

Elizabeth O'Regan

1 May 1927 - 9 June 2013

On my final visit with Elizabeth, just 8 days ago, I read to her messages on cards sent for her birthday. The first speaks to me of Elizabeth: *She loved the Lord with all her heart and it cast an amazing light on her life.*

The second suggests God's action in her life and seems to foreshadow her final home coming: *May God do in your life what only He can - strengthen you with his love, fill you with His assurance, bless you with His peace. And hold you in His arms as we hold you in our prayers.*

In the last few years, we have seen a mental and physical deterioration in Elizabeth as her illness took a progressive hold of her. To-day is a moment when we can try to be in touch with who she really was. A saying of Janet Erskine Stuart has been coming to my mind as I prepared to speak about her.

We know the best and worst of ourselves and others know the middle ... the part that shows. It ought to increase our reverence for each other very much when we think that however much good we see in others the best is always hidden.

Elizabeth grew up not knowing her parents or who they were and was placed initially with changing foster carers. Then, at about the age of 5, she moved to the O'Sullivan family. She grew to love her foster mother very deeply, a relationship that was sustained until Mrs O'Sullivan's death.

Her first contact with the Society was as a child attending St Madeleine Sophie's School at Island Bay, Wellington. She loved it and was particularly encouraged by one RSCJ, Mother Baird, who saw the good in Elizabeth and believed in her. Elizabeth spoke of being drawn to a life sized crucifix in the parish church from about the age of 6. Other children

may have been intimidated by it, but she said she was never afraid. Might this experience have kindled in her a lifelong love of the Lord?

She faced a major separation from Mrs O'Sullivan at about the age of 13 when she was moved by the welfare agency to a government hostel. Here she was treated badly, required to go out to work, but she held tenaciously to her faith. Once she recognized a call to religious life, she responded with determination.

Elizabeth entered the Society full of joy and enthusiasm. She faced the demands of constant heavy work, rigid discipline and, depending on who was in charge, methods of formation that were hardly enlightened. One person who understood her and whom she loved was her Novice Mistress, Mother Harmignie. Another was Mother Lucy Kennedy. Elizabeth, who could be very direct herself, responded to her open and straight forward approach. Her experience of some others during her early years in religious life was far from positive. She found companionship with some who were at a similar stage and their shared experience contributed to some lifelong friendships.

In the later 1960s and 1970s, Elizabeth went through some very difficult years in terms of her health. The care and understanding she received from Provincials at that time, Sisters Leila Barlow and Betty O'Brien, were significant in her recovery and they had an abiding place in her love. A friend once asked her why she was "hob knobbing with the Provincials" to which she answered: "I don't think of them as Provincials. They're my pals."

A new stage of her life began with the foundation of Karlaminda. She had trained for 3 years as a hairdresser at Randwick Technical College and undertaken an apprenticeship at a well known salon. At Karlaminda she had her own salon where she could give that service to the community. She excelled at dressmaking from an early age and many RSCJ were proud to wear her creations. Being able to contribute in tangible ways to the community was a source of happiness. Perhaps service is a word that sums up her approach to others. She loved knitting, crochet and later took up quilling. Her cards were a work of art.

Elizabeth had a beautiful voice and loved to take part in liturgical singing. She was one of a group of avid card players who met at night for 500, the game producing much laughter. She did everything with zest, perhaps sometimes too much for some people.

We know that Elizabeth did not suffer fools gladly, that she could be volatile, could come out with colourful expressions not learnt from Mother Baird or Mother Harmignie. But what about the "hidden best" that Janet Stuart spoke of?

Some people have spoken to me of her great gift of friendship. You knew if you were her friend by her unwavering loyalty. To be her pal was a true indicator of friendship. She had a very grateful heart, her generosity knew no bounds. When lay women came to Karlaminda, Elizabeth took them under her wing, offering them care and support.

A number of people remember her loving care for RSCJ who were ill and dying. She would spend hours watching by them - praying, attending to any need. To her, it was a privilege to lay the person out after death, something she did tenderly and with the utmost reverence

Jesus was her friend and she had an intimate relationship with him in childlike trust. One person spoke of her as a great pray-er. In her inimitable way she would share the fruits with trusted others. She spent long hours in the chapel with her "darling Jesus". She was a person with strong devotions: the Rosary said daily, Sister Josepha, the Divine Mercy.

The 1980s brought the greatest joy for Elizabeth, finding her own family and being welcomed by them with open arms. There were no words to express what this meant to her - to have a sister, Rosaleen and brothers, Terry and Lou. There is no doubt that your being here to-day, Rosaleen and Theresa, would mean the world to her. She embraced her new identity in 1988 by changing her name to O'Regan. After meeting her family in New Zealand, she was then warmly welcomed by relatives in England, Ireland and the United States in 1991. They have continued to keep in touch with her over the years.

In 1999, Elizabeth celebrated her golden jubilee of profession with two other RSCJ, Sisters Marie O'Brien and Jean Scott. This was a grand affair: Mass with renewal of vows held in the MSC monastery chapel with her great friend, Bishop David Cremin, presiding ("darling David" to Elizabeth) and ten concelebrating priests including her cousin from New Zealand, Father Francis O'Regan, SSS. She with 3 other RSCJ sang a Latin motet, *Domine, Tu Scis ... Lord you know that I love You*. Seventeen of Elizabeth's family came from New Zealand, Ireland and the United States. It was a memorable celebration and a tribute to her and her very loving family.

After 30 years at Karlaminda, it is hard to imagine what the move to an unknown aged care hostel meant to her, but she did so with great generosity and in a spirit of obedience. She loved her room there which was adorned with her favourite items, religious and otherwise, and photos of loved ones. She admitted to one person that the move gave her a new lease of life.

The final move to Holy Spirit, Croydon and periods in Concord Hospital were times of great confusion where she received very good care. I like to think of the moment of her death as freeing her from this, of Elizabeth finding herself face to face with her God, with her friend, Jesus and meeting again the people so loved by her in life. Perhaps Janet Stuart can best enable us to enter into this moment with Elizabeth.

Think

Of stepping on the shore and finding it Heaven:

Of taking hold of a hand and finding it God's hand:

Of breathing a new air and finding it celestial air:

Of feeling invigorated and finding it immortality:

Of passing from storm and tempest to an unknown calm:

Of waking and finding it Home!

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