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Remembering a sun-filled woman who worked in the church's shadows

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Apr. 11, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

On Easter Sunday, Mary Louise Schniedwind shook free of the shackles of time to be waived across the border into the Eternal. No need to check her papers; she had been there before, and everybody knew her anyway. She was in her 98th year, acting and looking much younger, still as single-eyed as we are bidden to be in the Bible and, as everyone blessed enough to know can tell you, ever-youthful in her interests and activities, less concerned with what was past than with what was yet to come.

Mary Louise had bested the archer of time with his quiver of sorrows because, unlike most of us, she was not afraid of it, and by entering it fully every day, she infused it with the eternal as the sun splashes a glow along the horizon to put the night on notice that it must yield to morning. Mary Louise brought a glow with her at the beginning of every workday that lighted the places in which she worked as well as the faces of those who worked with her.

She became my secretary after she had retired at 65 from her position as administrative assistant (read: keeping the operation humming day to day) at the National Federation of Priests' Councils headquarters in Chicago. That work had placed her at the center of the exciting post-Second Vatican Council initiatives of the nation's priests working with its first president, Fr. Frank Bonnike, and his successors.

The psychology department at Loyola University in Chicago was a calm port compared to the Federation and, although she worked directly for me, she soon got to know just about everybody, from the president to the police security on the large Sheridan Avenue campus.

I am, however, getting ahead of the story and its remarkable beginnings. She had worked for American Airlines early in her career, had tragically lost her boyfriend in World War II and, never feeling sorry for herself, went to work in a travel agency where she had a life-changing experience -- not as dramatic as St. Paul's on the road to Damascus, but one that involved travel and awakened her to her true calling of giving her life to the pursuit of social justice and reform within the church.

She booked an African-American doctor and his wife on a transcontinental train trip. When her boss learned of it, he gave her a rude order: "Get that couple off that train. I don't care what you have to do to do it, but get them off that train!"

There never were any scales on Mary Louise's eyes to drop off in a moment of religious conversion. She was a true believer, in no need of conversion, but she suddenly saw her calling with a clarity that called for action.

I wish I had been there to wipe the egg off her boss' face when she confronted him, informing him she would not get the couple off the train but would do everything she could to keep them on and that, as a follow-up, she was leaving her job to join herself wholeheartedly to the Catholic church's work for racial equality.

This led her into the intricate warrens of ecclesiastical bureaucracy, but with good sense and an even better

sense of direction, she ended up working with the legendary Msgr. Jack Egan, who was running the archdiocesan Office of Urban Affairs, his base for good works beyond counting in pursuit of racial justice.

She became his right arm as she kept the office running, coordinating its many activities when Egan was on the road or, as it developed, deeply involved with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the white-hot era of overcoming segregation and the race prejudice in America.

Its epicenter, for a while at least, was in Chicago, to which King had come in his hero's journey to find Egan and hundreds of Chicago priests and religious men and women marching with and for him. Even Cardinal John Cody, who fought segregation when he was archbishop of New Orleans, joined in Egan's efforts, reading at a huge rally at Soldier Field the strong talk supporting King that Egan had written for him without changing a word.

Mary Louise, of course, typed that talk just as she encouraged Egan to write it. She also supplied moral support to Egan and the many priests who marched, participated in integrating public facilities, and incurred a certain amount of suspicion and pressure from various groups for doing so. She was in the thick of the fight all the way.

Her work at the National Federation of Priests' Councils plunged her into the heady atmosphere of renewal that followed Vatican II. In this position, she came to know the priest leaders of the country she had not known before and served as a trusted liaison as well as office manager and convention organizer as priests entered a new, more cooperative phase of relationship with their bishops.

So she had enjoyed many positions and surely fulfilled the calling she had discovered in the prejudiced travel agency, but she was far more than just a secretary or a typist and copy editor of my book manuscripts and columns. She handled my lecture arrangements and travel and enjoyed, perhaps more than anything else, calling the offices of famous people, such as Sen. John Glenn, on whom I was writing a profile for *The New York Times Magazine*. She was at ease with everybody and, with a touch beyond the gift of Midas, turned every stranger she met into a friend.

She was also a wise and good counselor, never intruding but always sensing when to intervene if I was in the middle of making a decision. One such moment occurred when, as I was packing to accompany my wife on a lecture that would allow us to visit close friends, Kitty Bitterman and her husband, in Montana, I received a call that an old priest friend had died in Boston. I was on the verge of canceling one trip or somehow, with great complications, fit them awkwardly together.

"Life," she said simply, "is for the living," and in that instant I knew that visiting our friend Kitty was the right thing to do. It proved to be so because she died suddenly in her sleep the next year, and I was glad we had seen her and her husband on their home grounds.

"Life is for the living" was surely the summation of Mary Louise's own philosophy and her complete investment of herself in it and into other people until that last glorious Easter, when she entered the fullness of the life she had tasted and shared with so many thousands of friends in time. So let me sing, for no word is better to express it, of a woman you may not have known but you surely would have liked. And let me sing of the light she brought into the shadows of the church in which she worked and lived so fully.

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