

Sr. M. Olimpia Cibelli, a “7”

Is there any connection with a person and a number? Perhaps. With Sr. Olimpia that number seemed to have surfaced more than usual. Sr. Jean Marie commented to me about that number on our way up to Hamot Hospital on the night that she died. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

I find it fascinating that Sr. Olimpia entered religious life on April 5, 1934, in Grottaferrata, a province of Rome, Italy, with the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Was there something indicative of the year, 1934, when you put the “3” and “4” together of that year?

Sister Olimpia came to the United States in November, 1949 at the request of Bishop James McFadden, who had invited the Oblate Sisters to serve in the Diocese of Youngstown.

After attending the then Youngstown College to validate her Italian teaching degree with a Bachelor of Arts degree and serving more than 20 years at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in McDonald, Ohio, she arrived in Conneaut on August 5, 1970, the Feast of our Lady of the Snow, by way of Route 7.

Sister Olimpia served as a teaching principal at St. Frances Cabrini School, a position she held until her retirement in 1987. Did that number “7” show up again!

As you know, in the secular world, 7 is a lucky number in the game of chance. But I’m sorry to say, I don’t believe Sr. Olimpia ever won any major or minor lotteries in her 94 years, as far as I know.

But in the Scriptures the number 7 has a more significant meaning. It is a sign of completeness and fullness.

In the book of Genesis, we have the 7 days of creation, and on the 7th day God rested from all he has created. In the story of Noah and the flood, God tells Noah to take 7 pairs of every clean animal as well as 7 pairs of every clean bird of the air. And once Noah gathers all these creatures God tells Noah that in 7 days he will bring rain down on the earth for 40 days.

Going to the New Testament when Jesus feeds the 5,000 in Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, and John 6 he has 5 loaves and 2 fish. Is that 7 items in all four accounts? In all of these passages there is a sense of completeness.

However, in the Scriptures anything less than 7 is still incomplete. Take for example the wedding feast of Cana, when Jesus changed the water into wine. Notice that it was only 6 stone water jars and not 7 that the waiters filled. Symbolically that very well may say that as great as this wedding feast was, it is still not the eternal wedding feast to which we all have been invited.

Even St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century used the number 7 to designate the complete number of Sacraments that are part of the Catholic Church. Even today Catholics so easily speak of the 7 Sacraments.

In any case, I believe there is something complete in the scriptural number 7. I don’t intend to make Sr. Olimpia a saint, but I do find these facts interesting: She lived under 7 popes, and had the opportunity to attend the audience of Benedict XVI on her last visit to Italy in January with Sr. Jean, receive a rosary from him which is buried with her,

and we have a picture of her shaking hands with the Pope and Sr. Jean looking on with wonder.

So let me get back to telling you about my going to Hamot Hospital with Sr. Jean to see Sr. Olimpia shortly before she died. When we arrived at the hospital around 5:30 pm, she was sleeping soundly. Her heart rate was good as well as her respirations. A young couple who live next door on Mill Street had come to visit for a while. After they left Sr. Jean and I had an opportunity to pray the rosary with her, praying the Sorrowful Mysteries. Shortly after that her breathing began to be very shallow and then she soon passed. When I looked at my watch, it was 7 p.m. I was in complete awe at that moment, both with her death as well as with the time.

There were other instances of 7 in her life that I can't recall but I have noted that she died on a Saturday and was buried the following Friday; again, 7 days!

To me all of this speaks about completeness. Her life was very full and very complete; everything from her family life and her religious life to her life of service and ministry as an Oblate Sister of the Sacred Heart.

The Oblates' special charism is to pray for priests and help with every aspect of their work. Sister Olimpia exercised this charism in her daily life as she assisted the priests in McDonald for those 20 years at Our Lady of Perpetual Help and in Conneaut at St. Frances Cabrini School and later as she pursued her ministry to the sick, doing her best and letting God do the rest, as she so often said.

I want to conclude with the love for the Eucharist that the Oblate Sisters have and I know the special devotion that Sr. Olimpia had to the Eucharist.

Vatican II in the Constitution on the Liturgy (48) says this about the Eucharist in reference to the laity: "Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves."

Oblation is part of the Oblate Spirituality. The Oblate Sisters are called to offer their whole lives as oblations, as offerings, especially with the priest at Mass. But, not only the Oblate Sisters and Sr. Olimpia, all of us are called to live our lives as an oblation.

Each time we receive the Eucharist we are saying that we will live our lives as an oblation in union with Christ. Sr. Olimpia showed us how to live this with her life.

In the Gospel Jesus speaks about himself as the "living bread that came down from heaven." And concludes with saying, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever" (John 6:51).

Sr. Olimpia believed this and Sr. Olimpia lived this. The promise given her is also given to each one of us by reason of our baptism into Jesus Christ. The peace with which I saw Sr. Olimpia depart this life gave evidence to me of how complete her life was, as a woman, as an Oblate Sister, as a bride wedded to Christ.

For sure then, we can say with St. Paul, "Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" (1Cor 15:55).

Scripturally, "7" is a sign of fullness. If "7" was a significant number in Sr. Olimpia's life, I'd have to say her 94 years were very full and for that we all give thanks to God.

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