

Sr. Caritas Hopfenzitz, OSB

November 2, 1913 – January 24, 2005



"Taste and see how good the Lord is!" Sr. Caritas wrote on her jubilee card for the 60th anniversary of her profession. In her 91 years of life Sr. Caritas tasted how good the Lord was and devoted her entire life to thanking and praising God and to letting others see and taste the same goodness of the Lord. In Oksadok and in the Death March Sr. Caritas walked with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the white-hot furnace of Nebuchadnezzar and saw the angel of the Lord walking with her. Daily Sr. Caritas sang, "Blessed are you, and praiseworthy, O Lord... (Daniel 3:13–45).

Life is sacred! Sr. Caritas lived her sacred life to the full. In the announcement of the death of Sr. Caritas, we hear the word of Jesus, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). The love and the charm that Sr. Caritas graced upon everyone in her presence, including that guard of the Hard Labor Camp in Oksadok, should have delighted also the gatekeeper of heaven.

Life is sacred, and it is impossible and improper to verbalize about life, especially, that of our beloved Sr. Caritas. Sr. Caritas has been the Handmaid and the Princess of the Silent, the Silent People, the Silent Village, the Silent Craft.... Silence would be the only proper tribute for our beloved Sr. Caritas Hopfenzitz, OSB.

Sr. Caritas was born on November 2, 1913 at Oettingen-Nittingen, Germany, of her parents, Sebastian and Maria Hopfenzitz. She was baptized with the name Maria Luise. She had three older brothers and two younger sisters who were born much later due to her father's absence during the First World War. When Maria Luise was still a baby, her father went to war and suffered as a prisoner of war for six years. When father returned home, Maria Luise did not recognize him. Her two brothers went to the Second World War and, reported as Missing in Action, they never returned home. Shortly thereafter the mother received the news that Sr. Caritas and her missionary companions were missing. Having heard nothing from and about Sr. Caritas for over four years, the mother died in June 1953. The parents of many missionaries also make great sacrifices for God.

Maria Luise was a child full of life, ingenuity and charm. At times her mother told the family that Maria Luise is just like her brothers, but the grandmother's reply was that it is no problem and Maria Luise will grow up to do great works. Maria Luise attended high school in her hometown and then went to study chemistry at Munich University. However, after her sophomore year, Maria Luise entered the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing on September 1, 1937.

Already in 1938, Postulant Maria Luise was missioned to Korea and arrived in Wonsan on June 21, 1938. Maria Luise started her novitiate on January 6, 1939 and received her religious name of Sr. Caritas. Sr. Caritas made her first profession on January 10, 1940, and final profession on January 15, 1944. Thus, proud, happy, and grateful, Sr. Caritas used to tell everyone, "I am a Missionary Benedictine Sister 'made in Korea'."

After her first profession, Sr. Caritas served as the sacristan of the priory house and the catechist at the nearby parish. At that time, Sr. Caritas was assigned to teach the deaf-mutes of the parish. Sister began learning sign language in order to be able to teach catechism to the deaf-mutes. Thus,

Sr. Caritas began her life mission with the deaf-mutes.

In May 1949 the Wonsan priory house and its dependent stations were confiscated, the Korean sisters were dispersed, and the foreign sisters were sent to prison. After three months of imprisonment in Pyongyang, the 39 Missionary Benedictine monks and the 20 Missionary Benedictine sisters were transferred to Oksadok, a hard labor camp deep in the mountains near Zagangdo, Kangkye. In Oksadok and during the Death March of 1951, 15 monks (10 brothers and 5 priests) and 2 sisters died, and the International Prisoners of War Exchange Pact allowed the remaining 24 monks and 18 sisters to return to their homeland. Our sisters arrived in Tutzing on January 24, 1954.

In 1955 Sr. Caritas was the first to return to Korea from where the news came that our Korean sisters fled from the North and had settled in the South. Sr. Caritas arrived in Pusan, on November 29, 1955, and was reunited with the Korean sisters in Daegu. Soon thereafter, Sr. Caritas was sent to catechize parishioners at the Donamdong parish in Seoul. On the first Sunday at the parish, Sr. Caritas met the deaf-mute couple that she had baptized long ago in Wonsan. For Sr. Caritas, it was truly a miracle spelling out God's will for her.

The word that Sr. Caritas was also in Seoul spread like wild fire through the silent communication network among the deaf-mute refugees from the North. The refugee and other deaf-mutes from near and far flocked around Sr. Caritas. The Columban Fathers serving at the Donamdong parish fully cooperated, and thus the deaf-mutes came to the Donamdong parish for catechism, Sunday Masses, and the companionship and mutual support in their faith community.

During this time Sr. Caritas served as "the mediator" in the confessionals for the Rite of Reconciliation. Sr. Caritas heard and translated the confession of the deaf-mutes for the priests! Sr. Caritas listened to the admonitions of the priest and translated them for the penitent. Sr. Caritas and the deaf-mutes were thus so united in love and in faith.

The colonial policy during the Japanese occupation, World War II, the subsequent division of the country, and the Korean War ruined Korea. The Korean War refugees from the North suffered and the handicapped suffered more. The life of most deaf-mute refugees of the time spelled utter misery. Sr. Caritas did what she could to help her deaf-mutes.



From the early 1960s, through the help of the German ambassadors and embassy staff in Korea, Misereor and the Mission Society of the Holy Childhood in Germany, the US Army stationed in Korea, the US Catholic Relief Service, the Missionary Benedictines in Norfolk and Schuyler, USA, and other places, and many agencies and supporters, Sr. Caritas bought land to construct housing and raise crops and domestic animals, followed many other income generating and job

creating projects. A noodle factory came into being. The sewing factory was established to make Barbie doll clothes, stuffed animals and other toys, cleverly designed and colorful, for domestic but more for the international consumption. Thus, through the work of their own hands the deaf-mutes began to support themselves and their common dreams. In 1974 the dream to teach the deaf-mute children to speak began materializing, and in 1976 the "Love to Talk" School was established as a formal educational establishment.



In 1986 the Korean Broadcasting Service helped Sr. Caritas to televise her last dream. One of the TV viewers, an elderly woman living in the countryside, offered a large piece of land for "St. Joseph's Home" for the deaf-mute elderly, the first nursing home for the deaf-mutes in the country. Sr. Caritas lived at the Home with her old friends, the elderly deaf-mutes.

When, in order to reduce the size of the community, the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in Korea were divided into two priories, Seoul and Daegu, Sr. Caritas "automatically" belonged to the Priory of Seoul. At the age of 85, Sr. Caritas handed over all her endeavors to her sisters of the Seoul Priory and retired to the Daegu Priory.

In the years totally dedicated to the deaf-mutes, Sr. Caritas lived for most of the time in small local communities. Now in the large priory house she appreciated the basic elements of monastic life and other practices such as Gregorian chant, solemn Holy Mass, Opus Dei in the big choir, silence, "withdrawal from the 'world'", contemplative prayer, spiritual sharing, community recreation, tending the earth, raising herbs and flowers, simplicity and frugality etc.— the ideals of her choice when she entered Tutzing.

Always aglow, Sr. Caritas smiled and talked of course with sounds and with hands as she had done over a half century. "I cannot thank God enough; I am so grateful for everything and every moment of my life;" said Sr. Caritas most frequently. With Sr. Bertwina, now our only German sister in Korea, Sr. Caritas had a "soul friend" with whom to spend time in prayer and spiritual sharing, reminiscing, dictating letters for the family, friends, and benefactors, weeding in their own herb garden and admiring flowers in each other's own flowerbeds.

Sr. Caritas charmed the young and the old. She has been a real model of life for all of us. Her only complaint was about her arthritic knees. In early December last year, however, Sr. Caritas slipped while getting out of bed. From then on, Sister stayed in bed for most of the time. Yet, even in bed, Sr. Caritas was always in a positive mood. She greeted every visitor with a bright and happy smile and used to exclaim, "I offer my little pains and troubles. They are my small gifts. I offer them to Jesus." "I cannot thank God enough for my vocation. If only the people realize what happiness is ours in our monastic vocation, the people, beautiful young ladies, would all flock into the monasteries." Every day in the afternoon, one of the sisters regularly



took her in the wheelchair for a "walk" in and around the house.



In the afternoon of the day of her passing, our ever happy and joyful Sr. Caritas was taken in a wheelchair to visit Sr. Bertwina. During that visit Sr. Caritas dictated a letter and chatted a little. Then she went up to the third floor to look around the novitiate. After coming to her room Sr. Caritas observed the late afternoon routine. She prayed Vespers with the community from her bed where, through the intercom, she could listen to the community chanting Vespers.

After supper Sr. Caritas appeared uneasy and the two young sisters who were with her for the evening visit tried to comfort her. Around 9 o'clock the assistant infirmarian, Sr. Myriam, came in to ready her for the night, Sr. Gertrud, the prioress, came in for the "Night Blessing" rounds, and Sr. Petra, the infirmarian, came in for the night check. Sr. Caritas complained about breathing difficulty, saying, "I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe." Then Sr. Caritas repeated, "Mein Jesus, Barmherzigkeit! Mein Jesus, Barmherzigkeit!" (My Jesus, mercy!) and each time we repeated it. In and out of the bed twice, Sr. Caritas called out, "Mein Schutzengel! Mein Schutzengel! (My guardian angel!) Standing but being held in the arms of Sr. Gertrud, Sr. Caritas said, "Ich sterbe.... Ich sterbe.... (I'm dying...) Put me on the bed." By the time we laid Sr. Caritas on her bed, she breathed no longer. "Mein Jesus, Barmherzigkeit!" we continued, and when the community assembled we sang the "Suscipe me Domine...."

It seemed all so sudden. In the blink of an eye the God of life and the Lord of love snatched away our beloved Sr. Caritas from our arms. "My soul is attached to Jesus. At the moment of my death Jesus will draw me up to heaven by his right arm." Sr. Caritas used to say. It was shortly after 10 p.m. The day was January 24. On this day fifty-one years ago, having survived the indescribable ordeal for four and a half years, Sr. Caritas and her companion sisters returned home in Tutzing. On the same day and in the 50th year of her life in the South, our Sr. Caritas returned home to heaven.

As we watched Sr. Caritas ascend to the heavens, the heavens showered down millions of soft white flowers. The next day one of the postulants "trembling" confessed, "Last night I asked Sr. Caritas to send us snow. This winter has been so dry and we had very little snow." But the planners for the funeral Mass and burial were also concerned with preparing the ground for the burial and about the possible hazardous road conditions for traveling guests, especially the deaf-mutes coming from near and far. In particular, we worried about the possible icy road up to our cemetery located on a hill.

On the 25th, despite the short notice and the treacherous road conditions, Cardinal Stephen Kim, age 85, came to be with us, to mourn for his old friend, and to be the main celebrant of the funeral Mass. On the day of the funeral and burial, January 26, the sun rose high and bright, the sky was blue and the day was warm. The deaf-mutes and the sisters from the Seoul Priory came in buses. It was a perfect day for the funeral of Sr. Caritas. The funeral procession was a "March of Glory" through the silent cloister garden and up the hill to the cemetery nestled among the evergreen trees.

At times, the political world also came to recognize the works of Sr. Caritas. In March 1977, Sr. Caritas received from the Korean government the Order of National Service Merit Dongbaeg Medal and, in November 1977, Sr. Caritas received from the German government the First Class Service

Merit Cross (Das Verdienstkreuz 1. Klasse Des Verdienstordens der Bundesrepublik Deutschland). Sr. Caritas had also been named the Citizen of Honor of Oettingen (Ehrenbuergerin der Stadt Oettingen).

On February 18, 2005, the niece of Sr. Caritas, Rosemarie, wrote the following to Sr. Bertwina. Mr. Wagner, Rose Marie's husband, had a kidney problem and was to be hospitalized. However, the family planned to have the Requiem Mass for Sr. Caritas at 7 p.m., followed by refreshments prepared by Rose Marie and a slide show presented by Mr. Wagner, all on February 10, the Feast of St. Scholastica. On that day, in the afternoon, Mr. Wagner started to have severe pain attacks. Rose Marie asked Sr. Caritas, "Who should do the slide show if my husband is so sick?" Shortly before the Requiem Mass started, a grain of wheat-size stone came out and he had no pain any more.

We are grateful to Sr. Caritas for what she has been to all of us and to God for the gift of Sr. Caritas. On earth Sr. Caritas loved us and in heaven she will intercede for us. Please pray for us and for all who mourn for Sr. Caritas. On this earth, may we all "Taste and see how good the Lord is!", that we may all be united in heaven.

The Solemnity of St. Joseph, March 19, 2005

St. Benedict Priory – Daegu

