

Homily for Sr. LaSalle Nannemann, OSF

January 4, 2012

By Sr. Margaret Wick, OSF

**Readings: Deuteronomy 8: 2-3, 7, 9-10, 14, 16
Luke 9: 10 – 17**

On behalf of all of our Franciscan sisters, we welcome Sr. LaSalle's family and extend our sympathy to you, and we also thank you for sharing your sister and your aunt with us for 73 years. We are grateful for your presence here today. We also recognize Sisters Cecile Schlueter and Joyce Horbach, Sister's only living classmates of 1938. Our gratitude and prayers go out to Sisters Joan Losey and Dorothy Adams, life-long friends and companions who were faithfully by Sally's side these last months as her health failed. This event gives us an opportunity to acknowledge our sisters who ministered at Xavier and Emporia with Sr. LaSalle. The legacy you have given the congregation is one that we cherish. Long before the phrase "affordable, accessible health care for all" was part of our conversation, you were providing it in our hospitals. Although we will carry it on differently in the future, it is a legacy that we must remember. Thank you.

You are probably not surprised that the scripture readings selected for today's liturgy contain many food images, reflective of Sister's lifelong ministry. But what we learn from these readings, I think, goes beyond the symbols of food, just as did Sally's life. They reflect two lessons that her life taught us: (1) to remember where our gifts come from and (2) to always be ready to expand our table. Let us look closer at the readings to see what they teach us about these themes.

The verses from Deuteronomy are a special literary approach used often in scripture. The reader is told to remember the past in order to act in a certain way in the present. Usually the passage calls to mind either God's blessings bestowed in the past, or sometimes the punishment God imposed because of the sinfulness of ancestors. The purpose of remembering is to encourage the people to trust that God will continue to bless them, as in the past, or to warn them that punishment will follow sinfulness, as it did in the past. So in this reading we have Moses saying: remember how God was with you for forty years in the desert, and how God fed you. Then Moses lays out the vision of the Promised Land the people are preparing to enter. It is such a beautiful image of abundance, isn't it? Listen to this food list: wheat and barley, vines, fig trees and olive trees, pomegranates and honey – what a feast! But, says Moses, don't forget when you are eating your fill in this good land that God fed you in the desert. Don't forget God's care and guidance. Don't forget that God is the source of all of your gifts. As the reading says "do not become haughty of heart and unmindful of God." Trust God, have confidence that God will provide even if the abundant feast should disappear.

Of course, Sr. LaSalle always remembered where the food that she prepared came from. She had a quiet, steady way of sharing her great gift of making ordinary food into an abundant feast. Indeed, she was a culinary artist – this was her gift and she never forgot the source of that gift. As the years went on and she shared the gift on a smaller scale than at Xavier Hospital – caring for elderly, working at soup kitchens – she continued to share the gift of herself – her humor, her common sense, her presence. She did this with the same ease and graciousness as she did when she fed 200 people each day because she knew so deeply that all gifts were from God; that they were not hers to keep, but were to be shared. In later years when her eyesight failed, a time that understandably was limited and sometimes frustrating, she focused on what she still had, saying: “I can hear, I can think, I can talk, and I can walk.” Yes, she knew that God had given her many gifts.

The story of the loaves and fishes is the only miracle that is in all four gospels. It’s a clear reference to the Eucharist and is often heard on the church’s feast of Corpus Christi. We learn a lot about Jesus and the disciples in this story. In the verse that precedes the passage that was read today, we hear that Jesus and the disciples were tired and wanted to go off to a place by themselves and re-group. But crowds of people followed them – so much for peace and quiet! But the scripture says Jesus welcomed them. And then they wouldn’t leave, even though it was time to eat. The disciples had a couple of ideas on how to solve the problem – send them away or go out and buy food. What happens next is interesting. Jesus gets the situation organized: “Have them sit down in groups of fifty or so.” But then, after blessing the small amount of food that was there, he turns it over to the disciples. They did what Jesus said, even though their assessment of the situation probably caused them to wonder if it was going to work. The lesson learned here is that true discipleship calls us to go beyond our limits, beyond what we think is possible. The table can always be made larger. There will always be enough food.

So many memories have been shared the past days about the challenge of those first years at Xavier Hospital and feeding so many different groups of people: patients, employees, doctors, visitors, sister patients, sister employees. It took a lot of organization and a lot of faith. More than once the abundant food became scarce; more than once the table was expanded and by some miracle there was enough food.

Sr. LaSalle taught us by how she lived that tables could be expanded beyond where it seemed they could go. She also taught us that everyone was welcome at the table. Her baked goods were given as gifts at Christmas time to the doctors. They were also shared with the most ordinary of employees, and with family members of employees who might be especially in need. All were gifted; all were welcome; the table had no limits.

As we bid you farewell, Sr. LaSalle, we thank you for gifting our lives so abundantly. We thank you for teaching us that all gifts come from God and that they are to be shared generously. We thank you for showing us that there is no limit to the number our table can hold. You are now enjoying the heavenly banquet, a rich feast at a very large table, surrounded by those who have gone before you, a vision that you can now see perfectly. Go now in peace, our faithful sister and friend, and take our love with you.