



Eulogy of Sister Ethel Dignan, BVM (Howard)
Marian Hall Chapel, June 20, 2018

Good morning and welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Ethel Dignan.

Ethel Dignan was born on May 19, 1924, in Chicago, to Francis and Mary Jane Sullivan Dignan. An older sister Dee, brothers Thomas and Francis who both died in childhood, and younger sister Patricia completed the family.

Ethel once commented that she had three passions: intellectual life and ideas, the Eucharist and Hispanic culture. Although her father did not finish high school, he esteemed learning and inspired the same in Ethel. He planted the seed for a love of reading when he took her to the library to check out books and experience story hour. Later, Ethel discovered a love of English literature while attending a Benedictine boarding school in Kansas. "The dancing in the recreation room drove me crazy," recalled Ethel, "so I just sat in a corner and read English literature."

Ethel's father also cultivated an interest in Chicago history by taking her to the Maxwell Street Market, Jane Addams Hull House, and all the Chicago museums. In addition, he bequeathed his fondness for classical music by treating her to the touring San Carlo Opera where a "peanut gallery" seat was only 25 cents.

Ethel's mother, who had a tremendous devotion to the Eucharist and the Sacred Heart, nurtured her spirituality. A prayer book given to her for her First Communion blossomed into a love for the Mass. While at the Benedictine boarding school, she heard the nuns chanting the Divine Office and they gave her a well-used, old missal. "Now I was able to have my own Compline . . . before going to bed," recalled Ethel. "My love of the Divine Office began at that point."

After high school, Ethel worked at a bank while she attended night school at DePaul University. She completed her post-secondary degree at Mundelein College earning a bachelor's degree in economics with a minor in Spanish. Ethel worked as the secretary for the publicity director at the National Railways of Mexico in Chicago. She was encouraged to participate in the Student Relief Campaign in Mexico where she lived with a family who had protected priests during anti-clerical regimes. During this experience, her interest in Hispanic culture became a passion. "I was impressed with the pilgrims moving on their knees all the way to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe."

Although Ethel felt called to religious life, she wanted to complete a college degree instead of entering the Benedictines immediately after graduation as a number of her classmates had done, which was a fortunate decision for the BVMs. "I found my home at Mundelein College," she commented. "I was impressed with so many sisters there, especially Sister Mary Ligouri Brophy. The BVMs had the spirit of freedom that was joyous and appealed to me." Ethel entered the congregation on Feb. 14, 1950, and received the name Howard upon her reception on Aug. 15, 1950. She professed her first vows on Aug. 15, 1952, and lived 68 years as a BVM.

Ethel taught economics at Clarke University before studying at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. and earning a master's degree in psychology. Afterwards, she returned to Clarke to serve as the chair of the psychology

department. In 1963, she received her doctorate in clinical psychology from Fordham University in New York, and once again returned to Clarke as department chair.

Ethel served as a staff psychologist at the Dubuque Community Health Center in Dubuque, Iowa, and at Mundelein College in Chicago. She was a clinical psychologist at Agnew State Hospital in Campbell, Calif., where she recalled, "I loved my work and I liked the patients I worked with and the staff as well." When budget cuts abruptly forced the state to close Agnew, Ethel found employment at the West Valley Mental Health Center in Los Gatos where she spent many happy years, commenting, "It was called West Valley; we used to call it Heavenly Valley." She became the supervisor of outpatient care at West Valley in 1975, and served as the director from 1982 to 1991, during which time she established a Department of Children's Services.

After retiring, Ethel decided to combine her Spanish minor with her love of Hispanic culture to initiate a Hispanic ministry in Los Angeles where she taught parenting to immigrant mothers mostly from Mexico and Guatemala. She later volunteered in the Hispanic program at the Sacred Heart Community Service non-profit in San José, Calif.

Ethel was a very intelligent woman open to new ideas and involved in women's issues. She was devoted to her family, faithful to her friends, genuinely interested in people and always a good listener. She enjoyed celebrating with the community and sought insightful ways of being community. She was deeply spiritual, a woman of faith and prayer who liked to share her reflections and insights with others. Though she had to navigate through many perils in her life, she kept a good sense of humor and remained grateful and gracious.

As we continue this celebration of life of our sister Ethel, we rejoice that, in the words of St. Paul, she now knows "the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge" and is "filled with the utter fullness of God."