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The Life and Death of Sr. Hildegarde

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

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My friend Sr. Hildegarde Smith died April 25, at the headquarters of the Sisters of Christian Charity in Wilmette, Ill. She and I had served together at the parish of Cimarron, N.M. and its missions for several years. Last New Year's Eve, she suffered a stroke that hampered her movement and left her unable to speak. She never recovered.

Her passing marks, for many of us, the end of an era. Sr. Hildegarde had the deportment of an earlier time. She was an old-fashioned saint. In black and white habit, by all appearances here was an elderly, traditional, conservative nun. And to me it seemed odd, or providential, that she should be paired with me -- a notorious, felonious Jesuit.

But there was nothing stodgy about Sr. Hildegarde. She was tough as steel and compassionate as a mother starling. She was forward-thinking and possessed the kind of steadfast faith that moves mountains. I regarded her and was reminded of Mother Teresa.

I arrived in Cimarron in 2002, assigned to be pastor of the Catholic church there plus several other

churches and missions throughout remote northeastern New Mexico.

She had preceded me. And I was astonished to learn that at the age of 70, after a lifetime of running inner city Catholic elementary schools in Chicago and elsewhere, she elected to move to Cimarron, a town of 900, into a little trailer behind the adobe church. The parishioners there were poor, elderly, and alone, and Sister moved among them and loved and served them well.

I was also astonished at her doggedness, but shortly discovered it was a trait that ran long and deep. She was born in 1924, and at age 16, uprooted herself from the family farm in Wisconsin. Off she went to Chicago, on a train by herself. In Illinois, she entered the Sisters of Christian Charity and set a path to serve Jesus among the poor, the needy, children, and the elderly.

And now "retired," she was at Cimarron. There she found a town living hand-to-mouth and the church deep in debt. Shortly, she put on fundraisers and undertook to beg money from friends and family, and from the parents of those she taught in Chicago. And to everyone's astonishment, she raised enough to pay off a \$185,000 mortgage for the little mission church in Eagle Nest.

Her energy caught many an eye. And interest in the church sprang to life and the lapsed came back in droves. Soon there was a food pantry, CCD classes, and vacation Bible school. She visited the sick and elderly two days a week, arranged for annulments, and undertook countless other projects.

Her most astonishing accomplishment was the building of a parish hall. It was, she said, her dream. During a parish council meeting one night she announced it. Cimarron needs a real community center, she said as matter-of-fact as you please, and we're going to build one.

The council members looked at me and I at them and we said, "Sure, fine." But none of us ever dreamed such a thing could be done in our poor corner of the world. Sr. Hildegard thought otherwise.

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First, she began to pray. She prayed like it was her last day on earth. Among her prayers for the needs of parishioners, for the poor of the world, she begged St. Joseph for this special gift. Then she started to beg -- from everyone she knew, even those who had just helped pay off the mortgage in Eagle Nest. To supplement the fruit of begging came the bingo parties and bake sales.

We had trouble finding land near our church and trouble selling off the parish hall on Main Street, a sagging dilapidated affair. We had trouble every step of the way. But there soon arrived big checks, and several church groups pitched in. And not too many months after I left parish work there, the hall was built.

Opened in September 2006, the hall was christened at the parishioners' insistence "Sr. Hildegarde Smith Parish Hall." Today, it serves as the center of the community. Of course, pillar that she was, *she* was the center of the community.

She was also a pillar to me. In the fall of 2002, I began composing my sermons to ring with opposition to the impending U.S. war on Iraq. I found most everyone amenable to my message -- except at the little mission church in Eagle Nest.

A few friends remain there, but most took none too kindly to me. Most are Republican, retired, military families from Texas, there to enjoy the nearby ski resort. My arrival disappointed them and my sermons raised their ire. My persistence in preaching in this vein disgusted them. They put their faith, they said, in Bush and the war -- some had young people headed for Iraq. And the parishioners chastised me with great heat and scorn.

One weekend in January 2003, I was away in Washington, D.C., addressing a massive rally of 300,000 against the war. That's when the Eagle Nest folks decided they'd had enough. Unanimously they appealed to the archbishop. I was divisive, they said, a bad pastor, too political. The archbishop agreed and stripped the parish from my charge.

Alas, I'm all too used to rejection. It's part of the price of speaking against war and nuclear weapons, something I regard as part of my vocation, something of a Gospel requirement, I now believe. But poor Sr. Hildegarde -- the incident pierced her heart. She cried and cried. I'm merely upholding the gospel, I said -- "Love your enemies" and "Blessed are the peacemakers." And of course she understood and offered me support.

But then she soon suffered rejection herself. Several longtime friends took a dim view of her support of me and declared her persona non grata. For the first time in her life she tasted betrayal. She and I talked about it at length, especially as the war worsened and the stakes grew higher for those who denounced it, including for me, having the local National Guard march against me in my rectory one November morning and chant death slogans. We talked of how the crowds rejected Jesus, how he suffered the rejection of his own disciples. We talked of how the church shrugs off the Sermon on the Mount.

Eagle Nest was but one congregation. The other parishes campaigned that I stay, a campaign Hildegarde incited. So in the end I was only one parish short. But the episode brought her great sorrow; the ordeal wrung her heart. When she recovered she was stronger, wiser, and more compassionate.

I believe in all this I taught her something of the nonviolent Jesus. But then she taught me a thing or two. She exemplified faith and determination, dedication and commitment. I watched her side with the poor and offer selfless service. Most of all, she taught me how to forgive others -- a lesson especially pertinent -- and how to be willing to learn and grow.

Last summer she toured me around the new parish hall, the paint fresh and the roof sound. And at Christmas we enjoyed a good long talk. A week later she was felled by the stroke and helicoptered to Denver. I arrived a short time later and sat with her a few hours. There I entered upon something of a monologue. I remembered our years at the parish. I affirmed her long years of service. And I assured her of God's love. She smiled at my jokes and cried over her helplessness. During our time together, she couldn't utter a word.

When she died I wrote to my former parishioners in Cimarron. Now that she has gone to heaven, I said, we can be consoled because we have our own saint in heaven looking out for us.

I hope she rests in peace, and that I can live up to the standard she set.

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