

A Reflection on Ann Marie Izzo, *by Edna Arguello-Hitchner*

Ann Marie has been on my mind more than ever these past few weeks, particularly because I recently returned to serving as a music minister at her parish. She was always so energized at this time of the year. It was a time of great anticipation. Energized by the NPM Convention that takes place every year in July, she would spend the fall season preparing for advent. Choir practices would have already begun and in addition to advent, it was time to start thinking about the Christmas season liturgies. She would begin talking about all she had learned about at the convention, all the new music she wanted to buy and then share with Dina who directed the children and adult choirs. She would talk about a litany of things she wanted to do to build up the music program and enhance liturgy at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church where she had ministered for most of the years she was on this earth. She had started playing organ there as a teenager. In addition to music, there was much work to be done, including the bereavement ministry she had established in recent years and what about the ministry retreat she had been hoping to organize for years.

She would also get excited about school. She was working toward earning a Master's Degree in liturgy at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She was especially proud of this effort, as well as the fact that she had earned an organ certificate from NPM. She played so beautifully that day. Craig Williams, organist and choirmaster at the United States Military Academy, and her organ teacher when she studied in the Church Music Program at Westminster Conservatory, recommended her for the graduate program at CTU. I remember how I was moved to tears when he pointed out that during their time together that Ann Marie was a devoted church musician who always had to work around the limitations of her arms and hands to play organ. Hallelujah.

Ann Marie suffered with health challenges her whole life, and in all the time I knew her, despite many surgeries and the effects of chronic illness, her heart was always full of love for her ministry, even when in recent years her body ached so much that she sometimes had to literally climb on her hands and knees to get to the choir loft. She would come to church to cast her burdens upon the Lord. She never wanted to talk about taking care of herself, though. It was easier for her to talk about how she needed to deliver food to someone's house or seek out a friend going through a difficult time.

If you knew her well, you knew that in addition to her family - especially her nieces and nephew and the baby grandnephews she loved to spend time with - being a pastoral musician gave her life meaning. It was one of the few things that she could get fired up about. Holy Week and the NPM Convention were highlights of her life in ministry. We roomed together at these conventions for several years. I kid you not that sometimes within 24 hours of returning from a convention, she was already talking about reserving hotels and researching travel prices for the following year's convention. A few weeks ago, a picture of the two of us at the 2019 NPM Convention in Raleigh, N.C., showed up on my Facebook feed, and so I was reminded of all of this. She lived for that annual NPM experience. And then when it was all over, she would return on Sunday to that choir loft that had been home for so many years. She would sit at the organ, her feet dangling from the bench, as she readied to offer thanksgiving, honor and glory, having worshipped, broken bread, learned new things, and especially laughed with the musicians of the Diocese of Metuchen.

When I returned to Holy Trinity last month, it had been more than five months since I had visited the sacred space. Ann Marie was too sick to play on that day in March before the pandemic changed our lives and took away our ability to gather in large groups to worship and sing together. Her health had deteriorated considerably, and she had been in and out of the hospital for more than a year, willing herself to get better enough to get back up to the loft. On those days when she wasn't there, Ann Marie would find a way to be in church even though she wasn't. She had played the organ at her neighborhood parish forever, so when she was out sick, she was still calling or texting as I made my way into the church. By the time mass was over, my phone would be filled with texts. "How did it go?" "How many people were at mass?" "Did people sing?"

This pandemic has disrupted our sense of closure, our ability to enjoy each other, as well as our ability to say goodbye. Ann Marie died the day before her birthday and for me, it has been as if she just disappeared. When I saw Father Jeff that day, her death felt real to me. The emotions just poured out and I cried hard. She was crazy about him and she was excited about what they had done in the two years since he had become pastor. When she died, Father Jeff reminded us of the great love of God and how we should be thankful in the midst of our mourning.: "In this Easter season especially, we have right before us the knowledge that Christ has won the definitive victory over death. We trust in His power to raise up Ann Marie whose life was devoted to serving Him and His Church."

I almost cried again the other day when Anthony Nardino, the new music director at Holy Trinity, a brilliant liturgical minister and a man of great faith, told me that he had spent some time with her organ practice book. I have been talking his ear off about how Ann Marie loved Holy Trinity and her congregation who sang joyfully to notes played on an instrument that she worked hard to raise funds to buy.

Did they sing that day I returned to Holy Trinity? Yes, dear friend. Through masks and at six feet apart, they sang. Rest in peace.