

Fridays with Sr. Karen

By Matthew R. Smith

I knew Sr. Karen for about ten years through the Buffalo Catholic Worker, a faith group that meets on Fridays. The Buffalo Catholic Worker gathers on the first Friday of each month for prayer, study and action. Over the years we have met at soup kitchens, halfway houses, peace centers, homeless shelters and inner city parishes to learn about the needs of the poor and marginalized in our community and to discover ways to serve our neighbors in need. We meet on Fridays because that was the day Christ was crucified and we desire to help the crucified people of our world. In a way our monthly meetings are like a slow motion Stations of the Cross, a living Via Della Rosa.

One of the places we would often meet (at least once or twice a year) was the Hope House (now called the Bissonette House). We liked to meet there because, like Sr. Karen, we were attracted to the story of Fr. Bissonette, a person of deep faith and a passion for peace and social justice, a person who was murdered, many say martyred, after opening his door to others in a spirit of charity and hospitality. Sr. Karen chose the rectory where Fr. Bissonette was killed for her ministry to provide temporary residence for inmates who were released from prison and transitioning back to free society. In 1997, the Buffalo Catholic Worker held its first mass in the church adjacent to this rectory.

Each Friday we met with Sr. Karen, each Station of the Cross so to speak, we learned lessons for our life of faith. She explained how she started doing her work. She would talk about the example and witness of Fr. Bissonette. Through her stories we could see he was an important role model and inspiration. One Friday, she invited the Buffalo Catholic Worker community to help out at another ministry she oversaw called, Hope Hospitality House. The aim of this ministry was to provide room and board for those family members visiting relatives in prison as well as transportation to and from area correctional facilities. Many of our members were actively involved with this ministry for years. Sr. Karen would particularly like it when we met at the Bissonette House on a first Friday during the summer so we could have an outdoor mass in her Peace Garden. When I look back on these Friday meetings over the years I am reminded of the book,

“Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson.” Sr. Karen guided us on our pilgrimage of faith by her word and example during those Friday meetings.

During the last first Friday meeting Sr. Karen hosted at the Bissonette House, she brought in a mother whose son was killed in a shooting in Buffalo. This meeting made real another Station of the Cross for me. As the African-American woman before me spoke of the loss of her son, I could begin to sense the grief Mary must have felt when her son was killed. Sr. Karen worked hard to raise awareness of the violence in Buffalo. She was especially troubled by the number of homicides in our city. After that meeting, I asked Sr. Karen if she was planning on joining us for our second annual Good Friday Stations of the Cross walk in downtown Buffalo and if she would bring crosses (as she had done the previous year) representing homicide victims in Buffalo. She said she would.

April 14, 2006 was Good Friday and it was also to be the last day of Sr. Karen’s life. About twenty folks had gathered in downtown Buffalo to pray the Stations of the Cross between noon and 3:00 PM on Good Friday. We used various landmarks in the city to represent different moments in Christ’s passion. For example, we met in front of the police station as we recalled Jesus was arrested and we stood in front of the courthouse when we remember how Jesus was sentenced to death.

Sr. Karen met us downtown and passed out crosses with the name of homicide victims from the previous year. She told me, “Me and my guys were up late making these crosses.” One of the men helping with those crosses on Holy Thursday would murder her later that night. Sr. Karen wanted to raise awareness to the problem of homicides in Buffalo, ironically, when she became a homicide victim herself later that day she was able to give more attention to the problem in her death than she did in her life.

On the walk, Sr. Karen and I talked about the problem of homicides in Buffalo. I remember discussing the large percentage of cases that are never solved. I said, I heard that six in ten cases are never solved. She said it was worse than that. She kept a large sign in front of the Bissonette House indicating the number of days since a homicide. She told me that it was over twenty days since the last homicide. Then she told me she always

gets nervous when the number of days get that large because she knows another homicide will be happening soon.

Walking with Sr. Karen on Good Friday and watching her literally caring a large wooden cross through the streets of downtown Buffalo are my last memories of her. In walking with her on Good Friday and learning other life lessons on Fridays with Sr. Karen, I could not help but see her life and death in relationship with the Lord’s passion. I wrote the following words a few days after her body was discovered.

Fr. Bissonette, was a prophet of peace, who made straight the path. Sr. Karen preached peace and nonviolence. She led men to freedom. She helped people whose lives were headed toward death to a new life. She was leading about a dozen of these men when one betrayed her for a bag of drugs. Her body was stripped. She was murdered on Good Friday. She was placed in a dingy tomb for three days and her friends said, “Where is her body?” “What have they done with Sr. Karen.” The community came together and said, “Truly she was a righteous woman!”

Her work that many thought would end seems like it now has new life. Others, who at first felt fear about what happened, felt fear about trying to imitate her way of love, are overcoming their fear and are beginning to follow her way of peace and life.

The story is not over...it is just beginning... wait a minute... is it just me, or does this sound familiar?

When I think of Sr. Karen and her life and death, I think I will always look at it through the lens or perspective of that pilgrimage together, through those Fridays we shared. It has shaped and colored the way I viewed her life, death and legacy. I have come to see her as a model of discipleship, a prophet of peace and a witness to Christ. In short, I have come to see her as a martyr and a saint. Whether I am reading too much meaning into this experience because I have an overactive Catholic imagination, or I am over reacting as a result of the traumatic events of the day or whether everything that happened is just a big coincidence or whether it is providential and the Holy Spirit is at work, I will let the reader decide. +

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