

Sister Gracia Schmidt, BVM
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Sept. 28, 2015

Sister Virginia Crilly, BVM, Pastoral Services

Gracia said that we should live life with MAGIC. We were to be Mindful, Accepting, Grateful, Inclusive, and Compassionate. I can't think of anyone who was all of those but Gracia herself.

Sister Anne Buckley, BVM

I lived with Gracia at St. Jerome in Chicago in the 1970s. She was teaching music in the house and also teaching English to the Croatian sisters who lived down the street. She has always been the same—gentle. One thing I always loved about her was her laugh; she had a wonderful sense of humor. She was a wonderful person and I will miss her.

Mary Beth Schmidt, Niece

A few weeks ago when someone called me to let me know that Gracia was declining, she said, "She's dying." I had spoken with Gracia a couple of weeks before and, in fact, it wasn't that long before that that we were talking about a couple of clothing items that I was getting for her. I thanked the caller and said I would stay in touch.

I concluded the call calmly, but when I hung up the phone, I spontaneously and unexpectedly burst into tears. The news seemed shocking and she had used the word "dying." I thought, "Why should this be so surprising? She is 100." She was so resilient and I guess that it never occurred to me that she wouldn't be in my life, in our lives. I felt bereft and sad, not for Aunt Gracia frankly, but for us because we wouldn't have her anymore.

One of the many things I loved about Aunt Gracia was that she was up for anything. We had a wonderful celebration for her 100th birthday last year. It was in November. There was going to be a celebration here on Sunday and the family had a party for her the evening before at a hotel. It was dark and snowing when I came to pick her up. Here was this tiny, little person with her little plastic rain hat on. I just thought, "She is so amazing!"

In the homily that Pope Francis gave just a day or so ago at Cathedral Basilica Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, he called on all the faithful to communicate the joy of the gospel "daily in every season of our life." There is nobody on earth who reflects that and has responded through her whole life to the call to be faithful more than our Aunt Gracia—ever kind, ever generous, ever faithful.

Sister Jean Beste, BVM

A couple of weeks ago, I was in the Marian Hall dining room. Gracia looked at me; she wanted to leave but she hadn't eaten. That was most unusual so I said, "What do you want, Gracia?" She said, "I want to go to God." Since she didn't want to eat, I took her upstairs. She said, "I'm ready to go, Jean, I'm ready to go. It's time." The nurse came in and I repeated to her what I heard from Gracia. The nurse was shocked because Gracia was doing so well. I left then, but went back each day, and each day you could see the decline in her. She was ready to go and this was the time. That was Gracia.

Nancy Anderson, Niece

Gracia has been a wonderful part of my life for many years. I loved her very much. I was able to spend time with her two weeks ago; I came up here with my husband and was able to spend a whole day with her in her room. I was so amazed that she was still with it. She was in and out, but she knew I was there. I could talk to her and when she could she would respond. I always had such a wonderful bond with her; she's been a wonderful role model for me and my family. I'll miss her very much. I also received an email from my oldest daughter, Heidi, who lives in California and couldn't be here. It was so kind of her to send this through.

Heidi Anderson, Grandniece

Sorry I'm not there. When I was a child and would see Aunt Gracia at Grandma Rosemary's house, she always made me feel important and special by expressing an interest in what was going on in my life. If I had a triumph, she shared my joy. If I had troubles, she soothed my sorrow. When Aunt Gracia moved to the Motherhouse, I wanted to make her feel important and special by continuing to share the triumphs and tribulations of my day to day life.

My sweetest memory of Aunt Gracia in later years was when one week I became caught up in the crush of events and missed a letter. A few days later, Aunt Gracia called me to find out if I was OK because I always sent her a letter. She made me feel special and important even as I was trying to do the same for her. She will be missed and loved. P.S. If anyone is in the market for a pen pal, I would love to continue *Tails of Bozzy: the Happiest Dog in Lake Zurich*.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

I noticed a number of times when I went to visit Gracia in the last few weeks that on the September calendar hanging in her room it says, "My heart is ready, O God, I will sing your praises forever." I kept saying to Gracia, "Gracia, your heart is ready, your heart is ready."

I thought the writing, *The Reed of God*, by Caryll Houselander was so appropriate for this wake service because several times I said to Gracia, "Gracia, let's ask Mary to come and take your hand and lead you to Jesus." When Gracia heard Mary's name, her face lit up like she found her long lost friend, Mary. It was just so beautiful. Several times when I visited she would say, "I want to go home. I want to go home." Then, after Vivina died, she said, "When is it going to be my turn?" I'm sad about Gracia's leaving, but so grateful for her life and happy for her.

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

Gracia wasn't quite ready to go home yet. She signed up for the class on BVM Pioneers. She intended to be there this semester. She had been in that class for the past 10 years; every class Gracia was there. She was wonderful to have in that class because she knew so many of those early sisters and she would happily share any story she had about the early sisters. They were usually wonderful stories—humorous, affectionate. She is going to be really missed in that class; she was one of the best students.

Sister Mary Kelliher, BVM

To continue about Kitty's class, Gracia has taught us a great appreciation for music teachers in the class. I can't imagine my life teaching "C, D, C, B, up and down, C, D, C, B, all around." Yet, Gracia

did that. She even taught my sister out in Wyoming who was able to make a few dollars giving music lessons when she became a widow.

Sister Dolores Becker, BVM

A couple of Sundays ago, I stopped in Gracia's room to say to her, "Thank you. You've taught me how to grow old gracefully." At first I was praying out in the hall; I didn't want disturb her. But then she opened her eyes which said to me, "Come in." I went close to the bed and said my little sentence. Well, Gracia didn't have hearing aids in so she said to me, "There are no frogs here." That had nothing to do with what I said, but that was OK.

She kept waiting and waiting to go home. The last time I was Eucharistic minister, I was on my way back to the chapel with Jesus and I stopped in her room. I had Jesus in the ciborium and I put it gently next to her bedspread and prayed that Jesus would come and take her and she went in 24 hours. I'm still grateful to Gracia, but I will miss her.

Geri Henning, St. Constance Parish, Chicago, Friend

I've never had a BVM bonnet, but I feel like I could have or should have had one. I and my husband Walter (Wally) got to know Sister Gracia and many of the BVMs from St. Constance Parish when they moved into our convent. I fondly referred to them as "Our Ladies of the Parking Lot" because the convent was across the parking lot from the school, the rectory and the church. Sister Gracia was always a joy, along with the other sisters.

Like in the reading, *The Reed of God*, Sister Gracia said "yes" to many things at St. Constance. She was one of our lectors, one of our counters on Monday morning. Wally is still doing that and I joined a few years ago, but she was one of those counting all the loot from the weekend. She was one of our elves. We formed a group in the church basement that made arts and crafts. I know she was part of the Knit Wits here. She always showed us her crafty items and talked about what was happening here. We started Market Day at the parish in the 1980s and she was one of our two volunteers. One volunteer would bring the shopping cart over from the convent because, of course, if they worked Market Day they also had to purchase Market Day. They carried their treasures back in the grocery cart or, as one of the ladies called it, "put their cattle in their Cadillac." We had many happy times with the sisters as members of our women's club. As the sisters either came here or went to Wright Hall, they remained honorary members. As the years have passed, the honorary list has been getting shorter and shorter.

We've been coming up here since the 1980s a couple of times per year to see the sisters. Sister Gracia was our mainstay; we never thought of her dying. We know we are all going to die, but looking at Sister Gracia we thought, "She's 100!" We were here last year for her celebration. We saw her in April. I would always tell her when we would leave, "No tricks, OK, until we meet again." Well, when Wally and I were driving up today, I said, "It feels odd to be coming up for her funeral. We should be coming up to celebrate." Yet we are celebrating her life—her new life. She's been a joy and a pleasure to know. We were able to meet some of her family, whom we had heard all about through the years, and of course many sisters. Thank you, Sister Gracia, for all that MAGIC you shared with us.

Sister Donard Collins, BVM

I happened to be on call on Sept. 6 when Gracia had a very bad spell. We knew she expected company later that afternoon. When her grand-niece arrived, I tried to warn her that perhaps Gracia might not respond because she had suffered a relapse. We got upstairs and Gracia came fully alive and made me a first class liar. They had brought some gifts for her. She was very concerned that the sorbet be put in the freezer. The last thing that she said as I was leaving the room to let them have a private visit was, "Did you take care of the sorbet?" So I hope she had a chance to enjoy some of that sorbet.

Sister Dolores McHugh, BVM

Gracia was a woman who was very thoughtful, peaceful, loving. I don't think she had any negativity in her heart. I had many visits with her because I was taking the stipends and helping the sisters here at Marian Hall. She would quietly say to me, "You know I need some money for some poor." She would have their address, phone number, everything. She would say, "You write the check." And I did many, many times because she was reaching out to the poor, not here in Dubuque, but in the South. I will miss her because I always had a conversation with her about something good. I miss her.

Geri Henning, Friend

I forgot one thing. We used to go to the St. Constance convent where they had a lovely chapel and still do. When our grandson was born, they invited us to come and bring him. Sister Gracia was the community representative at that time. She said, "When you bring him, we will put him on the altar." That's one of our wonderful memories of her and our grandson. That baby is going to be sixteen in a couple of weeks. Thank you, Sister Gracia. We love you.

Sister Catherin Jean Hayen, BVM

Gracia was one of the original members of the Tai Chi Chih class that started over a dozen years ago. She would always be an example for the others of how to do it correctly. She also was a participant in the BVM readings and would have wonderful wisdom and knowledge to share with us. I will miss her greatly.

Sister Joan Stritesky, BVM

I loved Gracia. She was so alert. One day as the candy cart was passing, I happened to say something just to spoof her. She answered back quickly and we became friends. It was a lovely way to be introduced to the personality I was so grateful to know. She had so much in her to give to others. She had a twinkle in her eye. She was a joyous person; that was very attractive to me. We had little winks that helped in a situation that got a little rough and was hard to bear. She would wink and I knew she was thinking the same thing I was thinking, at least I thought so. When I get to heaven, I'll find out if I'm right or not. She will be missed.

Sister Judith Sheahan, BVM

My first mission was in Casper, Wyo. When I got there, Gracia was the music teacher. Around Thanksgiving, I taught kindergarteners a nice little song I had found someplace. They liked it very much and they liked to sing it. One day a little boy said to me, "Why can't we have that Sister who plays the piano with *all* her fingers?" I said, "Well, she's a pretty busy lady." He said, "She goes to all the other rooms." He said he knew because he had lots of brothers and sisters. So I thought I would ask her. I went with my little music sheet and told her this story. She said that she would be glad to come so we set a date. When I told the kids that she was coming, they were so happy. The Thanksgiving song made its way to lots of Thanksgiving tables and lots of grandmas and grandpas got to hear it too.

Sister Paulino Sullivan, BVM

Gracia, I, and three other people were in the hallway one time talking when one sister who had just come to Mt. Carmel and wasn't happy to be here came up and said, "When do I get to go back?" Gracia said, "What's your room number?"

Lucinda Turnis, Mt Carmel Staff

It's a great honor to work with the sisters and help them. I have to say that with Gracia, it was not only an honor to help her, it was a blessing. She always let us know how much she loved us. We went through some recent changes with moving sisters around in the past several months. I had never really worked in Marian Hall. Sister Gracia was the one who connected with me that first day. She made me feel at ease. She told me that she loved me from day one when she met me. I thanked her for that. She was just a very kind and loving sister. Her family should be, and I know they are, so proud of her. Thank you for loving us, Gracia!

Deb Doyle, Pastoral Services

I am following up on that last comment and am speaking for the staff. I've had many conversations with them throughout Gracia's illness and subsequent death. The words that they use are "a woman of deep, deep gratitude," "a woman of thankfulness," and "a woman who never had an unkind word to say." She was truly loved by the staff, each and every one of them.