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SR. LUCILLE KALINOWSKI: A SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

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The author, a principal in the diocese in which Sr. Lucille Kalinowski served as superintendent, reflects on Sister's spirituality, sensitivity, and simplicity along with her impact on the administrators with whom she worked.

Sr. Lucille Kalinowski, superintendent of Catholic schools in the Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese in Missouri, died in an automobile accident in January of 1997 as she was returning from a meeting with school board members in the Joplin area. The shock of her death left administrators in the diocese, myself included, reeling for weeks. The person we called "leader" was snatched up and taken so quickly from us in what seemed to be such a meaningless and senseless accident. It took months for us to feel the total effect of her death.

Having had some time to distance myself from the physical loss of Sister, I find it gratifying to reflect on her life as a leader. Although she was certainly not the obvious image of the saints I encountered in the literature, she was a blessed and spiritual woman whom I loved and admired. There is a saying: "Some people come into our lives and quietly go...some stay for a while, leave footprints on our hearts and we are never, ever the same." Sr. Lucille's footprints are forever a part of my heart, and it is out of my fondness, gratitude, and admiration that I offer her as the subject of this spiritual biography.

Sister was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1936. She entered the religious life as a School Sister of Notre Dame immediately after graduation from high school. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Notre Dame and completed her certification for the principalship at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Sister served Catholic education as a classroom teacher from 1957 to 1979 in Missouri, Iowa, and Illinois. She then served as an assistant principal and junior high school and

high school principal in four schools in Missouri and Illinois from 1979 through 1991. Sr. Lucille came to us as superintendent in 1991 after 34 years of service to the Church in classrooms and in administration.

Entering the convent at age 18, Sister answered God's call to serve early in her life. I often wondered how she could have known at such a young age what she wanted to do and be. The questions I raised about her choice were always framed in the context of my own life choices and in the spirit of uncertainty with which I sometimes made life decisions, especially at that same stage. Her great pride in being a School Sister of Notre Dame and the confident way she announced that allegiance eliminated those questions about her choice. She always spoke of her family of sisters with the same tenderness that I hear in the voices of parents when someone inquires about their families. The call to serve God in the religious life seemed clear to her and was a source of inspiration to me. Her example of groundedness and ability to make decisions clearly marked her leadership throughout the years that I knew and worked with her.

In speaking about women of religious communities, Bishop Weakland writes:

I feel that religious life has not seen its demise, as some may think. I have only to look around to see the large number of religious who have been faithful to their commitments and have blossomed into full and vital disciples of Christ to say that there is still much life and vitality in that form of following Christ. (1992, p. 160)

Sister was surely a model in this way. She seemed as sure of her vocation on the last day that I was with her as she must have been when she made her choice many years ago. She modeled commitment in a time when commitment to any lifestyle choice seems to be fragile.

Sr. Lucille lived simply. Her choice of lifestyle was as surely a choice as was her choice to follow the religious life. Although not living monastically as we might think of monasticism, Sister chose to do without the clutter of life that could interfere with her focus on ministry and spirituality.

Sister effectively balanced her call to the religious life with an understanding of what the secular world of professional women required. At a time when I often found myself acting as a role model to other women, to female students, to my daughters, and to the men I worked with, I learned through Sister's example that inner beauty and professional appearance can both be important, but surely the inner beauty is what people see and listen to after they notice how you look on the outside.

Sr. Lucille's sensitivity and simplicity were obvious in her correspondence. She was a woman of few words and hardly boastful in her writing. She knew and respected our busyness and didn't burden us with sermonizing memos and bulletins. She was direct and to the point, never once failing to

recognize our service, thank us for it, or encourage us in our work. "Let us continue to keep one another in prayer as we minister to God's people"; "Thank you for all you are doing for Catholic education"; "I pray that you will enjoy some spiritual, mental, and physical relaxation time this summer"; "I pray that God is blessing each of you with a special time of rest and peace as only God can do"—these were sentiments that were always there in her correspondence. She was a quiet cheerleader, squarely behind us. When Sister died, newspaper reporters interviewed principals around the diocese. Without exception, principals noted that the provision of personal support was one of her special gifts. What a beautiful example of a leader as shepherdess to have given that sense of support to so many.

Ironically, one of the last pieces of correspondence I received from Sister ends with her closing remark, "May God keep you safe as you travel southern Missouri." Her untimely death was especially difficult for us because she clearly disliked and was afraid of driving. She always offered to let someone else drive when we traveled together, but I never heard her complain about driving. Certainly, in this aspect of her life she modeled the holiness of martyrdom. She quietly bore "the crosses of her life day in and day out, with patience and fidelity" (Maloney, 1997, p. 18).

Her messages were often not only simple but full of sentiment along with sincerity. Sister kept a sign on her desk that read, "Life is fragile, handle with prayer." As a model of holiness, she was a contemplative in that she not only lived in simplicity, but led through simplicity and prayer.

Sr. Lucille practiced spiritual leadership through the model of the servant. She willingly and prayerfully accepted the position of superintendent even though, I often suspected, she would have been satisfied to serve the Church in whatever capacity she could. On her application to the superintendent's position, Sister wrote:

At this time, I discern a call to serve the Catholic Church by ministering in the Catholic education system in a regional leadership capacity. Desiring to evangelize in a collaborative manner, I pray for the strength and courage to respond to God's call.

Sister responded to God's call by providing thoughtful and practical staff development for the teachers of the diocese, visiting with and offering support to the administrators in the schools, providing direction to boards and teaching them to work in a collegial way, and modeling that style in the way she worked with her staff. On a more personal note, she taught me leadership through her example. Henri Nouwen speaks of spiritual leadership in his book, *Reaching Out*, saying:

The really great saints of history don't ask for imitation. Their way was unique and cannot be repeated. But, they invite us into their lives and offer

a hospitable space for our own search. Some turn us off and make us feel uneasy; others even irritate us, but among the many great spiritual men and women in history, we find a few, or maybe just one or two, who speak the language of our heart and give us courage. These are our guides. Not to be imitated but to help us live our lives just as authentically as they lived theirs. (1975, p. 140)

Sister inspired courage in me to trust myself and my own leadership abilities. She never felt the need to emphasize her authority because she led with such dignity. True leadership is the ability of the leader to “call forth the best in those led...liberating them into the fullness of their potential as individuals” (McCormick, 1996, p. 15). Sister personified that model of leadership to those she served.

We are not always afforded the opportunity to see people as spiritual leaders or examine their spirituality while they are living. We also tend to glamorize and idealize people that we love after they die. Perhaps that is because we are forced to describe them in shorthand. That is all that our memories will allow without their presence to fill out the sentences. I suppose the accounts of the lives of most of the saints we encounter are condensed in this same way.

I am certain that many things about Sr. Lucille were less than saintly. Having the opportunity to focus on her from this perspective, however, is a very special way of appreciating who she was and what that means for me in my life. It helps to create a snapshot of things to emulate, with my own particular fingerprint attached, of course, as Sister would have expected.

As a spiritual leader, Sr. Lucille succeeded in this life. She was successful, measured by the standard which counts persons a success by their ability to walk with Christ, gently hold out their hand to us, and bring us along with them on the journey. She touched many lives and left an indelible mark on mine. Unlike those people who “come into lives and quietly go,” Sr. Lucille stayed with us in Springfield, for a time that seemed far too short, and left a “footprint” on my heart. I know that I will “never, ever be the same.”

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