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The Friday morning poker club and its ordinary saints

by Christine Schenk

Simply Spirit

The weekend of the papal canonizations, I visited my hometown of Lima, Ohio, to give a presentation for a local Catholic group. This is the fourth time I've been invited, even though my message is a bit unconventional for some. I get away with it because I'm a local-girl-makes-good celeb in this struggling Rust Belt city with a huge heart.

Lima is big on family values and even bigger on helping each other out when need arises. It's a town filled with ordinary saints, the kind who will never climb a canonization ladder but who, without fanfare, bless everything and everyone they encounter. Some are precious lifetime friends I met at Lima Central Catholic High School. It's that kind of town. Friends are lifetime friends, even though you may have only exchanged Christmas card greetings through the family-raising, career-building years.

When my parents relocated back home after Dad's stroke, high school chums came out of the woodwork to support my sisters and me. They visited Dad at the nursing home and sat with me when Mom lay unconscious in intensive care. When I needed a break, they cheered me up with margaritas and memories of our madcap youth. My childhood pals comforted me when nothing else seemed to help very much.

So when I get back to my hometown, I always take time to visit. While there are a number of Limaites I regard as ordinary saints, this week, I write about the Friday morning poker club.

Karen, Annette, and George (not their real names) meet every Friday morning to play poker, laugh and engage in what they call "jolly good folly." This threesome is part of what I have fondly dubbed my "high school dweeb group." There were eight of us in all, evenly divided between boys and girls. We were very, very studious and very, very smart. And, God help us, we knew it. We read Dickens, Dostoyevsky and J.D. Salinger and discussed Big Ideas such as Beauty, Truth and Goodness.

We were irreverent, funny and probably developmentally delayed. Most weekends, we embarked on a giant group date, usually in someone's rec room basement, tentatively testing the tantalizing waters of how to interact with the opposite sex. (One of us later came out of the closet. We mercilessly tease that we helped him decide. It always gets a laugh.) But mostly, we engaged in "jolly good folly." By this, we meant quick-witted, meandering banter about the meaning of life, whether there is a God or not (we thought so but couldn't be sure), politics, Vietnam, teachers, pesticides, fruit flies, civil rights, Goldie Hawn, college and the occasional wickedly salacious joke, hugely enjoyed by all us good Catholic youth.

Even though no one married anyone else in the group, we retain a lifelong fondness for each other. Most summers, we gather from near and far for margaritas and a bit of judicious, deliciously understated mayhem, usually in George's carefully manicured backyard.

But back to the Friday morning poker club. It's been a tough couple of years for Karen and Annette. Karen, who has waged a courageous lifelong battle with depression, was diagnosed with throat cancer two years ago. She underwent grueling radiation treatments that left her cancer-free but scarcely able to eat and swallow. She wanted to quit in the middle of the treatments, but her sister, who is a nurse, wouldn't hear of it and literally kept her alive with steadfast love and incredibly skilled care.

Karen has had a hard life. Her husband was diagnosed with a severe mental disability shortly after their marriage. She hung on for many years because she loved him and didn't think a good Catholic should divorce, and besides, there were two children to consider. But when her husband's condition deteriorated dramatically, staying together was no longer a safe option. Karen reluctantly divorced, completed her teaching certification and raised two bright and gifted children. Her four grandchildren are the light of her life. Recently, Karen started a depression support group at her local parish, where she helps herself and others make the most of each day.

The Friday morning poker club has become a mainstay in Karen's week. George and Annette make her laugh. She recently purchased brand-new poker chips from Amazon and tells me she is a survivor. And then some, I think.

Karen is on my list of top 10 ordinary saints. And so is her sister.

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Annette is a brilliant, gifted poet and teacher who worked for many years at Lima's juvenile detention center. She had a deep sense of compassion for her troubled young detainees and found ways to help them despite chaotic family situations. When new management instituted tough boot camp tactics, Annette disagreed. She soon found herself in the untenable situation of needing her job but constitutionally incapable of supporting tactics she found unhelpful, not to say draconian.

Annette's health rapidly deteriorated. She eventually recovered and worked long enough to receive her pension, but last summer, she suffered a relapse. She lost so much weight that we feared for her life. While Annette was in the hospital, George mobilized two of our out-of-town group members and, along with Annette's faithful brothers, made much-needed repairs to her home, installing new flooring and a new kitchen. Thankfully, Annette is now much better. Besides being active in her church, she gives many hours to the humane society because she loves animals so very much.

The Friday morning poker club is a highlight in Annette's week, too. She has perhaps the most wickedly

dry wit of us all. Annette is among my candidates for ordinary saints, perhaps because her poetry is so damn good, but mostly because I never met a woman with more compassion.

George is on my top 10 saint list because he is the most compassionate man I know. His Irish wit is never at a loss for quick, amazingly funny yet gentle repartee. He reminds me of Garrison Keillor, and he's every bit as talented. The Friday morning poker club was George's idea. The only rule is that each hand must be dedicated to something or someone. On the Friday morning I visit, the dedications flow fast and furious. We dedicate our hands to "metallurgy," "standard deviation," "Crispina" (That's mine -- it's the name of an early Christian woman leader carved on a fourth-century sarcophagus lid.) and "pliers." Well, you get the idea.

At one point, George shows his hand to the rest of us and asks if he should draw three new cards. We say yes, and the game proceeds. George loses. Highly competitive we are not. Or maybe we're just not so good at poker.

Oh, and did I mention that when anyone runs out of poker chips, someone else automatically pushes half their stash over to them? Such a magnificent metaphor. If only the rest of the world operated that way.

I think to myself that these are probably the kind of people Jesus hung out with for most of his life. Ordinary saints.

Now that's a canonization I could really get excited about.

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

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