

An Address Delivered at the Holy Eucharist

September 8, 2020

**The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary &
The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Life Profession of
Sister Laura Katharine, C.S.J.B.**

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, Father Smith was not able to be present, in person, for the Holy Eucharist at the Convent in Mendham, New Jersey on September 8, 2020. His address was read for him and in his name by Sister Monica Clare, C.S.J.B., Sister Superior of the Community of Saint John Baptist.

My dear Sister Laura Katharine, Sister Monica Clare, Sister Deborah Francis, and all the Sisters of the Community of Saint John Baptist, greetings from the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square:

I was very much looking forward to being there to celebrate this great day with Sister Laura Katharine and all of you.

Though this was not to be, still, I hope you know that I am with you in spirit. Today at Mass at Saint Mary's, I celebrated the Holy Eucharist for Sister Laura Katharine's intentions, and we prayed for her and for all of you, giving thanks for Sister's ministry here at Saint Mary's and for the ministry of the Community of Saint John Baptist.

Your Sister Superior and my good friend, Sister Monica Clare, asked me some weeks ago if I would care to share some thoughts about Sister Laura Katharine with you today. I was very honored and happy to be invited to do so. Since then, I have worried that I am not up to the task of saying all that needs to be said concerning Sister Laura Katharine, her work, her life, and her ministry. I realized, of course, that no one person can ever say everything that needs to be said on an occasion such as this. I will depend on all of you to say what I cannot say. But please know that what I do say to you today comes from the heart, with much joy, gratitude, and affection.

I don't remember meeting Sister Laura Katharine. Were we introduced? We must have been, though I don't remember any introduction. My relationship with Sister L.K. grew slowly over the weeks, months, and years. We didn't go out for coffee together. We didn't make appointments to share with each other our inmost thoughts. I think our understanding of each other evolved, slowly, quietly, over time into something that I greatly value. We came to know each other by working and living in the same community, and of course by praying together almost every day of the week for a good many years.

Sister and I usually talked on the fly, in the hallway, at Coffee Hour, in the ambulatory, after Mass, during Bible Study, and, perhaps most often, in the sacristy, which in

many ways was the place that, if it belonged to anyone, belonged to her. Sister L.K. and I somehow got to know each other mostly “on the way,” pausing to share the news, to ask and answer questions, to complain and roll our eyes, to plan, to solve problems, and, very often, to laugh.

This is not the way one usually makes friends, but it seems to have worked for us. For one thing, our conversations weren’t all casual, and they certainly weren’t superficial. I came to realize, for instance, that over time Sister Laura Katharine had been, for whatever reason, paying attention. She had been listening to me and had noticed who I was and what I thought and believed. From time to time, quite out of the blue, she would quote some long-ago homily of mine to me; and, of course, she would often remind me of what my Enneagram number was, and *why* it was what it was, and what I needed to *do* about it; and she would always tell me this sort of thing without judgment. People who have watched too many movies often think that the religious life makes you judgmental. But that is not the case, is it? In my experience, life in community has made Sister Laura Katharine an acute observer of the foibles of human nature, but it has also made her a deeply compassionate friend, companion, and minister. Having patience with eccentricity is an advantage at Saint Mary’s, Times Square. Sister Laura Katharine seemed always to accept us as we

were, God's unusual children, and that's what made her such a help to us.

Which is not to say that Sister Laura Katharine is a hippy. She does have rules. After Sister moved back to Mendham, we realized that, somehow, her voice was still present with us, living in our minds, our memories, and in the *many* notes she had left for us, tucked away in odd corners of the sacristy. *Many* times, during the shutdown, I found myself saying to the friars, and then to the sextons, "That's not how *Sister Laura Katharine* would do this. Somehow she's going to find out that we're wrinkling this fair linen." One time I broke one of Sister L.K.'s most important rules. I carried the sacred vessels back to the sacristy the lazy way, saving myself a trip, *using two hands*. Inevitably, the paten fell off the chalice right onto the floor with a most disconcerting ding. Very bad. And so, I thought, "You see, L.K.'s rules exist for a reason, and so I now must do my penance."

I think it was one of you sisters who named L.K. "The Black Flash."¹ When I first learned of this, I found it very amusing. Over time, I came to think of it simply as a description of things as they are. I can still see Sister hurrying down the aisle of the church carrying a perfectly

¹ Some weeks after the September 8th Eucharist, Sister Laura Katharine informed me that her nickname had been bestowed on her by Saint Mary's parishioner, Larry Hamil, when he was serving at an Episcopal parish in Morristown, New Jersey.

pressed alb high on a hanger so it wouldn't drag on the floor. Her determination and speed were remarkable, especially since she had just hurried down five flights of stairs from the convent in the Mission House. Sister could move around the sacristy, especially before some big Solemn Mass with great intensity. But she was never frantic. She always moved with a sense of why we were all there. In this, she reminded me of my long-ago work in the theater. Sister Laura Katharine never made *herself* the drama, and by performing her own part in the drama expertly and with quiet dignity, she reminded me of the Jesuits' famous motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam/To the greater Glory of God*.

Of course, Sister Laura Katharine didn't *always* move like the Black Flash. She and I often worked together in the sacristy, sometimes talking, sometimes not, while she carefully and very precisely folded vestments in a way that only a few at Saint Mary's have ever mastered. Her prayerful patience while performing this task was truly remarkable, and it has made me aware of something else that I think the religious life has taught her.

You see, I think Sister L.K. is a conservative, the best sort of conservative. She believes in good order, though she is no tyrant. She also believes in tradition. She believes you need to know where you come from so you can preserve what's best from your tradition. And she certainly believes in *conservation*. I will always remember the day she gave me a

tour of the vestments in your sacristy. At Saint Mary's, we've been hard on vestments, but not *you*. As Sister reverently and carefully showed me those treasures, I think she was inviting me to consider the "beauty of holiness," incarnated in thread, fabric, color, icon, and design. She helped me imagine the faithfulness of the women who had made those beautiful things. She was reminding me of God's beauty. She was reminding me that all of us are capable of giving beautiful things back to God, whoever we are, in our work, our words, and our lives.

I should probably say at this point that, though Sister Laura Katharine and I agree about many things, we are also in some ways rather different. I was raised in a family with a father, a mother, and four brothers. She was raised in a family with a father, a mother, and a sister, no brothers at all. I blame these differences in our upbringing for the fact that though I persist in kidding Sister L.K. on a regular basis, she almost never gets the joke. This is how it always worked: I play the class clown, L.K. looks at me in pained befuddlement, and Sister Deborah Francis or Sister Monica Clare turn to her and say, "Sister, he's just *kidding*."

One example: L.K. once asked me to buy her 3 or 4 packets of those instant, quick-and-easy dry-cleaning sheets we both like, when next I was at the local Duane Reade. She told me she would reimburse me afterwards. I rolled my eyes at that, because I knew she was going to use these sheets for some

parochial purpose and that there was certainly no reason for her to pay for the sheets herself. So, I bought the sheets, each box costing about eight bucks, \$24 in all. I gave them to her. She asked me how much they cost. I told her not to worry about it. A few days later, she asked me again, and I told her no reimbursement was necessary. A few days more, she asked me *again*. Finally, exasperated, I said “\$167.00!” and kept on going, sure that by resorting to hyperbole I could bring the matter to a close. A day later she handed me an envelope with \$80.00 in it and asked me if she could pay me the rest later! This time, somewhat shamefacedly, it was I who had to say, “I was just *kidding!*” And so, for all the kidding over the years, I hope Sister L.K., you can forgive me.

This is not to say that Sister L.K. is a pushover. She’s not. As some of you know, my husband and I took care of Kooki, that “Feline-Possessed-of-a-Demon,” on many occasions while the Sisters were back in Mendham. Kooki puts up with me because she has to, but she doesn’t *like* me. One of my favorite memories of L.K. is something that happened one Sunday afternoon when she came to pick the Mad Feline up and take her back home. I had already tried to put Kooki into her carrier, had suffered multiple lacerations doing so, but had not succeeded in caging her. She had escaped my grasp and taken refuge behind a built-in desk in the library. When L.K. arrived, I told her what

had happened. She said, grimly, “Show me.” So I did and the next thing I knew she was down on the floor, on her hands and knees, crawling behind the desk, gently, but firmly, pulling a suddenly and annoyingly complacent Kooki out from her refuge. “Don’t mess with *L.K.*,” I thought to myself.

I know this is too long, and by now I am trying your patience. But I hope these reminiscences—and there could be many more!—bear witness to how much we miss Sister *L.K.* and how grateful to her we are for all she did for us.

Let me close with a metaphor. I think the metaphor is probably a cliché. I don’t think I made it up. I’m sure I read it somewhere, but I can’t remember where. But here it is: it seems to me that the religious life, if one gives oneself to it, as Sister Laura Katharine has done for these past fifty years and more, is rather like the slow, persistent action of the sea on a stone. Yes, it wears away some of the rough edges, but it also reveals the person who was always there, the person God created her to be, in all her singularity. I give thanks that Sister Laura Katharine said Yes to God and the Lord Jesus all those years ago, and for being who she is, for God, for all of you, and all of us.

Sister, I wish you many more years of this life, which you have lived so very well. I hope you have a blessed and joyful day. And I look forward to seeing you in person before too

very long, so you can tell me why I am most *definitely* a 4 and not a 5!

With the greatest affection,

Father Jay Smith

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