

Some memories of Sr Virginia Hasson RSM

On Holy Saturday, Sr Joanne Whitaker sent a message to Sr Denise and me that our dear friend Sister Virginia Hasson, had died on Good Friday (10 April 2020), following a massive heart attack on the previous Tuesday.

One of my first encounters with Virginia was (if I remember correctly) in late 1984 when we learned that a COERR (the Thai Catholic agency) van in which she was travelling near the Thai Cambodia border, had left the road at speed and some of its passengers were severely injured. The most serious cases, and Sr Virginia was among them, were flown by helicopter to Bangkok and taken to the military hospital in Rajavithi Road, around the corner from Xavier Hall where I lived. On receiving word from Fr Alfonso I went quickly to the hospital. There in the Emergency ward I saw a number of patients lying on gurneys, just arrived and awaiting care. Anxiously I discreetly checked among them for Virginia, praying and hoping that she was safe. We spotted each other. She raised an arm and a finger in her characteristic way. "Oh hi", she said from the side of her mouth, as if it was perfectly normal to be out flat in an emergency ward. If she could move that arm then she was not paralysed.

Two of the passengers, Virginia and a young American doctor called Clara, had been thrown clean out of the van. Others within the van had but minor injuries. Clara became a paraplegic. While Virginia was kept under observation for a few days, then picked up her cushion and walked home. After resting some weeks, she went back to work in Site II camp. There she stayed another five years or so, overseeing a range of schools from primary to college level, until repatriation to Cambodia began to emerge as a real possibility. Then she responded to a call to serve in refugee camps in Africa. At its height, Site II held close to 200,000 people, half of them children. For refugees, education is the doorway to a possible future. Education instils hope. Virginia was a quiet, discreet source of hope for thousands of children, young adults and for anxious parents.

Virginia always carried that cushion to ease her back when she sat. But never ever did I hear her speak about the continual discomfort the injury must have caused. A shrewd observer of people and of processes, she was always ready to review a proposal or available to offer wise advice on how to support people. Always loyal, discreet, professional, at peace and playful. Virginia gave to the refugees and her teams all she had learned from her years and years of teaching and administration.

Virginia had been recruited for JRS by Fr Ed Brady, a great educationalist who had earlier been a missionary in Sri Lanka, and with the first wave of Jesuits to respond to Fr Arrupe's 1980, he came to the Thai refugee camps from Philadelphia where he lived in the 1970s. Ed was back in Philadelphia briefly in 1984 and enticed Virginia's congregation and Virginia with his idea to start programs of college level education in the camps. Ed himself moved to set up education systems in Ban Vinai in northern Thailand, a refugee camp for the Hmong, hill tribe Lao people. Ed would later move to the Sudan where he lived until he died.

Virginia had a Doctorate from Fordham University and vast experience at all levels of education, special education, through to college level. She got the idea to start a college for distance learning and recruited retired sisters of her Gwynedd Mercy College in Philadelphia mentoring students and correcting their papers. The correspondence was all in hard copies, sent through the postal services. Years later, Sr Denise Coghlan could walk into one of the biggest private banks in Cambodia and its owner would proudly recall how he was taught English by her and business principles by Fr Ron Anton, who came to Thailand for some summers to help in the college program that Sr Virginia had set up in Site II. Virginia was ably guided and supported by Denise and Bernie Evans, Mercy sisters from Australia also with decades of teaching experience behind them, and many other collaborators,

including refugee teachers whom they recruited and formed. (Virginia would not let us say that she “trained” teachers. You train animals, not people, she would say.)

On several occasions Virginia had been asked to visit Ed Brady’s work in the Sudan, but had great difficulty in getting the visa. She was about to go to the Sudanese embassy in Rome one day and in the letter of guarantee that to accompany her application I wrote her name as “Hassan”. The official said to her that she must be a Muslim! The visa was granted immediately.

In the early 1990s we went together with Denise to visit a huge refugee camp in Gambela, in the Rift Valley in the South of Ethiopia, with plans to open education projects in the vast Sudanese refugee camp of Pugnido and hopefully in a nearby camp of Sudanese boy soldiers (“lost boys”). Before we could put everything together, Mengistu Haile Mariam was overthrown. After this regime change Sudanese were no longer welcome in Ethiopia. The refugees were chased thousands of kilometres to Kenya and Uganda. JRS regrouped and some of the same team, Virginia among them, with Celso Romanin leading that team, established a base in 1993 in Adjumani, northern Uganda, to serve the many Sudanese who arrived there. Virginia often tells the story of meeting a man who recognised her in a Ugandan camp and came with deep appreciation to tell her that they had met in Fugnido camp. “You said you would come back,” he said with tears, “and here I find you. Thank you, you don’t forget us.”

After leaving the JRS in Uganda, Virginia returned to Philadelphia, to Gwynedd Mercy College where she served as a Trustee on the board and in other roles. But she came back to Africa to support her lifelong friend, Sr Joanne Whitaker who had been recruited to a demanding assignment as Regional Director of JRS for Southern Africa.

On a website of her congregation I found these words by Virginia. Clearly they came from her heart. They describe the hopes and dreams that were brilliantly reflected in the life she lived.

What are your hopes and dreams for our Institute as we move into the future?

“My dream is that grounded in reflection and prayer, we will continue to strive to be women of integrity, wholeheartedly engaged in lives of compassionate service. My hope is that we will grow in our empathy for those who are suffering throughout our world and persistently use all means at our disposal to collaborate with them so that together we can seek short-term relief as well as long-term solutions.”

What are the challenges we face? What are some suggestions you have to meet those challenges?

“One challenge is the increasingly fearful global environment which is motivating many to give priority to protecting one’s own economic well-being and the status quo. We can meet this challenge by planning and acting for the common good of our global community, consciously monitoring the presence of any self-interest in our decision making and remaining mindful that the common good will only be attained if there is active participation by all those affected.”

Virginia was certainly a “woman of integrity, wholeheartedly engaged in a life of compassionate service”. What a privilege it has been to know and love her, to be in her company, to be guided and encouraged by her.

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