

Homily for Sister Carmella Richie's funeral liturgy

The Scripture readings that Sister Carmella has chosen for her funeral liturgy center around the theme of love, resting from labor and having our deeds follow us to eternity. And when all is said and done, it does come down to that one basic question, "How have you loved my people?" In all the complexities of life situations, when it comes to the end of the day, when it comes to the end of one's life on earth, it is as simple as "How have you loved one another?"

"Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another."

How fitting John's words during this Christmas season, during this season when we celebrate:

- God-with-us
- the love of God becoming incarnate
- love taking on human form
- the Divine being enfleshed and living among us
- eternal divine love taking human form so that we could see and touch and hear what God's love is like

"Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another."

How fitting that we gather today during the Christmas season to celebrate Sister Carmella's life.

It seems to me that in many ways her spirituality was an incarnational spirituality

- Love become flesh
- The divine embodied
- Attentive to mind and spirit, but rooted in her body
- Human experience of Divine love

We know how Carmella lived life with passion,

- Proud to be an Italian
- Humbled to be a woman religious
- Called to be cook
- Always a friend
- And a storyteller

"Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another."

Scriptures like this and prayer were the root of her love. It was her deep relationship with God that allowed her love to flow out to others.

It was in 1987 when Carmella came to live with our local community in Beloit. Prior to that she had been at hospitals, high schools, the Motherhouse and most recently at the semi-retirement community in Decatur, and she said what she wanted to do in her "retirement" was to have time to pray. Sometimes in institutional settings – while sisters gathered to pray the Office, she would need to be in the kitchen so that a meal would be ready when they finished prayer. And now she wanted time to pray to make up for some of that time. And pray she did.

Intimately she knew God. Sometimes when we were driving home from somewhere, especially if it were after sunset, she would say, "Is it okay if I pray my night prayer now? Then when I get home I can just go right to bed?" Of course, it was fine with me if she prayed! She'd begin with a prayer to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and then she would just talk to God about the things on

her mind and in her heart. I would feel like I was eavesdropping on a conversation between the closest of friends.

“Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another.”

We read in her obituary, “For more than 50 years, Sister Carmella served as a homemaker in various houses and institutions of the congregation.”

Food was an important part of the way she lived her life, expressed her love for God and ministered to others. Not only was her food incredibly delicious, but it was also nurturing because of the love with which it was prepared and presented. As our first reading today said, “Without love, this ministry would have been empty, meaningless”. She expressed God’s love in her food preparation and planning, in the CSA charism of simplicity and hospitality. Those of you who were at the prayer service this morning probably noticed how many stories centered around food!

There is a spice company in Milwaukee called Penzey’s that is currently running a series of great billboards, and when I see one, it reminds me of Carmella. The other day when I was driving I saw one that said, “Love People; Cook Them Tasty Food” and there is another one that says, “Heal the World; Cook Dinner Tonight.” To Carmella, cooking was not only about food, it was about relationship. She wasn’t merely about the art of cooking, she was healing the world.

“Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another.”

One of the days last week when I came to visit Carmella, the hospice nurse was just finishing her care, and she said, “Sister’s heart is strong; she isn’t going anywhere any time soon.” How fascinating - as she lay there in bed, somewhat unresponsive, even though other parts of her body had weakened and were no longer working at optimum, her heart -- that which fueled her life and her ministry was still strong.

“Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another.”

One thing that can be said about Carmella is that she knew what she wanted, and she knew how to make known what she wanted. One of her strict directives to me when she asked me to give the homily at her funeral was that she wanted it to be SHORT, no longer than five minutes, and if it got too long, she was going to sit up in the casket and bring it to a close herself. Somehow I have a hunch that she might just do that.

So, in closing, let me say that I believe that Carmella is present here today in spirit. We may not be able to see her with our eyes, but we can feel her spirit, and perhaps we are being called to honor her life by remembering those very words that she chose for her funeral liturgy, **“Just as I have loved you, so shall you love one another.”**

Each of us is called to that simple question, “how do you love my people?” Can each of us take a minute now to think of one person in our life to whom we could reach out with unconditional love today or this coming week, someone with whom we might want to mend a relationship or someone with whom we haven’t been in contact for a while? Can we renew our commitment to incarnate divine love, to be the presence of God in the world?

Just as God has loved us, so shall we love one another.