Columns
Ministry





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January 17, 2023
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My precious friend Marie died a few weeks ago.

I helped care for Marie during her last few years, through many medical emergencies and setbacks. On my way to see her each morning, I would pray to God to leave me open to what Marie would teach me that day about how to live the Gospel.My faith helped me embrace the goodness that Marie brought into my life amid the too-numerous hospital stays and doctor visits. Loving and caring for her was one of my greatest gifts from our God.

Listening to stories and words of the Old Testament prophets often reminds me of Marie. She lived her everyday life as a witness to God's simplicity, goodness, mercy and all-inclusive love. Marie was interested in everyone she met. Within minutes of meeting a person, she would know the essentials of their life and their greatest sorrows and joys.

Once, while I was sitting with her in her room in a rehabilitation center, a nursing aide came in who made it obvious she did not want to be there. By the time she left the room, she had shared her family life with Marie, and Marie had her laughing. Several days later, this aide commented to Marie, "If all my patients were like you, I would love to come to work."



Marie died recently, surrounded by caregivers and friends. (Courtesy of Maryann Agnes Mueller)

Marie saw good in everyone. In all the years I knew her, I never knew her to say anything negative about another human being. At her funeral Mass, the priest celebrant defined a "saint" as one through whom the light of Christ shines. The light of Christ certainly shone through Marie.

Marie often referred to herself as "not smart." She had learned to spell only the simplest words. I would often tell her that I might read books, but she read hearts. Her greatest joy was being with children, all of whom identified with her playfulness, simplicity and sincerity. She was "godmother" to 12 blessed boys and girls, including one girl who grew up to be a mother and asked Marie to be godmother to her

daughter.

Marie could take apart, clean and put back together a John Deere tractor (twice!), create a Popemobile cover for her snowplow to keep her dry while she cleared her neighbors' driveways before they needed to leave for work, create woodworking pieces, and cook five lasagnas at one time, all to be shared with friends and family.

All doctor visits included a homemade dessert for the doctor and staff, and in later years when baking became more challenging and infrequent, bags of candy for everyone in the office. She was always delighted to have an excuse to buy a friend a simple gift of candy or fruit — anything to bring a smile to someone's day.

Marie was resilient, knew what she wanted, and no amount of reasoning from others would dissuade her. It took me a while to trust that what she wanted was — perhaps mysteriously and illogically — the best for her.

During the past few years, as her medical needs increased, I often begged God to help me in my care for Marie. At times the problems seemed insurmountable, but I knew in my heart that God put her in my life for a reason. Toward the end, she simply stated, "My friend, please, no more, no more hospitals, no more pain." She died two weeks later, surrounded by devoted caregivers and friends.

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When Marie died, I felt a warmth of light and goodness leave the world. At her funeral, a friend and former neighbor of more than 25 years spoke of Marie as the good neighbor whom each one of us needs. Marie's life challenges us to be the Good Samaritan, the good neighbor to all. In her own vulnerable and straightforward way, she was a prophet for our society and time. She was inclusive of everyone and would talk with anyone she passed on the street. She was interested in and listened to the stories of the "other" — what concerned them and what made them happy.

She was a Felician Franciscan associate, and her daily actions and interactions with people embodied the peace prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. From her stance of vulnerability, she sought to understand and love others. Where there could have been resentment and isolation, Marie spread love, pardon, hope and laughter. She brought a smile to everyone.

I pray to keep her beautiful memory alive by trying to see the good in all I meet and to pass Marie's goodness on to them. I know I am forever better for having loved this woman, who, by the standards of some in our world, was "not smart." I thank God for sharing Marie with me and all those who were privileged to know her for all too short a while.