

Harriet pioneered the Christmas letter. Before many others got the idea, she sent an annual newsy letter that kept all of us in Kansas City up to date on the events befalling our Minnesota relatives. We never told them this, but we sometimes smiled at all the bad news those letters contained. Litanies of difficulties came to us wrapped inside Christmas greetings. These testimonies of hope in the midst of miseries became a way of tracking Harriet's biography and her spiritual life.

Chief among her worries was the welfare of her family. The heroic care she offered Steve after his brain tumor was matched only by the courageous freedom she gave him to be his own man. The viewpoints of her daughters certainly challenged her preconceived notions about God, church, and women. But she opened her heart to the views of a younger generation and adopted them as her own. She was duly proud of Mary and Cathy, who devoted their lives to God, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the poor and the oppressed. Still, in the household they were probably no easier to manage than Steve was. Through it all, Harriet could always rely on the steady hand of the sensible man she loved, her husband, my mother's older brother, Frank.

Each year she and Frank prepared stables and figurines for devotions in family homes. As Christmas drew near, she gazed time and again on the images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family, whose lives were filled with wonder and danger, heartache and love. Their story helped Harriet reflect on her story, and perhaps it was only at Christmas, in the glorious promises nearly concealed by the bare manger, that she could write about her struggles in hope.

After all, she had reason to give thanks. In the improbable length of Steve's life and the accomplishments of each family member, she generously received an answer to her prayers.

The Letter to the Colossians urges every Christian to put on virtues like garments - heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, and over all of them, even over the virtue of forgiveness, put on love. The early Christians had to be reminded of this, as do we. We do it better when we witness the example of others who have suffered much yet loved even more.

When I was a child, our family occasionally drove to Grandma's house on Chestnut Street in Redwood Falls, and Aunt Harriet would always walk over to greet us there and then welcome us to her home. She labored quietly in the kitchen and throughout the house, and yet she sat at the feet of the Word of God, making time to nurture her spiritual life.

Harriet looked frail, and she spoke with a timid, shaky voice that belied the strength inside her. She held strong convictions, and sometimes she surprised you with them. But you could always rely on her friendship, her faith and her love.

Our family has lost a loving mother and aunt, and all of you have lost a good friend. We send her away today with a litany of our own difficulties, praying that God will enclose her and us inside a message of hope.