “DPI Forever” because once you became a teacher there, you were there forever! She was sent to learn how to teach the deaf children by first observing in Sister Francis Louise’s classroom.

It was there, with a student population of about 300 deaf children, many of them residents during the week, that she became a mother, that is, a “house mother.” She, Sister Marie Andrea, Sister Mary Lois, Sister Rose Xavier, and other sisters took care of the girls after school hours. Sister Scholastica didn’t teach school subjects, she taught crafts – crafts of all kinds, including rick rack, sewing – even painting. Some of her paintings hang in the halls outside her third floor room in Caritas. She oozed talent for this kind of thing! She helped Sister Mary Lois, teaching skills so the girls could earn Scout badges. You can be sure they displayed them proudly.

When I went to DePaul in 1969, I wondered where Sister Scholastica was during the day. She didn't have regular classes, for her charge was working with the students after school hours. Often she'd be learning something else to teach "her" girls: mending, sewing. She was a marvelous seamstress! Scouting was the one after-school activity everyone at DePaul took part in. She always had the Girl Scouts and Brownies making – even creating – something. Since scouting was so important the sisters created a level of scouting below the Cubs and Brownies. These were called the "Peeps" with a special salute not of three fingers of the full scout or the two fingers of the Brownies or Cubs but a single finger. To see a line of 5, 6, and 7 year olds lined up with the Peep salute was better than the long gray line at West Point!

You may not know that Sister Scholastica–Scholy – was a life saver. Not a Red Cross Life Saver! I mean she actually saved the life of one of our students! She told us this story – shortly after it happened.

A family asked to have their five year old girl as part of our after school and evening program three days each week. The diagnosis of deafness was questionable because this child had other symptoms. She needed to be watched carefully. One morning as the girls rose and began to dress, this five year old dashed to the window, mounted the window sill holding on to the window frame. Sr. Scholastica, knew the impetuosity of the child so she wisely approached her as she clung to the window frame very slowly and spoke to her soothingly. Thank God she reached the child just as she turned and was about to jump. Scholy was still shaking when she told the rest of us how she had resolved this crisis!

With the resident population of students dwindling, Sister Philomena, now the Principal, closed the residential program and Sister Scholastica became head of the Upper Department with "headquarters" in Room 13 and there she stayed for the next 45+ years – teaching both academic subjects and crafts and still mothering "her" girls.

Sister's next move was to come here to Caritas Christi. She said, "At first it was not a happy time because I couldn't do things for myself. It was different at first, but I adjusted to it. I did a lot of sewing. I've been happy all my life. I've been happy at Caritas, being with the sisters, but I'm lonely sometimes." She filled some of this loneliness with her love of birds. She always loved animals – all kinds. But the birds, especially the ones who depended on her, were very special. She told me they all had their own personalities, and of course, they did. "Joy" was her favorite and helped her to combat her loneliness.

Sister Scholastica told us she was waiting for God – and this is a quote – "to come and take me." And, on last Sunday, early in the morning, God did.

I have a suggestion for a living memorial for Sister Scholastica. Don't go out and buy a bird! But stop in some sick person's room, or call them on the phone. Say "I'm thinking of you." In some way show you care, and then come away and say quietly to God, "This is for Scholy"!

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
~Sister Jeremy Mahla
April 9, 2013*