



Eulogy of Sister Dolores O'Dwyer, BVM (Wilmetta)

Marian Hall Chapel, Dec. 21, 2017

Dolores Margaret O'Dwyer was born on Aug. 28, 1923, the third child of William and Margaret Meaney O'Dwyer of San Francisco, Calif. She joined siblings William and Mary Catherine. Dolores' parents were born and married in Ireland before immigrating to the United States and settling in the Mission District of San Francisco.

Her father had a fun-loving personality, opposite yet complementary to the quiet, serious and pious personality of her mother. Both parents had strength at the foundation of their characters. The O'Dwyer family belonged to St. Paul Parish and Dolores attended and graduated from St. Paul elementary and high school, where she was taught and influenced by the BVMs.

Religious vocations apparently ran in the O'Dwyer family. Dolores was inspired first by her mother who belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis and instilled in her children that religious life was something wonderful. Her brother William joined the Lasallian Christian Brothers and later became a diocesan priest. Her sister, Sister Mary Catherine (Paul Anthony), entered the BVM congregation in 1932 and died in 2001. Dolores herself entered on Sept. 8, 1941, and received the name Wilmetta upon her reception on March 19, 1942. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1944, and lived 76 years as a BVM.

Dolores taught in elementary schools for 24 years. She was missioned at St. Odilo in Berwyn, Ill.; St. George, Christ the King, and St. John in Seattle; St. Clare in Portland, Ore.; and Holy Family in Glendale, Calif.

In the middle of Dolores' teaching years, tragedy struck the O'Dwyer family. Dolores' mother, who had been diagnosed with dementia, was exceptionally restless on Oct. 1, 1956, so Dolores' father decided to take his wife for a ride, which included a stop at the bay to gather sea grass as they used to do in their early days in Ireland.

After returning home, Dolores' father fell asleep and awoke after midnight to discover his wife was gone. It is believed that she thought it was morning and had headed to Mass at St. Anthony Church, only to be struck and killed by a Greyhound bus.

In a letter to friends, Dolores wrote about the comfort the family received from the BVM community. "There was a special BVM rosary [in the afternoon] . . . My Dad was greatly impressed and [remarked], 'I gave two daughters [to the BVMs] and got a hundred in return.' My cousin who is a Sister of Mercy was there and was overcome by the charity and love of the BVMs . . . Please accept [our] thanks . . . for your part in making this tragedy easier to bear. All your letters and promises of prayers have made us all so happy."

In 1968, Dolores became the principal at St. Bernard in Los Angeles and remained there for 36 years. She truly became the center of the St. Bernard community. The pastor wrote, "The greatness of your service to St. Bernard School and Church is not measured only in the number of years you have given, many as they are. Your service is measured especially by the love you have shown, the dedication that is always evident and the God-given talents you have shared with generations of students and families."

Dolores was a woman of wisdom and grace as she faced numerous educational challenges and proved herself an innovative leader. She received the Distinguished Principals Award from the Department of Elementary Schools

of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) in 1991. The executive director of NCEA stated, "Sister Dolores has a clear, integrated philosophy of Catholic Education, is highly regarded by peers, students and parents. She firmly believed that a Catholic School is a place where children are allowed to grow to maturity in finding God and contributing to society." In recognition of this award, she was also honored as the "Principal of the Year for the Western States."

As a member of the 1994 delegation of the NCEA and the People-to-People Organization, Dolores visited and studied Catholic schools in Australia and New Zealand. In 1998, Catholic Charities honored her with the Lifetime Achievement Award for her involvement in Catholic Youth Organization athletics. Dolores engaged with her students by attending all school activities and challenging the athletes to learn the skills of the sport and to play as a cohesive team, skills that helped them succeed later in life.

Dolores' contribution to Catholic education was tremendous. Her determination, unselfish devotion, love, faith and skills as an educator influenced the lives of many students, parents, teachers and staff. She was a source of inspiration as she taught by example that every person is loved and cherished by God, and that we are all one family. She truly made a difference.

After retiring in 2004, Dolores volunteered as a tutor at St. Bernard and pursued her other interests, which included crocheting, cooking, reading, indulging her cats, and cheering on the Los Angeles Lakers. She had a delightful wit and a cheerfulness about her, and was honest to a fault. She loved to sing and dance, and enjoyed a good party, all of which fit quite well with her Irish heritage.

Dolores moved to Mount Carmel in 2012. It was a difficult transition at first, but eventually one could hear her singing, sometimes through the night. The last verse of "Amazing Grace" was a favorite tune: "When we've been there ten thousand years/Bright shining as the sun,/We've no less days to sing God's praise/Than when we first begun."

Dolores longed to join her parents, brother and sister. Finally, last Saturday, Jesus came for her. One can imagine Dolores speaking the words from Song of Songs: "Hark! My lover—here he comes . . . My lover speaks; he says to me, 'Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!'" With this invitation, Dolores followed her beloved to a new dwelling place; her voice joined the heavenly chorus. Sing on, Dolores! Sing on!