

Assunta

Sister Assunta Kirwan OP, Prioress General of the Dominican Congregation of St Catherine of Siena of Newcastle, Natal, South Africa died peacefully on 10 September 1997 at the age of 62 after a short illness. In the early years of her working life as a Dominican she was Head of Religious Education at St Michael's School, Garston, Herts. Later she became Headmistress of Rosary Priory Senior School, Bushey Heath. Her years running Spode House Conference Centre will be remembered by many as will her eight years teaching in the Dominican Studium at Blackfriars, Oxford. Her funeral took place in St Dominic's Priory, Haverstock Hill and was presided over by the Master of the Order — Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP who gave the following homily:

When I was told last Thursday that Assunta had died, I could not believe it. I thank God that I had been able to see her many times in the last weeks of her life. I had seen her growing weaker; we had talked together about her death, and yet when it happened I could not believe it. How could someone so strong, so alive, so vital, so comparatively young die? I suppose that for most of us it will take a long time to really register that Assunta is dead, especially her family in Ireland, and her Sisters here and in South Africa, Jamaica and Rome. Assunta, what shall we do without you?

The first thing that I did, like many of us I suppose, was to read the morning prayers for the dead. And words from the first psalm leapt from the page. "Indeed you love truth in the heart; in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom". It was the truth in her heart that brought so many people to love Assunta. She was a truthful and wise woman.

"Indeed you love truth in the heart". Assunta was certainly someone who always was truthful and said just what she thought. Often in a discussion, when the rest of us were paddling around, fudging the issues, she said what we had all been thinking. You always knew exactly where you stood with her. She was truthful in the face of death and talked about it openly. The last time we met, she told me that she was not afraid to die, but she only prayed that she would not be afraid when the moment came.

She was true to people, true to those whom she loved. She was true to her family, her friends, her sisters and her brothers, to God. If you had Assunta's friendship, you had it for life. You could rely upon her friendship, like a solid rock. She knew that because of the history of

cancer in the family, then it was quite likely that one of her siblings might die of it young. She told me only a couple of weeks ago, that she had always prayed that it would be her, since she had no children to raise. That is what it means to be true to others. Assunta, what are we going to do without you?

It was that truthfulness that made Assunta so deeply Dominican, through and through. "Truth" is the motto of the Order. She had a profound conviction that the brethren and the sisters are called to a common Dominican vocation, to be women and men of the truth, preachers and teachers. She saw that we need each other to realise that vocation today. And that is why so much of her life was spent in building the Dominican Family. She was warden at the Conference Centre at Hawkesyard, she was a member of the teaching staff at Blackfriars with the brethren, she organised the Dominican Conferences, as a joint venture of the whole Dominican Family. She opened a new community of sisters to work in Jamaica with the brethren, and one of her last projects was working on the transformation of the Congregation's house in Rome, so that it could become a truly international Dominican home, open to all. She worked for a much closer cooperation with our Dominican sisters of Stone, and the foundation of the common novitiate for the two Congregations

I think that Assunta did more to help us brothers and sisters and laity to come together than anyone else in the country. And the finest way to honour her memory will be for us to grow even more together in that common vocation, in which we need each other's gifts so much.

"In the secret of my heart teach me wisdom". I suppose part of the secret of wisdom, is to see what really matters, what really is central, and not to let ourselves be distracted by minor matters. The wise person is magnanimous, large-hearted. They do not waste their time in pettiness. During the many years that I knew Assunta, I never heard her be small minded. One glance of Assunta's would be enough to quell any pettiness around her!

Where did Assunta learn that wisdom, that magnanimity? I would guess that she got much of it from her parents, perhaps especially her father to whom she was devoted. I think that her father's young death was the most painful experience of her life.

I think that her largeness of heart also came from her deep love of the Bible. This was fully the Word of God to her. She was caught up in that great rediscovery of the Word of God that swept around the whole Church during the Second Vatican Council. She went to Durham to study under C.K. Barrett, and did her thesis on Lagrange, the great Dominican who founded the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. We all prayed

that Lagrange would do a miracle and save her from death, but, as Assunta told me, perhaps he was not so keen on what she had said in her thesis about him.

Another characteristic of wisdom, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is that it is like play. Wisdom danced and played before God when she made the world. And the wise person shares in that pleasure, that playfulness, that joy. The wise person, because they know the ultimate end of all our lives, can take pleasure in them. There is a sort of playfulness which is born of seeing things as they really are.

It was surely a sign of Assunta's wisdom that she had an enormous capacity for the enjoyment of life. Things were never dull when Assunta was around! When she came to help with the cooking at Blackfriars, Oxford, on the big feasts, then all the brethren would show an enthusiasm for helping with the cooking which was not usually evident. It was simply more fun to be in the kitchen when she was there, serving large gin and tonics to all who came to help!

Finally, Assunta had a practical wisdom, which is certainly rare among her brothers. She could get things done; she could make things happen. A few of the brethren and I and Assunta used to go away together for a couple of weekends a year. The idea was to plan the Dominican conferences, but they were also fun. We would have wonderful ideas as to what themes we would address, and what speakers might be invited to take part. But if it was not for Assunta, then nothing would have happened. With a minimum of fuss, without apparently doing much, she made sure that the conferences actually took place. Assunta, what will we do without you?

Assunta showed the same practical wisdom in organising her tours. If Assunta wanted to go to the Holy Land, then she organised a pilgrimage. As the years went by these "Sunny tours", as they were known, went to more and more exotic places, Greece, Turkey, Russia. It became ever harder to identify the "religious dimension" and persuade people that they really were pilgrimages. But people longed to go, and the brethren longed to be invited to be chaplains, just for the pure enjoyment of being with Assunta for a time.

"Indeed you love truth in the heart; in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom". We give thanks to God for this great, big hearted, wise and truthful woman. We pray that we too may receive the gift of God's wisdom, that we may be magnanimous, and free of all small minded pettiness; that we may grow in the love of the Word of God, and be true to each other. May we live life with some of her zest and enthusiasm, and share the joy of eternal life with her in the Kingdom.