

Companions IN PRAYER



Sisters of St. Clare
Saginaw, MI

From ashes to insight

I must confess that often the yearly ritual of receiving ashes on my forehead at the beginning of Lent has become dangerously routine. Certainly I pause at the solemnity of the occasion, but it has never touched me with the power that it will this year.

This new awakening began for me when we received news that a dear Poor Clare sister had died. I had visited with her a few months earlier and had enjoyed her quick wit and lively personality. I was not immediately shocked or saddened when I heard of her death. She was a woman at peace with life and with God. However, not long after her death, I was surprised that I felt an intense weight of pain and sadness.

As I thought about it, I realized that I have experienced similar painful sadness when other loved ones have died. After the religious services when I was alone and left with the memorial cards and other memorabilia reminding me of their presence in my life, I could no longer hide behind busyness to avoid my sadness. I had to face the stark reality of death and admit my own fears. I realized that death is unbelievably painful to me in its raw terms: the still body, the loss of that lively spirit. I saw the burial again in my mind. I wanted to deny the death and shout out that this cannot be.

Hidden in that pain is, of course, the awareness of my own death. What will that be like? When I dare to sit quietly and ponder these sad thoughts, I soon want to get busy and hide behind distractions so that these fears will go away. As I realized that I was afraid of death, I knew it was time to face those fears. I had to realize that I will not live forever.

Recently, I decided to meditate on my pain and sadness. As I sat quietly with my fear, my body felt like cement. I waited for some sense of comfort to come. Having nowhere else to go, I waited and waited. Looking for a sense of certainty, I wanted a sign that I could hold on to. My fear of death was paralyzing me. Many questions raced through my mind. How and when will it happen? Why do we have to go through with death? Why doesn't God do it differently?

As I continued to meditate, the image of a spiral came to me. I realized that my thoughts have circled deeper and deeper into the mystery of death. With each death I have

experienced, I have gained more insights into my feelings and faith. When I was young, I was stunned and curious about death. Later in life when I encountered death, I felt great sadness and grieved the loss of loved ones. Now, at this stage of my life, I am questioning basic religious beliefs about death, especially my own end of life.

As my meditation continued, I remembered sitting with my mother in her last hours of life. She was a woman of great faith. When I asked her if she believed in eternal life, she said, quite calmly, "I'm not sure." I didn't understand her response at the time, but as she was dying her body and spirit were at peace and I prayed her favorite Psalm 27.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

It is now clear to me that my mother's faith was built on a complete trust in God. Her faith gave her great courage. She had reached a point at the bottom of her spiral of thought where her faith and the mystery of death met: She was at peace.

My meditation ended with this comforting image of my mother's death, and I experienced a feeling of new life in my own spirit. I had received new insights into my faith and seemed to be living deeply in my being. The gift my friend had given me in her death was the opportunity to go more deeply into my fear and through that, into my faith.

As I enter into the ritual of ashes this year, I will be saying with new insight and deeper conviction, "Don't be afraid of death. The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"

(We are interested in your thoughts. Let us know at:
<http://srscclare.com/about-us/companions-in-prayer-newsletter>)

Sr. Laura and Sisters

Published (2016, February 10) at GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT:
A project of National Catholic Reporter. Retrieved from
<http://globalsistersreport.org/authors/laura-hammel>