

Homily – Sr. Theresa Bernhart

by Sr. Ana Lydia Sonera Matos

Welcome to this celebration of life. Sister Theresa waited for a long, long time for this celebration. I will share with you some of her history and visions as a missionary.

But first, I want to share with you my response when Sister Michele asked me, "Would you like to do the homily for Theresa's funeral?" It was not easy to say yes. For the people who know me, I am an introvert and speaking in a second language is difficult. After regaining my breath, I responded, "How can I say no to one of those women who planted the seeds of Providence in our Puerto Rico? Thank you to those women like Theresa, so I can be here today speaking to you about the gift of her life. I am a fruit of the seeds she planted. We, the community of Sisters of Divine Providence and the people of Puerto Rico, have so much to be grateful for because of her commitment.

I want to share with you the important historical moment when Theresa came to Puerto Rico in 1945. These were difficult days for our homeland. After World War II the island was being transformed from a sugar producing mono-culture to a more viable economy. Our relationship with the United States was marked by the struggle to obtain greater democratic rights. In 1948, Congress passed an act permitting my people to elect our own governor. Four years later, Puerto Rico officially became a U.S. Commonwealth, which enabled us to create our own constitution and granted other powers of self-government. During these transitions, Theresa had to navigate her relationship with our people as they faced the challenges of self-government.

Can you imagine what it was like for her to spend 20 years in Puerto Rico, with all this transition, in a new land, as a teacher, learning a new language, suffering from the tropical heat in full habit, with misunderstandings due to language and customs, missing her family and important celebrations? Theresa was open to learn and to accept the challenges that brought her to this new land where she was needed to serve the people. She assumed even more responsibility when she was called to be the new superintendent for all catholic education in the Diocese of Arecibo. This was an important service she provided as a Sister of Divine Providence and a tribute to her gifts, dedication, and commitment to the children of Puerto Rico. How to say NO to so much YES!

I didn't know Theresa very well, but I have heard over the years that she was strong in character. As a matter of fact, when reading her papers, I found a description she wrote of herself. She said she was a prayerful, pleasant, determined, and strong individual, but also kind. For Theresa to accept God's will for her, to be open to God and to be faithful to her call, she needed to be strong and trusting. Whether we are single, married, religious sisters, or priests, we all know that when we decide to do God's will, we need to be strong. In Theresa's case, she was strong enough to enter into another culture during difficult days and to endure all that would mean and she let herself be transformed by God and by the people to whom she ministered. One of the ways this transformation manifested itself in Theresa's life was in something she wrote as a missionary in 1972. She stated: "If I die while I am still missioned in Puerto Rico please do the following: (1) Lay me out in white habit - no veil? (2) Bury me according to the customs of Puerto Rico, (3) Have a Funeral Mass sung in the parish church where I am then located, (4) Have a Mass celebrated in the Provincial House Chapel to which members of my family will be invited to attend, (5) Extend to my family the same expressions of

sympathy and concern given to the families of sisters who die and are buried at Providence Heights and (6) Place a marker for me in the Provincial House cemetery.”

Here we find a woman who not only accepted “the customs of Puerto Rico” but showed she belonged to the people of the island by her desire to be buried among them if she died while ministering there. In a community that values our intercultural experiences and identification with people all over the world, she was an example of how to live out those values.

As we read in the First Reading, she is now part of those dressed in white, joyfully entering the New Jerusalem with all the people she served in whatever land with kindness and devotion.

She is singing. A second vision of Sister Theresa is marked by the song used in the Psalm she chose for her funeral mass. She wrote, "I heard a musical selection at the funeral service for Sister Annella. The music and the words struck me as so appropriate that I decided to request having them used for my own funeral liturgy. So, if it is possible and there are enough voices to sing them, and here is the strong part of her vision, I will hopefully join the Sisters as they offer the Holy Mass for my burial service. Hopefully my voice will have the angelic quality I never had when still on earth. **I love you all and carry the memory of your goodness to the "heart" of God.**

Let us sing with her the first verse of that song. She with her angelic voice will sing with us:

May the choirs of angels come to greet you.

May they speed you to paradise.

May the Lord enfold you in mercy.

May you find eternal life.

Theresa, thank you for being kind, prayerful, pleasant, determined and strong. Thank you for being a Sister of Divine Providence and showing the face of our Provident God.

And with the Hail Mary that you love so much, ***we tell you we will see you again.***

Dios te salve, salve María

Llena eres de gracia

El Señor, el Señor es contigo

Y bendita

Tu eres entre todas las mujeres

Y bendito es el fruto

De tu vientre Jesús.