

An Appreciation of the Life of
DOROTHY BAXENDALE SEEGER
Offered at the Mass for Christian Burial
Saint Mary of the Lakes Church
Medford, New Jersey

July 3, 2001

Good morning, friends. My father and mother had four children, four natural grandchildren, one adoptive grandchild, and so far, five great-grandchildren. On behalf of my father and of all of these members of our family I want to thank our good friends, Doris Shamleffer, Lumberton Mayor Marge Gest, and Stanley Gest for joining with us in this Mass for Christian Burial being offered for my mother. I want to note that it is a marvelous thing that my niece Cindy has been able to make it here all the way from her home in London on such short notice. I also want to express special appreciation to Father Joe Tedesco and to Mr. and Mrs. Tedeschi of Saint Mary of the Lakes parish for their ministry of healing and for their help with this liturgy.



My Mom was born on October 20 in the year 1909, and she died last Saturday, on June 30, 2001. This is a long life, and so, in the midst of our tears and grief, it is important that we remember that there is so much to be grateful for, not only for the number of her years in this life, but also for the many gifts of the Spirit which my mother was able to bring to her family. Hers was a life which was centered and purposeful, a life expressive of Catholic and Christian values, a life of service to the Truth. But these more sturdy qualities were balanced by a wonderful capacity for tenderness, affection, empathy and playfulness in a person whose demeanor was never lost to the sight of love.

The second of two daughters of William Henry Baxendale and Elizabeth Johnson Baxendale, Dorothy Seeger spent her childhood mostly in the State of Maine, until the family settled permanently in northern New Jersey in the township of Palisades Park. Nowadays Palisades Park is a small part of the New York City metropolitan urban sprawl, but back then it was a distinct village surrounded by open spaces. My grandfather was an immigrant from Wales, and he brought with him to America a staunch commitment to the Presbyterian

Church, and the four Baxendales were pillars of the First Presbyterian Church of Palisades Park. He also brought with him the fondness for music and poetry which is characteristic of the Celtic people among whom he had lived in Wales. The musical side of this heritage was absorbed more by my mother's older sister, my Aunt Beatrice, who became organist and choir director of the Presbyterian Church; my mother, although not unmusical, specialized in poetry.

My mother met my Dad when they were both on vacation at a resort called Shepherd's Farm. They were married slightly more than a year later, in August of 1934. The marriage was not welcomed by my grandfather Baxendale, who boycotted the wedding. There was a cultural difference between these two immigrant families, the Baxendales and the Seegers. The Seegers were Roman Catholics from Bavaria, working class people not averse to enjoying their beer in moderation. My grandfather Baxendale, a staunch Presbyterian and a small businessman whose family had a background in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, could not quite tolerate my mother's conversion



to Roman Catholicism and her affiliation with the quite different cultural background of the Seegers. I am told that it was my own arrival on the scene, with my cute blond curls, which eventually melted my grandfather Baxendale's heart. Reconciliation did occur, and, happily, my brother and sisters and I spent many happy hours in the embrace of both the Seegers and the Baxendales.

My Mom was able to continue her interest in writing poetry after her marriage and after my arrival. A little while ago I was rereading some of her published works from the late 1930s and early 1940s. When they were married my Mom and Dad set up their first household in the Bronx, and apartment living in a densely populated Bronx neighborhood offered a stark contrast to the environments of Maine and New Jersey where

my Mom had grown up. Reflection on this is a theme in several of her poems. Here is just one example:

SONG FROM AN AIRSHAFT

Such a scant bit of sky!
I can hardly say
Whether the day
Be fair or gray
With great clouds drifting by.

No willow hands wave in the weather,
Reaching up to a gables edge;
No bird preens a ruffled feather;
No dewy webs whiten a hedge.

Never there comes a gay young breeze
To rattle the pane,
And even the rain
Taps its refrain
But lightly on windows like these.

Past our knowing, the star shine!
Two brief moments of moon!
The smallest ray of sunshine
Slips in and out at noon.

My heart hugs a dream of burgeoning white
Dogwood in bloom;
But deep is the gloom
In this narrow room,
And frail, frail is the ladder of light.

We know that the period of the late 1930s and early 1940s, when my mother was writing, was one of the most tragic in recent history. While focusing most intensely upon her own direct experience, as most effective writers do, meditation on the awful realities visible on a wider horizon also found a place in her verse. Thus:

LEST THE SPRING FAIL

Watch now, my heart, how quietly unfolds
Each shining leaf, each petalled flower.
Learn all the mysteries this season holds.
Forget not one lush breeze, one singing hour.
Go down to the meadow and memorize
The feel of soil made spongy-soft with sun;
And bring back, too, the gladly whispered cries
Of all the little brooks let out to run.
Garner these things but gently! They are frail
And in some fastness of a close-kept soul
Hoard them, lest in another year the spring shall fail;
Lest through these fields the wheels of war shall roll.
If the black blight that's spread around the world
Finds this small garden, these low, lovely moors;
If these bright banners be death-stricken, furled,
A spring that none may ravage shall be yours.
Study where grows the hawthorn, where the willow,
And where the lilac and the trellised rose,
And all the homely, common flowers that follow
Day after day the pattern each one knows.
So that past clamor, pain, and cruel disaster,
With knowing hand to set each blossom right,
I may creep back in that hushed moment after
To heal my heart again in this loved sight.

Eventually, my parents moved our family to a small house in Queens, New York where they were to live for fifty-one years, until they came to Medford Leas. Their community in Queens at that time was surrounded by wooded areas and open spaces. The poetry writing stopped, perhaps because of the pressures of a growing family, perhaps because the new setting, being more compatible, no longer caused a yearning which prompted the expressive muse. But my mother's interest in words abided; she was a great resource to her children when it came to lessons in literature and in English composition, and in her later years she was an absolutely formidable Scrabble player! I could not bear the crushing defeats myself, and played with her and my Dad only rarely; happily, my sisters had more fortitude, as did my Aunt Caroline, my father's sister, who lived a block away from us.



When there were household chores to be done together, especially the dishwashing, my Mother would have us singing hymns or golden oldies while we worked. Or else she would recite poetry to us from her extensive memory, sometimes her own poetry, but more often the poetry of someone else, particularly the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay. She would do everything she could to make home life inter-

esting, stimulating and joyful - cooking up special dishes, or launching creative projects, like producing home-made Christmas cards for the entire list, including original verses tailored for each recipient.

My mother never had a college education. All the original poetry did not emerge from advanced courses in creative writing! But she was deeply committed to the idea that women and men should receive equal educational opportunities, and firmly resisted any notion that if resources are limited education should be parceled out more generously to young men, an idea which was not unknown in our family's traditions. She stood up for treating everyone equally, and, in fact, both my sisters, having been equally launched, have earned more advanced degrees than my brother and myself.

My mother also had no patience for bigotry of any kind against categories of human

beings. She believed that the good and the bad aspects of human nature are equally distributed, and she would not tolerate disparagements of other religious, racial or ethnic groups. She taught us to respect people of every background. We take these values for granted today, although we fail badly in our practice of them. But it was not so long ago that, sadly, these values could not be taken for granted. Perhaps her own conversion from Protestant to Catholic, and my grandfather's boycott of her wedding, made her more than uncommonly sensitive to the costs of intolerance. We know that one of the enduring legacies of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II will be his energetic ministry of reconciliation, atonement and forgiveness among human groups which have been separated by formidable barriers. So I think of my mother, a convert with no advanced education, as having found her way, nevertheless, in the middle of the last century, to a 21st Century Catholicism.



Having lived through most of the calamitous twentieth century, my parents have been spared direct exposure to any of its many horrors, as have their offspring also. This is a blessing we did not merit or deserve, but one for which we must give abundant thanks. But tragedy did come, as it must into every life, with the death in an automobile accident of my sister Enid, which occurred in 1995. My parents bore this in a spirit of Christian obedience and patience, but the need to bury a child causes a wound from which parents rarely

can be said truly to recover. One of the first things my father said when we were with my mother's remains on her deathbed was "She is with Enid now."

There is no way fairly or adequately to summarize the gifts brought to us by any given life. In my mother's case, though, I feel certain of this: she would want most to be remembered as a loving and devoted wife and mother. In fact, for all her special personal qualities, her many talents, her clear opinions and views, her strong womanliness, her individuality, she would not want to be thought of as distinct from my father. This is a rich and instructive paradox. We have been told that we gain our life by losing it. All of us may not be called to die on a cross, but the Lord does call each of us to a task or a vocation, a vocation which deserves our selfless and unstinting devotion. Sixty seven years of marriage and family life is no small thing. As I have seen my father's caring for my mother during the recent years of her disablement, I have known that, were the situation reversed, the same thing would have occurred the

other way. In my parents' love for each other and their devotion to their family we all have seen something of eternity, we have seen how the Cross means life as well as death. This is their beautiful gift to us; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Daniel A. Seeger