



**Wake Stories of Marilyn Thomas, BVM**  
Marian Hall Chapel, June 7, 2019

**Charlotte (LePetit) Jacobs, Former Student** (*Read by Sister Anne Marie McKenna, BVM*)

For my four years at Immaculate Conception Academy in Davenport, Iowa, Sister Marilyn was the director of the Glee Club, my first love. I always loved singing, but Sister taught us to sing "together" as "one." How could a typing teacher be so talented at the piano, and take a motley group of untrained voices and make us sound like angels? I pray that someday I'll be deemed worthy to sing in her heavenly Glee Club.

**Joan Leland Spittler, Former BVM** (*Read by Sister Anne Marie McKenna, BVM*)

Sister Marilyn taught organ when I was in the novitiate. I have fond memories of conversations with her about entering later in life. I entered at age 23 and she told me she entered at 29. My husband Tom and I have visited her several times over the years. She was a quiet, loving person who lived a long and peaceful life. I will always remember her.

**Paul Gardner, Nephew**

Sister Marilyn Thomas - I knew her as Aunt Fonny. Her birth name was Florence after her mother. Florence to her little brother Al came out Fonny, so Fonny is was until she became Sister Marilyn Thomas almost 75 years ago. To me, she was always Sister Marilyn and Fonny. As a kid with a checkered academic and behavioral record at Sacred Heart in Davenport, Iowa, either Sister or Aunt could be intimidating and the combination – well you get the picture. Sister Marilyn and Aunt Fonny, strong in belief, faith and character, was never anything but kind, accepting and thoughtful to me. She always asked how I was doing, what was going on in my life and in the lives of those around me. As I think back over the 69 years I knew Aunt Fonny and Sister Marilyn, the moments I will cherish the most are the quiet conversations we've had – just the two of us. Faithful servant of God and my loving aunt, inseparable, will live on in my memory.

**Sister Nancy McCarthy, BVM**

I've known Marilyn since I entered 59 years ago. I am definitely one of her oldest organ students. I first met her when she had only been here a couple of years. I already had four music teachers before coming here, but Marilyn was by far the most outstanding organist I had ever encountered. Some of you don't know that we had more in common than music. We both entered later, not just out of high school. She helped me deal with that experience. Both of us had studied French and shorthand and we used to write notes to each other in both of those languages because we were not supposed to have conversations outside of music lesson time. Marilyn shared some of her French spiritual reading books with me and I taught French to my set one summer when Marilyn went to summer school. Our main common bond was accompanying on the organ. Marilyn was definitely the best – a real perfectionist. I really was inspired and motivated to practice for the first time in my life, but there really was not much else to do at that time. I used to think I was pretty good at covering up my mistakes, but Marilyn *always* heard them. She also understood that I did not want to be a music teacher. After I left Mount Carmel the very day I was professed, we continued to keep in touch. I never lived in Dubuque, but she was a wonderful letter writer and I managed to visit a few times every year. When I decided to stop doing music after losing half of my hearing, Marilyn just couldn't believe that I couldn't hear; I was only 40 then. However, I played something on the organ and she said, "You're right. That sounds terrible. You probably should give up." While wearing hearing aids, I could not tell how what I sounded like while playing the organ because it's too

electronic. I continued to play the piano, but I really couldn't play the organ anymore. Our relationship continued and grew for many years. In the days of renewal, we were not always on the same page regarding progress, but somehow that didn't matter. I never visited Marilyn without coming away feeling something very special. That was still true the last time I visited her the day before she died. Thank you, Marilyn, for sharing part of your life with me for 59 years.

### **Patrick Gardner, Nephew**

Thank you for coming to celebrate the life of one of the most phenomenal and wonderful people I've ever known. My name is Patrick Gardner and I am general referred to as Marilyn's favorite nephew. My mother was Dody (Dorothy) Gardner, my brother is Paul, and my cousin is Jim. I think in most families, there is a person who is welcomed and accepted at birthdays, anniversaries and graduations – someone we all look forward to seeing and having around. Marilyn was certainly one of those people. In these walls, you know her as Sister Marilyn, but outside of these walls, she was Aunt Fonny. When Uncle Al, Jim's father, would come into town, it was Fonny this and Fonny that. When my mom Dody would talk about Fonny, it was always Fonny.

I have a little story that has nothing to do with Sister Marilyn actually being there, but with the name Fonny. My mom and I traveled up here some years ago to visit Aunt Fonny. We walk into the door and my mom, as she was going to sit down, says to me, "Why don't you go up to the receptionist and see if Fonny is available." "Sure, I can do that." So I walked up to the receptionist and said, "We're here to see Aunt Fonny. Tell her that her sister Dody is here." She says, "OK. What's her name?" I said, "Her name's Aunt Fonny." "Is she a sister here?" "Yeah." "Well, she has to have a given name." I didn't know if I was missing some kind a protocol here, so I said, "Well, see if Sister Fonny is available." The receptionist wasn't in a very good mood after that, so I turned around and said, "Mom, we have a problem here. They've loss Fonny." I worded it wrong. What I should have said was that they loss Fonny's name. My mom tended to be a little excitable and emotional before she has the facts. She comes up and says, "What do you mean you've lost Fonny?" The receptionist says, "Ma'am, calm down. I just need to know her name so I can contact her." Mom says, "Her name is Sister Marilyn." "Thank you." I looked at my mom and said, "Who's Sister Marilyn?" She looked at me and said, "Aunt Fonny."

I could go on and on with stories. I'm sure you will hear plenty today with the reoccurring theme about what a wonderful person she was. She was somebody who never judges me, was always kind to me, and was always pleasant to be around. When I was doing something that my parents weren't thrilled about, Fonny would not judge me or hold that against me, even as a teenager, and you know how teenager can be – they know everything. It was different with Fonny, with Sister Marilyn. There was a comfort I had with you. Certainly, Paul, Jim and I have been coming here for 55+ years. It has always been such a favorite memory of mine; it's so calm here. When you are raised with her siblings – Dody Gardner and Al Thomas – two emotional and excitable people, it was nice to have Fonny around because Dody and Al behaved themselves when she was in the room. She was an incredibly wonderful person and we should celebrate her 103 years. Yes, it is sad, but she is where she needs to be. She is calming mom and Al down right now as we speak.

### **AJ Thomas, Nephew**

I have been coming here for almost 70 years because my mother used to tell me stories about coming here when she was pregnant with me to see Fonny. It has been great coming here. I have two fond memories of Marilyn. She always could see the best in people and what they could become and she always expected you to work hard to become the best you could be. I thought that that was an interesting way to interact with people. There was a time that I needed to pass French to get into graduate school. I was at Loras College and had taken six years of Latin; that was vogue back then. Fonny found out and said, "Well, I have a master's in French. Just come over to Mount Carmel every week and I'll see that you get through it." So I did and she did. She was always fun to work with. She set expectations that I always wanted to meet. It's just a good memory of interacting with my aunt. Thank you all.

### **Georgina Mensen, BVM Center, Treasurer's Office**

Sister Marilyn was very special to Bob, our children, grandchildren and me. When I visited her, her first question: "How is Bob, how are the children and grandchildren?" She never said kids. When I started at Mount Carmel in 1992, Sister Sue Rink informed me I was to be Sister Marilyn's backup. She was from the old school regarding "laypeople." I was taught to respect religious and called her Sister Marilyn and did as she wanted. I gained her confidence and we became very good friends. Sister Marilyn had her routine of coming over to the BVM Center after breakfast each morning with the mail. She very seldom missed a day. She would go to the bank and Clarke College about every day. We referred to her as "Mario" when she would speed out of Mount Carmel. As you know, Sister Marilyn played the piano and organ. I was amazed when she typed. Her fingers were in perfect rhythm when they danced across the keyboard. I will forever be grateful to Sister Marilyn for all she taught me about the BVMS. She now rejoices with her family, especially her sister June, whom she lost at a young age and mentioned often. Rest in peace, Sister Marilyn, and watch over us all.

#### **Sister Diane Forster, BVM** (*Read by Sister Bertha Fox, BVM*)

When I entered in 1964, Marilyn was here, handling a variety of tasks. As a junior novice, I began organ lessons with Marilyn. When I was assigned to cleaning duties at the BVM Center, Marilyn explained how to do some of them. As a senior novice, I attended her summer session French class, and I continued to play the organ.

When I came to Mount Carmel in the summers to work at Marian Hall or just for a short visit, we always had good conversation, and exchanged letters during the school years. When I returned to Mount Carmel in 1996, I struggled with the transition from teaching elementary school music and directing parish choirs to working in the Office of the Secretary. I left my heart in Chattanooga. Marilyn did so much to ease the change by listening and by sharing her own transition from the teaching she loved at Immaculate Conception Academy to working at Mount Carmel. In my transition, however, I was pleased to return to playing the organ regularly, and Marilyn was most encouraging and willing to share playing for masses and events. Sister Ann Eileen Clancy gave us some books of organ-piano duets, suggesting that we would enjoy them. Both practicing and playing these duets was a delight for each of us, and we invested in more and more duet music.

My family welcomed Marilyn among us for family events near home, and for a dozen of our family gatherings in Snowmass, Colo., at the Trappist Monastery to which our brother Chuck belongs. (Each member has an annual "family visit week.") My family soon decided that I could not come to the Colorado gatherings if I didn't bring Marilyn. In some years, we preceded the family gathering with a week of retreat at the monastery. In other years, we followed it and became tourists; highlights were trips to the Grand Canyon and to Yellowstone. At one of these family gatherings, my father informed Marilyn that he'd wanted another daughter, but thought it would be one younger than she. When Marilyn became unable to make the long trip to Colorado, it wasn't the same without her. I lost my travel partner. As her vision changed and she could no longer see music clearly, I lost my duet partner. But, through all of these years, I know I've never lost my teacher, mentor, pray-er, and friend.

#### **Sister Eileen Healy, BVM**

When I came to work at Mount Carmel in 1994, I thought Marilyn was the liturgy person because we treated her that way. We had practice for the whole Motherhouse community every Wednesday afternoon at a specific time. People who didn't even sing came and sat in the chapel to listen to the practice. It wasn't Schola; it was the whole house – a very interesting gathering. We had a liturgy committee with about eight or ten of us. Each person had a turn in doing the whole week's liturgies – what was going to be sung, what was going to be spoken. Marilyn typed it all up. We were given little folded papers that had the whole week on it. She got these pieces of papers from *non*-musicians who just like to do liturgy, and somehow made sense of it. I always appreciated all the work Marilyn did to make our little liturgy committee work.

#### **Sister LaDonna Manternach, BVM**

As a novice, I was also one of Marilyn's organ students. It was a real pleasure to have her as my teacher. I had taken four years of organ lessons as a youth from middle school through high school, yet never accomplished being able to use my feet with any ease. Whether it was a few years of maturity or Marilyn's guidance, I was able

to do it and, to this day, don't worry so much about where they go. I have another story that shows Marilyn's encouragement. One time I was telling her that I had written a "Holy, Holy" to use as an a cappella piece and had never put chords to it. She said, "Well, let me see it." I shared it with her. She chorded it for me and then used it at Motherhouse liturgies for quite a long time. At this point, I couldn't tell you how it sounds, but she certainly saw the worth in it and I appreciated that.

### **Sister Margaret Mary Cosgrove, BVM**

Marilyn worked in the Treasurer's Office when I was Treasurer. When I first became Treasurer, she was the treasurer for the Mount Carmel campus community – Motherhouse and Marian Hall. She went through many changes as technology changed. We went from bookkeeping to accounting with a computer system. All along the way, Georgina Mensen was Marilyn's faithful companion. Marilyn was very protective of her work. It took a long time for Georgina to earn Marilyn's confidence, but she did. Georgina had a very gentle way with Marilyn. She worked in our office until the last software switch. It was a very complex program and we were moving everything to one system. Georgina and Marilyn patiently worked together. Marilyn decided on her own that the new system was too complex, but she still came in daily to meet and visit with Georgina and do odd volunteer tasks in the Treasurer's Office. The friendship that developed between Georgina and Marilyn was really beautiful. As Georgina mentioned, Marilyn was very interested in all of her children and grandchildren and her husband Bob. Marilyn had a quiet presence in the office and made everyone feel better for having known her.

### **Sister Judith Callahan, BVM**

One thing I always appreciated and loved about Marilyn was her sense of humor. She had a somewhat sour looks somethings, but behind that was a suppressed giggle. She was very proud of her students. As a French student in the Novitiate, I loved French class and ended up majoring in it. She followed me over the years, asking about it and encouraging me. She would point me out to other people and say, "There's one of my students. I taught her French in the Novitiate." All through the years, she continued to be supportive. Eventually, I got the Latin American fever and switched to Spanish. Then when I would come back to see her, I would either talk with her in Spanish or destroy the French language. She would act as if she was so disgusted, but she was really suppressing a belly laugh. It was delightful to joke with her and cheer her up. She would say something negative and I would turn it into a joke. She would laugh and say that it was somewhat silly. That's an aspect of her that I learned to appreciate through the years of friendship with her.