

Reflection for Sr. Natalie's funeral

by Rita Yeasted, SFCC

In the earliest days of Sr. Natalie's life in community, and that of many in the chapel today, some meals were eaten in silence while a Sister read from Thomas a' Kempis' 15th Century book, "The Imitation of Christ." Its dour precepts often provided indigestion, but the importance of that book that lasted six centuries was that it reminded us as young religious that our task was to imitate Christ in all that we did. Sister Natalie certainly took that task to heart.

But in trying to imitate Jesus, we realize that there are many images of Jesus that fill the pages of Scripture: There is Jesus the Teacher, providing Beatitudes to the multitudes from a mountainside, or trying to help his apostles to understand why he had come to earth. Sr. Natalie certainly imitated Christ the Teacher for most of her life. There is the image of Christ, the compassionate healer of the sick. In the later years of Sister Natalie's life, she was permitted to tend to her mother's last days, and she spent years visiting and caring for the elderly Sisters once she returned to the Motherhouse. There is the overwhelming image of the Suffering Christ in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and

surely Sister Natalie in her last days suffered, usually uncomplainingly, in union with the Jesus she had vowed to imitate for her 72 years in this community.

But the image of Christ that most reminded me of Sister Natalie is that of Jesus blessing the children. All three Synoptic Gospel writers, Mathew, Mark, and Luke, include the story of Jesus blessing the children, and the message that was contained in each of these Scriptural passages captures not only Jesus' words to us, but I believe that they capture the essence of Sr. Natalie's spiritual life.

When Sister Michele invited me to offer this reflection, I learned that it was my task to choose the three readings for the liturgy. The first reading was easy. The passage from Micah, "to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God," was once chosen by Sr. Natalie herself as her favorite Scriptural passage. Few walked more humbly with their God than she did.

The second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that like Abraham, Sr. Natalie, in faith, left her little ones in primary classrooms to be part of a formation team for the young Korean Sisters, first in Rome, then Korea. As St. Paul writes, she, like Abraham, sent off for a foreign land in faith that God's promise would be fulfilled. Again, in imitation of Christ, who came to

earth as a child, a foreigner in a strange land, in Wordsworth's words, "Apparelled in celestial light, The glory and the freshness of a dream." I thought it was eminently fitting that the Nativity of the Lord was Sr. Natalie's patronal feast. Christmas is the feast most loved by children.

Which brings me to the Gospel of Mark, in which he tells us, as do Matthew and Luke, that an indignant Jesus scolds the apostles, who see the mothers with children as annoyances in the great work of the Lord. But Jesus not only blesses the children and holds them to his heart, he gives us the important message that "unless you become like these little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

I don't know about you, but those words have often puzzled me. Is it not spiritual maturity that is the goal? What is the quality of children that is so admirable?

Historically, in the time of Jesus, children held the lowest status in society. They provided no help with running of the household and had to be fed and cared for 24/7 until they could carry their weight in the family structure. Yet Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of heaven is made of those who are like these

children in the ancient world: the dispossessed, those without rights and without any esteem among their contemporaries.

One Scripture scholar writes that Jesus blesses the children not because of anything they had done, not because they knew the Law, or because they fasted and offered sacrifices, but because of their simple hearts. To put it another way, these children, like Sister Natalie, were examples of total trust in the Providence and care of a loving parent. The Gospel reminds us that what Christ most values is not money or power or prestige. As adults we learn that we must work for what we own, yet young children simply depend upon their parents for food, shelter, and safety.

I chose the image of Jesus blessing the children because I remembered the hundreds of little ones that Sr. Natalie had brought to Jesus for their first sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. I first knew her six decades ago during her years at Sacred Heart School in Tarentum, now long closed, when she taught my youngest sister and first cousin and many close relatives besides. Sacred Heart had four double classrooms beneath the church above it, where children attended Mass five days a week before school began. My sister reminded me last week that Sr. Natalie had 72 children in that room, with desks

nailed to the floor and no teacher aide or special needs instructor to help. And in that space, she prepared the second graders for their first confession and first holy communion, as she would do for many years after that. She is still remembered fondly by both the parish and by members of my family, who over the years often invited her to family celebrations.

Sister Natalie was surely a woman of Providence, who followed Christ's call to enter religious life, even when she was the only daughter of a much beloved mother, whom she wrote was her model and mentor. She shared with her six- and seven-year-old students a joy in life, a childlike delight in and openness to all of God's creation, a sense of hope in the goodness of others and of themselves, and the quality of giving you her undivided attention when you spoke to her, as if you were the most important person in the world. No wonder her students still remember her patience and her kindness decades later.

Sister Natalie died on the 71st anniversary of the day she received the habit and her new name, no longer Emily but Natalie, after her mother, Natalina. Her legacy can be found in the hundreds of children she brought to Jesus to be blessed, and in her faithful life of humility, kindness, and total trust in the Providence of God. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.