

Reflection: Sr. Muriel Young

Today I welcome all present, Family, Friends, Former Students and Colleagues, and the Community of Sr. Muriel Young to this liturgy of Resurrection. Today we celebrate and honor one last time Sister Muriel Young. Many of us were here three months ago to honor Muriel on the occasion of her 75th Jubilee. In spite of her compromised condition, Muriel enjoyed the time with family and friends, and they were happy to be here celebrating with her. No doubt Muriel recognized this celebration as the beginning of her final transition, as she began to decline shortly after that celebration. She had given her life away to all those with whom and to whom she ministered over the years, now she was ready to give her death away in a peaceful manner knowing she was returning to the God she had so faithfully served during her life time. This was a quiet time of her life, she knew her life's work was done—there was no struggle for more time, no final admonition had to be given, no last lecture was needed. Her life over the 75 years she was in the Community had spoken all of this. She was ready for the eternal embrace of the God she served so faithfully.

On the occasion of her diamond jubilee, she had received a letter wishing her blessings as she observed 75 years of Consecrated Life. The letter goes on to exclaim, "What a witness of faith your life has been! Like Anna in the Temple at the Presentation of our Lord, you have served the Lord God faithfully in his household all these years! Actually, this letter was written by my brother, Donald Fest, a Josephite Priest who went on to personally thank Sr. Muriel for the inspiration she had been in his life while a student at St. Anne School in Castle Shannon. He also wrote that he wanted to thank her for her support through his seminary training and his 39 years of priesthood. He concluded his letter by saying "You are a good and faithful servant to the Lord and a tremendous witness of commitment to all us—thank-you!" His letter drew me to Sr. Muriel's faithfulness and to the person he likened her to.

Anna, the woman referred to in the gospel we used today, was Phanael's daughter, of the tribe and tradition of Asher. She is described as a devout, dedicated woman, a prophet, who is able to see and interpret the silent, veiled revelation of God's mysterious ways. We assume that Anna was a wise woman because the Gospel tells us that she had seen many days and now remained in the Temple serving her God night and day. In today's first reading, we hear about wisdom from the Book of Sirach. Sirach tells us that wisdom is not easily acquired because it depends on human experience. Sirach recognizes that wisdom is not just speculative ideas and a dictionary of facts. Wise ones interact with patience and forbearance, with interest and enthusiasm, with responsibility and self-control. This kind of wisdom has to be grown into so that it becomes truly a part of who one is. Wisdom blends and integrates and enables us to live and respond with one another as persons. One becomes wise over a life time. The Gospel tells us that Anna was 84 years old when she saw the Child with His Mother. Sr. Muriel, wise woman like the prophetess Anna, had her faith rewarded by all those who recognized her outstanding contributions to catholic education. She received many acclamations and citations by those who recognized the wisdom of her words. Most importantly, Muriel, like the prophetess, recognized the incomprehensible light of God and was able to pass that torch to others.

Anna responded to the on-going calls in her life. She was seven years a wife, then the rest of her life a widow. She remained now in the temple serving her God day and night through prayer and fasting. She was 84 years old when she saw the Child with His mother. Praising God for this blessing, she spoke of this Child to all concerned about Israel's liberation. From that day on, she preached the miracle made flesh whom her own eyes had seen. Unlike Simeon, who appears earlier in the Gospel, which will be used tomorrow, the feast of Presentation, Anna was not telling God that He could dismiss her, his servant in peace, because God had fulfilled His word to her. No. Anna still had work to do. She had to preach the miracle that her own eyes had seen to all who would listen; she had to deliver the good news to all who were concerned about Israel's liberation.

As we examine Anna's calls, we recognize that her first call was being a daughter of Phanuel. We can assume that even though she was a daughter, she was given the opportunity of an education, to study and learn. Next, she followed the call to be a wife for seven years. After the death of her husband, she followed the call to be a widow. I am not sure exactly what she was doing as a widow before entering the temple, but we do know that the God of our biblical tradition favors older women and widows as channels for revealing the depth and the extent of God's love for us. Her next call was being in the temple praising God night and day. Perhaps, she came out of retirement after she saw the Child with his Mother. We know that she spoke of the Child to all concerned about Israel's liberation.

When we look at Muriel's life, we also see her responding to many calls—her first major one was her decision to enter religious life. She met the Sisters of Divine Providence in her parish school, Sacred Heart, in New Philadelphia, Ohio. She talked about the little white frame house that had been the home of the Sisters since 1908 when they first arrived in that area. When she visited with them she experienced a peaceful aura that she likened to the brooding of the Spirit over the waters. She said, in the same writing, that she still experiences the same quiet atmosphere, the voice that attracts, a voice that is strong and clear, that calls through its silence and still fills her with peace years after her entrance. So it seems that it was the Sisters and not the house that brought peace to her. She wrote that when she wanted to enter the Community in 1940 at age 16, her mother thought she was too young and she wanted her to see more of the world. "If you enter now," her mother cautioned, "you will never see much more than the state of Pennsylvania." Dorothy knew that she was not too young. She was ready and in her own words said, "But I was content to live upon or below the hills of Pittsburgh if that is where I would find God." She maintained this passion for her religious vocation all her life.

Another call was to the Community itself. In the early years of her life, from the 1943 to 1960, she taught primary grades in several schools of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and Detroit. Like many Sisters, she stayed one, two or three years, except, St. Anne's where she stayed six years, and she was always ready to move on to wherever the Community needed her. She was a strong community member. In the late 70s, Muriel was a member of the Community's Forum and was chair of the Communications Committee and the liaison of the Community with the Pittsburgh Catholic. In looking through her file, I found one of her communications written to the Sisters via "The Intracom," our monthly newsletter. She wrote as chair of the Communications Committee encouraging the Sisters to put out information about the

Community in the Pittsburgh Catholic. She said, “The Sisters of Divine Providence are important to the Diocese of Pittsburgh and we want them to know it. In some instances, she says, the paper may decide to eliminate news items for various reasons, but we will continue to get information to them, regardless of their decision to print or not to print. Remember, our purpose and work deserves to be published.” She was dedicated to all aspects of the Community and its mission.

I think it is providential that Muriel’s wake and funeral occur the day before we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation, as we liken her to Anna, the prophetess and as we begin Catholic Schools week.

Muriel’s penultimate call, of course, was nestled within her others calls. It was to Catholic education. She had a passion about it. In 1960-63, in recognition of her giftedness within the classroom, Sister Muriel was named Assistant Supervisor of the schools staffed by the Sisters of Divine Providence. As such, she visited the classrooms and assisted new teachers as needed. At the same time, she was preparing to be a principal. In 1963 she was named principal at St. Anne’s in Castle Shannon, the mother school of the South Hills area, a school that had 1600 students and stayed 6 years. She then went on to be principal at St. Basil’s School in Carrick for 7 years. She was lauded for her innovative work and the new programs she initiated in both schools. After that, she was snatched up by the Schools Office in the Diocese. In the following years she held positions of supervisor, educational consultant, and finally, assistant superintendent of elementary schools in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Over the years she held these positions, she created, designed and implemented new instructional programs for students, teachers and prospective principals. While serving in the Diocese she was asked to be the Director of Vision and Values Program for the Diocese. This program was designed by National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) to preserve and strengthen the Catholic identity, of schools. As such, she wrote a 54 page article published by NCEA in 1986 called *New Wine in New Wine Skins: Challenge to Administrators*. She also wrote Gospel value correlations for major books companies (Merrill, Macmillan and Laidlaw) in social studies and science. She gave countless workshops in catechetics, curriculum development and teacher training. In recognition of her tireless efforts on behalf of education in general and catholic education in particular, she received countless citations, letter of commendation, awards, and invitations to serve on advisory boards. Sr. Muriel retired in 2002 from the diocese at the age of 78 and returned to the Motherhouse the following year. Her hope was to write children’s books. She participated in a workshop for writers of children’s literature and worked on getting an illustrator for her books. She set up her computer and assembled some of the things that she would need to pursue this next dream. But her energy and health did not permit the fulfillment of this last dream. So perhaps her last call, like Anna’s, was to learn the art of letting go—to model for all who are anxious or insecure to allow themselves to be set free. She showed us how to continue to grow in wisdom and grace as we age. Like Anna, she was able to speak God’s Word as she awaited her final liberation. I am sure she heard her God speak to her on the day of her passing—well done, you who were faithful, well done and welcome home.

Finally, in going back to my brother’s letter and changing the tense, we can echo what he said. You were a good and faithful servant to the Lord and a tremendous witness of commitment to all of us—thank you!