TRANSFORMING GRACE: IN MEMORY OF ANNE E. CARR, BVM

St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Chicago 15 February 2008

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In the late winter of 1982 we were driving up the North Shore of Boston to visit Marblehead and then Gloucester, where we would drop in at Eastern Point Retreat House, a place of prayer and grace for so many, and afterward have lobster at some old restaurant on the harbor. I was responsible for a convention on "Power as an Issue in Theology." Anne had agreed to lead a workshop on "Women and Power in the Church." As we came to the bend where the highway turns breathtakingly toward the beach and the sea at Swampscott, I asked how plans for the workshop were going. "Oh, well!" she said. "We have fine panelists—and there's *lots* of interest." "Well, I look forward to it," I said. "But *you* can't come," she replied. "Oh?" "It's for us," she said. I understood.

I adored her.

Didn't you all . . . adore her?

Earlier this week on the phone David Tracy said simply: "Of course, everyone adored her." Certainly his mother Eileen Couch did, as close a friend as Anne ever had, and also, as Anne put it to a University of Chicago graduate recently, "*her* mother, too."

I. The Loss

What was it we loved? Well, everything about her. The way she wore her hair, when there was still an auburn glint in it, and then when it went gray and finally white. The way she took your hand. The sparkle in those gentle, sky-blue eyes. (They were her father's.) The way she said, "Who'd a thunk?" (That was her mother.) The steady stride of her slender form and, then later, the way she needed your arm. The ripple of her chuckling laughter—"Uh huh!" The readiness of her humor. The fact that it was never at anyone's expense, except perhaps her own. "Well, they're calling it elective surgery," she said before one of those four awful brain interventions, "and I'd rather not elect it." (Thank you Dr. Hekmat, for your extraordinary care.) The way she

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listened. The way she questioned. The way she asked what you'd read, or seen, or heard. The way she delighted in being presented by young Christopher, her godson, with the light bulb dotted with black by a magic marker to look like her shaved head after the first surgery in 1979. The way . . . she was.

The way she cared for her family—devotedly, dependably, deeply. The way she cared for her BVM community—for Catherine and Lois and so many other women she loved—gratefully, givingly, with all her gifts. The way she appreciated colleagues, especially at Chicago but in fact all over the country and indeed abroad—with sympathy, insight, patience, sure judgment, an inclusive openness, a true sense for the creative, the timely, the compassionate. And of course her devotion—personal, lively, detailed, enduring—to her students, whom she loved to teach and who taught her, as she thought, so much.

The way she could find joy in ordinary life—over breakfast with her Mass buddies from this church, at a bridge game, or on the great early spring trips to Florida with Anne Patrick and her sister Maureen. The way she could find joy—and share it. Jerry Herman may not have known it, but when he wrote his song "Life is in perfect order, with Anne on my arm," he wrote it for Anne Carr.

In the early spring of 1978, Anne, Roger Haight and I drove to Holland, Michigan, to see the annual Tulip Festival and Parade (all high school bands!). We walked the fields of radiant red and gold and green and then, half-way home to Hyde Park, had dinner in a grand old German restaurant. It was better than a week's vacation in Europe.

And, of course, because she was so intelligent, there was the occasional, wonderfully witty irreverence. Anne Patrick recalls visiting her the summer after her third brain surgery in 1996 at the rehab hospital in Chicago, where she was getting therapy that would allow her to learn to swallow and walk again. Anne presented the patient with Anne's then new book, *Liberating Conscience*, and the patient wanted (unrealistically) to get dressed and go to the book signing that had been arranged in Hyde Park. Because of her difficulties in swallowing, Anne was only allowed to drink beverages that had been thickened to the consistency of a milk shake. She said she was thirsty and asked Anne Patrick to get her a coke. The good friend said she couldn't do that because the rules were that she had to have everything thickened in order to be sure she didn't choke on it. The patient was angry with her friend and exclaimed: "Forget the rules. Didn't you write the book on conscience?"

I do believe that well before she read Karl Rahner Anne Carr knew that all the longing, searching, reaching beyond of our lives only matters if we pay close, appreciative attention to ordinary things, to the

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daily particular, to whatever in fact real people celebrate and suffer. And so of course she could write her masterful doctoral dissertation, under David's direction, on the methodology of Rahner's theology, a most instructive book still, arguing that it was a twofold, transcendental *and* historical approach that Karl proposed.

. . . "Oh no, they can't take that away . . . ," the song goes.

But death has—implacably, silently, finally—taken Anne from us. Monday's news has left us dumb, distraught, hollow. How could anyone so wondrously wrought, so clearly chosen, so precious and honored in God's eyes, so clearly a disciple whom God chose so that others might know and believe and understand that one alone is God—now be gone? (And let us remember that when Isaiah so described the Servant, Israel had not yet come to any clear hope of true resurrection from the dead.) A gleaming winter sun may have turned the skylines of New York and Chicago into towers of diamond these past days. But for many of us in this church there was little light, scarce comfort, only a deadly constriction at the heart as we realized our loss.

"There is no substitute for them," Karl Rahner wrote 70 years ago in wintry Innsbruck. "There are no others who can fill the vacancy when one of those whom I have really loved suddenly and unexpectedly departs and is with me no more. In true love no one can replace another, for true love loves the other person in that depth where she is uniquely and irreplaceably herself. And thus, as death has trodden roughly through my life, every one of the departed has taken a piece of my heart with her, and often enough my whole heart."

II. The Search

And yet. And yet. Anne herself had not only the courage of her faith and vocation—witness her thoughtfully decided signing of the famous 1984 ad in the New York Times. She had also a reasoned conviction that despite all appearances God offers the church new hope and future. Despite all the disparagement and displacement of women in the Catholic (and also broader Christian) community over the centuries, she argued in her ground-breaking book, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (1988), that the experience of women today was a new and blessed source of *renewal* for the Church. Strong essays with wonderful titles—"Engendering the Future," "Of Angels and Gargoyles"—had prepared the way. "My religious community, the Sisters of Charity, B.V.M.," she then said, "has long provided a context of love, debate, and support for my conviction that the movement of women is indeed a transforming grace in our time." With typical clarity, concision and comprehensive vision she

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continued: "While feminism presents a challenge to Christianity today, it is a challenge that is a powerful grace in its call for the church to be faithful to its own transcendent truth, to the deepest meaning of its symbols, its great tradition and the new experience of over half its members."

Readers of English editions of the book, and then of German, Italian, French and Portuguese translations, met here a deeply rooted appreciation of Christian tradition coupled with courageous hope for its true future. The argument was detailed and thorough, vigorous and unequivocal, but also calm and balanced, a marvel of a call to arms not with swords but ploughshares. If the moment in church history offered a transforming grace, in the author's view, she herself appeared as a graciously transforming presence on the theological and ecclesial scene.

Who are we, then, recalling her serene but steady call for a community of full equality, dignity and personal participation, not to hope also in an absolute future beyond our present, piercing loss?

Though probably best known for *Transforming Grace*, Anne confided to me that she was most pleased with *The Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (also published in 1988). Here, as the citation for her John Courtney Murray Award from the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1997 noted, "she was able to develop more amply the mystical-prophetic style of theology characteristic of her writings." The search of many, whether Christian or not," she had earlier written, "is for an integral way, a spirituality, sometimes called a mystical-political orientation, that unites the concerns of both self and world." In Merton she found a spiritual theologian whose self was a journey of faith in the world. And a fellow wayfarer whose struggle mirrored much of her own.

Anne was not given to speaking much about her personal doubts concerning meaning and value in life. But in Merton, I believe, she found, and was strengthened by, a growing maturity even with respect to the framing of the question. How can one give oneself to God, surrender to the divine plan, become an agent of providence, unless one has first (also) risked becoming some-one? In Merton she found a religious author for whom the question of selfhood was ongoing, with startling changes of perspective emerging at successive stages of his life. He *lived* the issue of continuity and change in the spiritual self. As did Anne. As do most seriously reflective contemporary Christians. "From the young self-negating and world-denying monk of 1949," she wrote, "to the mature self-affirming and world-embracing Asian traveler and religious seeker of l968, there is striking change as well as deep continuity in the search for the true self."

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If one takes the threat of emptiness seriously, I believe, the discovery of a companion like Merton can easily make him a favorite—as it did, I think, for Anne.

III. Adoration

And so we are bereft of a woman we loved, yet bequeathed her witness of courageous hope. Have we really lost the luminous presence Susan Ross spoke of so tenderly when Anne retired from the Divinity School on May 12, 2003? Will we ever know again the remarkable love of her God, along with the unparalleled lack of all intellectual hubris, that former Dean Chris Gamwell recalled last night at the Vigil in this church?

Which symbol is more promising, more real? The heavy darkness in our hearts, or the quiet radiance that always accompanied her, even in her most painful diminishments?

Early in the last century Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

> Death is not extinguishing the light
> but putting out the lamp
> because the dawn has come.

A few days ago, on learning from Cathy Hilkert of Anne's death, a former student wrote: "She was a very important part of my life in Chicago. . . . There was a seamless continuity of justice, intellect and love such as I had never experienced before in any human being. . . . The best way I can describe it is a constant, gentle presence of God, unlike anything I have ever felt."

For all my love of Christ and belief in the Spirit, I need help here.

It comes from you. Some of you are friends of many years. Some are family whom I have known almost as long as I have known Anne. Some I know only as Anne's friends. That is enough.

For today, in fact since learning of Anne's death, something new is happening: You are surrounded and imbued with her love. Your love for her is welling beyond what you have expected. I see it. I feel it. It is as if in her dying is her rising.

No, it is not "as if." It is *because* she died in Christ that she rises in him, too. And that her love, with his, now floods you all, fires our love for each other, raises an affection among us that we had not known, calls us more strongly together, forgives our follies, impels us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to care for the sick and free the imprisoned—to live as if for the first time the Gospel on Five Fingers, as Teresa of Calcutta used to say: You-did-it-to-me.

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Don't you see the tongues of fire above each bent and mourning head in this church? Don't you see the triumph of love? Yes, you do. Because you loved someone forever.

And this is the first miracle.

The second is like it. I do not hesitate to say before you, even as we prepare to proclaim the Eucharistic Prayer, that I adored Anne Carr.

"Of course," David, "everybody adored her."

But what, really, is "adoration"?

I don't really know.

The words, the theology and its distinctions, the liturgical expression, yes. But the reality?

It is more than love, it would seem. More than joy, which Thomas Aquinas called "the overflow of love." It is *not* a matter of putting someone on a pedestal. Anne reminded us that pedestals can separate and segregate.

Awe somehow accompanies it. And reverence. A desire for song, dance perhaps, the profound bow, the offering of a gift, something that means one's self.

To adore must mean to see someone against the white radiance of eternity, to love without all self-regard, together as a community to look up with singing yet serene hearts toward the glory that would otherwise render us prostrate.

Tell us, Anne, what adoration is.

For now you know.

Amen.

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