

Funeral Homily  
January 17, 2012  
for  
Mary Alice Pratt (1929–2012)

by Fr. John S. Rausch

This episode started with Gov. Ernie Fletcher's dog. You may recall that a number of years ago we held demonstrations against the death penalty in Frankfort. This one Sunday afternoon with Gov. Fletcher ensconced safely in the Governor's Mansion, the rally on the capitol steps decided to march the two blocks to the mansion and take its message to the governor.

Mary Alice came to the rally that day with Mrs. Bowling, the mother of T.C. Bowling, a mentally challenged fellow on death row. They had tried several times to see the governor, but he would not meet with them.

Just as the crowd got to the fence of the mansion, a little dog came running out and behind him was Gov. Fletcher dressed in a jogging suit chasing him. The governor caught his dog right by the fence, and right where Mary Alice and Mrs. Bowling were standing!

Mary Alice seized the opportunity and said, "Excuse me, Governor, but we need to talk to you."

The three of them talked for ten minutes about the immorality of capital punishment and the inappropriateness of executing a mentally challenged person. The crowd turned to one another and the common feeling was that we just witnessed a miracle.

Mary Alice had befriended Mrs. Bowling and even drove her to Eddyville to visit her son a few times. While many of us talk about the injustice of capital punishment, Mary Alice reached out to the families of the perpetrators as a relational ministry because those families were also victims of that violence.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because He has anointed me  
to bring glad tidings to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,

and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Lk. 4:18 & 19)

Mary Alice loved studying Luke’s Gospel and, in particular, she loved this passage. She wrote three short essays entitled, “Snapshots: Examples of Social Situations and Possible Christian Responses.” She wrote them as a three-part series for the diocesan newspaper, and each one of them referenced this passage.

The first essay discussed a hospitality center and the people who frequented it. She subtitled it “Good News to the Poor.” She wrote:

“But Jesus had a broader idea of poor. He included those excluded from full participation in social life, those who did not, possibly could not, always observe the purity laws: women, disabled, foreigners, all those including the economically poor.”

Sr. Ellen told me she met Mayor Gray in the last few days and he hadn’t heard of Mary Alice’s death, but he went on to recount her last words to him. Pointing her finger at him Mary Alice said, “Mayor Gray, you need to keep thinking about how we can get this affordable housing for the poor. You need to do something about this right now!”

The second essay was about immigration in which she described an undocumented family. This time she used the Scripture a few verses beyond her favorite passage. She wrote: “In the same synagogue episode in which Jesus proclaimed ‘good news to the poor,’ he told the congregation of the prophets Elijah and Elisha who ministered to strangers—Gentiles, instead of to their own. Despite Scriptural indications of God’s concern for all people, Jesus’s synagogue congregation was not accepting his message. They saw themselves as the chosen people and felt themselves exclusive.”

Mary Alice knew about the struggles of Third World people and why they may be forced to emigrate—she traveled. Mary Ellen and Kerby Neill were doing some work in Guatemala and they invited folks to come and see their project. Mary Alice made the rugged trip alone to affirm the Neills and observe the community conditions. She also made a trip with Sr. Iris Ann Ledden to observe the conditions in Columbia—and that’s where she learned to dance the Salsa. I bet she was a real hot tamale.

The third essay talked about “Obstacles to Health Care,” which she subtitled “Restoration of Sight to the Blind,” where she cited examples of people without health insurance. Again, returning to her favorite passage in Luke 4, she quotes the Isaiah scroll: “good news to the poor...and recovery of sight to the blind.” In her words:

“In Luke’s Gospel recovery of sight to the blind is a metaphor for healing, restoration of health...In the passage following that in the synagogue, Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law. Throughout the Gospel he cured a centurion’s slave, a bent-over woman, a woman with a hemorrhage, persons with leprosy, and ‘crowds would gather to hear him and be cured’” (Luke 5:15).

Jane Chiles worked with Mary Alice on Kentuckians for Health Care Reform in the ‘90s.

She wrote:

“Mary Alice seriously understood the importance of coverage for screening and prevention...I recall Mary Alice as being unrelenting in her pursuit of justice, and resultantly, if you were going to work with her, you better be serious about working with a capital “W!” Mary Alice walked the walk!”

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts  
will provide for all peoples  
a feast of rich food and choice wines...  
On this mountain the Lord will destroy death forever” (Is. 25:6 & 7).

Mary Alice was with me this past weekend. She was with me because I gave two talks against mountaintop removal (MTR) and I played a ten minute DVD about the Religious Leaders Tour of MTR in 2007. In one scene where local residents testify about the damage from MTR, the film maker focused on a cameo of Mary Alice for three seconds because she sat wrapped at attention exuding an expression of compassion and concern.

She saw creation as the footprint of God and she wrote about it as a prophet and poet:

#### ALL SAINTS DAY

The flame-bright foliage  
of October fades.  
Lace-patterned light dances  
on hallowed graves  
new-carpeted in last season’s  
fallen finery.

From a newly bared pulpit,

a lone bird  
presides at summer's requiem.  
Brown fields sleep, expectant  
of Spring resurrection.

In this, the evening of our year,  
the dead are most present,  
their memory warm and glowing  
like lighted windows  
in the cold November twilight,  
inviting us home.

(Autumn, 1998)  
Mary Alice Pratt

“If God is for us, who can be against us...  
What will separate us from the love of Christ?  
Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or the sword?”  
(Romans 8:31 & 35).

If we apply that to Mary Alice we would extend that litany to include: “Will sexist institutions, will Fox News Catholics, will insults from passing cars at peace vigils separate us from the love of Christ?”

Mary Alice answered, “No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37).

Mary Alice was three days older than Martin Luther King, Jr. MLK was born January 16 and Mary Alice came to us January 13, and both would have been 83 this round. The Holy Spirit was stirring up some powerful souls in 1929!

But, Mary Alice most closely emulated another great prophet of our time: Dorothy Day. She wrote a one person play about her and acted it in church basements and religious gatherings. Dorothy Day’s non-violence, simplicity of life and dedication to the poor visited us in the prophetic presence of Mary Alice.

Some people preach with words—Mary Alice preached with deeds. Some people preach from a pulpit—barred from a pulpit Mary Alice preached with the written word. Some people preach while they’re alive—Mary Alice in her death preaches with her spirit that challenges us to assume her mantle and continue renewing the face of the earth!

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