



Eulogy of Sister Mary Ellen McDonagh, BVM
Marian Hall Chapel, Nov. 9, 2018

Good morning and welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Mary Ellen McDonagh.

“At the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Today these words of T. S. Eliot, chosen by Mary Ellen for both her final vow and 25th Jubilee celebrations, take on a special meaning.

Mary Ellen McDonagh was born on Nov. 17, 1950, in St. Louis, the first child of John (Jack) and Rosemary Burke McDonagh. Her younger brother John completed the family. Both sides of her family came from Ireland. Her father had more cousins in the homeland than in the United States. Two of his cousins, both Franciscan priests, concelebrated the Mass for the 100th Jubilee of the Sisters of Charity, BVM in Dublin, with the rest of the cousins participating.

Mary Ellen graduated from Xavier HS with an honors diploma. She attended Saint Louis University on a scholarship and earned a bachelor’s degree with honors in communications and mathematics. She later earned a master’s degree in journalism from Iowa State University.

Mary Ellen entered the congregation on Jan. 14, 1973, was received on Sept. 23, 1973, and made her first profession on Oct. 4, 1975. She lived 45 years as a BVM, the first 14 of those years as a secondary English teacher at Regis-O’Hara in Kansas City, Mo.; the Immaculata in Chicago; St. Francis Xavier High in Phoenix; and Assumption in Davenport, Iowa.

Journalism was one of Mary Ellen’s special gifts. While she served as faculty advisor, the Assumption’s school newspaper won first place in the National Scholastic Press Association contest for their school size category. “The thing I try to do is instill in them a sense of pride in what they are doing,” she commented. In 1988, Mary Ellen became the editor of *The Catholic Key*, the newspaper of the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph. During her two-years as editor, the *Key* received four Catholic Press Association awards including first place for Best News Photo, Black and White taken by Mary Ellen. In addition, the *National Catholic Reporter* published many of her articles and photographs. Of course, she was a frequent contributor to the BVM *Salt* publication and served on its editorial board. She also worked as publisher, circulation manager and bookkeeper at the Kansas City Interfaith Peace Alliance.

Social justice became Mary Ellen’s passion as she strived to live the Beatitudes. “They are a call for people like [me],” she wrote, “who can’t rest until the world is right and just and equitable for all.” For more than four decades, she worked for justice starting as a high school junior when she became aware of starving people in Biafra and decided to limit the amount of food her family discarded. Volunteering at a home for mentally challenged adults and participating in anti-Vietnam war protests during her college years followed.

While teaching in Davenport, Mary Ellen served on the steering committee formed by the Quad Cities BVMs to assist Laotian refugees with housing, furnishings, clothing, and learning English. In 1989, she attended a Faith and Resistance retreat weekend that culminated in an act of civil disobedience to protest nuclear weapons by

trespassing onto the Whiteman Air Force Bases near Kansas City. After being photographed and processed, she received her first “ban and bar” letter ordering her not to enter the base. She received her second letter in 1995 when she trespassed onto the U.S. Strategic Nuclear Command in Omaha. At the time, she was living and working at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Mo. Catholic Worker communities from around the Midwest had gathered at StratCom to protest the high price our nation’s military and nuclear expenditures extract from the poor.

Mary Ellen worked as an assistant administrator and project coordinator at St. John’s Center, a diocesan meeting and retreat center, in Kansas City, before serving as the BVM representative at the 8th Day Center in Chicago. “8th Day Center would be the only place where my arrest record would get me the job!” she commented. Her years with 8th Day led Mary Ellen to a nuclear test site in Nevada, Fort Benning in Georgia, the gates of prisons to protest the death penalty, Orange Parades in Northern Ireland, trips to Haiti, Guatemala and Ecuador to promote education, healthcare and outreach programs and so much more.

Not once but twice she traveled to Iraq. The first time was in 1998, breaking the imposed sanctions to deliver medicine, medical journals and school supplies to a country devastated by poverty and genocide. “I not only saw, but heard the truth,” Mary Ellen wrote, “the cries and moans of pain that permeated the background noise of every conversation.”

Her second “illegal” trip to Iraq was in 2002 as a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team in a campaign to end sanctions and prevent a post 9/11 war. “The team hoped that our presence with the Iraqi people indicated in a small way that war and violence are not what we desire for them, that we seek a just relationship with people rather than one of dropping bombs.”

Reflecting upon her experiences, Mary Ellen wrote, “Why travel halfway around the world to immerse myself in holocaust conditions? The command of the Gospel is quite clear to me. I am required ‘to love my neighbor as myself’ . . . If we are to love God, then we must love all of God’s created people, including those our government has declared ‘enemy.’”

Mary Ellen served the congregation on several committees and boards, including the Corporate Responsibility Committee and as the BVM representative to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), where she urged “corporate and political leaders [to] do more to protect God’s creation.”

At the time of her silver jubilee, Mary Ellen wrote, “A favorite translation [of the Beatitudes reads]: Blessed are those who have lived their belief out loud. That is my hope . . . I long to live my belief out loud, to have those still stony parts of my heart turned to flesh . . . Overall, I’ve become more connected to the poor, to the earth, to a loving God . . . And I’m looking forward . . . knowing that at the end of my exploring, I will arrive where I started and ‘know the place for the first time.’”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” (Matthew 5: 9). We celebrate today for Mary Ellen, a daughter of God, has arrived at her heavenly home.