

Journeying with Sr. Nicholas

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DANBURY CATHOLIC
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Sister Mary Nicholas was born on January 6, 1930 (Little Christmas) in Chicago. She was the youngest child of Otto and Isabel Kronenberg and was given the name Georgianna but because she was so tiny at birth her mother called her "Smallie" which to this day she is still called. At the time of her birth her sister Audrey and brother Bob were in there teens. Another sister Marian was about two years old but she died at the age of five...also of cancer.

Although her father had been baptized a Catholic, he did not attend church. Her mother was an Anglican but the children were not brought up in any particular religion.

Sister Nicholas told me of the first time she heard the name Jesus Christ. She was five years old at the time and was with her brother and some of his friends when one of them used His Name in vain, saying to another one, "Jesus Christ, get out of here" She said to him, "Who is Jesus Christ?" They laughed and said, "You mean, kid, that you don't know who Jesus Christ is?" She said "No." And they said, "That's Him up there." And pointed to a crucifix. She said she asked them to tell her more about Christ but they just brushed her off.

Her next memory of meeting Christ was when she was ten years old. She and a girl friend were riding their bikes down the street and they passed a church. Through an open window she caught a glimpse of the Blessed Sacrament which was exposed at the time. She said she felt something come over her and she said to the friend who was a Catholic, "What's that?" The two of them went to the door of the church and her girl friend told her that was Christ. She again asked, "Who is Christ?" This time she received more of an answer. When they got back on their bikes she paused again at the open window and looking at the Host said, "I don't know much about You, but I promise to love You all the rest of my life."

After completing sixth grade at the local public school, her parents decided to send her to a boarding school. So she went to Mt. St. Clare in Clinton, Iowa, where she stayed until she graduated from high school.

While there, she was instructed in the truths of the Faith but the Chaplain wouldn't baptize her since her parents were not practicing Catholics. But she was determined to get baptized. So when she was fifteen years old she came home on a vacation and asked her girl friend to take her up to the pastor of the local parish church. She told him she had been instructed in the truths of the Faith and asked to baptize her. He did. She then returned to the Mount and told the chaplain she was now baptized and would he please tell her what she had to do to be confirmed.

When Sister Nicholas was in her last year of high school her family moved to Hinsdale, a suburb of Chicago. She really loved this suburb for its proximity to the Forest preserves which gave her plenty of opportunity to ride and train her horse which was something she really loved to do. There was also an air strip nearby which she put to just as good use since she owned her own plane and had a pilot's license at the age of sixteen. And if she wasn't on her horse or up in the air she was driving through the countryside in her yellow convertible.

After she graduated from high school she went to work as a secretary for her brother Bob. She worked for him for two years and then on September 8, 1950, went back to Mt. St. Clare to begin her postulancy as a Franciscan Sister.

Following her profession on August 12, 1953, she was sent to Danbury, IA to teach kindergarten which was something she loved doing and did exceptionally well. She spent the next four years there.

In the spring of 1957 she noticed a lump on her neck and went to see a doctor. He thought it was just a little cyst and after giving her a shot of Novocain, began to remove it right there in the office. He soon realized that this was more than an ordinary cyst but since he had already started to remove it, he had no choice but to continue. He didn't have anything stronger to give her for the pain which became so great that she lost consciousness right in the chair. When this ordeal was over he told her that she would have to see a specialist. So shortly after she left for St. Louis. As she was leaving one of the nuns asked her if she was afraid. She said, "Oh no. Whatever God wants is O.K. with me."

In St. Louis she was told that she had cancer and was given about ten years to live. The type of cancer she had was one in which tumors formed on nerves. Not all the tumors formed on nerves in the neck area alone; she also had many on her arms and feet.

From the first trip to St. Louis in 1957 until October of 1966 Sister led a normal life although she did have to go back for check-ups and had several small tumors removed during the course of this time.

In the fall of 1957 she was assigned to our hospital in Burlington, Iowa, to begin studying to be a lab technician. She remained there after her training and worked in the lab until the early part of 1963 when she was assigned to our hospital in Macomb, IL.

In October of 1966 she began to lose her voice and experienced difficulty in eating, so on Thanksgiving Day she went back to St. Louis and was admitted to the hospital the next day. After several weeks of tests she was told that all that was wrong was chronic laryngitis caused by tension. She knew that wasn't what it was but there wasn't much she could do except accept the diagnosis and the misunderstanding that accompanied it in her characteristic spirit of peace.

But in the weeks that followed the pain became greater, her voice got worse, she was nauseated and lost twenty-five pounds.

So in February she again returned to the hospital in St. Louis for more tests. This time, however, the doctor was able to feel the tumor on her neck. It was about the size of a plum. They removed it with surgery on March 17 and discovered it was malignant. She was told about it and even though her ten years were up she still had high hopes of being able to live a normal life again.

When she left St. Louis our Reverend Mother sent her to the Bahamas to recuperate. We have a school and clinic in Freeport on Grand Bahama Island. The Superior of the nursing Sisters down there was a very close friend of hers. They spent their days traveling in a station wagon from one poor settlement to another bringing medicine, comfort, love, and Christ to all they met. She was so very, very happy down there. In addition to loving the work, she also loved the relaxed spirit of the people and their friendliness. She often talked, too, about the beauty and vastness of the ocean and sky that she meditated upon each day. She said it reminded her so much of eternity.

She had hoped to stay in the Bahamas for six months but she told me that even as she was on her way down there she knew she wouldn't be there long. The pain she had before surgery was still there and was getting worse instead of better. Neither had her voice improved. She went to the Bahamas in May but by the middle of June the pain in her face was so bad and she was so nauseated that she had to give up and return once more to the hospital in St. Louis.

On June 16, 1967, Sister Nicholas returned from the Bahamas to be admitted to the hospital in St. Louis. At that time, I had never met her and all I knew about her was that she was a Sister in our community and she had cancer.

Two days later I arrived in St. Louis to begin summer school at the University of St. Louis. I was met at the train by one of our Sisters whose first words to me were, "I have just come from visiting Sister Nicholas in the hospital and she is dying. We have a convent in St. Louis but it was closed for the summer so Sister Rose and I were the only members of our Community in the city. Both of us were students at the University and lived on campus although not in the same dorm. The hospital was only a half hour walk away.

The next day the two of us went up to see her. It was June 19. Little did I realize that the complete stranger I was introduced to on that day was to become my closest friend whose death I would be present for exactly five months later on November 19th.

As I left the hospital after this first meeting a very strange feeling came over me. She was different from anyone I had ever met before. When she looked at you she seemed to see right into your very soul. And I couldn't understand how, for being as sick as she was that day, all she wanted to talk about was what Sister Rose and myself were doing. In fact, I don't even think we asked her how she felt. And for certain, I didn't know any more about her illness when I left the hospital than I did when I went in. Sister Rose and I decided that she would go up every afternoon to visit her and I would go up every evening, which is what we did.

In that first visit with her I discovered that we both loved to play chess. So I got a chess set and took it with me to the hospital the next evening. After one game she couldn't sit up any longer so she suggested that we just talk. And talk we did- about the Bahamas, the poor, our community, and Christ. When I left, I felt that I hadn't just talked about Christ, I felt I had talked to Him and I still hadn't asked her about her health.

As it was, she was nauseated and had a pain in her face and head most of the time. She also had frequent choking spells and had a terrible time eating. They had her on various medications none of which helped a great deal and were doing all kinds of tests, but her spirit was always cheerful.

The only thing she complained about was not being able to attend Mass. She mentioned this on the first evening I visited her and I told her not to worry about that because I would remember her in every Mass that I attended. I was very fortunate in being able to participate in the Mass as it was celebrated in a very meaningful manner at one of the college chapels. Each day's Mass had a little something new and different in it. After Mass and supper I would hurry down to the hospital and the first thing Sister would say was, "tell me about the Mass today." This would begin a conversation that quite often lasted long after I should have been back at the dorm. And again I felt that we weren't just talking about the Mass but rather the Mass was being continued there in her hospital room. She would quite often say to me, "Hurry back tomorrow night and bring Christ to me again." And I would always hurry back, not because I felt I was bringing Christ to her but rather that I was being introduced to Him by her. I would make a special point to remember the sermons so I could repeat them to her. We soon discovered that the theme running through all the sermons was love. So quite often she would greet me by saying, "What did they say about love today?" I will never forget the look on her face when one day I answered her by saying, "They didn't talk about love today. They talked about suffering." Just her look was enough to tell me that I had made a mistake. And then she said, "They talked about love."

When she was able to be up and around in the hospital she could visit everyone else on the floor. Then when I would ask her about how she was feeling she would tell me about how much worse everyone else was than she was. And there was never a night that she didn't tell me to stop in room such-and-such on my way out to see some poor soul. Nor was there ever a night when some visitor didn't come in to share their troubles with her. "Sister, my husband is dying and I can't watch him die any longer." Or Sister, my daughter is going to have surgery in the morning." And for each of them she knew just the right thing to say.

All of her tests failed to indicate the presence of a tumor but the doctors decided to do an exploratory operation which they did on July 7. I asked her before the operation if she was afraid and she said, "Oh, no, whatever they find, they find." I

asked her if she thought she should be anointed and she said "Not yet. I'm not going to die for a while." But she was almost wrong. What was supposed to be a two hour operation took five and half hours because she started bleeding and they had a difficult time getting it to stop. The doctors were really afraid that even if she pulled through she would have permanent brain damage as a result of this bleeding. But she came through that part all right. They found the tumor that was causing the trouble but were not able to remove it. The tumor had entwined itself around nerves 9, 10, 11, and 12 as they left the spinal cord at the base of the brain.

Since Sister Rose had stayed up at the hospital all that day, I went up and stayed all that night. She was in an intensive care unit and I could only go in for five minutes out of every hour. She was still getting blood and was vomiting almost constantly. She was so weak and her neck hurt so much that she could not hold her head up to vomit in the pan. So I would try to wipe it out of her mouth with a tissue. Once she began choking and turned blue so I called the nurse. She used a suction pump on her and that took care of things but later Nicholas told me how she almost died after I left to get the nurse. She said that while I was there she was struggling intensely- which I saw for myself. But she said that as soon as I left, she completely relaxed.

The struggle was over and the most beautiful feeling of joy and peace came over her. She knew she was dying and she felt that Christ was drawing her to Himself very slowly but steadily. Then, all of a sudden, the struggle began again and she was once again alive and suffering.

During the time that I wasn't with her that night I sat in her bedroom and studied and prayed. But all through the night people kept coming in to ask me how she was doing. Every patient on the floor who was able to walk was in at least once during the night. And one man was in practically every hour. I suggested to him that he should go to bed and get some rest but he said, "How can I sleep when she's in there like that? Do you know that she's a saint?" I nodded. He then excused himself saying that he promised this man down the hall and the woman across from him he would keep them informed of her condition. And off he went on his crutches.

When morning came I went in and kissed her. That awakened her and she spoke for the first time since coming out of the anesthetic. She asked me if I had been

there all night. I told her I had and she said, "Oh, thank you so much but you better go home now and get some rest." I had to turn my head quickly as my eyes were filled with tears. Here she had suffered and almost died during the night and yet the first statement she made is one of concern for me.

Our Reverend Mother came down and spent the next two days with her and told her of her condition and that the doctor had prescribed cobalt treatments for her which they would begin as soon as the incision healed. She made what I thought was a remarkably fast recovery from the surgery and was released from the hospital on July 15.

I had a double room at the dorm but didn't have a roommate so she moved in with me. Every morning as I left for class she left for the hospital to get her cobalt treatment. And we returned home about the same time. It was in living right with her practically around the clock that I really saw how much she did suffer and it was also when I realized so much more fully her deep spirituality.

The first night she was with me both of us slept the whole night. But that was the one and only night that was to happen. The next night she was up choking several times and the third night she again almost died. I had heard her choking but I didn't want her to think she had awakened me so I lay very still. All of a sudden the choking stopped but she was still standing in the bathroom. I looked up and caught the reflection of her face in the mirror and it was completely blue. Her mouth was open and she was gasping for breath but all I could hear was the wheeze of the phlegm which would move neither up nor down. I jumped up and clapped her on the back but to no avail. I started to run for help but just then I heard the beautiful sound of a cough and I knew the air had gone through and she was O.K. When her breathing was back to normal again she put her arm around me and said, "Relax." Said I, "But you almost died." "That's true," she said, "but that wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to me." It was then that she told me about how she almost died the night after surgery.

That night marked a real turning point in her attitude toward her own death. Up until then she really didn't want to discuss her own death. Although she had always been ready to accept whatever God wanted and was very much aware of her physical condition, she just couldn't bring herself to believe that she was as close to death as she really was. I lost count of the number of times she said in the week following surgery, "They're all wrong – the whole bunch of them. I'm

going to be around for another fifty years yet.” But after that night she didn’t say that anymore

The next morning when we were eating breakfast she said to me, “Did you ever think about how God is Truth?” I said, “no, not really.” “Well, He is.” She said. “and if you accept God you also have to accept the truth.” I knew what she was getting at but I didn’t say anything then.

But that night I asked her if she was afraid to die. Her eyes filled with tears and she said, “I am not afraid of death but I am afraid of dying.” I asked her to explain and she said, “You see, Christopher, I have seen many people die with the same thing that I have and it is a very long painful death. It can go on for weeks and for some of them it is physically impossible during this time to be able to think a single thought or make so much as one act of love. It isn’t death but rather life without knowledge or love that I am so afraid of. I want you to pray every day that this doesn’t happen to me.” By that time both of us were crying and the silence that followed was sacred in its beauty. That was July 18. Exactly four months later would be her last night on earth.

Thereafter, we were able to talk about suffering and death with the same joy with which we talked about love and life. By my helping her to face the reality of her death and by her helping me to face the reality of my life, we soon realized that there was life in death. And it was in realizing this completely that Peace filled the both of us.

Our greatest joy was in being able to attend Mass together. Now she could experience herself what I could only tell her about before. Something that had tremendous meaning for her was the Kiss of Peace. She was so filled with peace that she wanted to share it with all she met. Not only was she filled with peace but she was also filled with pain. It was this combination of peace and pain that taught her what the Peace of Christ really meant. His Peace is the Peace of Pain. So when she would turn to me and say, “The peace of Christ be with you” and I responded, “And remain with you forever.” I knew those were mighty strong words we had just said.

Many an evening we spent up on the roof watching the sunset. We had a glorious view of the entire city since we lived in a sixteen story building with not many other tall buildings around it. One night she said, “The sun is dying so slowly tonight and yet so peacefully. I so hope that I can die as peacefully as it.” After

commenting again on the peace on the sunset we went over to the south wall from where we could see the hospital. She pointed to it and said, "And there is so much pain in that hospital." And then she led me over to the East wall and we looked down at all the projects and slums lining the river front and she said, "And there is so much pain down there, too." Then she took a hold of my hands and said, "Both of us have received peace from that sunset. Now I will bring that peace to the pain-filled in that hospital and you take it down to those slums." "But how do I do that?" I asked. She answered in one word – "Love."

Every night we would light a candle and sit and talk until the candle burned out. One night the flame reminded me of hell so I asked her what she thought about hell and heaven. I asked her if she thought that people were surprised to find themselves in either heaven or hell. She said, "Oh no. You die just as you live. Heaven is where there is love. Hell is where there is no love. If you live in love before you die, you will live there after you die too. And if you don't love before you die neither will you do it in eternity."

Summer school was over on July 25, but Mother called and asked me to stay on with Sister until it was time for me to begin retreat. I was overjoyed with this. July 25 was also the last cobalt treatment she was to have for a while since her mouth had broken out in tiny sores from it. She was also losing weight and her eyes were bothering her. She wasn't able to walk down the hall without running into the wall and quite often she would walk down toward me and end up on top of my feet. I just joked about her clumsiness. I didn't realize she was losing her equilibrium until she told me later that was what it was.

During this time we were together I would read to her several hours a day and then we would stop and talk about what we had read. This was especially true when I read the Office. Sometimes she would have me read the same psalm over two or three times and each time she would find a new beauty in it. She had told me earlier in the summer that she would like to tell me the story of her life but thought it best to wait until we were both "old and gray with nothing to do but sit under the apple tree." But she changed her mind and thought she had better do it now if she was going to do it at all. It took several nights and days but I don't think she left out a thing.

My big objective was to put some weight on her before I left. We would spend as long as two hours eating a meal and many was the time that she really got a good

meal into her only to take one last swallow of coffee and choke on it and the whole dinner was lost. I have to confess that I swore whenever that happened. But her eating did provide us with a good bit of humor also. Whenever guests came to visit, they brought their own refreshments. Our food stock consisted of bananas, cream cheese, and grapefruit juice. We also had a few cans of baby food on hand but they were of the junior variety and she could only eat the strained kind. When I did buy some of the strained kind she ate one jar and then told me it was bad for her psychology. For some reason, small green grapes were easy for her to get down although they didn't always stay down for long. Grapes were terribly expensive so it really hurt to see what often happened to them. One day I was able to buy some half rotten ones for only half price. I brought them home and told her that she could throw these up without worrying about it. She did.

Quite often we would heat a can of spaghetti in an electric coffee pot we had. Invariably she would let it burn and I would end up cleaning the pot. So one day I suggested that she eat her spaghetti cold. It took her so long to eat that it was cold before she finished it anyhow. But somehow I just didn't have the heart to let her do it.

Sister Nicholas had a love for the poor such as I have never seen before. She didn't limit her love to poor saints but she also loved poor sinners. One evening we went down to a nearby ice cream parlor for a soda. Leaning against the door of the place was a drunk – dirty, unshaven and reeling. She greeted him but I pulled her in the door before she could say anything else to him. After we were seated at the table she said, "Christopher, go out and invite that drunk in to have a soda with us." I thought I was hearing things or that she must be joking. My middle-class upbringing just didn't allow anything like that. But she meant what she said so I went out to get the drunk but he was gone. I came back in and breathing a sigh of relief said, "Thank God, he's gone." All she said was, "Is that what Christ would say?"

As I said before, the doctor told her not to go back for more cobalt until her mouth had healed. But before it got better it got much worse. Her entire mouth, tongue, and throat became completely raw and she was unable to eat or drink anything except ice chips. This went on for three days. On the third day she couldn't even stand the ice in her mouth so I asked her if I should call the doctor. She said, "You know, Christopher, another day or so of this and I'll be dead. And

right now that's a mighty appealing thought. All my sufferings would be over. And since I know I'll never be able to do any real work for Him anyhow why don't I just wait it out right here?" I told her it was her decision to make but I thought we should keep silent for a couple hours and pray over it. Two hours later I asked her what her decision was. She said, "Call the doctor." I asked her what made her decide that and she said, "Our community needs too many graces that can only be purchased by suffering. If I die now then all the graces that I could have purchased by my future sufferings will be lost forever. So call the doctor and he'll get me all fixed up to be able to suffer some more." So I called him and brought her back to the hospital where in just a matter of hours they had her all fixed up again just as she said they would.

She returned to the dorm and was really feeling good during our last few days together.

At 1:00 a.m. on August 7, I thanked her for all she had done for me and we wished each other the peace of Christ as was our usual greeting and farewell. I then kissed her and got on a bus for Cedar Rapids and the Better World Retreat. At that farewell I knew we would meet again. I didn't know when or where but I knew this wasn't our last good-by.

While I was on retreat she was going back for more cobalt treatments, but during this time our convent in St. Louis opened again and she was living out there. Although she again had a reaction to the cobalt it wasn't as bad this time and she used her last cobalt treatments as her periods of concentrated prayer. She said she felt that during those minutes under the machine God was filling her soul with rays of love even more intense than the rays of cobalt that were filling her body.

In the letter she wrote telling me of her last cobalt treatment she said, "I don't quite know how to feel now that the last cobalt treatment is over. Just glad so much is over and happy to do whatever comes next." Later she said, "Knowing what God wills is one thing but finding Him in what He wills is another thing. It's like playing hide and seek – one minute you see Him and the next minute He's gone again."

Sister had asked permission to visit her family here in Chicago after the last cobalt treatment. She arrived a couple days earlier than I had anticipated so when she called to tell me she was home I was really surprised. We made arrangements to spend the week-end together and what a memorable and beautiful one it was.

She came to my classroom at noon on Friday, September 8 and greeted me with "Peace." That night I told her all about the Better World Retreat I made and we went through and discussed all the notes I had taken at it.

The next afternoon we went out to the Forest Preserves and walked along the trails stopping occasionally to reflect on the beauty and goodness of God. The sky was as blue and clear as it was on the day she died. The leaves were beginning to change colors and I picked a particularly beautiful one as a remembrance of the day which I later framed and keep on my dresser. I remember saying to her, "Nicholas, why is it that I never feel alone with you? I always feel that God is right here with us." She said, "Wherever love is, God is."

That evening we went to her mother's house for supper and right after supper the three of us went out driving through the countryside. We drove past the air strip where she used to land her plane and the place where all the horse shows were held in which she won so many prizes. When darkness fell we took her mother home and drove back here to the convent. That night she was sick so we neither slept nor talked very much.

At Mass the next morning I knew that this would be our last Mass together. As we sat eating breakfast I knew I couldn't hold back the tears so I left the table and went out into the kitchen. One of the nuns said, "What's the matter, Christopher?" I said, "This is the last time I'm going to see Nicholas." She cried with me but that gave me the strength I needed to go back in with a smile.

That afternoon we went to her brother's home for a family reunion. This was the first time they had had something like this since she had entered the convent. And as I watched her say goodbye to them, I knew she knew that for most of them this was their last goodbye. I stayed at home with her that night and she and her mother and I really had a good time. But that night as we were getting ready for bed, Nicholas called me over to her and said, "Christopher, feel this." As she put my hand over her left eye. I felt a lump and asked her what it was. "It's a tumor." She said. I asked her how long it had been there and she said, "I just discovered it now." We looked at each other and neither one of us could hide the tears any longer. The hopes we had placed in the success of the cobalt were now dead. It had perhaps given her a few more weeks on earth than otherwise would have been but not the months or even years we had hoped for. But yet, even through our tears we felt a great joy and peace. We prayed most of the night but

our prayer was one of thanksgiving to God for his great love for us. Dawn brought new tears to our eyes but she said, "We have to be brave as we don't want Mom to think there is anything wrong." We hurried and ate breakfast and then she drove me back to school. We drove most of the way in silence and our eyes were still filled with tears. The only thing I remember her saying was, "If you're going to cry, then who is going to give me the strength I need?" I didn't cry again after that. When she dropped me off at school we wished each other the Peace of Christ and I told her I would be at the airport Thursday evening (September 14) to say goodbye to her.

Her mother and brother and sister-in-law were also at the airport but when they announced that her plane was ready to be boarded, her family said goodbye to her and I told her I would walk out to the ramp with her. But when we got to the ramp they said the plane would not take off for another forty minutes. Once more God had arranged for us to be alone with Him. It was the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and we spent the time in doing just that...exalting His cross. When the call came to board the plane she kissed me and said, "Peace." She had the most beautiful smile on her face and there were no tears. It had been raining earlier and as she walked across the runway I noticed a rainbow had appeared in the sky. I watched her plane take off into the sunset and I knew it was taking her into eternity. And I was happy.

She had gone back to St. Louis for a check-up which was scheduled for the next day. And she was to remain in St. Louis until after September 29 when she had an appointment for a check-up with the radiologist.

(Excerpts from letters after this period to Sister Christopher)

Sept. 17..."It's 2:00 a.m. Would that you were here to help me understand myself. My mind is a blank...am peaceful and I feel a closeness to God. But why am I up? I do not long for any physical comforts nor am I lonesome. It is an understanding of this blankness that I desire most. It may be because I don't have a real job. Yet I have no desire to do anything except be where I am...just because this is what Providence has brought me to or permitted. God's grace, goodness, and love seem to cover me and I lie still in a blankness."

Sept. 18..."Sister, you have paid me so many compliments but I take them as your meaning to give them to Christ. But do not think of me...it is Christ you know who is our all. It is His personal interest that assures you of love. What a joy to think

together of the One we love most. Such closeness stirs every inch of me and I end up on my knees filled with joy...thanking Him...for I am not worthy of so great a gift.”

Mass tonight was a levitating experience. Inside I was exhausted and my thoughts rested on all the things God has done for me. I know it is Christ who is praying for both of us and somewhere it says, “He prays that our faith will not fail.”

Sept. 28...”Good morning to you and Christ living in you. Just came from Mass...How great our Mystical Body! Right now I feel closer to you than ever before. We have so much to thank Him for. Sometimes thoughts run through my head faster than I can think and like now I wonder what they mean. Last night I was awake and up from 2:00 – 5:00 a.m. Ended up taking a tranquilizer but was open-eyed at 7:00 and again at 8:00.

Sister Callista just asked me to go to the bank. A good thing...for I am not sure if I would be able to find words to explain what went through my head last night. Mostly about what God has done for me...and how little I really do to show my love for Him.

You think I am suffering. Dear, I do not suffer. What you think is suffering to me is only joy. Who else has been blessed with so much free time...no working demands and for six months I have been able to do just about as I please and He has filled this time with so much love.

Should get going. But do you really think the time spent at Rogers Hall or even at Firmin Desloge hospital could be called a time of suffering? All I thought of then and now is wound up in giving and receiving love. If what took place in between time is called suffering...I don't know what suffering really is. Joys I remember most of the past six months. You know the blessings received. Now if I couldn't give or receive love this would cut deep and to endure that would hurt. And if I could not see with Faith that every act has God's grace running through it, I would be lost and feel miserable.

Love...Peace...Joy and the Lord be with you. (The above was an entire letter.)

On October 1, she left St. Louis for Burlington. She was feeling pretty good and was so happy to have a job to do again. One letter starts out, “Hi. Wish you were here...I could show you much better than tell you how happy I am to be working

again.” But two days later our Reverend Mother called and asked her to go to our hospital in Grinnell, Iowa, for the next three or four weeks as they needed someone there who could drive a car.

It was October 11, when she arrived in Grinnell and the good health she had enjoyed for the last month was now gone. She said, “My head is pounding and I feel like a cat in a bag. However, the view from this room is beautiful and if I am going to spend many hours looking out, any depressing thoughts will turn to the mystery of harvest and glory of God’s natural law at work.” Later in the same letter she said, “I want to be home for Christmas but Lord where is my home? Right now home is that beautiful sight before me and thoughts of love.”

Each day for the next week she felt increasingly more dizzy, nauseated, and in greater pain. She was in bed most of the time and felt so disgusted with herself because she couldn’t do anything. She said, (Oct.14) “Time is going too fast and I must not sleep away. I don’t care what I do but it has to be something...nothing is Hell!”

She began feeling better though and on October 19 drove a carload of nuns to Burlington to attend a funeral of one of our Sisters. Little did she know (or did she) that in exactly one month she too would be dead.

Oct. 24 “peace to you...the kind that comes from facing unhappy situations and walking with Christ...seeing the Father’s Will...and loving beyond the reach of self, seeing that He has first loved us.”

Oct. 25...”Two months from today will be Christmas...And we will enjoy the thoughts of His coming more than ever before because we have seen with Faith His plan for each of us to share in His glory.”

Also in that same letter...”Just finished reading Van Zeller’s “We Work While the Light Lasts.” I wonder how much longer my light will last.”

Oct. 26...I had written to her and expressed concern over her health. She answered, “Nothing bothers me now. My voice is the same...doubt if it will ever get any stronger but that doesn’t mean anything. Thank God I can talk as much as I can. Be at peace...the kind of peace that comes from letting God take hold of you. I’m at peace. And if anything should ever pop up you will be the first to hear about it so stop worrying. Besides, why should you worry anyway? Whatever

God wants to send me I want to accept 100%. If you are going to worry, how can we be ready to accept with love whatever comes?"

Oct. 27..."Tomorrow I leave for Burlington. Now I sort of hate to leave because I have done nothing while I was here. At Mass tomorrow I will have nothing to offer. And that hurts to have nothing for someone who loves you so much and whom you really want to love just as much in return."

Oct. 30..."I feel wonderful and my thoughts are prayerful and very peaceful. Doubt if these black thoughts and dark moods I have had in the past will be around anymore now."

Nov. 1... "Would have written to you while coming down here (St. Louis) on the bus but it makes me sick to see things moving so I had to keep my eyes shut most of the time."

Nov. 2... "The long awaited day is here." Then she told me about the people making the retreat. This was a Better World Movement Retreat she made at Our Lady of the Snows, Belleview, Ill. "Joy and peace has filled this night. How I wish I could give to others what He has given to us."

Nov. 4... "The more I hear of love and unity, the more I appreciate God's bringing us together. I do thank Him and wonder if I will be able to stand the Joy He is leading us to." Somehow I have so much peace I do not feel a need to say anything to anyone about myself. But many have asked.

Nov. 5... "This has really been a full day...I am too tired to write. All talks were on prayer today and I hate to admit after so many years I know so little about it and so little have I done. Again I find myself standing in His Glory saying have mercy because I have done nothing with the time You have given me. Now this is not self pity...I honestly see very little prayer in the year behind me. True, you have seen a few times I prayed but there is much you have not seen.

"My Eyes are not getting any better. Today I gave up trying to see the Office book. Tis strange...I can see yet I cannot see. Whatever is causing it...He knows it's there. So your prayer for me I want to be that I will forget myself as Christ forgot Himself forty days before He started to work for His Church and from the time Judas kissed Him till He said it's all over. I just want to do Gods will and not care how I feel.

“Good night... The Lord be with you. And I hope you can feel the peace and joy I have. Love...much love.”

Nov. 7...”I am enjoying the retreat very much. But think I would be enjoying it more if I could see better and speak a little clearer. Never have I met such wonderful people. There is so much unity and love present. But so many have problems so big that mine are nothing compared to theirs. My eye is not any better and I do wonder what the doctor will say and do next. Whatever comes you know I must take...and it will be just as I have taken everything in the past but I just don't like fussin' around.”

Nov.9...”Had to give up. Last night everything was going around. I could not see. I went to bed early. This a.m. pain in my left eye. I got up dressed and went out to the car to ride down to the chapel. I got sick, went back to my room till 9:00. Tried to stay through the first meeting but had to leave. My head is in one big whirl. Can't keep my balance. Something needs to be taken care of. One of the priests from St. Louis and two Sisters took me to St. Justin's. I called Dr. Hanlon but he is not at home. But tomorrow I am going in to Firmin Desloge. I will call you as soon as I find out what they are going to do for me. I don't like this but I can still say everything is O.K. And you had better keep calm for me. How I hated to leave that retreat. Missed just the last day and a half. Don't do anything but pray for me.”

Nov. 13... “Heard from several who made the retreat today.” “Not much change yet...Hope not to be here anymore than a week.” And then there was a P.S. which is probably the last thing she ever wrote. “Have had many nice thoughts and am very peaceful.”

About 9:00 p.m. on Friday, November 10 I returned home from Loyola U where I take an evening course. I had just finished taking a mid-term exam and felt like a great weight had lifted from my mind. But another weight was soon added when I met my Superior and she said, “Sister Nicholas' sister just called and Nicholas is back in the hospital.” I was stunned. I knew she had to be bad if she didn't finish retreat. I called her sister and found the details. A few minutes later Nicholas herself called. The first words she said were, “How was your test:” This self-forgetfulness again brought tears to my eyes. Then she told me how terrible she

felt because she couldn't finish the retreat. She said, "I had to leave for two reasons. First of all, I was just too sick to make it any more but then I was also drawing too much attention to myself and I felt that this was taking away from the spirit of the retreat. People's attention was being centered on me when it should have been on Christ." I said, "I'm sure though that they were loving you because they saw Christ in you." All she said was "Yes, but..."

The next day I asked for and was given permission to spend Thanksgiving vacation with her. She was as happy as I was about it but she said, "I'll be out of here by then but we'll spend Thanksgiving together anyhow. (She was out of there by then and we did spend Thanksgiving together with a degree of closeness that I had never before experienced with anyone.)

I talked to her again on Tuesday and she told me the pills they had given her didn't do any good so they had taken her off of all medication and the pain was intense. Again they were taking tests on her. The doctor said the trouble was the result of either a cobalt reaction, an infection in the inner ear, or the tumor itself. Nicholas knew herself which one it was. And she knew that death was beginning. But what none of us knew was just how quickly it was going to come. I told her not to think of the pain but rather of the joy that would come once the pain was gone. And she said, "You mean the joy of new life?" I hesitated and then said, "Yes." And she said, "The joy of eternal life is great indeed but I still have a lot of suffering to do yet." And in her mind what constituted the greatest of all suffering was still alive but yet be unable to love or think. And it was this suffering that we were both so much afraid of.

Wednesday morning she went to Mass in the hospital chapel and Father had a dialogue sermon on death. The nursing Sister who was with her said that when Father asked Nicholas about death all she said was, "Father, death is much too close to me to be able to talk about it freely."

That night Nicholas told Sister Luanne, one of our Sisters who was there visiting her, that her lips and face were numb on one side. Sister Luanne kissed her and said, "We love you anyhow." And Nicholas said, "But will you still love me when my mind is like that also?"

On Thursday morning her sister called me and said that the nuns had called to say that she was worse. I told her I would fly to St. Louis that night but she suggested I wait until she had talked to the doctor herself. She called back a while later and said that he said Nicholas only seemed worse because they didn't have her on any medication. But just as soon as they finished all their tests they would again give her something to make her feel better. He assured us that there was no need to come there at all. Audrey told me to call Nicholas myself and see if she thought we should come. So I did. Nicholas said, "Oh no. Next week I'll need you much more than I do now. I'm sick but I'm so full of love and peace." Then I talked to the head nurse and asked her if she thought Sister was near death. She assured me that although Sister was sick, death was still a long way off.

Friday night, Nov. 17, I talked to the head nurse again and once again she assured me that Sister was in no danger of death. They were putting her back on medication and she would be feeling much better soon. Then I talked to Nicholas and she sounded the best I had ever heard her. She said, "Christopher, I have never felt so close to God in all my life. His presence is all around me and I feel if I reached out I could touch Him. And I can pray like I've never prayed before." She asked me how I was and if I was worried about her. I told her I never worried about her when I knew she was in peace. She said, "May this same Peace of Christ that I have be with you." "And may it live on in you forever," I answered. These were her last words to me.

The next day I picked up a little poem that talked about courage. It said, "Tomorrow has a secret for you. But you have to have the courage of today to face the secret of tomorrow." I felt I knew what tomorrow's secret was and prayed for courage.

That afternoon Sr. Rose called me from St. Louis and said that the doctor had just given his report to our Reverend Mother. The cancer was spreading rapidly through her brain and there was nothing he could do for her. He said that she would be entering a period of intense suffering which would last until her death but death was a long way off.

Since there was nothing he could do for her, he would release her to go back to Burlington. Two nuns were coming by ambulance to get her and take her back

that night. Nicholas was heavily sedated but could still talk intelligently. After Sister Rose talked to me Father came in and anointed her and she was able to respond to the prayers. A letter I had written to her had just arrived so Sister Rose read it to her and she reacted to it.

Just after that she got a terrible pain in her head and for about an hour suffered intensely. But at 4:00 p.m. The pain suddenly left her and she said to Sister Rose, "I feel so good." Just prior to this, blood had come from her nose so evidently the pressure in the brain had been released causing the pain to leave. Phlegm began to lodge in her throat and periodically she would stop breathing. Soon her breath never returned and she started turning blue. Sister called the nurse and they administered oxygen...first with a mask and then with the Bennett respirator. But she never regained consciousness. The ambulance got there but turned around and went back empty.

In the meantime, her sister and I were weighing the pros and cons of driving to Burlington the next day. We were not yet aware of the fact that Sister had gone into a coma. The doctors thought it might be the result of too much medicine and if that was the case she would come out of it soon.

I was so very discouraged and wondered why our prayers had gone unanswered. All Nicholas and I had prayed for was a speedy and love-filled death but it seemed that that request was not going to be granted. I just didn't know what to say to Him anymore.

But at 9:00 p.m. the phone rang. It was Sister Luanne to tell me that Sister was in a coma and they weren't sure if she would live through the night. My voice was too choked to talk but my heart said, "Thank you, Lord. I'm sorry I doubted your Love a little while ago. But Lord, one favor more...let me get there before she has gone to You completely." I tried calling her sister but couldn't get her. There were no flights out that night but I was able to get a midnight train. I got her sister before I got on the train and they were getting the family together to drive down.

The train was so dark and cold and empty but inside I was completely overcome with joy and gratitude to Him for all He had done. The sunrise that day was the

most beautiful I had ever seen and it seemed to tell me that she was still alive. The train got in at 7:30 a.m. and thanks to a fast cab driver and a waiting elevator I was at her side by 7:40.

Only her mother was in the room with her when I got there. I paused at the door for a second to accustom my eyes to what lay before me and to say, "Thanks God and please help." I bent down and put my lips to her ear. I told her thanks for waiting for me and asked her if she realized what a tremendously happy day this was...for both of us. When I straightened up, she raised her arms. Her action may not have had any real significance but I felt that it was a sign of recognition. In a few minutes when her brother, sister, nephew, and the five Sisters from St. Louis joined us and were all talking she raised her arms several times.

The nurse said she was really doing quite well so I decided to go down to the chapel for 9:00 Mass. The opening line of the Introit was, "I think thoughts of peace and not affliction." That hit me with unbelievable force and that was my only thought for the remainder of Mass. When I went back to her and began talking to her again she raised her arms and I gently put them back in place.

Father came in and said prayers for the dying, another priest came in and gave her and us his blessing, several nurses and aides who were off duty came in...all with tears in their eyes.

About noon I could feel that she was beginning to slip away at a little faster rate. I continued to hold her hand with one hand and stroke her head with the other as I whispered into her ear and urged her to keep looking at Him...to give Him all she had...to keep moving toward Him. I told her He was coming for her...all she had to do was put out her arms to Him and let Him take her. And it seemed like the more I encouraged her to die, the faster she died. I took my crucifix from around my neck and put it in the palm of my hand that was holding hers. In a few minutes she began to get cold. I had never seen anyone die before so I said to the nursing Sister who spent the day with us, "How do you know when she is dead?" She said, "When you aren't able to get a heartbeat with a stethoscope," and tried to find Nicholas's heartbeat. She straightened and looked at me. She didn't have to say anything. I had the message. She went for a doctor. He came in and tried the same thing and then asked us if we would leave the room. But as I went to

leave, I felt her hand holding mine tightly. I had to uncurl each finger and then untangle the crucifix and chain that somehow had become twisted and was binding our two hands together.

We waited in the room across the hall and at 1:55 the doctor came out and announced that Sister had just died. Sister Luanne and I went back in and joined our live hands to her dead ones and prayed that the spirit of love she had given us would not die with her but would continue to grow in our own lives. Father came in with her family and we said some prayers. I felt a little guilty but I didn't then, nor have I yet prayed for her...all my prayers have been to her.

When I left the room I went to the waiting room down the hall to call my Superior. When I walked in everyone stood up and waited for me to say something, I guess. When I didn't, one of them said, "Sister, is she...?" "Yes," I said. And then they all started talking softly among themselves as they began putting on their coats. "She was so good." One said. Or, "She was so kind to my wife." And then I realized that these people were all waiting there just to hear about her.

I rode back to Chicago with her family that night. We were lonesome and yet felt her presence in a strange new way. Only once...when I gazed back into the sunset...did I have to struggle with the tears.

Her body was brought back to Burlington and we went down on Tuesday for the funeral. Tuesday night, three of us stayed up with her all night. She had a smile on her face and it was just like she was there with us. We made sandwiches and coffee and sat and talked until 4:00 a.m. Then we chanted the Office of the Dead at her coffin. I had a holy card with the words, "May the Peace of Christ be with you" written on it that I never got around to sending her so I tucked it in her coffin. Then we looked out the window and it was snowing...peacefully. We were so filled with joy that there was only one thing to do and that was to sing. So the three of us gathered around the coffin and sang songs like "Allelu", "Here We Are" and several others. When it was time to leave, I kissed her twice...once for me and once for a friend of hers who wasn't there and wished her Peace.

Her body is laid to rest in what I think is the most beautiful spot in the whole world. It is on a hill looking down over the Mississippi River. Most of her life was spent overlooking that river...at Mt. St. Clare, in Burlington and finally at St. Louis. There is a bend in the river right there and it seems like the waters turn to find her grave and then wait for her to bless them with peace and then carry that peace on down the river and out into the ocean of eternity. Before I left her graveside I went over and touched her coffin and for the last time said "Peace"

And the next day was Thanksgiving Day!