



Sister Thomas Welder

April 27, 1940 – June 22, 2020

A life of...

great faith, steadfast love,
and compassion for all.



Sunday Evening Prayer Vigil *for Sister Thomas Welder*

by Sister Janet Zander

28 June 2020

On this North Dakota late June evening, the Church's 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time with invitation to follow Jesus and extend hospitality to the least, to all, and the eve of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, we are here because we knew Sister Thomas Welder.

Some of us knew her as "our Benedictine sister" at Annunciation Monastery, and were privileged to walk with her to the edge of eternity. Knowing Sister Thomas were the community, Oblates, employees, and, in turn, our families and associates...

Some of us knew Sister Thomas as daughter of Mary Ann (who followed her into community as a Benedictine sister) and Sebastian (who died when she was 11 years old), as sister to George (who preceded her in death) and sister to Judy, as sister-in-law to Marcia and Steve, aunt of Michelle, Ali, Scott, Sara, Tommy, and Joseph, their spouses and children, as her aunt, uncle, cousin and Welder family acquaintance...

Some of us knew Sister Thomas as a consecrated woman of the Church, her association with our bishops, the many priests, sisters—including her Notre Dame aunts, her Franciscan cousin, deacons, and the many Christian sisters and brothers and others she came to know...

Some of us knew Sister Thomas as a University of Mary student, (perhaps as "Sister T"), as a student's family, alum, as colleague in her service as teacher, in development, as President for 31 years, and subsequently named "president *emerita*" by successor, Monsignor James Shea (regarding "president-emerita?"— she would quip, that means 'old')...

Some of us knew Sister Thomas as audience members at her many talks, including for Benedictine higher education, and in her dedication to fostering servant-leadership development, as musician or as her kidney donor or facilitator...

Some of us knew Sister Thomas as a Bismarck-Mandan and North Dakota citizen and perhaps in your own calling as community leader or public servant, as Rough Rider, as collaborator in such groups as the Bismarck-Mandan Chamber, and Development Association, Higher Education

Roundtable, United Way, as colleague on committees such as North Dakota's Vision 2000 back in the 1980's, or board colleague for CHI St. Alexius Medical Health, MDU Resources, The Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, and Light of Christ Catholic Schools...

BUT...all of us knew Sister Thomas as friend - friend who was so present and vitally interested in you, friend who listened with "the ear of her heart" and held, for herself, confidences and sorrows, as did Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and took them to her heart and up in prayer; but who eagerly shared stories told to her by others delighting in life, in family, children and grandchildren; friend with a great sense of humor, friend who imparted her insights into current events and easily shared what she'd read as she was as interested in your insights and discoveries, friend who delighted in being a citizen of North Dakota with its fields, prairie, and Badlands and wandering about and discovering new wildflowers, friend in her gladness in the incredible gift of life, friend who went to the fullness of life just into this new season of summer.

When she and I visited briefly about this time and about related scripture passages, she responded "John 14 and 15,"... "there's a place prepared for you." It's Jesus' last supper with his disciples, and as he converses with them using various images, he then says "I chose you. I have called you friends."

For Sister Thomas, friendship with God and friendship with us had that kind of fullness of life, that fullness that harkens us, with Jesus, back to the Father, the God who is love.

Years ago when our community of Annunciation Priory celebrated the "burning of the mortgage" of the building now called the University of Mary's Benedictine Center, small stones with our names on them served as dinner place cards. Stones are very much a part of our buildings, stones each uniquely shaped, variously colored (when not painted as they are here), and fitted together as "community" to shelter and to provide places of worship—such as in this chapel in which Sister Thomas played the organ and directed the Sisters' Choir. She did this last on May 30, Pentecost Sunday. Regarding these stones, as sisters died they were gathered one by one and placed in a bowl in our chapel. The placing of a sister's stone has now become part of this Evening Prayer before a sister's funeral. Years ago a Benedictine writer brought together the Genesis accounts of Jacob using a stone for a pillow, wrestling with God, and of setting up a stone to mark the place of meeting God. Sister Mary Collins wrote of our lives, of our very bodies being the "markers," like the stone of Jacob, as the place of meeting God, the wrestling place with God in our lives, the "living stones" as scripture says (I Peter 2:5). Sister Thomas, a "living stone," engaged with, wrestled with God in

her need for two kidney transplants, encountered God as Benedictine Sister, wise guide, servant leader, and friend. She engaged with God and the Word of God in planning music for each Sunday Mass for over 50 years as choir director and where psalm and hymn texts were the prayer of her voice, her mind, and her heart.

Wrestling with God is what happens when you give your life away in love, with a fullness of presence, in listening with your heart to God's unconditional love for everyone, and in wrestling with God's unconditional love for oneself. And then, the final wrestling is to come to accept Jesus' words, "come to me...I will give you rest." Sister Thomas, a "living stone" whose very life and body mark, as do ours, the meeting place with God.

As friends of Sister Thomas, each of us has our own and many "Sister Thomas stories." In these days messages have richly conveyed your regard for and tribute to her, citing such characteristics as her rare depth of humility, stalwart faith, supple and expansive heart, her genuine love and respect for others, witty humor, ready, joyful laugh, profound wisdom, graced presence, gentle nature, heart for service, inclusive forgiveness, and attentiveness...attentiveness that had an energy and fire of blessing.

In that great communion where we are one in the heart of God, we pray for each other--Sister Thomas for us and we for her. Because, that's who friends are for each other, because that's what friends do for each other.

For, with Jesus, Sister Thomas called each of us "friend."



Prior to the evening's vigil in which Sister Janet delivered her reflection, members of the University of Mary community and close friends read the Gospels of Luke, John, and the Psalms (concluding with the Songs of Ascent) from the university's St. John's Bible. The reading lasted more than six hours in the presence of Sister Thomas' body as more than 1,000 friends and family came to visit and pray for her, a woman of the Word.

Standing next to Gift Hill Cross, Sister Thomas joins her community of Sisters of Annunciation Monastery for a photo.



FUNERAL REFLECTION

for Sister Thomas Welder

Sister Nicole Kunze, Prioress

29 June 29 2020

I thank all of you for being here today to celebrate the life of Sister Thomas. Our monastic community certainly extends our sympathy to Sister Thomas' family and friends who are with us today in the chapel and those joining us through the livestream. We also thank all of you for your prayers and support for us.

“Listen carefully, my child, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.” This is the first verse from the Rule of Saint Benedict, the short book which guides our life in community. Over the past week, it was rare to read a story, memory, or tribute to Sister Thomas that did not mention or illustrate how she listened to the person to whom she was talking. We all know when we are really being listened to and Sister Thomas exhibited those characteristics – eye contact, head tilted to the side, the head nod, the follow-up questions, and that ever present smile.

In living the Benedictine life for 59 years, Sister Thomas took this advice from Saint Benedict to heart and listened to many, many people. Who are some of the people she listened to during her life?

First, she listened to God. Our community prayer schedule, with morning prayer and evening prayer as the bookends to her day, grounded Sister Thomas and opened her heart to hear God calling to her through the hymns that were sung and the psalms that were recited. Her daily private prayer provided the foundation to assist her in facing the challenges in front of her with grace and humility. Her list of people to pray for was always full and she appreciated the grateful words of thanks and the updates people provided to her.

Sister Thomas listened to her Benedictine foremothers, starting with the first Benedictine sisters who came to Dakota Territory in 1878 and then the founders of our community of Annunciation Monastery. Many of our sisters were her teachers in her youth. Thomas often cited the courage and faith of these sisters who came to the prairies and decided to start a college in the late 1950s.

She listened to those around her. As President of the University of Mary, she listened and responded to the needs of Bismarck, Mandan and the



Sister Thomas directs the Sisters' choir at the annual Benedictine Appreciation Week Mass.

broader region by increasing the offerings of the university. She listened as a board member of CHI St. Alexius Health for over 30 years, ensuring that Catholic healthcare truly “received all as Christ.” She listened to her sisters in community, engaging in conversation at the dinner table, in the hallway and over a bowl of popcorn.

All of this points to the fact that Sister Thomas’ life was about relationships. It was rare to go anywhere and not have someone recognize her or for her to recognize someone. We sisters who attended public events with her knew we’d be the last ones to leave the function, because there was always someone she wanted to visit with before we left. She was energized by being with others. These last four months during the pandemic were challenging for her – there were no public events or funerals to attend, no donor calls, and no talks to prepare and give. She continued sending cards and making phone calls to friends to fill the void, but she was never bored enough to learn how to play a card game.

Family was an important relationship to Sister Thomas. She had the unique experience of having her mother, Sister Mary Ann, follow her in joining our community just a few years after she did. Having the two of them in the community gave us sisters the privilege of getting to know George and Marcia, Judy and Steve, and all the kids, even the next generation. Thomas enjoyed following her nieces and nephews’ lives – from high school and college athletic careers to marriages, children, and grandchildren. Many great stories were shared when the family visited her just two weeks ago. Mary Ann had some high expectations for her family members, even Sister Thomas. Thomas often shared how her mom attended one of her many talks and in the introduction, the emcee shared the long form of Thomas’ resume

with all the various accomplishments and awards she'd earned. As Thomas took the stage, Mary Ann, in a whisper loud enough to be heard throughout the auditorium, leaned over to her friend and said, "Yeah, but she doesn't cook and can't play bridge." (Two of Mary Ann's great loves)

A musician must have a good ear and know how to listen. Sister Thomas served as the choir director at the monastery for over 50 years. Even in the prime of the presidency, she was taking the time to plan the Sunday liturgy, sometimes early Sunday morning, and lead our choir practice at 10:15am every Sunday morning. Many sisters visiting our community would compliment us on how we sang together, our pace, and even our pitch. That was because of Sister Thomas' continuous work with us. Thomas was too polite to ever come out and tell our choir that we were singing flat. She had many clever phrases instead: Sing lightly, open your mouth and drop your jaw, sing on the top half of the note. As it said in the obituary, she always gave credit to the choir, but I can't help but think she sometimes felt like the manager of the Bad News Bears baseball team – trying her best to get just a bit of talent out of this rag-tag group and she did manage to pull it off. Now, she gets to sing with, and maybe even direct, the choir of angels on high!

During my past four years as prioress, Sister Thomas became my trusted mentor and friend. The wisdom she shared in our many conversations was a most valuable gift to me. As she always said, time was the most precious gift one could give to another and I was a blessed recipient of her time. Over the past few weeks in our final conversations, I kept telling Thomas that she was still teaching me. It was a blessed experience to walk with her and watch how she journeyed through this illness and the dying process. I've never experienced anything like her last day with us, just a week ago. There were signs on Sunday morning that the end was near. I shared that news with our sisters at morning prayer, encouraging them to visit Thomas that day. Many sisters visited in the next few hours. One sister said, "Even on her deathbed, she's the one giving me a compliment." The messages we all shared with each other during her last day are ones we should share with each other all the time: we loved her, she loved us, God loves all of us, God truly loved her, and that she had been a gift to all of us.

The last week has been a sad time for all of us here. The following sentence has been shared with me by different people during these days when the loss of Thomas is still so fresh, so real: "The pain we feel today at losing Thomas is nothing compared to the joy of having known her." Thank you, Sister Thomas, for the joy you have given us. We are better people for having known you. We are grateful for the gift you have been to us. May you now share in the glory of God with the saints in heaven.

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL MASS

for Sister Thomas Welder

*by Monsignor James P. Shea,
President of the University of Mary
29 June 2020*

*Wisdom 3:1-6, 9
Psalm 27
II Corinthians 4:14-5:1
John 12:23-26*

Good sisters and brothers:

On behalf of the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery and all of us here at the University of Mary, we want you to know how deeply you honor us in joining us to grieve for Sister Thomas. We know it's not just empathy but true sympathy, you grieve with us.

- A special welcome to the Welder family, to whom we are immeasurably grateful;
- To the Most Rev. David Kagan, Bishop of Bismarck and great friend of Catholic education;
- To Abbot Daniel Maloney of Assumption Abbey, long-time chaplain of Annunciation Monastery and teacher of philosophy at Mary;
- Senator Kevin & Kris Cramer, Governor Ed & Nancy Schafer, all long-time and treasured friends of Sister;
- And Mayor Steve and Wendy Bakken.
- And of all the other wonderful people here today, I should offer a word to Joann Butler. Joann, you and your husband, Matt, who died three years ago, have been the dearest of friends to Sister and the university, and without you we couldn't have grown. Thank you for coming.

In Chapter 68 of his Rule, Saint Benedict provides a teaching on impossible tasks. To say anything adequate now feels like an impossible task. Do you remember when she would come to the podium after a glowing introduction, how she would always remark, "If my mother were here, she would say: 'Yes, but Thomas can't cook and she doesn't play bridge!'"?

Well, there was much more to her than that.

When we struggle to know the words to say – and it is a struggle! – we can't go wrong by turning to the Word, to the Scriptures which offer us the whole cadence of our lives as believers and disciples.

The Scripture readings Sister Thomas chose for the Mass of Christian Burial resoundingly point us to Faith: not wishful thinking or vague platitudes but real Gospel faith ... in the invisible world, in eternal life.

From the Book of Wisdom: The souls of the just are in the hand of God. The foolish think they're dead, but their hope is full of immortality, they shine like the sun!

Psalm 27: I only want one thing: to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, to see God's face!

From Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: Though the outer self is wasting away, the inner self is being renewed. And this life is a small, passing affliction to prepare us for an eternal weight of glory.

And then there is **John's Gospel**, words of Jesus that sum up Sister Thomas' whole life: Unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it remains alone ... a single grain. ... Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my true servant is there with me.

Sister Thomas Welder, a great servant leader, was remarkable not so much for her competence, energy, or integrity, but because she marshalled all these gifts and many more under the banner of faith in a good God.

And so we are left with the burning memory of a woman of faith. Most people seek to be known by their accomplishments, to live in their accomplishments. But a woman of faith, a woman like her, lives in her loves. So let me tell you a love story in five short chapters.

Chapter 1: **CHILDHOOD**

Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone.

Diane Marie Welder was born from the stock of German-Russian pioneers, who landed like wheat from the hands of the sower in Emmons and Logan counties, people of the prairie. These were people who built beautiful churches to God's glory while they were living in sod homes with dirt floors. There are certain places you can leave that never quite leave you. Her childhood was happy and sad. Her faith grew like a tender shoot, taught by her family and the Church, moved by the first stirrings of love for the Lord.

About a day before she died, she told a dear, mutual friend that she was most looking forward to seeing her dad again after all this time. Sebastian Welder died when she was only 11 years old, two days before Christmas 1951, leaving a wife and three young children.

She met the Sisters growing up in the Catholic schools of Bismarck, and learning to play the piano.

Chapter 2:

ENTRANCE INTO THE MONASTERY

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die,
it remains alone, a single grain.*

She entered Annunciation Priory in 1959, and she forgot to bring her toothbrush. Her mother was overjoyed when she called home to ask for one, blurting out: "I knew you'd call. I'll be right out to get you and bring you home!" (Little could anyone have imagined then that her mother would also join the Monastery nine years later and go on to live as a Sister here for 40 years!)

In that same year, 1959, Mary College was founded and John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II's central document on the Church in the modern world was *Gaudium et Spes*, "Joy and Hope." How do we find joy and hope? We find them for ourselves and are able to offer them to others only by giving ourselves away. Unless we find a way to give ourselves away in love, we are lost in this world, lost in the cosmos. But if we do, we become great signs of joy and hope for a hurting world.

She gave herself away here, in her life with her Sisters, and here, in this chapel, singing the psalms morning and evening, with the rising or setting sun streaming through Marcel Breuer's windows: rose and azure to the east, violet and amber to the west.

She said that she learned from her Sisters and her life as a monastic how to be fully present to God in the ordinary unfolding of life, so as to be renewed and enlivened by the extravagant love God has for each of us.

The greatest love story in the world is God's love for the human race. Within that is the beautiful love story between the Benedictine Sisters and the people



Sister Thomas, a 1958 Saint Mary's Central High School graduate, was well-known as a talented musician and scholar.

of the prairie, and within that she took her place, drawing life from her community.

When she joined the Monastery, she was given the name Sister Thomas, after Thomas Aquinas, patron saint of students and universities. Was there ever such a prophecy?

Chapter 3:

THE UNIVERSITY

Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it produces great fruit.

She was chosen president of Mary College at the age of 38. Young and inexperienced, she knew she could not do it alone. But she believed she had been given the grace to receive this office of leadership as a call, and she believed in the dream of the Sisters for Mary College.

It was a dream, born in the heart of God, for growth.

Under her calm, confident, leadership over more than 30 years, we would expand our academic offerings, become the University of Mary, and then become the premier institution in the country for the preparation of servant leaders with moral courage.

It is a story of growth ... with grace and grit. These elements – growth, grace,



Sister Thomas addresses graduates while receiving her honorary doctorate from the University of Mary.

and grit – mark our culture at Mary and flow through our bloodstream in large measure because they were happening in her, our leader.

And in the meantime she was cheering on the Marauders, attending concerts and recitals, giving speeches of all kinds, modeling the Benedictine values, and making apple pie on television.

She said that, at the University of Mary, we measure our success by the success of our graduates, that they should be both competent and compassionate.

And she was filled with faith. She was faithful to her monastic vocation and faithful to her office of president in good times and in bad. And that gave her not power but authority, the authority of a genuine servant leader.

When she retired, the whole world came out to greet her.

Chapter 4:

THE FINAL DECADE

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die,
it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it yields great fruit.*

Whoever serves me must follow me.

She never really retired. As our president *emerita*, she continued in her fundamental call to faith and love.

In her shadow, for me, it was all light.



And she kept us all grounded in our vital connection to the Monastery and the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition. She was an ambassador of God's presence, continuing to speak and serve, attending countless funerals, greeting every alum who came back to visit.

And to everyone she offered a kind, encouraging word. St. John of the Cross once said: "They can be like the sun, words, they can do for the heart what light can do for a field." A public life is a life full of words, but when Sister Thomas spoke – about servant leadership, about education, about religious life ... when she spoke your name – you felt something stir inside you.

Chapter 5:

THE CONSUMMATION

Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it yields great fruit. Whoever serves me must follow me and, where I am, my true servant is there with me.

That brings us to the present moment. The great love story of her life, what she was created for, was to run while she has the light of life, going forward to meet face to face her one beloved, the One she has been following and serving all along on the road of faith.

Sister Thomas was one of those people who, because of the task given her by God, has left her permanent stamp on the communities she was part of. There will be others who have their important part to play in the monastery, the university, and North Dakota. But no one can replace Sister Thomas.

We all keep saying that she died so quickly. But you know, we're wrong:

She was dying all the time. A life of service is a life of dying. To serve is to love. To love is to die.

The only way to live is to die. With every breath, we're dying. But every breath is also a gift from a good God. For each breath we take is a participation in dying, and the rising, of Jesus.

She was dying all the time, and so she was never alone, a single grain.

It turns out that saying something about Sister Thomas and her life is an impossible task only because it involves using a word which has vanished from our vocabulary.

That word is holiness.

Her quiet dignity, her grace and her grit, her girlish laughter ringing in your ears, her devotion to her life as a Benedictine Sister, her joy, her capacity to listen and to lead and to love: in a time when we were less bashful about God and what it's like to have a life with God, we would say that these were all just ordinary signs, glimpses, of holiness.

It's not meant to be so unusual.

And yet, the life of Sister Thomas, in its holiness, shows us that love – real love, divine, unconditional love – really happens in human lives. God grant that it happen in our lives, in our lives here together, today and tomorrow, for as long as we are granted to stay here.



“Whoever comes my way is welcome,
because they have been created by God and
they have the beauty of being a human person and
they are welcome *into my life.*”

— Sister Thomas Welder

To learn more about Sister Thomas Welder,
visit umary.edu/SisterThomas.