Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“In my Father’s house there are many mansions” (John 14:2).

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 6:1-7; Ps 33; 1 Pt 2:4-9; Jn 14:1-12

More than 50 years ago, when I was a college student in Dubuque, IA, a group of us decided to visit area nursing homes on weekends to cheer up the residents. Among the places we graced with our youthful exuberance was the Villa, the care facility for sick and elderly members of the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters. I revisited the area recently for the funeral of my sister-in-law, Sr Leonius Skaar, and this stirred memories of when I first met Sr. Mary August van Eyck.

August was an anomaly at the Villa because she was relatively young, perhaps in her thirties when she suffered a devastating brain aneurysm that resulted in partial paralysis and slurred speech. Under her white cap and veil, it was evident that surgery to stop the hemorrhage had meant removing part of her skull, which left her head sloped on one side.

Her teaching ministry days were over, but August took up a new mission among her elderly sisters as the darling of the Villa, her smile and knowing eyes charming everyone she met. Her bright personality was undiminished and even enhanced in that nursing care setting.

I always stopped to visit her, often with blind Carmenita, an elderly sister who knew more world news than Reuters from listening to the radio. She and August (whose baptismal name was Sally) were buddies. Carmenita came to August's room every evening to pray with her and to kiss her "good night and sweet dreams."

Today's Gospel reading from John: "Do not let your hearts be troubled … I am going to prepare a place for you," was August's favorite passage of Scripture. Jesus tells his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled at his departure, for he was not only going to God but was so intimate with God, he was the very human path to divine union. He was "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

So, when August died, this Gospel was read at her funeral. She had gone home to God to dwell in the place prepared for her by Jesus. I wondered what kind of mansion would suit her, but figured she got one with a big garden and lots of trees near a river.

Her death occasioned a final image shared by the sister in charge of funeral arrangements at the Motherhouse. She said that the mortician who prepared August's body was struck by just how beautiful she was, her auburn hair smoothed back over her misshapen skull. In death, the distortions of her illness relaxed their hold, and her almost childlike face re-emerged. Capped, veiled and in habit for

burial, Sr. Mary August took many hearts and not a few tears with her to the cemetery that day -- and beyond.

Her simple faith has remained a model for me these many years later. I hope to get a modest mansion near hers when I enter the same mystery she so fervently trusted. It will be good to see her again, to catch up with her and the news with Carmenita on a long walk by the river.