

Maria

Reverend Fathers, Reverend Mother and members of the General Council, dear members of the McCrory Family, friends, and all of my beloved Sisters and Brothers in Carmel -

We begin this day with prayers of gratitude to God for allowing us once more to gather here in Avila on Hudson to mark the Anniversary, the 33rd Anniversary of the entrance of Venerable Mary Angeline Teresa McCrory into Eternal Life. From near and far and with the cooperation of the weather, we can do what we Catholics do best: offer the Eucharist, our great prayer of Thanksgiving to God in and through Jesus Christ, and to praise God for not just all of his goodness to us, but in particular for calling Bridget McCrory from her adopted home in Scotland to His service first as a Little Sisters of the Poor, and then as a Carmelite Foundress in the service of the Aged and Infirm. In the Exultet each Holy Saturday night we sing, "How wonderful your care for us, how boundless your merciful love." It is part of God's marvelous providence that he chooses individuals and circumstances and, by his grace and seemingly invisible formation, prepares people, times and places to accomplish his loving and beautiful will. Mother Angeline was so chosen, and through her active cooperation with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, passed step by step through her formation in France, and Pittsburg, and Brooklyn, back to France and finally to the Bronx to be at the right place and at the right time, to accomplish God's will. Through all this, she never lost her grounding in prayer and child-like trust in God, and so was able when the time came, to be bold and fearless in pursuing her call to serve the elderly in a new way, and to become both a real mother to the Aged, and a Carmelite to the full.

Anyone with a basic understanding of Mother Angeline's life or how her Carmelite Sisters conduct themselves and their facilities, can understand the theme we are reflecting upon this year: Venerable Mary Angeline Teresa: Model of Hospitality. After the cut, Hospitality remains one of the four core values with which the

Sisters flavor their ministry and mission. Along with shared commitment, sanctity of life and compassion, each aspect of the care of the elderly is to be marked by a sense of hospitality. In short, each Carmelite Nursing Facility strives to be a home, a place of welcome with a person-centered environment, which is warm and supports the human and spiritual journey of each resident of any faith. How true it

is that even the elderly and those rounding out their years nevertheless remain on a journey, unfinished like each of us, until the moment that the Lord calls us to the fullness of life with him. Each man and woman needs to feel that they are in a loving and caring environment so that they can continue to grow, to cope with the weaknesses of old age, and to have people around to calm their fears and to love them. Hospitality is an irreplaceable aspect of that atmosphere.

Today's scriptural readings drawn from the Old and New Testaments, remind us that hospitality is a biblical value. It is also a Carmelite value, as the very first Carmelite hermits on Mt. Carmel in the Holy Land while still living an intense personal life of alone-ness with God and solitary prayer broken only by times of communal prayer or meals, nevertheless also welcomed and cared for pilgrims and penitents who came from Europe to pray at the various Holy Land shrines and sights where Our Lord lived and died and was raised up. There was no conflict between the eremitical pursuit of union with God and welcoming others on their own faith journey. Scholars tell us that offering hospitality to strangers - of which we have some beautiful biblical stories - was a bedrock of Middle Eastern culture. Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, Elisha, all have hospitality stories linked to them. The real tradition of Israel constantly called the Jewish people to be kind and compassionate to the aliens who lived among them. This is a lesson we surely cannot forget these days.

It might be said that hospitality in the biblical sense means helping people feel not that they are strangers, but that they belong. This makes God the host's host, for he is the perfect model of hospitality, for He has adopted us, and made us his own children, no longer strangers, as the New Testament proclaims. We have been made, in Christ, a family and not a mass of humanity. To love the stranger - as the story of the Good Samaritan proclaims - perfects the Christian virtue of hospitality, consistent with the best tradition of Old Testament hospitality. In fact, the very root of the word hospitality lies in the Latin word "hospes" which could mean host, guest, or stranger - and we derive the English words for both stranger and enemy, as in "hostile" from it, as well as "hospital."

Again, from today's readings, we learn the three L's of hospitality - all of which permeate hospitality, color it and show its effects. Isaiah describes hospitality as an act of true religion, contrasted with ritual fasting. This truly religious act of

hospitality releases, unties and sets free the captive and oppressed. It shares and shelters and clothes the homeless and needy, and does not turn its back on its own. Those who practice such hospitality bring LIGHT into the world and into the lives of other people. The first L is light. People who are bound in physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or relational darkness (the absence of something) suddenly experience light when someone reaches out to them. Isaiah says that this light brightens the darkness and the gloom becomes like midday. It doesn't take us much to understand how, in the eyes of someone like Mother Angeline, hospitality to the aged and infirm eases the burdens of the elderly, lights up their life through loving care, spiritual assistance, good food, a pleasant atmosphere, and restores life and joy to people as they round out their years. Mother understood that if the Sisters really worked at hospitality and forming family with the elderly in the homes, this would be a 24-hour a day work, and there was no need to add extra penances for the duty of constant charity would be demanding enough.

However, what under-girds, what is even deeper than hospitality? What grounds hospitality? The answer, as St. Paul proclaims today, of course, is love, charity. Love of God and neighbor are always joined together and he or she who would love God must love their neighbor which, usually, is much more difficult. The God who is love, and who created us in his image and likeness, wants us to be love for one another. In addition, Love is meant to show itself not just in interior dispositions, poems and songs. Love - the second L is to be shown in deeds. St. Paul writes: love each other with mutual affection, show honor; be zealous and fervent and serve. Rejoice, endure, hope and contribute to the needs of the holy

ones, exercise hospitality and have the same regard for everyone, being humble in all things. What an ideal to strive for. This kind of charity from the heart - from the heart - was at the root of the fourth vow of hospitality that Mother Angeline professed as a Little Sisters of the Poor, a vow whose demands ultimately brought her and her companions to the point where they asked, "Is the way we are doing our ministry in the Bronx in 1929, truly hospitable according to the needs and standards of the male and female residents living there?" We know the answer to that questions led to the founding of a new religious congregation, a Congregation which now, almost 88 years later, continues to find creative and practical ways to show genuine hospitality, true love and charity for today's elderly, often shunned by society, but in need of great Love and Light to help them in their golden years.

And the final L is called to our mind by St. Luke who, in telling us the story of Martha and Mary, clearly indicates that while Martha was rushing about offering hospitality to Jesus in terms of food and drink, Mary offered her hospitality by sitting and Listening - the third L. How difficult it is to truly Listen to the other, to offer hospitality not just with a good drink of water - tea or maybe something stronger, but with a listening ear and a listening heart. As the Sisters and their co-workers move about the homes caring medically and humanly for the aged and infirm, they must also and are listening to them, people often lonely or confused, and offering them the supreme hospitality of listening to them, valuing them, paying attention to them. Again, this is a very Carmelite value as well, as we have all been taught to listen for God and to God in the silence. My brothers and sisters - while hospitality seems nice, and even quaint, it is work! Offering hospitality can be inconvenient, particularly when we are tired or stressed. Hospitality demands that we step out of ourselves and our own interests, in order to focus on, listen to, and help someone else. Hospitality, as a fruit of charity, always brings us back to God, praying and beseeching that He gives us the open heart, spirit and energy to listen to the other person and make him or her feel not as a stranger, but as a family member, loved and valued. For this, we need grace, a grace that Mother Angeline received and modeled and practiced heroically as a virtue.

I hope that we can see that Mother Angeline knew this virtue of hospitality inside and out and in a thousand ways, taught it and modeled it for others. Although I had seen Mother Angeline several times, her first words to me were, "Did they give you enough to eat?" She barely knew me, but already her maternal and hospitable heart reached out with love and concern. Venerable Mary Angeline Teresa brought light, and love and a listening ear to countless bishops, and priests, to her own Sisters and Sisters from other Congregations, to her family and to her beloved old people. We ask her, as a Model of Hospitality to keep our hearts and souls open to others, and to always be willing to offer to the next person, whatever the cost, the grace of hospitality and love.

Father Mario Esposito, O.Carm.

Avila-on-Hudson

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