

Reflection

Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate

Joliet, IL

Sr. Grace Ann Rabideau, OSF

By: Sr. Rosemary Huzl, OSF, Monday, February 16, 2026

My reflection begins with a traditional ceremonial prayer of the Chippewa/Ojibwe nation, the Indian tribe into which Sister Grace Ann was born:

"Great Spirit, we gather here in reverence and love for Sister Grace Ann Rabideau who has crossed to the next world. We ask for your guidance and protection for her soul as she journeys onward. May she find peace and comfort in your embrace and we trust that she is surrounded by love in her new life. Help us to honor her memory and carry in our hearts all that she has taught us. We thank you for the time we shared, and may we carry her love in our hearts as we continue our own journeys. Help us to remember her strength and wisdom, and guide us in a way that honors her."

I have known Sister Grace Ann in a variety of capacities for most of my 60+ years in religious life. You might say I walked with her as she ministered in California, Colorado, Montana, Illinois and Wisconsin. During these years, she shared her Franciscan life in community with her dear friends Sisters Maxentia Yirku and Clare LaPointe. Grace Ann was a woman of prayer, strength and wisdom. Sister Grace Ann touched so many lives and brought such happiness to everyone she met. Always reflecting respect for her ancestors and a connection to their enduring presence in her life, she truly lived the meaning of her Ojibwe/Chippewa name-WABANOKWE (wah ba noke way) given as a member of the tribe at birth. It translates to mean "Early Star in the morning

woman." Grace Ann said in one of her writings, that it was her "nickname." However, under one of her pictures as a child is written the nickname "Biddy."

As we listened to the reading from Isaiah, picture yourself in the wilderness, a vast and desolate landscape with rugged terrain and sparse vegetation. The scene is set with a group of people gathered around John the Baptist, a rugged and charismatic preacher dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. John stands at the banks of the Jordan River, his voice echoing through the wilderness as he proclaims a message of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Reflecting on this reading, I thought of Grace Ann sitting in her chair looking at the view she had of Lake Superior....not a desolate landscape with rugged terrain and sparse vegetation but a beautifully calm, place for reflection of God's peace and tranquility. The place she chose was not a desolate landscape, but a place of quiet. As Grace Ann sat by the window in her house she engaged in a loving relationship with her God as she gazed at "her lake," Lake Superior.

Still picturing yourself in the wilderness with John the Baptist from Isaiah's passage, also imagine the crowd surrounding John. It consists of people from all walks of life, drawn to his powerful words and compelling presence. Among them are fishermen, farmers, merchants, and even some religious leaders who have come to hear this unconventional prophet. They are

captivated by John's message of hope and redemption, feeling a stirring in their hearts as he speaks of making straight the paths for the Lord and preparing a way in the wilderness for our God. As the sun sets over the rugged landscape and the people listened with curiosity, the atmosphere is also one of anticipation and expectation. The people gathered around John the Baptist can sense that something significant is about to happen, *a divine encounter that will change their lives forever.*

As we gathered around and visited Grace Ann in the past several months, we knew that something was changing, that something significant was about to happen, that divine encounter, known as death, was about to change her forever from this life to the next. Throughout her lifetime, Grace Ann met, worked with and became friends with people of all walks of life. She never had to shout her message but did it in her way, often with humor, but always with love.

I visited her on the Tuesday before the Sunday on which she died. The week before that she asked for me to bring her some popcorn. It wasn't so much that she was hungry but she was getting ready for the change about to take place in her, perhaps reminiscing our times together when she and Clare LaPointe would come to Joliet. Grace would stay at Our Lady of Angels and Clare would stay with me. We would bring Grace over to my house and in the middle of our visiting, Grace would tell Clare and me to go shopping or "go do something fun." Her exact words were, "you kids go, just give me some popcorn and a movie and I'll be happy."

In the second reading, the reading from Peter, several things struck me in regards to Grace Ann particularly these words, "...he has given

us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you."

No matter what pain or trial we face in this life, we live in hope knowing that whatever we are going through is not our final experience. Eventually we will live with God forever, our inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade away. In times of struggle Grace Ann knew her faith was being strengthened. She lived with the hope our reading from Peter speaks about. Grace Ann sometimes talked about her struggles. At a young age growing up, children were picked up by farmers in their trucks at 5:00 a.m. to pick strawberries receiving a cent and a half for each box. After strawberry season was over they picked green beans and then apples.

Grace said when she was growing up Bayfield was ethically divided between White and Indian, Catholics and Protestant. As kids they would meet on the iron bridge and called each other names: Catholicker and Publicker.

The two years she was in public school she worked cleaning the classrooms after school. It was during World War II, and many of her classmates went into service. Since there was a shortage of men due to the war, the high school girls carried the load of work. They'd be released early from school to pick out fish during the herring season. She said their hands were freezing so they warmed them in barrels of hot water. When Grace Ann was old enough to get a permit, she worked as a waitress at Grunke's restaurant which is still open today. Grace Ann graduated from Bayfield High School on May 25, 1945, and on September 3 she took the train to Joliet. On September 4, 1945, she entered the convent as a Franciscan Sister of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate.

Through her outreach, welcoming heart, hospitality, understanding and empathy, Sister Grace Ann reached and offered guidance to young women, empowering them to feel safe, secure and confident she was an instructor and coordinator of an abused women's program on the Bad River Reservation in Odanah, Wisconsin called "Women's Cultural Self Empowering Program," a funded program which was not renewed in 2014.

- While in California, she was instrumental in getting the mayor of Los Angeles to establish an American Indian Scholarship fund to support American Indians with funding.
- In Montana, she worked with the Crow and Cheyenne students as a counselor.
- In Colorado she worked with Native American Indian youth in a drug and alcohol program.
- When she came to Joliet for meetings or just to visit, she looked forward to being with the Sister residents at Our Lady of Angels. She always referred to them as "my Sisters." While visiting she offered a listening ear, a compassionate heart and many good reasons to share a good laugh.

When Grace Ann returned to Bayfield in 2007, she became involved at Holy Family parish as lector and Eucharistic minister, also as lector at St. Francis Church on the Redcliff reservation. She participated in many parish activities, attended and helped at fish fries, luncheons for the elderly, and of, course Bingo. Those of you who experienced her playing bingo at St. Patrick's know she was known as "the bingo queen." She would tell me about all the money she wins when she played. (By money, I think she was talking about credits to be used in the gift shop items.)

Finally, in John's gospel we read that after we are finished living our life here on earth there is already a place prepared for us and to be where God is. Sister Grace Ann is now experiencing God's house with many rooms. Jesus used this metaphor to illustrate not a physical mansion, but a spiritual reality of dwelling with God. Although none of us know a lot about what eternal life will be like, what we know from Scripture is enough to show us why we would want to go there. It is enough to say that it is a perfect place and our part of it is uniquely designed for us. Jesus says that he is the way to our place in God's house. Jesus used this familiar image of a large home to show there is ample space in heaven for everyone. God's house in all inclusive. There is room for everyone. In her life Grace Ann was inclusive. She welcomed, valued and involved people from all backgrounds, ensuring that they felt a sense of belonging and that they had equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and succeed.

As I thought of how this reading from John applies to Grace Ann, I have to admit I smiled because I recalled the big, I mean really huge, dining room table and chairs Grace insisted on buying when they moved into their house in California. The table sat more than 12 people without a leaf. She, Maxie and Clare liked to entertain friends and staff from the Cal State University in Northridge. At Christmas time, they would have a Christmas tree decorating party; at Thanksgiving a great Thanksgiving dinner; Easter and birthdays were celebrated in big ways as well. So, as I think about Grace enjoying her place in God's house, I am sure she is gathered together with her family, friends, Franciscan Sisters and all the people with whom she spent time. I am convinced it pleases her that there is room for all of them.

In closing, a paper with a Native American proverb was found among Grace Ann's personal items. In keeping with her Chippewa/Ojibwe culture, heritage and tradition, these words could be her words to us:

"Listen to the wind, it talks.
Listen to the silence, it speaks.
Listen to your heart, it knows."

And to Grace we say, "Grace Ann, you have prepared well for the coming of the Lord to take you home. Rest in peace in the room God has chosen for you in God's house. Thank you for your prayers and your presence which you gave us as we journeyed together. Remember us to our God with whom you now share all eternity. May perpetual light shine upon you, WABANOKWE, our dear "early star in the morning woman."

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