



EULOGY
SISTER CECILE PAQUETTE C.S.C.

Today we gather here together in this unique moment to pay tribute to Cecile Paquette, a very courageous woman, dearly loved, greatly admired and deeply cherished. We gather as family, as Holy Cross Sisters and Associates, as friends and acquaintances, to express our love... and to grieve the loss of her physical presence among us.

I first met Cecile when I attended a retreat Jean Vanier gave in Vancouver many years ago. I can still see her standing beside him, a beautiful young woman dressed in her blue habit of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. Something emanated from her that I could not miss...and that I would be given to know more deeply in the succeeding years. Life called her forth and fashioned her into who she was when she left to go Home, Home to the One she so yearned for.

Although most of you know Cecile very well, many of you may not be familiar with her journey, so I invite her tell us some parts of her story.

"I was born on April 26, 1945. From the beginning, I formed an alliance of belonging with the God who created and loved me into being.

When I was 5 years old and in grade one, I met the Sisters of the Child Jesus as my teachers and I was touched by their life style as well as their habit. In my heart of hearts I knew that one day I would be one of them.

As we moved from North Vancouver to Montreal and back to North Van, the intensity of my belonging to God remained in my heart, so after completing grade twelve with the Sisters of the Child Jesus, I entered their community as a "come and see" and officially became a postulant at age 16. I continued my formation, pronouncing my temporary and perpetual vows with these sisters. I remained with them for thirteen years until I met the Sisters of Holy Cross, where I answered the call to teach and be present to those who sought to tend to their inner growth.

It was in Ottawa that I began my ministry of counseling and giving workshops. Sister Marlene Bosch joined me there, and we continued working together in St Joseph's parish and in the growth process with individuals.

But two years later, in 1982, I was diagnosed with MS, and my whole focus changed. I belonged to God, yes...but how was I going to continue living out this belonging without being bitter or resentful? How would I accept what was now in my life and would be a deep source of my own growth?

Our experience with Cecile over the years clearly answers the question she asked when she received such a life-changing diagnosis. She needed to take the time and the means to grieve her losses, yes... but she was anything but bitter or resentful.

To describe the impact Cecile had on so many, I asked several of you to speak of your experience. Your words reveal Cecile as you perceived her...as you experienced her... as you received her as a gift of light, healing and transformation in your lives.

Here is some of what you told me:

Cecile was a loving, compassionate and caring constant in our lives. So many of us would not be who we are today had it not been for her intervention in our lives. Several of us came to know her through her dedicated work with PRH, where she brought her quality of compassion, deep listening and insight to her calling as a teacher, mentor and guide, walking faithfully with us on the path of self-discovery and healing. She created a space for individuals to heal their wounded hearts and she also led growth groups where we learned to hold one another's pain together, in gentleness and respect. She brought solidity and security to our lives. She was someone to whom we could always turn; a calm presence in the middle of a storm.

A very private person, Cecile was kind, gentle and patient. Her way of listening was unique – she spoke only when necessary, opening avenues of truth, encouraging with words of wisdom and discernment. The friendships she made, and her influence on those she accompanied were lasting, as indicated by the many testimonies received from far and near.

Her acceptance of others was total and unconditional. She believed that "God writes straight with crooked lines." This helped us to forgive ourselves and to trust that no matter how many mistakes we made, how many challenges we faced, we are loved by God, and all will be well.

Cecile was very talented – she could do just about anything; her creativity knew no bounds. When she could no longer draw, she took pictures. When she could no longer cook, she taught others how to make her special apple pie, when she could not care for house plants she taught others how to make things grow. She not only shared her own gifts of art, dance and creativity, she knew how to cooperate with others' gifts and draw out their special abilities. Many remember the beautiful decorations and liturgies at St Joseph's Parish, the fruit of teamwork when she, Marlene and Jane Williams pooled their inspirations and giftedness.

Cecile loved beauty in all its forms. She loved nature in its majesty and abundance. She admired everything that revealed the goodness of God. And she liked having fun! – We can still see her dancing in her wheelchair. She loved to laugh...even at herself...even through very embarrassing situations. Annette could tell us hilarious stories!

Cecile was an intuitive observer, who sensed our search to grow in faith and deepen our understanding. Persistent and persuasive, she gathered her flock: "Come learn about Moreau" she said with a smile. "Explore the Holy Cross charism." And so the Associate program began to flourish. In 2003, Cecile developed the Associate Program which continues to be used in the Congregation as formation for those wishing to become Associates. Over the years, the Associates have bonded, socialized and found light. Together they have explored their call to service and gained new insights through regular meetings. The yearly retreat has been a high point where the Associates were introduced to different members of the Holy Cross Family who led various retreats. The Associates like to refer to Cecile as "A mighty, spiritual force on Holy Cross wheels!"

Cecile's Holy Cross community was very important to her. No matter the effort it took, she made it a priority to be present at all community and Congregational meetings,

faithful to the responsibilities that were hers as an active member but also as one who took initiatives. She received the younger members from Haiti and Africa who came to St Laurent on their way to the novitiate in Peru. They visited her at her home in Ottawa, where they also met the sisters from the Ontario sector. Her influence, though discreet, was felt internationally throughout the Congregation. And her presence continued to be a witness through Zoom meetings these last years.

The way Cecile lived through so many years with MS with dignity, grace and courage; the manner she experienced its gift of poverty and humility; the way she embraced every succeeding diminishment, was an inspiration to all who knew her and who heard of her. It seemed as if she lived her MS as a vocation...facing her struggles with constant courage and conviction. How many times, when her name would come up in a conversation, someone would share how much of an inspiration she was to them, just by the way she lived her life without complaint, in gratitude that she could continue to give of herself in whatever way she could.

Annette, Cecile's companion and soul-mate of over forty years, speaks this way of her experience with Cecile.

"Cecile was my angel to a new life. She had this gift to look beyond the exterior into the very heart of a person. When I first met her, I was in the throes of despair, not wanting to live and not having anything to live for. She took the time and the patience to be with me and called me to look at my life and how to heal with the help of God. She never judged nor criticized me. She saw my softness and my beauty. She loved me unconditionally back into life and into wanting to move forward. She was my angel, my friend, my mentor and my companion, and she never let me down. Many refer to me as Cecile's caregiver, but our relationship was much more than that. We were friends, companions, and kindred spirits, learning from each other how to live and enjoy life as it was given to us by God, driven by the Spirit spurring us on to new challenges, and giving us the strength to be there for each other. There was a special bond of trust between us.

She introduced me to Holy Cross where I immediately felt at home and was totally accepted and always welcomed. I was slowly learning who I was and finding my

heart again. As the years passed, we worked closely together. Cecile and I lived life, enjoying celebrations, travelling, and experiencing all that nature had to offer, from the mountains, to the oceans, to God's majesty in a way I had never experienced.

I will be eternally grateful to Cecile for all she has done and been for me and for others."

Annette, those of us gathered here are keenly aware of your selfless presence in Cecile's life. As time went on, you went from being Cecile's hands and feet to making up for those muscles which ceased to serve her needs. With all the love in your heart, you remained true to what you had received as a call - creating the means for Cecile to live life to the fullest. Nothing was too daunting for you to attempt! Within Holy Cross, you cooperated with her in fulfilling her mission. We are well aware that Cecile would never have been able to fulfill her life calling the way she did had it not been for your constant, selfless and loving presence at her side, your total dedication to her well being. You also gave her the possibility of living at home in a setting which allowed her to live in freedom, peace and joy. You never considered the cost...

Receive our gratitude and our appreciation, Annette. Without your dedication, your special care and perseverance, Cecile could not have been all that she was for and with us...

Cecile, you have been our sister, our companion, our family, our friend, our guide and our mentor. You have been our inspiration, our leader, our wisdom teacher...and the reflection of Jesus in our midst. As we say our final farewell, receive our love and our gratitude. You have left an indelible mark on our lives... You have left us a legacy of courage and peaceful acceptance... acceptance of life as it is... not matter how it is...and the willingness to cooperate with life so as to allow it to bear lasting fruit.

God, to whom you belonged from the very beginning, has set you free at last - and welcomed you home - home into the Land of the Living.

Adieu, Cecile!

Jeanne Wilfort csc