

Words of Remembrance for Sr Jan Geason RSM

Funeral Mass, Melbourne, Friday, 6th December 2019

When offered the privilege of sharing Words of Remembrance about our dear Jan, Sr Jan Geason, I began by reflecting on the great gift of our human capacity to remember.

Those of us who have known Jan are already cherishing the time we are taking to share stories, anecdotes and relational connections.

This is our way, in the midst of grieving her sudden absence, that we invite her presence amongst us once more.

In the early hours of last Wednesday morning (November 27th), after serious injuries sustained in an accidental fall at home, in Fitzroy, on the Monday night, Jan died and left us all so deeply saddened.

But she also left us mightily enriched by the strength of the memories of her great life. In recalling moments we shared with Jan over the years, we can connect with her spirit which remains present to us who are gathered here, in community, in this church today.

Jan lived her gift of life (and her gifted life) with grace and with goodness.

And we have all been blessed and enriched by her in the many places and spaces and roles and relationships which she was called to engage in for 64 years as a Sister of Mercy.

After her Mercy schooling in Deloraine, Tasmania, Jan began her novitiate formation as a Sister of Mercy at Rosanna in Melbourne in 1953. On this very date, 66 years ago (6/12/1953), she was received into the Order as a Novice along with Sisters who are here today.

Following her profession of Vows in 1955, (64 years ago tomorrow), she studied teaching at Mercy Teachers College and then completed her Arts degree at Melbourne University.

Education/Teaching

Jan's lengthy **ministry in Education** began as a teacher – at St Michaels, St Aloysius (North Melbourne), The Academy (Fitzroy) and then for 14 years as Teacher and Principal at Our Lady of Mercy College (Heidelberg), as well as St Ann's (Warrnambool).

These were all years Jan, then known then as Sr Teresa, cherished and enjoyed, including the challenge of taking on the Principalship of OLMC at 29 years of age!

Students, staff, parents and advisors at these Colleges were significant for Jan and, as attested to in the numbers of you gathered here today, with such respect and affection, you always had a special place in her heart, as she does in your hearts.

Many of you have kept in touch with her over the years since school days and know how she continued the joy and warmth of her sincere interest and concern for you.

According to Mary Helen Neale, who is here today with a number of the women from the 'Class of 1967', you reflected together, just yesterday, at a lunch which Jan would normally

have attended, 'we were so blessed to have Jan as a teacher.' 'She taught us how to think and how to question. She challenged us.'

Her listening ear and her generous, compassionate heart, as well as her capacity to understand the human struggle and the challenges faced, were indicative of Jan's character. Her wise advice was never harsh or judgmental.

Jan's equanimity grew out of her ever deepening knowledge of the God of Mercy. This core awareness shaped her way of relating, mentoring and guiding those in her circle of influence throughout her life.

Formation

During and immediately after her years of education ministry, Jan was appointed to lead **Formation programs** in Mercy Religious Life. She had studied theology and spirituality at the Jesuit College of Theology in Berkley California (in the 70's).

In this role she inspired groups of young Mercy women, in their years as newly Professed Sisters, and in their preparation for Final Vows.

I was blessed to be one of those women and to enjoy, with many others, her insights and understandings of the profound theological changes in religious life and the broader church in the post Vatican 2 era. Jan was indeed a woman of broad vision and deep intellect.

Many of us remember Jan as a mentor at this time with:-

- her readiness to face new challenges and to accept new directions in Religious Life - based on hope and supported by faith,
- her call to a humbler and more deeply human spirituality - of a God present to us as the locus of our everyday lives
- of her openness to discuss the mystery and the mystical as intrinsic dimensions of a deeply faith-filled life
- of her sense of the centrality of the Eucharist,
- of meditative and reflective prayer and reading
- of her enjoyment of a shared meal, with story, laughter and good conversation
- of her love of music and literature and her considerable depth of talent in both

And most of all, for those who were newer to the journey – Jan's unwavering encouragement and belief in the fundamental 'goodness' of people. She brought out the best in us!

Family Services

In her mid-life and in the mid 1980's, Jan responded to a new call to work in the Mercy ministry of **Family Services**. To do this well and professionally, she completed tertiary studies in Social Work at the University of Melbourne and took up leadership responsibility (as Director of St Vincent de Paul Children's Home, Black Rock)- in an arena of deep need in our society.

This was very much in continuity with the traditional works of Mercy which our Foundress, Catherine McAuley, had begun. Jan wrote,

'Fidelity to our past helps us to develop new life in the spirit of the original vision.'...

and ... 'Catherine's basic stance in life was a remarkable trust in God's providence.'

Jan's capacity to create the space within herself to fully consider the person or the need or the issue before her, was key to the integrity, and authenticity of her response.

Creating that inner space was born of her faithful practice of prayer and reflection, for Jan was a woman of deep and **genuine** faith.

Her efforts to follow the mission and teachings of Jesus Christ, were intrinsic to her way of being in the world.

Leadership

Her ministry in roles of elected **Leadership of the Sisters of Mercy** - in the Province as Councilor, as Melbourne Congregation Leader and as Institute President (ISMA), reflected this faith and integrity of purpose.

Jan was a natural Leader and the apparent ease with which she carried great responsibilities, often seemed effortless.

The call of the Gospel, (within the call to Apostolic Religious Life), was always at the heart of her decision-making, both organisationally, in relation to our larger public ministries, and personally, with the Sisters.

She spoke of our practical Mercy structures as being essential and foundational, but she always viewed them as **at the service of the primary focus of our lives**, namely the **living of our vision and mission** as Sisters of Mercy.

That stance was the basis of her courage in leadership during an era of profound change in the church and broader world.

Jan wrote during those years:

'At times of crisis, Mercy people have realigned and dreamt of new ways of implementing the spirit and vision – indeed – taken the greatest risks.'

During those years of Mercy Leadership, including as National President of ISMA, (1993 – 1999), Jan, following Sr Kath Burke, supported the newly formed **Mercy International Association**, based in the original House of Mercy in Dublin.

Inspired by her capacity for a global Mercy perspective Jan said, at that time:

...'Connectedness across the world can sustain us in our local on-going struggle for mercy and justice.'

...'That the mercy vision within the broader Christian context has survived for 160 years says something to me of its universality.'

And so, Jan and her Council and the Congregation Leaders of the time, Sr Helen Delaney here in Melbourne, gave support to the growth and development of the Association. They also encouraged volunteers and supported a successful communication capacity for Mercy across the world.

As part of her Leadership responsibilities, Jan visited many Mercy Sisters who were working in the harsh and demanding environments of **Refugee Camps** in South East Asia, African countries and in countries experiencing great poverty, such as Pakistan.

Influenced by the pain of these people and her belief in formal education as liberating and empowering, Jan went, at the conclusion of her ministry of Leadership, to work in Teacher Education with other Sisters of Mercy and the Director, Sr Annette Schneider, at Notre Dame Institute in Karachi, **Pakistan** for three months, every year, for ten years.

Spiritual Direction

Jan's skills of **Spiritual Direction and Guidance** continued to be a strong focus across her years of active Mercy ministry. She also worked, part time, for 16 years (2000 -2016), with the Retreat Team at Campion College, Kew, at the Jesuit spirituality centre in Melbourne, Australia.

Community Life, Family and Mary's words.

It was evident to those who knew Jan, that her wisdom was increasingly drawn from a deepening well of mercy.

She grew to be an ever more transparent mediator of the compassion of the God.

Some 8 years ago Jan had a very serious stroke and her loving Mercy Communities of Northcote, and then Fitzroy, cared for her so beautifully, particularly in the early years of her recovery. Despite a number of health challenges since then, Jan never complained.

As Mary, her sister, has said 'Jan was peaceful and serene, taking joy and satisfaction in all the activities in which she could engage, and content and accepting of what was not now possible for her.'

She was so happy living at Fitzroy and was always full of praise and gratitude for each of you in the Community and for the Carers who made life easier for her.

She also cherished those special years of living there in **Community** with her beloved sister, Mary.

As we have heard from Joe, Jan's brother, Jan loved and valued each one of **her family** members. Jan's sister, Mary, shared with me that 'Jan took joy in Geason family gatherings - birthdays, first communions, confirmations and weddings,' - delighting in your significant life events.

'She also took great joy -

- in offering hospitality and genuine welcome to visitors and friends,
- in being hosted by those who sought and appreciated her company and friendship,
- in her daily 'reflective hour' at Fitzroy that commenced at 5.00pm each evening in the Reading Room!
- in her weekly exercise program to stay as well as possible'

Mary has also spoken of 'the joy she has in the memory of Jan's company and, in a special way, in the two weeks they spent together at the beginning of November with Madeline and Faye, cruising the South Pacific.'

Mary has reflected that 'Jan was full of joy and they were joyful together and she would often say to Mary "It's all a bit of fun".'

Farewell

Yes, we are all deeply saddened by Jan's death and her disappearance from visibility and voice, - for that is the reality of death.

We mourn the end of the great conversations, the laughter and the encouraging words, but let us give thanks and celebrate today

- that we have known her personally,
- that we have been influenced by her inspiration and leadership of our Mercy Communities and Ministries
- that we have been taught by her wisdom and guided by her faithful heart
- that we have been blessed to be her friends
- that we have witnessed her courage and integrity to engage in change when it was the call of the Gospel,

Jan Geason - woman of great vision and perception, of graciousness and big-hearted compassion, ...we will miss you so much... but we have called up your presence in the Spirit amongst us through the remembering we have just shared.

We will do this again after this Eucharist and after your Burial, and again when we gather in the future. For in memory is the gift of presence and in presence is the energy of the Spirit on which we can continue to draw for consolation and inspiration.

We are so blessed and grateful to have known you Jan and to have been challenged by you to take risks beyond fear, in the knowledge that the God of Mercy, in whom you believed so deeply, will continue to be with us, to hold our hands steady and guide our feet surely, as we navigate new pathways of mercy and justice with fresh responses in a world crying out for greater truth, love and compassion.

May you now rest in peace Jan.

Adele Howard rsm

Our Lady Help of Christians Church Brunswick East, Melbourne, Australia.