Memories of Sr. Hazel Sommer, 01.12.1933 – 17.12.2023

Funeral Mass in the Bar Convent Chapel, Thursday 11th January 2024.

I knew Hazel, along with Madge McCarthy, from early in 1959, the year when we entered in Ascot on 12th September. Angela Reidling and I had already known each other for longer, because we had both been following Fr. Lyons SJ’s three – year theology course on Wednesday evenings in Portman Square. That, incidentally, was where we got to know a group of IBVM sisters from Ascot and Hampstead, of whom Sr. Christina Kenworthy-Browne is now the last survivor – but the connection between the four about-to-be-postulants was that each of us in some way knew Fr. Lyons, so that for a while after our arrival in Ascot we were known as ‘the Lyon cubs’. Among ourselves, in the months beforehand when we were meeting in London to get to know each other, we were ‘the gang’. It was Hazel who found and sent me the birthday-card that July, with a picture of convicts in traditional coats with arrows on them, and the words ‘Happy Birthday from the Gang’ – typical of Hazel’s quirky sense of humour.

She and I, both born in 1933, had similar war-time experiences – evacuation to the country, half-days at school because ‘official ’evacuees were using the building for the other half-day; return to the city, before the blitz started, then nights in air-raid shelters; fathers in dangerous occupations – her father was an aeronautical engineer working on Spitfires. In fact I never met her parents, or her brother John, because they were too upset about her entering to feel able to come, so she remembered with gratitude, even very much later, how my parents ‘adopted’ her, and included her in our family group, on visits for special occasions like our professions.

From the noviceship – not a time of exciting events, back in the 1950s/60s – I remember how single-minded she could be. There was the time when we found an injured bird, and Hazel, who already had strong healing-instincts, undertook to nurse it back to health. For some days she spent all her limited spare time digging up worms to feed it, and if I remember rightly her care was rewarded.

She spent all her adult life, before and after entering, in caring for people. Her first training and working experience were in occupational therapy – after she had qualified, her first post was working with patients who had psychotic and neurotic illnesses and behaviour-problems. Then came some months working in a children’s hospital, and finally a year as occupational therapist in a team caring for children with cerebral palsy. But after first vows she was asked to extend her work into general nursing – at that time it seemed likely that her ministry would be confined to our own houses, our own communities and pupils. So she spent 1962-1965 working towards an SRN qualification in St. John’s and St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in St. John’s Wood. From 1965 –1983 she was Infirmarian first in Hampstead, then in Ascot, and finally, for just over a year, in York. She and I had not lived together from first vows in 1962 until September 1982, when she came up to York, where I already was. It soon became clear that she was having a hard time, because at that time there were many sick elderly sisters in the Bar Convent. Yes, there were other nurses working there during the day – but not unnaturally those sisters kept their real problems and needs to confide in Sr. Hazel in the evenings. It all became too much for her, and it was decided that she should leave York and move on to Cambridge. There she was able to bring her various interests together, and extend them, becoming a Staff Nurse from 1984-1990 in Arthur Rank Hospice , then returning for six years to occupational therapy, At the same time, throughout her time in Cambridge she was extending her knowledge of particular aspects of patient-care through in-service training, and courses in bereavement, individualised patient-care, care of the dying, counselling, stress-management. Still later she moved into spiritual direction and retreat-work, using those skills and insights also in bereavement-care and family support-work at Arthur Rank hospice. It was not until 2016, when she moved up to York to St. Joseph’s, that she retired completely.

These activities happened very quietly, but with the determination which was always characteristic of Hazel. It is only now, looking back over all the different yet connected activities that she undertook, that the pattern of Hazel’s life emerges strongly and distinctly. Writing about her life in 2014 she reflected on her first experience of working with patients who had psychotic and neurotic diseases and behavioural problems. She wrote ‘In those days patients had a difficult time, less was known about helpful medication and I think it was there that I learned the great need for God’s help to help those people. It was, I felt later, the beginning of my vocation.’ Later she looked at early experiences of making retreats: of the first she wrote ‘it was an amazing introduction to God and his love for us, and our need for his help, especially to help others. Of the second, ‘it came out clearly to me that only with God’s help, could I help people who needed it so much, and that without him it was not possible.’ But with all this there was a quietly contemplative dimension, and a love of the outdoor world: to almost the very last she would be in the garden when it was too cold or too hot for most other people, just being. Now, surely, she is with God – and with so many of those whom he helped her to help.