

One day 20 years ago, Barb Zanin invited me to help her give a retreat to parish catechumenate teams in the diocese. We had been friends for years, but she had no idea what she was asking. I had just joined her on the staff of the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry after finishing my studies in Rome, so I was smart and stupid at the same time. I knew everything about the sacrament of confirmation, as long as it concerned matters no later than the 16th century. Well, there wasn't much of a market for that, so somebody else had to teach me what I needed to know, and for this particular retreat, that somebody was going to be Barb. I was comfortable learning from her, always had been. Back when she worked for the Office of Worship with Bob Thompson and Cele Breen, the three of them helped plan my first mass. So when she said, "We're going to do a retreat together," I told her the truth: "I don't know how to do that." "Sure you do," she said. "You just stand up there and do it." "No," I insisted, knowing that I had to get her attention on this point, "I really don't know what to do." So she helped me – as she had helped many others. She was wise beyond words, and she shared wisdom with those who were less endowed.

Barb was a wife and mother of an outstanding family, so she was rooted there. And I know her family lays a special claim to mourning her loss in a way that the rest of us cannot feel. Nonetheless, we miss her. She served us in several of our parishes, in different offices of our diocese, and many other dioceses, where she was a presenter for the North American Forum on the Catechumenate. Just this week I heard from several of her coworkers from around the country. Barb worked on the Ministries Institute, which formed catechists, sponsors, liturgists, priests, musicians and parish directors. She had a vision for the whole works, and she could help you no matter how God was calling you. One of her coworkers told me this: "Another great Church Woman has entered the fullness of the reign of God. Barb was one of Forum's 'originals' and Forum rests well on her shoulders and on her soul. Rest in peace, Woman of God!" Another said, "It was such a joy to watch her run those three-day institutes! She was efficient but kind. She was right on target with advice, but listened thoughtfully. She was serious, but had the most outrageous sense of humor. She was an impeccable presider, but made prayer seem natural and easy." Another remembers a distress call he received on the eve of one institute. Barb was supposed to present with him, but all she could do was blubber into the phone, "I can't go! I can't go!" Bob Thompson had just died; Barb knew where she was needed, and where she needed to be.

Now that Barb is gone, there's been plenty of blubbering to go around, but she wouldn't stand very long for this. She'd say go ahead and have your cry, but then get on with it. There are, people to teach, encouragement to spread, love to show, meals to eat, stories to tell, and feet to wash. For me and others, she was lady Wisdom: "Let whoever is simple turn in here; to the one who lacks understanding, she says, 'Come eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding.'"