

Sister Virginia Hughes, BVM (Flocella)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Feb. 13, 2014

Sister Mary Frances Reis, BVM (Read by Kathleen Danz, Pastoral Services)

On hearing of Virginia Hughes' death, my first image was one of her dear friend Sister Bertilla Barrett greeting her in whatever way one greets one another in eternal joy. Her death renewed my own grief for Bertilla and how much I appreciated a characteristic that both of them had—the ability to listen attentively and to ask questions that would make you think. Virginia never stopped reading and learning. She loved the congregation without measure and her prayers in eternity will continue for the congregation, I am sure. I am so grateful for the way that our community so beautifully celebrates the stages of dying and death. Although I do not always respond to the tributes and memories shared, I deeply appreciate the communication.

Sister Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM

Some years ago, as some of you remember, we had regions. There was one, Region 10, which got a lot of notoriety. One of the things that occurred was a visit I made to Wright Hall. I was sitting at a lunch table with Virginia. At the end of the meal she said, "Just stay for a minute. I have a couple of items that you might use in the newsletter." Did she have news! In fact, I found generally that at Wright Hall, if you wanted to know what was going on in the congregation, there were people from all over the country, sometimes outside the country who were in touch with friends who kept them alerted. To make a long story short, and for those who are connected with media, you will understand the term stringer. Most small newspapers, including regional newsletter, have what they call stringers—very, very important people who are out there. They get news that a person sitting behind a computer trying to put together a newsletter simply doesn't have access to. Virginia was one of those people. She stuck with me through two different newsletters in two different regions. She was of an incalculable importance. I'm not sure that those folk in the regions know how much she did to make visible what was going with the sisters in our region.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

I would like to follow-up on Mary Alma's statement. Virginia loved when I gave her current news that she couldn't get herself, be it Global Sisters, NCR, LCWR, and what was happening in congregations throughout the world. She loved to receive and always acknowledged that she appreciated it.

Sister Helen Maher Garvey, BVM

When I think of Virginia, I think of an evangelizer, I think of a missionary, I think of a person who had a passion for the Gospel. I know that she traveled the back roads of Iowa, but when I met her in New York in the 1980s, she was carrying the Good News into rural parishes throughout the area. She went anywhere and everywhere. It was her desire that teachers of religious education be updated, be educated, be aware, and pass on the tradition of the church and the good news of the Gospel to the students. She was basically an educator. Nothing tired her out; nothing deterred her; she was a force. She was much appreciated in the Archdiocese of Washington. She also, at the end of a day of evangelization, could take you out to a great fish dinner, those kinds of places where they just put the newspaper on the table, give you a bib and it's up to you to do the rest. She was as good at that as she was at the Gospel.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

The morning that I heard that Virginia had died, I went to her room; her body was still there. I promised her that I would share this memory. Not so long before she passed away, four of us were sitting at the dining room table in Marian Hall. We were talking about the latest PUD plan that was going to be taken to the Zoning Advisory Committee. Virginia was always filled with ideas; some of her ideas were accepted and

some of them had to be pondered. Virginia's part of the conversation had to do with her dream that someday some of our property would be farmed by the Catholic Worker people who have a small farm outside of Dubuque. I smiled at her and said, "Virginia, you might have to make intercession in heaven for that dream to come true." She smiled as if to say, "I haven't given up yet."

Sister Margaret Devereux, BVM

I have to tell you about something that I did after she did, but really I'm telling you this because it was so appreciated. We worked with Sisters Monica Seelman and Doris Walsh in religion classes every two weeks. The people were mentally challenged. I enjoyed it so much and I shared that with Virginia because I knew she had done it there before I came. It was a wonderful thing to do and so greatly appreciated.

Sister Gracita Daly, BVM

My sister and brother-in-law were both friends of Virginia since they were in high school. I have known her since I was in six or seventh grade. She would come to our home and visit and my dad and I would take her home. I have been close to her and I am grateful for my friendship with her through the years.

Sister Therese Frelo, BVM

I found Virginia to be a woman way ahead of her times. She was intelligent, well-read and articulate. She loved her church, but she wanted to change it. She was extremely encouraging of people no matter what they did. I always appreciated her honest evaluation of regional meetings; that was important. She was a true and faithful friend. On Page 3 of her prayer service program it reads, "To be a Joy-Bearer and a Joy-Giver . . ." That really says everything; it really describes Virginia.

Sister Rosemary Surby, BVM

About a month ago, the IT Department called and asked if I would help Virginia with her computer and emails. So I went up and made an appointment with her and said, "What would you like me to do for you?" She said, "I have some emails that I have to read and I really need to answer some of them. I've forgotten how to do this."

I'm thinking, she's 95, so I'll see how much I can help her. Well, she was just amazing. We got on the computer and she had over 2,000 emails in her inbox. Many of them were about BVM governance and elections. I said to her, "We've got to get some of these off. Can I delete some of them?" "Oh no," she said, "I want to read those. They keep coming in and they're important because they tell me what's going on in the government and in the world." So we looked at certain ones and then she said, "I really need to answer several that came from my family." I'm sorry I can't remember who from the family sends her emails. So we looked at them and she said, "Look at this one. I want to answer that." So she wrote this, "Dear _____, I'm doing well so don't worry about me. It's been a long winter with my old bones. I'm hanging in there."

After I left her I thought, what a great person! I guess I'm sort of age conscious that at 95 she had that same spark and that same interest in whoever was writing to her. I agree with Mary Alma Sullivan that the news was such an important part of Virginia's life. I intensely enjoyed that experience.

Sister Pat Nolan, BVM

Among her many activities and interests, Virginia was one of the founding members of the BVM Heritage Society. In 25 years, she rarely missed a meeting. We can be forever grateful for the tireless work she did collecting and preserving BVM history.

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

I want to follow up on what Pat Nolan said about Virginia being such an influential member of the BVM Heritage Society ever since its foundation. She was very proud of being from Burlington, Iowa. One of the projects that she took on while she was part of the Heritage Society was to write a profile of all the sisters who entered the congregation from Burlington, Iowa. So we have great profiles of the sisters from Burlington, Iowa, due to Virginia being so proud of her home town.

Sister Renae Hohensee, OSF, Pastoral Services

I want to share with all of you (and many of you may already know) that Sister wanted desperately to be the first natural burial in this congregation—and she wasn't. In February 2013, Sister and I sat down because she had so much communication she wanted to have in order so that when she did die, things were ready to go out. So she wrote personal notes and letters, maybe 30 to 35 of them, and gave them to me so that when she did pass, I would then notify these persons of her passing. She had a list of people for me to call typed on a 9" x 13" piece of paper. It took the greater part of a day to make phone calls to inform them of the date she died and the date she was buried. So she had a great number of people with whom she communicated and stayed in touch. She was so deeply appreciative of the impact those individuals had on her life and how those relationships made her the person that she was. I am greatly honored and humbled that she allowed me to share that time with her.