



Wake Stories of Philomena Rosselli, BVM

Marian Hall Chapel, June 21, 2018

Phyllis Sharrow, Cousin *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

My mother was a first cousin to Agnes and Philomena. Their fathers were brothers. Frequently Agnes and Philomena visited Petaluma to see their half-brother, John, and visit other family members. In a fortuitous happenstance, my mother was at the same beauty parlor as Agnes and Philomena one day that resulted in a very happy reunion and a lovely relationship with all of us. Never did we lose touch again. Sister Philomena was a kind, sweet person who was a blessing in my life. A favorite thing I liked to do was send candy, cookies or wine to Sister Philomena for her jubilee. As the good person she was, all the goodies were shared with the sisters on her floor. She reminded me that she was very popular when that happened. My personal and everlasting thanks to the staff and sisters at Mount Carmel for taking care of Sister Philomena in her later years but mostly for being her family. With sincere gratitude, Phyllis Sharrow

Sandra Rosselli Nagy, Cousin *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

When Philomena's mother was dying, she asked Agnes to look after Philomena as she was still in school. When both the girls were out of school, they went to work at the Bank of America in San Francisco before they entered the Convent. That was the last time my mother saw them until I started doing genealogy research. I found out where they were and told my mother. She got so excited. We called the convent, spoke to the "Girls," and told them we would be coming down to see them. From my understanding, they got so excited they told everyone that their cousins who they hadn't seen in 64 years were coming to visit. It was a wonderful visit and when we got home, my mother made each of them a quilt always to remind them of her. I'm so thankful that Agnes and Philomena was in my mother's and my life. I want to thank all the sisters for the love and friendship Philomena and Agnes received from all. With God's Blessings and Love, Sandra Rosselli Nagy

Sister Marion, Murphy, BVM

I met Philomena in the 1970s at Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago when her BVM sister Agnes was there. Periodically, Agnes would come to Mount Carmel and bring Philomena to Our Lady of Angels for a little while during breaks at Christmastime and during the summer. We had plenty of time and we loved having Philomena visit repeatedly. Although she was a quiet person, we loved everything about her. She was always interested to hear about the students, the parents, and the parish. Sister Agnes was the moderator of the media center in the school. Philomena liked going over to school and was very happy spending some time there. Once in a while, we would take a little trip up to the BVM house in Salem. She was very excited to go. However, there was something special about her. She always had to check and make sure she wasn't keeping someone else from going. Once assured, she could really enjoy three or four days at Salem. Another time we took a trip up to Door County in Wisconsin. Of course, she had to check that no one else was losing out because she was going. The most wonderful trip was their trip to Switzerland. During that trip, they found their parents' homes. They brought back pictures and, for the first time in her life, she talked for way over an hour! She didn't forget a thing and gave wonderful detail about the trip. She never complained about pain. She listened well to anybody who needed to talk. She was always grateful for everything that she had. For all of her life, she thanked God always. She was a wonderful sister.

Sister Donna Schauf, BVM

For the last several months, I took Philomena's mail to her. I was always uplifted visiting with her. As Marion said, she was always very grateful. However, sometimes when she wasn't feeling well, she would get even more quiet. When she felt better, she would start talking more, and I said, "You must be feeling better. You're complaining." When she celebrated her 97th birthday, she said to me, "You know, over 70 years ago, I walked up those front steps of Mount Carmel. I didn't know if they were going to let me stay, but here I am." She was a wonderful lady.

Sister Joyce Cox, BVM

I lived with Phil in San Francisco at St. Thomas More. At that time, she had several illnesses and had been hospitalized. She had a remarkable spirit. It always amazed me knowing that she realized her illness but still had a spirit of great compassion for others. She was gentle to live with, lovely to live with. I knew her sister Agnes very well and knew the relationship between the two of them. Actually, Philomena really depended upon Agnes. Agnes seemed to be more healthy and stronger and a strong supporter for Phil. A gentle, wonderful woman. I will surely miss her.

Sister Donard Collins, BVM

I had the privilege of getting to know Philomena when I worked at the Motherhouse. As people have said, she was a very gentle person. She always had that little twinkle in her eye that you didn't know if she was really kidding you or not. There was just something special about Phil. A few weeks ago, I was asked to talk with Philomena about hospice. We sat down and I talked with her. She said, "But I just want to die." I explained, "Hospice can't do anything about that, but they can make you very comfortable while you are waiting to die." We talked about it several times and kept coming back to that. Finally, I said, "Maybe we could go down and talk with the nurse." So we did. The nurse said, "You've been talking about hospice." Philomena said, "Yes, and I want to sign up for it." She was such a beautiful person.

Lou Ann Bach

Philomena and I met in 1976 when I was just a new teacher and she was embarking on retirement. She came to St. Patrick ES where she volunteered in a classroom of 31 first graders. I learned from her during that year about gifts that were part of me all of life. First, as you well know, she taught me how to be organized. When I planned a lesson, part of it was making sure the students understood that time is allowed at the end of a lesson to put away every crayon, every block, every marker, every piece of paper. I still remember that she pulled me aside at the end of the year, looked at the shelf, and said, "If you have not used it in a year, you need to get rid of it because it's only collecting dust." The second thing I learned from her was to be open and welcoming to volunteers. She made that year so effortless for me. What followed for my future students were many opportunities to meet all sorts of people from the community. When someone came to school and said they would like to volunteer, my hand was up first. She showed me that that was truly a gift. She taught that service to your community doesn't end at retirement, but it's only really beginning. You have talents that need to be shared, given and extended to everyone well beyond the years you are employed. Finally, as I heard all of you speak so greatly, she taught me what it means to be a true leader. She was gentle. She was quiet. She led by example. All of that made Sister Philomena a powerful leader. During my life, I've learned things from classes that I've taken. I've learned things from research and personal reading. Then there are the gifts you receive because you were fortunate to share the path of life's journey with a new friend. I consider the friendship that we shared one of life's greatest blessings.

Sister Eileen Healy, BVM

I met Philomena in the early 1960s when she was on the streetcar in San Francisco and so was I. She recognized me and knew that I was teaching in Portland, Ore. I was in San Francisco for the NCEA convention. She knew that my parents still lived in San Francisco. She asked me if they were going to come and see me in Portland. I said, "Yes, they are coming in the summer." Her sister Agnes created the mosaic, which currently hangs in the Caritas Center Dining Room. She made it for her Masters in Fine Arts at the University of San Francisco. She wanted it brought to Seattle. Philomena made all the arrangements with my parents. They brought it when they drove up to see in Portland. Marion Murphy and I got a chance to go to the Seattle World's Fair because we were taking the

mosaic to Seattle. My parents were most impressed with her and with the mosaic. They were very careful not to be in any kind of an accident.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

I didn't know Philomena until I moved here almost five years ago. I loved to visit Philomena. When I walked into her room, I got the impression that she lived very, very simply. There was hardly anything in her room. I enjoy most that she usually had on CNN or MSNBC. She was very interested in politics and the happenings in our country. I think that Philomena is in a very good position to pray for what is happening in our country now.

Sister Anne Buckley, BVM

Philomena and Margaret Swann, BVM became very good friends when Margaret moved here from Kansas City. When Margaret died, I was visiting with Philomena and she said, "I really miss her. We used to have such good chats together over all the gossip."

Sister Catherine (Kitty) Ornellas, BVM

I lived with Philomena at St. Bridget's in San Francisco and had come from Butte, Mont. When I stepped into her classroom, there was such a tranquil, peacefulness in that classroom. The students sat there looking so peaceful. I couldn't understand it. I know Philomena is a saint. I always thought that when I stepped into this building, I would be a saint. I found out fast that I was different. However, I think that Philomena stepped through that door and truly was a saint. She was a very peaceful person. She was lovely. She was quiet. I think she was a saint and we should start canonization.

Sister Eileen Healy, BVM

I remember a funny story Philomena told me. She and Agnes ended up in a Butte, Mont., at St. Joseph's convent together. They figured the Provincial didn't realize they were sisters. With Rosselli as their last name, I don't know how she wouldn't know, except that they were very different. That was a great time for Philomena. They enjoyed living together. One other funny thing. During my sabbatical, I used Santa Maria del Popolo in Mundelein, Ill., as my grounding place in the Midwest. Agnes was there, so I drove Philomena from San Francisco to Mundelein. She called the white car I had my "turtle" because I carried everything in it since I wasn't going back to San Francisco.

Sister Donna Bebensee, BVM

One day when I was talking with Philomena, I asked her if there was anything she really liked and missed. She said she liked Reese's peanut butter cups. After that, I would leave a little bag on her door on feast days and times like that. It would have a Reese's peanut butter cup in the bottom. I said to her one time, "I always leave it on your door because I'm afraid that you might be sleeping." She said, "I never sleep."

Sister Alice Kerker, BVM

I lived across the hall from Philomena. Quite a while ago, she stopped coming to the dining room to eat for various reasons. One of the feast days, I stopped in her room and said, "Philomena, you're missing the wine. Here you are Italian and you're missing the wine at feast days." She said, "Well, I'm not Italian." "Oh, you're not? With Rosselli as a name?" She said, "I'm Swiss." I said, "Does that prohibit you from liking wine?" She said, "Oh, no." From then on, I would bring her a little glass of wine. She would have it and enjoy it. Somedays she didn't want it, didn't feel up to it. She thanked me multiple times. I said, "Philomena, just make sure there is someone around when I'm in your state to bring me a glass of wine." She laughed. She thought that was wonderful. I would like to thank all the sisters in her name who supplied the wine that didn't come from the dining room.

Sister Mary A Healey, BVM (Via e-mail.)

I had the pleasure of living with Philomena in the 1970s. She was named for her mother and may have been pleased to find the life-size statue of St. Philomena in the front corridor at Mount Carmel then because of a bit of BVM folklore. An early settler of Dubuque, John Walsh, said he saw a young girl far out on prairie land that he was

thinking of claiming. She told him to save the land for the "Children of Mary." Walsh claimed it and offered it to Fr. Donaghoe when he was planning to move the sisters and the boarding school girls out of Dubuque, a wild western town then. The offer was accepted and the old Motherhouse built. The name Philomena has almost disappeared since Vatican II. She was removed from the canon because there is no proof she existed. I'm not so sure. When I was in high school one of my teachers, SM St. Eugene Mullaney, BVM was deeply devoted to her, had a statue in her classroom, and advertised her all the time. She told her students, "If ever you are in danger, call on Phil." One dark evening, one of my classmates who had a 4–8:00 p.m. job after school was walking home from the streetcar past a row of stores. A man stepped out from a gangway and grabbed her. She yelled, "Phil! Phil!" The man said, "Phil? And turned to look for Phil." She broke loose and ran like a scared deer the rest of the way home.

Betty Fitzsimmons Seymour, Friend

Gary and I had the pleasure of meeting and knowing Sister Philomena through her friendship with Sister Mary Thomasella Fitzsimmons. We loved listening to [her stories](#) of her early childhood with her sister Agnes, how they entered the convent and her experiences teaching over the years. I always left with a strong feeling of her peace and gentleness whenever we visited. She was an example of faith to me, showing it by the way she lived it! We will miss her."

Joan Fitzsimmons Blevins, Niece of Betty Fitzsimmons Seymour (Via e-mail)

I would agree with what my aunt said and add that I thought she was a courageous soul. We are often saddened when we hear of a child who lost their family members. Philomena was in her teens when she lost both parents to illness. She also had a brother who was in WWI, who did return from the war, however, was affected by it and never the same, she shared. Her older sister, Sister Agnes, postponed joining the convent until Philomena graduated from high school. They then entered together. I think she did have another older brother, as I heard her mention a niece, however, I don't know anything about her. Due to her family circumstances, she had to make an important choice early in her life as to who would she live for – herself or God. She chose to live for God. She was a quiet soul. I know she was a teacher, so maybe that brought out another side of her at times. I was a teacher too, as were my aunts Sisters Thomasella and [Luceda](#) Fitzsimmons. However, she most definitely was an encourager, as I am sure many of the sisters and staff could attest. After her own sister, Agnes, died at Mt. Carmel, she was checking in daily with our aunt, Sister Thomasella and became a dear friend until Thomasella died. I am sure it was a comfort for both of them to have each other near as they grieved. After our aunt died, Betty and I continued to visit Philomena over the years. She was always happy to hear from us or see us. We loved her. She was like family to us. God crosses our paths in interesting ways. Though I didn't get to know Philomena well until the last ten years, I have a sweet picture of Philomena and our family from over 30 years ago when we were visiting at the convent in Chicago where my aunt and her sister lived.