

## Sister Gemma Liberati, OSB

How did they know her? How did St. Paul writing to the Christians of the first century know Gemma? And how did the evangelist Matthew know her? And how is it that the readings for the Eucharist that the church gives us for today, Wednesday of the 11<sup>th</sup> week in ordinary time, are the perfect readings for the woman we celebrate the Resurrection liturgy for today.

St. Paul tells us that “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” And “God loves a cheerful giver.” And today we send off a woman who gave her all, sowing bountifully to the very end!

Recently, in anticipation of her surgery and what we thought would be a period of rehabilitation, several Sisters offered to take over some of her responsibilities. She spoke to each one and explained in her own inimitable way how the job was to be done! I was going to take care of washing the dust mops and the rags. She gave me numerous details and told me she did them on Tuesdays. She even gave me a bottle of OxyClean for some VERY soiled ones! I told her I would probably do them on Sundays when the washers were not as busy. Last Sunday, mid-morning, she stood at my door asking, “Did you do the mops?”...I had to tell her I didn’t...I felt like I was confessing a sin! Several other sisters told me she came to them also by way of reminding them of what they had committed to. She wanted things taken care of.

Cheerful giver...what a great description of our sister, our cousin, our aunt, our friend St. Paul gave of this woman who would live 21 centuries after him. And he noted “God loves a cheerful giver!” What a cheerful, witty person she was and how she shared her wit and humor with all of us. Often times it was just her comments that made us smile. And when her entertainment was planned, our laughter would raise the roof...Cinderella and the Halloween witch are two that many of us remember with a smile. She certainly knew how to get into character. I doubt that few of us in this chapel today would not remember her “food litany,”..too sweet, too sour, too hot, too cold, I can’t chew it, it gets under my plate.!” That was her mantra when she heard comments about food. Her many years in food service were years of total commitment ...and occasional frustration...but she performed her duties with love for those she served.

The gospel of quiet action seems to fit Gemma well...she did many things in a hidden way, quietly, without fanfare or notice, just because they had to be done!

In a reflection on today’s gospel, writer Valerie Schultz notes, “Jesus admonishes us to shirk the spotlight, to do God’s work anonymously. Don’t chase the glory. Don’t expect your name in lights. Don’t trumpet your charity. Don’t even take the free tote bag when you donate to a cause.”

Gemma lived the ideal without even noticing!

In the past few years I have learned more of what she did usually after she did it. For instance, after a Sister died, she would clean that sister's bedroom, readying it for the next person...I wonder who will clean hers! She saw what needed done around the monastery and took care of it. The Rule of Benedict reminds us that we should treat all things in the monastery as though they were "vessels of the altar." The care she took of everything under her charge, right down to the trash cans and rags, was admirable and indicated her care and devotion.

Gemma was a woman who loved her Benedictine life. She was faithful in every aspect of her vocation. Her quiet, faithful presence at prayer is a marvelous example for all of us. She loved each of us with a warm affection. (I must add that she also idolized her sister and brothers and their families and her friends.) While she often laughingly commented that she only had "three credits in Gregorian chant" her knowledge and understanding of others can teach us that our degrees are only a part of who we are as human beings.

We remember that just about two years ago, Gemma "died twice." We have gotten a lot of mileage out of that event and we didn't realize at that time as she recovered, that her recovery was a gift of time for each of us. Gemma did all things well and thoroughly...she died, now three times... She did it in her time and did it well!

As she went into surgery last week, her only hope was that she would feel better and be able to do the things she used to do with the pep and energy she once had. God had other plans. Now at rest in the divine embrace she can give her all to her God for all eternity.

May she rest in peace!

-Karen Brink, OSB 6/21/17