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An example of love and faith to follow in these uncertain times

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread

I wasn't too surprised to see Pope Benedict XVI following Erma Gorwoda's example. I'm just disappointed more bishops and priests don't take their cues from her.

Erma will be 89 in May, a few years older than Benedict. They shared the same century, with all its terrors and consolations. They share an abiding faith in Christ. They share a life of service to the church.

A few weeks ago, we got the news that Erma is in renal failure. She does not want any treatment beyond comfort care. She is, she says, at peace and ready to go. She is eager to see Woody again. She has so much to tell him.

I tell her she has taught us how to live and now she is teaching us how to die. I tell her she is like St. Paul, who knew that, awake or asleep, he belongs to Christ. "Whether I live or whether I die," I say, and my eyes fill with tears, because Erma is one of the saints and I can't bear to lose another one.

Erma looks at me with great affection and sympathy. She holds my hand. But she will have no talk of indispensability. Erma does not believe in the finitude of the saints, but of their communion. She is quite sure another will rise to do her work and take her place. After all, it isn't her work, but Christ's.

I look at the pictures of Benedict as he read the message of his resignation and I see a familiar peace in his face. It is the peace I had seen in Erma's face just the day before.

By the time I met Erma, she and Woody were married. Both had been married before; both were widowed. After his first wife's death, Woody became a permanent deacon. Erma never had a title, but she

mothered hundreds of people through RCIA and through baptismal preparation classes. She was famous for crocheting a crib blanket for every baby of every couple she helped to prepare for their child's baptism.

Erma and Woody met working for the church. On long car rides out to the eastern plains of Colorado to lead a class or a retreat, they talked and laughed and fell in love. Theirs was a late love, all the sweeter for its unexpectedness.

Woody, as a permanent deacon, was not free to marry. Erma left town for a time, telling Woody he needed to forget about her and get on with his ministry. She remembers flying into Colorado Springs, Colo., and getting off the plane. Woody was waiting at the gate. He hugged her tight and said, "Don't ever do that again. Please don't leave me."

Erma went to a meeting with Richard Hanifen, then auxiliary bishop. Hanifen had been sent from Denver to prepare the way for a daughter diocese in Colorado Springs. He would be named its first bishop. Although Hanifen was not much younger than Erma, he was new at this job. So when Erma poured out her heart, telling him about Woody and their love and their need for his advice, he listened. Then he said, "Well, you could live as brother and sister."

Hanifen was driving. I've never heard how fast they were going or anything about the road conditions, but it must have been slow, and sunny and dry, because they both lived to tell the tale. Again and again. It is a story they relish recounting.

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No sooner had Hanifen given his textbook answer than Erma, a Kansas farm girl who has wrestled some calves in her day, walloped him with her purse.

"Brother and sister!" she cried. "Dick, I'm a woman! He's a man! We're in love!"

They went ahead and married while waiting for Woody to be released from his vows. When the approval from Rome came through for their marriage to be celebrated by the church, Hanifen gave the toast at the wedding breakfast: "To Woody and Erma, who've always known what it took Rome years to learn."

Woody was released from his vows, but the two of them continued to counsel and care, praying with people, feeding them, welcoming them into the church. Their ministries as layman and laywoman continued.

Woody died, and Erma moved into a nursing home. She shares a small room with another woman. She arranged for a room in the facility to be made into a chapel and saw that priests were invited to celebrate Mass with the residents. She prays with and for the people around her. She continues her own life of reading and study and prayer. Through it all, there was -- there is -- a peace.

We are a grasping people. That is perhaps why baptism seems so daunting. If you carry everything you've scratched and fought to accumulate into those waters -- all the stuff, all the cars, the house, all the resentments and emotions -- you will surely drown. Every lifeguard knows you need to be light, buoyant, to float. You must let go.

I know it, too, but still I clench my fists, still I hold on. Sometimes, like a dancer learning the steps, I have to watch, watch, watch and concentrate as Erma and the other saints I know teach me how to move, when to go forward and when to step back.

I try to match their rhythm. It's that rhythm I see in Erma's life and, now, in Benedict's. They know who is the master and who are the servants. They know their frailty. They know their mortality. God alone is strong. God alone is immortal. And God will provide.

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