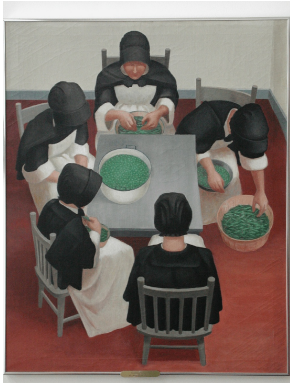


Sister Mary Francis Irvin **October 4, 1914 – January 8, 2011**



Convent Kitchen (oil on canvas, 1994)
Artist: Sister Mary Francis Irvin, SC

Lucy Irvin was born in Canton, Ohio, in 1914. Her mother was Marie Flinn Irvin and her father was Francis. He died in the flu epidemic soon after the fourth child, Gertrude, was born. Gertrude and four of her nephews are here today. Her two maternal aunts were Sisters of Charity: Mother M. Ignatia Flinn and Sister Antoinette Flinn.

As a little girl Lucy wanted to be a Sister. She went to Saint James School in Wilkinsburg and to Wilkinsburg High School. At 18 she entered the Sisters of Charity and then discovered that she had artistic talent. She taught grade school a few years but found disciplining the students to be difficult. The leaders of the congregation sent her to Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting and Design and then to Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan where she earned a Master of Fine Arts in Painting. During her time in the art schools, she created many beautiful paintings and collaborated with other artists in making metal liturgical vessels and the stained glass windows that now surround this Chapel at Caritas Christi. If you have not seen the windows in the daytime, do come back!

She taught art at Seton Hill College (now University) from 1945 until 1977. The Art Program at Seton Hill was cofounded by Sister Mary Francis and her dear friend and colleague, Sister Mary Estelle Hensler. They were a dynamic duo, and they collaborated from the late 1930's until the end of their lives! Sister Mary Francis was always pursuing a dream, very serious, hard working and a perfectionist. Sister Estelle was philosophical, open to new ideas and had a good sense of humor. They complemented each other. Together they built the art department from scratch. Sister Estelle taught art history and Sister Mary Francis at first taught all the studio courses, which included: sculpture, pottery, enameling, metal work, wood shop. Sister Mary Francis lived long enough to see Seton Hill offer two degrees in Art: the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Fine Arts.

Talking about Sister Mary Francis is like describing the Grand Canyon....so vast! In preparing this reflection I saw that Sister Mary Francis's life had three phases. The first phase I call "ART." Sister was devoted to the creation of art and the teaching of art. The second phase of her life I call "DEVELOPMENT." She worked on fund-raising and planning for Seton Hill College. This phase overlapped the art phase. Sister had the dream of having a building for the fine arts. In order to get that, in the 1960's she first worked on a master plan for the college and got the funds to build Lynch Hall and to renovate the first floor of Maura Hall for the sciences. When Lynch Hall for Sciences was opened in the late 1960's, it was debt-free because of the government grants and the donations that she had obtained. But there were no government funds for the fine arts building!

The third phase of her life I call "PRAYER." This phase overlapped and enlivened the other two. Both Sister Mary Francis and Sister Estelle were prayerful women. In 1972 Sister Mary Francis was in Saint Joseph Chapel at Seton Hill College praying about the college and the congregation of Sisters of Charity. She believed that God told her that the college and the congregation would be saved by prayer. She went to the Art Department office to talk with Sister Estelle. Sister Francis de Sales Joyce was there, also. When Sister Mary Francis told of her inspiration, Sister Francis de Sales

said that she had the same idea. She suggested that Sister Mary Francis and other sisters attend the Life in the Spirit Seminars at Saint Francis Seminary in Loretto where Sister Francis de Sales was a leader of a Charismatic Prayer Group along with Father Michael Scanlan. This suggestion built on recent experiences of Sister Mary Francis and Sister Estelle and some other Sisters. In 1970 Sister Estelle was asked to give a talk on Pentecostal prayer at an assembly of the Sisters of Charity. To prepare for her talk she went to a service at an Assembly of God Church and to meetings of the Full Gospel Business Men. She was inspired by the joyful praise at these services. In the summer of 1972 Sister Mary Francis, Sister Pauline Grentz and I went to the Seminars at Loretto and then, with the help of Father Dan Mahoney, began the Family of God Charismatic Prayer Group. This group has met weekly since then, first at Seton Hill College and more recently at Doran Hall. For over 30 years Sister Mary Francis was the effective leader of this prayer group and also a leader of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Diocese of Greensburg.

Continuing the emphasis on prayer, in 1977 Sister Mary Francis and Sister Estelle moved to Doran Hall to help start a Retreat and Renewal Center. In 1982 Sister Estelle moved to Ennis Hall to live as a ‘wisdom figure’ with our young sisters, and Sister Mary Francis lived at Marian Hall.

The Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation is an ecumenical group of Christian ministers which promotes initiatives to make Pittsburgh a “City for God.” Father Scanlan, now the President of Franciscan University, suggested to Reid Carpenter, president of the Foundation, to invite Sister Mary Francis to join the Pittsburgh Offensive. This was the prayer and discernment group for the Foundation. Sister went to monthly meetings for several years and for eleven years worked with a person from the Foundation to meet weekly with the Sisters at Assumption Hall to intercede for the prayer requests of the Foundation. When we notified Reid Carpenter about the death of Sister Mary Francis, he wrote this message: “It is with obvious sadness and an overwhelming sense of gratitude that I express my condolences to all the Sisters of Charity regarding the loss of Sister Mary Francis Irvin. She and I were very dear friends and journeyed together for many years. She and her fellow sisters were a major source of prayer and encouragement that led me into the Catholic Church.” Both Reid and his wife, Carole, are Catholic converts and now work at Ave Maria University.

Sister Estelle and Sister Mary Francis shared their prayer lives throughout the years. I found a birthday card that Sister Estelle gave to Sister Mary Francis. She wrote” If it were not for your dream, from the beginning, and still is, the story of Art would have taken a different course. You, above all have made possible, what we hope will materialize, God willing. You sacrificed your deepest desires and that offering, I trust God, will bring the dream about.”

All through their lives as Sisters of Charity, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Estelle would meet each day. Now they are reunited in heaven and may even at this time be working to achieve Sister Mary Francis’s dream for a Visual Arts Building at Seton Hill University! And we know that they believe the message in the letter to the Ephesians, which follows what we heard at Mass: “To him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” Eph. 3:20.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection

~Sister Ann Infanger

January 12, 2011

