

Sister Kathleen C. Nelessen, CSA November 29, 1941 – April 6, 2012

Kathleen Catherine Nelessen, given **BY God**

to Mary and Norbert Nelessen on November 29, 1941.

Sister Kathleen Nelessen given back **TO God**

by her mother, Mary Kessler, her brother Cletus, her sisters Donna, Luella, Sharon, Cindy and Carla, her aunt, Sister Anne Jude, nieces and nephews, other relatives and friends and her religious community, the Sisters of St. Agnes.

Welcomed by God on Good Friday, April 6, 2012.

In thinking about this liturgy a number of readings passed through my mind- We could have used Paul's message- "*I have run the race, I have fought the good fight, and there awaits a place for me....*" or "*the souls of the just are in the hands of God and no harm (no pain) can touch them.*" or Jesus' proclamation— "*in my Father's house there are many dwelling places...I have prepared a place just for you!*"-- this last, especially because it is my favorite and because the last words I heard Kathy speak were from that passage. In a brief visit last Tuesday afternoon, Kathy asked me to pray with her and at the end she said very softly, "peace, oh yes, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives....." Those passages and many others would have been appropriate but we believe that the most appropriate message has been given to us in today's readings, the message of Resurrection, of hope, of the truths surrounding our salvation through the life and death of Jesus.

How awesome is it that Kathy would complete her final journey on earth at the same time that many Christians were walking another, but similar, journey with Jesus --remembering his passion and death. It was during this time that Jesus held out his hand to tell her that she had suffered enough, that there was a place for her where pain and sickness would be no more. And without hesitation Kathy calmly and peacefully took that hand and walked with Jesus into her new life...*It is finished!! It has begun anew!*

In today's first reading Peter begins his discourse as if pointing a finger, reminding the Jewish people that the one whom God sent as the Christ was the very one that they had crucified. It was as though, for the first time, they understood, really understood at the gut level, their complicity in all that had happened. Can you imagine their inner turmoil, the feelings of guilt? After all did anyone OF THEM step up to help Jesus, to fight for justice, to let the enemies know that they had the wrong person? When you think about it, each of the followers of Jesus reacted in a defensive and disconnected way.--claimed they

didn't even know him, never stepped up to protect him, hid behind a tree, denied that they were his followers. Their response after all was said and done and truth revealed itself, oh my gosh, we blew it; we really blew it! What do we do now?

We likely blew it a lot of times with Kathy...There was so much emotion these last months, weeks, days....tears over what could have been or should be, at least in our minds. We wanted the best for her but she was too busy making sure everyone else was doing ok, even when she was not. So often we want people to feel and do what we think is best for them.. but I can just see Kathy, now, a big smile on her face, "HEY, I DID IT MY WAY. You knew I had to."

In today's Gospel, we can so easily identify with Mary Magdalene, another woman whose emotions came to the surface quite readily. Imagine the most precious thing you know or have being stripped from you with no sense of how, or why, or where it is. Here was Jesus, the one she had come to know and whom she loved deeply... gone! First they killed him and now what did they do with his body? She couldn't do like Kathy who by this time was too sick and often too exhausted to give attention to her own valuables which, as we know, fit into category of "pretty much everything she had." Yes, she had many things, none too valuable in a worldly sense, just many. Basically, her possessions included anything that was ever given to her. She treasured it all- mementos, cards, pieces of paper with something she had heard or read, or someone gave to her. Value was found in who it was that gave these things to her. Yet, with all her accumulations, Kathy knew exactly where each thing was. She didn't have time to do what others thought she should do, something like "get rid of it." In Kathy's heart people mattered. Family was so important, friends were too numerous to count. It was really quite amazing! Even in her last days she could be found in bed, dozing, with her cell phone in her hands. She still managed to call a number of people, to tell them she loved them, and to say "good-by."

We ministered together as regional coordinators along with Sister Pat Bogenscheutz for 7/8 years. No matter where we went in the US and outside of the US Kathy could always find someone she knew—either from Kimberly, or with a "van or vander" as part of their names, or someone who knew someone who was a third cousin once removed. One fall when we were at a NACPA conference there was a woman on the Board whose name was "Mary Kessler." It was a sign for sure, as though a light went on and as you might suspect, the other Mary Kessler quickly became one of her new friends.

This morning, we see Mary Magdalene all distraught, wanting, demanding to know what they had done with Jesus body so she could take care of it herself and do what was right for him. That would have been Kathy...demanding the respect and reverence that Jesus deserved. Another chaplain, Dawn Vandenberg, (notice the Vandenn..) and I spent hours with Kathy as she transitioned from ministry at SFH. It was obvious that the last five plus

years were so important to her. Yet, every time she explained a procedure that she had developed or discovered to work she would reassure us that we would probably end up doing what works for us. Another letting go. During that time we became aware that Kathy knew every single resident by name, knew what was important to them, knew their families and insisted that their names be pronounced correctly, out of respect.

When Mary Magdalen discovered the empty tomb she became emotional, vigorously reacting to such a discovery. Her sadness deepened, confusion reigned, and then she heard her name, Mary! She immediately recognized the voice and peace washed over her, all was well. Sister Kathy heard and recognized many voices. She connected deeply with and embraced the Native American culture. Their heritage and prayer, their relationship with Earth, their way of living out who they are spoke to her and captured her reverence and awe. She traveled to Russia as part of her ministry with the congregation. She went to India several times as a favor to a woman who needed a companion to go with her.

With each discovery of cancer over the past 24 and a half years Kathy would react with strong emotion—how could this be? Why? She didn't really expect answers but the questions were more a cry of pain. Then she set about the work of healing spiritually, emotionally, and physically. She would often say- "I have had so many chances since my first diagnosis, so many years of life in between each new occurrence that others never got." That was how she lived. In a meeting years ago she declared, "People should realize that happiness is an option. It's a choice." Kathy made that choice daily.

As word of her death reached the folks at St. Francis I heard over and over—
"We knew she had cancer, that she was getting chemo, but she never made us feel it."
Like Jesus, Kathy overcame every obstacle. She loved life, was dedicated to the people of God, lived by example, and walked with an open and welcoming heart and an awesome sense of joy.

In time, our sadness too, will turn to joy. We will remember all that was good. Whether family, friends, relatives, community members Kathy left something for each of us. The sadness we feel now will find peace. Kathleen's life is changed, but not ended. She leaves a legacy of celebration, the celebration of the gift of life. She is at peace! She IS at peace!

