

Sister Theresa Catherine Brophy RSCJ, 23/02/1928 – 2/07/2013

“Your life is a sacred journey. It is about change, growth, discovery, movement and transformation. It is continuously expanding your vision of what is possible, stretching your soul, teaching you to see clearly and deeply and helping you to listen to your intuition.”

Janet Erskine Stuart

Haere mai. Tena kotou katoa.

Theresa’s life journey began in Pungarehu, on the lower slopes of Mt Taranaki between New Plymouth/Ngāmotu and Opunake, near Parihaka Pa. (This is te wiki o te reo Maori – Maori Language Week – and Theresa would wish me to honour this year’s theme of correctly using Maori place names. Theresa valued New Zealand’s bicultural reality. Her best friend at primary school was Queenie Ngaia, and she recalls that Ben Paki Paki lived with the family and shared a bedroom with her brother so that he could help with the milking. She had learned and used te reo at school, and until the end of her life remembered all the words of many action songs including *Me he manu rere*, “If I were a flying bird I would fly to your side,” which she sang for Sister Suzanne Cooke who visited her recently on behalf of our sisters in the United States – Canada Province and delighted her with her pure New York accent.)

Theresa came from a large and loving family. Her parents, Patrick Brophy and Catherine née Doyle, were Irish Catholics, hardworking pioneers. Theresa, born in 1928 as their tenth child, used to claim to have had 4 parents. Her eldest brother Tom 19 and sister May 18 at her birth, both loved her dearly and in looking after her they showed their affection in a way her rather reserved and deeply religious mother did not. Her father was easy going and quiet, her mother the disciplinarian around the house. When her father spoke, however, they all knew he was to be obeyed without question. He became a local Justice of the Peace and an honorary chief of the Maori tribe of Parihaka who held him in great affection. This entitled him to make a cattle beast available to them to be cooked for tangi (funerals) and other feasts.

Her family was deeply religious, ‘though not oppressively so’, she noted later. Theresa remembers kneeling to pray the Rosary daily, going to two Catechism classes every week and attending Mass and evening devotions on a Sunday. A pious young tomboy, she was sent to board at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Remuera, now Baradene, at the age of 12, already a Child of Mary from her own Parish, and when she was not allowed to join this congregation at Baradene – it would have been the Aloysians and Angels congregations for younger students in those days – she is remembered as stubbornly retaining her practice of singing hymns to Our Lady on a Saturday evening in the otherwise silent dormitory. I surmise that she was not immediately required to cease and desist because of the beauty of her singing voice, as well as her evident piety and lack of human respect! This transition to school away from home was eased by the fact that May had by then married and come to live at the bottom of Shore Road, offering Theresa some home life during these 5 years.

For Theresa, people mattered, always – and she writes : “As I listened to and read the Word of God, Jesus began to emerge for me as a person, alive right now, a person to whom I could always turn, a person who would never fail me.” Her desire for God and the idea of a vocation to religious life grew throughout her years at school and she entered very soon after leaving. She was idealistic and in love. “I had begun to realize that making Christ the center of my life meant self had to die. And man, that’s a

lifelong process! Now years later I am still trying to be more human, more Christ-like, but I'm less intense about the whole thing. I've learned to relax, be open to the Spirit and to be just loving." At the time of her entry to the Noviceship in Rose Bay Sydney, she needed every bit of that intensity of commitment, however, because she found the two and a half years of initial formation "turbulent". She was inclined to treat everyone, including authority, as her best friend, with the accompanying casual attitude and this did not go down very well. Though the authorities may have wondered at times, she had no doubts that she was in the right place and recalls becoming "a conforming me" as being the only way to answer God's call and make her vows.

This was still the case when, after two years of teacher training as a foundation student at Loreto Hall, Theresa began to teach in primary schools in Australia and New Zealand and was judged ready for final profession, eventually. "I still hadn't quite got that nun look." From Rome, Theresa went to study Science at the University of Sydney, specializing in Genetics, and there rediscovered herself as a real person again, reminiscing once after Vatican II that "all the qualities which were against me in the convent were an asset in everyday living." Theresa was an openhearted extrovert – Myers Briggs ENFP – entering in a Province where silence and recollection came more easily to the introvert majority.

Her native qualities of spontaneity, interest and curiosity, creativity and joyful appreciation of the uniqueness of every individual stood Mother Brophy in good stead when she began to teach biology and general science at Erskine College in Wellington. She was the irrepressible "fun nun" according to one of her students, a great teacher and confidant of many. She introduced her students to genetics by keeping and breeding mice in a sturdy mouse-house at the back of the college, and had rabbits in a moveable hutch on the grass outside the Library windows. (Sister June Kirk Smith remember the shock received by a priest coming to give the community retreat, when being introduced to Theresa. As they shook hands a mouse appeared out of her sleeve and ran up his arm.) She was the guitar playing singer who introduced students to folk-style hymns – remember "It's a lo-ong road to free-e dom" ? – and having told her classes that two occupational groups in danger of Vitamin D deficiency were miners and nuns, she used times of supervising recreation on the top field to protect herself by rolling up her long black sleeves and browning her arms in the sun. Many remember her free spirit, her courage to be herself, her kindness and openness to everyone. She did an extra-mural Dip Ed from Massey during these years one paper at a time, concluding with one on the role of the teacher. "I am trying to educate the whole child, to make her more fully human and hence more able to accept Christ's love. Scientifically, I want to impart to the children a sense of wonder and to develop in them scientific attitudes such as intellectual honesty, open-mindedness and a willingness to suspend judgment," she wrote in 1972. The former students who rise up to proclaim her blessed testify to the fact that she did what she claimed.

Theresa was president of the Wellington Science Teachers Association for three years. Out of school hours Theresa came in contact with the Charismatic Renewal, and also acted as chaplain to two Wellington City Young Christian Worker Groups and gradually she came to realize that she wanted to serve Christ in a more direct way than classroom teaching. It was focused for her when a School Inspector offered Theresa a job as a counsellor in a big State School. Theresa felt drawn but recognized that she needed more experience and more supervised practice. She applied to do a Master of Science

degree in Pastoral Care and Counselling at St John's University in Jamaica, New York , with a view to working in New Zealand parishes as a pastoral counsellor.

She began her course in 1973, concurrently working under supervision at the Family Counselling Centre at the Catholic Center, 1st Avenue doing individual counselling and marriage guidance. A summer unit saw her working in the ICU and a medical surgical ward at the Lutheran Medical Center, and the autumn unit brought more ICU and the maternity wing. She also organised a counselling center for students, taught in the Educational Opportunities Programme for Adults and helped some patients in the Mental Health Clinic. From 1974 Theresa was still trying to keep her options open for a return to NZ, but was considering going on to supervisory status in CPE. So she spent a very valuable time as a non-verbal member of a group, to observe everything that was happening and really get in touch with her own emotions, checking things out with the leader afterwards. She discussed the students' process notes and verbatims with him also, and in the light of this learning chose to do a unit in supervisory consultation. She became an acting supervisor at the Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn from 1974 until 1977, and at the Goldwater Memorial Hospital from '76 until '79. Theresa held the position of Director of Pastoral Care and ACPE Supervisor at St John's Queens Hospital from '79 to '84, and.

Theresa was held in very high regard in New York, amongst her RSCJ sisters. The communities of New York asked her to be their area coordinator from 1982 until 1984 and messages have come telling of their respect and love for this "great community person". Professionally Theresa grew to be an incisive, constructive and compassionate supervisor who helped her students to grow both as pastoral care givers and as individuals who better knew themselves. And they were a diverse mix, these students, from varied backgrounds in an often challenging ecumenical and interfaith context: Christian and Jewish clergy , religious, seminarians and lay ministers. Their growth was her joy. People were sacred to Theresa – she loved their humanness, and rejoiced in their becoming the free and loving person they were invited to be in Christ. She worked well with others in projects, enjoyed groups, entered into their fun and socializing and treasured the friendships that arose from team membership. Her relationship with Christ was an integral part of that. A colleague wrote in 1997: "The depth of her spirituality, the solidity of her integrity, her sound self knowledge, her deep compassion and her contagious spirit of hospitality and good humor have made her a remarkably valuable resource for many clergy, seminarians and lay people exploring their vocations and their spiritual journeys."

Theresa was quite simply herself, without guile or pretence, an eccentric free spirit and enjoyer of people. She knew herself to be a bit stubborn. Was she easy-going to the point of laziness? Theresa thought about this. In ministry she always liked to finish tasks that had to be done as expeditiously as possible so that she could then have time for real relaxation – and she did this well: enjoying reading, walking, singing, dancing, good conversations , (with anyone), going to the pub. Though gregarious she had a lifelong dislike of gossip and was very wary of entering into "this kind of indoor sport." It was distressing for her to hear others being spoken of unkindly.

When she returned to New Zealand in 1997-8, Theresa missed so much that she had loved in NY and her friends there kept in touch, sending her regular copies of the New York Times. She lived at Aroha at first, and continued to use her skills working for several years with Father Conrad as an ecumenical chaplain at National Women's Hospital, where she talked with new mothers, supported women who

had miscarried, baptized babies and followed the Maori tradition of blessing space where a death has occurred. At the same time she ran CPEs for four NZ seminarians. Though she was still walking for her health and recreation, (her scavenging or foraging activities on these walks have given rise to many good stories,) Theresa found doing chaplaincy and CPE increasingly taxing as her memory began to fail and she submitted her resignation in June 2001. As a member of the parish choir at St Michaels and a great proclaimer of the Word Theresa went on doing what she had loved, meeting and greeting all and sundry on her walks. Subsequent moves to Baradene and then seven years ago to St Catherine's have marked stages in her journey, and diminishment in her activity, but not in her desire to sing, read aloud and take an interest in people around her while God continued to embrace her heart. Our gratitude to the sisters and carers of St Catherine's is great. She was so at home with you that she regularly asked her visitors when we too would be moving in.

Theresa loved her extended family dearly and they her. She visited family as she could in holiday time – in Taranaki, Perth, Dublin, wherever the nieces and nephews had landed, and never forgot her early years and her *turangawaewae* however vague more recent events became. We extend our loving sympathy to her brother Kevin and those who couldn't be with us today, even as we think with glad hope of the great reunion Theresa will be having now with family and friends in the presence and joy of the Lord.

Haere ra, Theresa, ka kite ano (Farewell. See you again.) We are all planning to 'move in' with you in the Lord's good time.

Elizabeth Snedden RSCJ

