Remembering Sister Nancy Bartolo, IHM

In the first three pages of her white binder of memories, Nancy has saved three quotes:

“Yet I will **rejoice** in the Lord, I will **joy** in the God of my salvation, the Lord God is my strength.” Habakkuk 3:18-19

“Be my Savior again, renew my **joy**, keep my spirit steady and willing.” Ps. 51

“**Joy** is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Le’on Bloy

The word common to all three is **JOY**. Nancy believed her life was always filled with joy and she wants us to remember her this way.

**IHM’s, Bartolos, students, faculties and friends** are the threads that weave the life story of Nancy Dolores Josephine (Bartholomew) Bartolo.

Born in 1931 in Brooklyn, N.Y., Nancy’s father, John Farrugia, died when she was 3 months old. When her mother remarried, Nancy’s family grew to three brothers and two sisters. It was in junior high school that she learned of her real father, John and her stepfather, Charles Bartolo’s, ethnic background; they were both from Malta. She was always proud of her heritage. At her official retirement from teaching, 2001, there were two limericks posted on the De La Salle High School’s faculty room bulletin board expressing her desire to visit Malta and her wonderful trait of cleanliness:

There once was a nun from Malta
Who taught Math at LaSalle without faulta.
   But the sad day arrived
   to bid her Good Bye
And send her away to Gibralta!

There once was a nun from Malta
Who kept this place tidy without faulta.
   But alas the day came
   To stop playing the game
And now cleaning will come to a halta!
Yes, we can all enjoy some wonderful laughter at Nancy’s expense. She would tell stories on herself with such detail, we would often say: “You have the mind of an elephant!” I remember one time when our Cluster C of the Northeast Province went on a long weekend together at Sue Gourley’s sister’s cottage in Gladwin, Mich. Previously, Nancy had often shared with us her anxiety when she had to speak with or be in the presence of someone who was an IHM authority person. Well, that weekend, the first night she discovered that she was sleeping in a bed next to our provincial, Mary McDevitt. Needless to say, she did not really sleep well. The next morning she admitted to all of us including Mary, her shock at seeing who was sleeping next to her. Laughter and teasing at Nancy’s expense rang out for the rest of that weekend.

Her love for teaching expanded over 50 years at 12 different places in the Detroit metro area from 1952-2011. On the bottom of the list of her Mission Record for the IHM Archives it jokingly says: “Obviously Sister, you couldn’t hold down a job!” She loved all these places because she loved the art of teaching and the young people. In an essay that she wrote as part of her receiving the Distinguished Lasallian Educator Award in 1996, Nancy writes: [paraphrased]

To me, being an educator means much more than being a classroom teacher. It means being a giving person – one who does more than carrying out a daily lesson plan. ... an involved person – one who gives up personal time to be present with the students in after-school activities … a Gospel person – one who believes in Jesus Christ and lives the Christian message.

One thing that we all admired about Nancy was her strong faithful friendships. Often she would tell of staying connected with her students, faculty members and parents through reunions, parties, anniversaries, holidays, visits to their homes, individual tutoring sessions and so on. Many letters of appreciation are in her book of memories telling of her special love and concern for each person. Here is one from 1995. A young man, a music teacher in California, writes:

I remember one day, in the 5th grade, you played a recording of the life of St. Dominic. At some point in the story, you cried. I was so touched by that. I don’t think I knew why then, but maybe I do now. I was able to see your sensitivity and your humanity. You were not afraid to let us see that about you. Very few adults would have done that in those days, or even now. A couple of years ago, I substitute taught a 5th grade class. We read a story that day about the destruction of a Native American tribe by American soldiers. I was so moved by the story that I cried with the class that day. I couldn’t help but think of you at that moment. ... Maybe, like myself, you have days when you think that teaching is too hard or that the students are not grateful. Maybe you sometimes wonder if
you’ve made a difference. You have made a tremendous difference in my life, Sr. Nancy. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Nancy, your name means “gracious one.” You have shown us JOY, LAUGHTER, SENSITIVITY and FAITHFULLNESS. Your spirit has been steady and willing. You were and are now, the infallible sign of God’s presence to each of us.

Tomorrow, we will sing at the end of our Liturgy for Nancy, “The Song of Farewell”. Angels are named as the ones who take us on our final journey to God. Nancy loved her guardian angel and prayed to her spirit many times. Today, I would like to close by reading the words of this peaceful, hopeful song as we wish Nancy Godspeed. At the end, please say AMEN three times in affirmation.

“May songs of the angels welcome you and guide you along your way.
May the smiles of the martyrs greet your own as darkness turns into day.
Every fear will be undone and death will be no more,
as songs of the angels bring you home before the face of God.”
AMEN. AMEN. AMEN.

Written and delivered by Alice Baker, IHM
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