

## **Reflection for the Funeral of Sister Mary Andrew Matesich**

Sansbury Hall, June 20, 2005

*by Ruth Caspar, OP*

The Scriptures chosen by Sister Mary Andrew's sisters were beautifully appropriate for this Eucharist honoring her entrance into eternal life. This is especially true of the gospel of John. The appealing image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one on which she has preached, as recently as the Jubilee celebration for the sisters in the Motherhouse. The gospel concludes with the wonderful promise: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." That promise is now fulfilled in the one whom we honor today.

No one can say that Sister Mary Andrew did not prepare us for her death. Especially in recent years she was courageous in the face of the inevitable progress of her cancer, and spoke of it without dissimulation. Nevertheless, for the members of this University community, it must have come with some element of surprise. Only six weeks ago, on May 3, she was honored at a reception in Wehrle Hall. On that occasion she was presented with the faculty's gift, commissioned at the time of her retirement in 2001 to mark their appreciation for her years of service, but only acquired earlier this year. It was a work of the artist, Aminah Robinson—a study of Elijah's Angel, prepared for the production of a children's book by that name. All who were there will remember how characteristically Andy spoke on that occasion, and how great she looked! She was dressed in colors to match the work of art, her Easter colors she called them, and she was clearly delighted to be among the people with whom she had worked for so many years.

Sister Mary Andrew had seen the artwork before this formal presentation and (so true to her character) had carefully prepared her words of acceptance. She did some research on the work, and searched for the children's book on Amazon.com. Within days she had a copy, and carefully examined the difference between the study made by the artist, and the picture as it appeared on the cover of the book. That day she helped us see the progress from the earlier study (her gift) and the final version done by the artist for the book. She was amused by details that changed: the polka dots on the wings, colors, positions—and pointed them out to us. Then she used this overture to launch into a truly Dominican preaching about study, and about angels.

Moving from the graphic arts—which she so deeply appreciated—she went on to speak of music. Though most of us knew of her constant delight in classical music, particularly the Bach St. Matthew Passion, we were surprised by what she spoke of that day. From her sisters she had received a CD by the vocal group Anonymous 4 of early American religious songs. There was a connection to the Aminah Robinson work of art because this CD bears the title "American Angels: Songs of Redemption, Hope and Glory." And that's what the music was all about: redemption, hope and glory, as it ranged from the spiritual songs of the Revolutionary War to camp songs and spirituals, even to the present. "Wondrous Love," she told us, was beautifully done by the vocal quartet, as was "Shall we gather at the River?" She had been struck by how many of these songs spoke of death, and she observed that many featured angels.

She was in rare form that day, the Andy we knew and loved, and the Wehrle Reception gave some of the newer faculty a chance to meet this amazing woman. One of them said to me, “This is so Dominican! She’s using the occasion to preach.” And so she was.

On June 15, shortly after noon, the angel that had just accompanied Andy across that River and into Paradise made a slight detour on the way home to stop in Ponchatoula, Louisiana where I was giving a retreat, to whisper in my ear that I should check my e-mail. We were three days into the retreat, and I had moved with the retreatants into their contemplative silence, so it wasn’t something I had thought of doing. But I did, only to find the message from the congregation stating that Sister May Andrew had died peacefully early in the afternoon on June 15. I realized that whatever/whoever had inspired me to check my mail had alerted me within hours of her death. After an initial stunned sense of the finality of this moment, I could be grateful for her release from pain and suffering, and truly rejoice. I was awed by this completion of her earthly life, and in my contemplative frame of mind, wondered what it had been like for her. We had spoken about it.

On Friday, June 10, the day before I left, I had one last visit with Andy. I shared with her some of the Fra Angelico images (angels among them) that I would be using on this retreat, and we prayed a decade of the rosary. She joined in prayer. Though weak, I heard her answer some of the Hail Mary’s, and we were able to exchange a few words. When I kissed her goodbye I told her where I was going and begged: “Andy, don’t go anywhere until I come back.” Then I realized how selfish that was, and added: “unless you want to.” She smiled.

Those of us who are gathered here cherish the person she has been for each of us, and the part she has played in our lives. For her sisters, her nieces and nephews, she has been a beloved member of the family. For many of us, our own sister as a member of the congregation—our Dominican family. For others, a friend, a colleague. For her physicians, especially Dr. Shapiro, she had a special, unique relationship, as she did for the priests represented her at the altar, especially Father Vinny. For most of us gathered here today—faculty, staff, students, alumni—she was best known as the President of Ohio Dominican College.

Last year, when Sister Catherine Colby asked me to present the history of Ohio Dominican for one of her programs in the Center for Dominican studies, I decided to ask Andy to give me her own assessment of what she should be remembered for during her presidency. We were in the car, on our way somewhere, and I was driving. She took out a piece of paper and began to write out her list. Among the things she listed were the Humanities Program, which was developed under her leadership as Dean and implemented when she was President; NEH funding for an endowment that supported this program; the development of our Weekend College; programs for the neighborhood and disadvantaged students—Upward Bound, Village to Child, Talent Search; the technology initiative which she called “Invitation to Tomorrow,” for which she secured

funds both for equipment and faculty development; increased enrollment; balanced budget; and the support of programs promoting our Dominican identity and sense of mission throughout the campus community. After handing me the list, she remarked that of all of these, the one she considered most significant was promoting the sense of Dominican identity and mission.

Since my own career at Ohio Dominican paralleled hers, I had been involved in many of these projects. And in the promotion of Dominican identity, I had been an active and enthusiastic participant. With support from the college I enjoyed a sabbatical in Europe during which I collected the material that would result in a course on the Dominican Tradition and a video series on the Dominican charism. One of the colorful posters that I brought back from that trip was the vision the Dominican artist, Fra Angelico, has offered us of Paradise: a graceful dance of brilliantly attired angels and saints before the gate of heaven. As I left Andy on one of my final visits, I showed her this picture. "You'll be part of this vision very soon," I said. She nodded her understanding. There was no fear in her eyes.

Today, as we honor the woman we have known and loved and respected, let there be no fear in our hearts, and no regrets, but simply the honest grief for our own loss. We know that her angel has helped her cross that river, and that from the other side she will continue to love us and to support us with her prayers as she enjoys the embrace of the God she loved and served so well. For she loved and served her God with all her heart, and all her soul, with all her strength and all her mind. Until the end.