

Reflection for 25th Jubilee of Sister Tonette Sperando, O.S.B.
November 18, 2017
By Sister Janet Marie Flemming, O.S.B.

I would like to thank Sister Tonette for this opportunity to share a few thoughts with you today. I do believe she might be just a little nervous about what I'm going to say. I would quiet that nervousness with the phrase she has heard every day of her life from a God who loves her dearly... Fear Not.

On behalf of Sister Tonette and all of our sisters I would like to thank Bishop Foley, Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Birmingham, for being with us today. Thank you for your continuing prayers and support for our Community.

To Father Joel, Father Linus and the monks of St. Bernard (with a prayer for Bro. Gus who was always present at our Community celebrations), the sisters of Mount St. Scholastica and Our Lady of Grace Monasteries, better known as the Atchison and Beech Grove, and all of our Oblates: It's a joy to have you celebrate with us, especially on the occasions where we give witness to that which bonds us as sisters and brothers in Christ, our monastic way of life. Thank you for being with us.

To the many other consecrated Religious women who join us today, thank you for your love and support as we all serve the Gospel together.

Sister Tonette was born and raised in Birmingham, AL in a strongly Sicilian Catholic family. We welcome Sister's parents, Steve and Catherine, her brother Michael and her sisters Gina Lackey and Sarah Burns and thank them for the part they played in Sister Tonette's vocation. We also welcome Gina's husband C.D. and Sara's husband Roland and a good portion of Sister's extended family and many friends to this celebration.

To quote Sister Tonette's vocation story, "My family has always played a significant role in my life. It is from my family that I first learned of God's unconditional love for all people. It was through the example of my parents and siblings that I learned that God should come first in my life and that everything else should be a reflection of my relationship with my God.

My parents instilled in my brother, two sisters and me that family was a priority. The strong community bond I found in this monastic community

matched my understanding of family. Hence, I felt a familial bond with the women of this Benedictine Community.”(end quote)

A reminder for Sister’s family of something they are already very aware of: When Sister entered this community, you didn’t lose a daughter or sister, you gained a whole community of daughters and sisters into your family, just like we welcomed you all into our extended community.

Years ago the Sisters living in Birmingham gathered at St. Paul’s to celebrate Thanksgiving. At mass before lunch, there was a young woman who read the first reading that I had never met before. As she read I had a strong conviction that I was listening to someone who had a religious vocation, and I began praying for that vocation that day.

Little did I know years later, that same young woman would become such an integral part of our Benedictine Community.

Sister Tonette said that her *fiat*, her yes to God, caused her life to take on a whole new meaning. The missing puzzle piece finally slid into place causing a wholeness to occur in her life. To quote her “I knew by entering Sacred Heart Monastery I was “coming home.”

Sister Tonette made it clear in her selection of the readings for this celebration the importance of Love in her life. She is in good company in believing in the primacy of Love.

At the beginning of the fourth chapter of his *Rule* on the Instruments of Good Works, St. Benedict emphasizes the importance of love as the greatest instrument of good works, and indeed the goal, of every good work his monks would seek to accomplish when he quotes from the Gospels:

“First of all, love the Lord God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22.37-39, Mk 12.30-31, Lk 10.27) (RB 4.1-2).

Pope Francis reminds us that God’s love is infinite when he reflects: “Jesus teaches us the way of love, of having an open heart, of loving without measure, putting other kinds of love aside.”

Our mission, the Holy Father underscored, is to obey God and to give joy to others, noting: “Love and joy are gifts we must ask the Lord for.”

Love and joy are gifts that Sister Tonette has received abundantly and shared freely throughout her life.

She has taken that unconditional love learned from her family and embraced it as part of her primary vocation.

Whether in the classroom or school administration, community finances, development or fundraising she has listened carefully to the words of St. Benedict that **“Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else (RB 4.21).**

Now as prioress she is sharing her many strengths and gifts guiding our Community with this unconditional love into our future together.

Real love is not something we consume, it’s something we co-create with God. It involves the will. It involves choosing to do a right action — a selfless action — and then actually doing it. That’s what changes human hearts. In the long run, people remember what we do, a lot more clearly than anything we say. So “Let us preach the Gospel at all times, using words when necessary.”

St. John of the Cross reminds us that “In the twilight of life, God will NOT judge us on our earthly possessions and human successes, but on how well we have loved.”

Last Thursday we celebrated the feast of St. Gertrude the Great. St. Gertrude was a Benedictine mystic who had a special devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus which she described as the point where human and divine love are most intimately joined. “Inscribe with your precious blood, most merciful Lord, your words on my heart that I may read in them both your sufferings and your love.”

This Love is personal, because it is not lived primarily in ideas or programs or structures . . . but in the flesh-and-blood relationships of daily life, between God and humankind, Parent and child, sibling and sibling, friend and friend, and yes, Prioress and Sisters. In other words, real love always has a face. It’s never just a theory. People met the person of Jesus Christ, and their lives changed.

Love also has a cost. Love always involves personal sacrifice. We're all called to live our lives for others. Thank you, Sister for making that personal sacrifice when you accepted the call of the Spirit in assuming the mantle of leadership in this Monastic Community.

Remember this day and the readings you have heard. We are called to be love to all those we meet. Our witness of love is the seed of the future. When you leave here today, be true to that love. Be true to those in the faith who came before us to those who will come after us.

In that spirit, may God grant each of us the openness to hear His voice with the ear of our hearts . . . and the courage to act on it by following His call.

Our prayer for you Sister Tonette, may Christ will be more and more at home in your heart, living within you as your trust in Him continues to grow.

May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep and how high His love for you (and all of us) really is.

May your heart be filled with the peace and love of God as you continue your life's journey in the midst of your family and friends and especially in the midst of this Monastic Community and please continue to fly high your kite in love as you lead us into our future together.