



**Wake Stories of Mary Christine (Christophil) Athans, BVM**  
Marian Hall Chapel, Dec. 16, 2019

**Father Joseph Chinnici, OFM, Franciscan School of Theology, University of San Diego** (*Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM*)

My dear Christine, when God called you to live forever on Dec. 7, I am sure in your heart you argued the case in good Jewish fashion: “Aren’t you a day early, Lord? Wait a little while, not long. Can’t it be tomorrow?” This is how I imagined it, anyway; and then an astounding thing occurred: You were silent, being folded into God’s heart.

**Sister Diane Forster, BVM**

As the letter continues, Father Joseph describes his imagination of Mary and Jesus coming to meet Christine. He refers to the prayer that Christine wrote in the last chapter of *In Quest of the Jewish Mary*. He names Christine’s gifts to him in a Jewish formula: “If you had only given me . . . .” He names a gift and writes, “It would have been enough.” The gifts he names are their first meeting, the appreciation he gained for Jewish heritage, her openness to scholarship and commitment as a student, and her being his lifelong friend. I have chosen to read his longer description of their first meeting.

**Father Joseph Chinnici, OFM, Franciscan School of Theology, University of San Diego** (*Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM*)

Lord, if you had only given Chris to me in our first encounter, it would have been enough. Do you remember this, Christine? I was a young professor just returning from Oxford; you were assigned to me because they did not know what to do with you, and we were both Catholic and religious! So you bounced into my office, sat down and began speaking. Forty minutes later, I said, “Could I say something?” That was the beginning. We both survived—eventually.

**Father Michael Sparough, SJ, Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House** (*Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM*)

I first got to know Christine when we both taught at Loyola’s Institute of Pastoral Studies in Chicago. Later when I celebrated Masses for the Sisters at Wright Hall at Loyola University, Christine was often present. When I was missioned here to the Bellarmine Retreat House, Christine came out several times to make individually directed retreats. And then, as you know, in this last year, when it was clear that the cancer could not be stopped, I spoke with Christine several times to discuss her hopes and her fears, her joys and her sorrows. I’ll always be grateful that I was able to visit her at Dubuque.

Christine was an unforgettable woman—a scholar with a real sensitivity to pastoral concerns. She was passionate in her pursuit of inter-religious dialogue, truly believing that Christ’s priestly prayer for unity was our mandate. She was deeply influenced by her study of Judaism and much admired her rabbi mentors. Her last major publication, *In Quest of the Jewish Mary*, was very favorably reviewed and sold well. She was very proud of this work because it represented a lifetime of scholarship integrated with a lively faith and a deep love of Mary. I was delighted that two of the closing meditations in the book emerged from her retreat prayer here at the Bellarmine Retreat House.

Christine was not one to hold her opinions to herself, but one could sense whether she was complaining or praising that she was speaking from a heart that really loved the BVM sisters and was truly in love with our Lord. She was a dedicated BVM sister to her core.

I grew up being taught by the BVM sisters, and it was one of the joys of my later years to call Christine a colleague and a friend. May she rest in peace after a lifetime of loving labor in the Lord's vineyard!

**Heather Angell, Former Student & Friend** (*Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM*)

I first met Sister at the beginning of my senior year at Loyola when she was a newly arrived adjunct professor. I immediately loved her spirit, full smile, and bright red lipstick. Every time I went back to visit Chicago, we went to Mass at Madonna della Strada Chapel and then to her apartment for a lunch of soup and bread, three hours of conversation on everything from feminist theology to memories of her parents: the Greek god and Irish lass. She always welcomed me and was always ready to climb into the foxhole with me to help me discern amid whatever crossroads I was at. She quoted Teilhard de Chardin, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and Blessed Mother as if they were her old friends. There was no end to her knowledge and wisdom. I will forever treasure my nun, especially those long lunches surrounded by her piles of books, breaking bread while she prayed in Hebrew, and then sending me forth with love.

**Sister Paulette Skiba, BVM**

I had the privilege of knowing Christine in a professional atmosphere. We've been roommates at the Catholic Theology Society of America for years. When we began, people wondered if I would ever get a word in. But we could talk late into the night and establish a pattern of phone calls that were also very long. Christine was an historical theologian. Sometimes people would be surprised when I said I was going to these meetings with Christine, because BVMs often thought of her more as an historian. I think that always left her a little disappointed. I'm going to tell you a story of how she was an historical theologian. It was at the CTSA a few years ago. We were having a panel complete with the Sister Sarah Butler who is now totally against women's ordinations. There was a panel of historical theologians debating the ordination of women to the diaconate. The room was full and everyone wanted the last word, but Christine got it. What she said highlights how she was a theologian. "It really doesn't matter," she said. "We could debate what was historical practice here and what was historical practice there forever. We are going to find that it is inconsistent. What is really important is that when you go back to the book of Acts, and they made the decision to call the first deacons, they did it because there was a need, they prayed about it and then they acted. That's what we need to do today."

**Scott Hippert, Friend**

Christine and I go back many, many years. She was a professor of mine at the St. Paul Seminary. I became her student assistant. Later we became wonderful, wonderful friends. It has been an incredible amount of time together. My memories of her go in a lot of different directions, as you can imagine. Most of them have something to do with the speed at which she could talk. I remember sitting in her office. We had to type out her book *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection* in print-ready form. I was sitting there typing it, while she was standing behind me continuing to talk. I thought we would never get through it because I couldn't focus on the book. She was amazing—an amazing and faithful friend. About 21 years ago, I invited Christine to join my mother, my friend Stanley, and me for a Mother's Day dinner. It was a bit of a distance to get to this restaurant. Christine, of course, talked the entire way there, all through dinner (we don't know when she ate dinner), and talked all the way back. We pulled up to her apartment and dropped her off. As soon as she got out of the car, my mother looked over at me and said, "I love her dearly, but don't ever put me through that again." Jump ahead a year. My mother passed away. Christine came to her Minnesota memorial service. At the end of it, she stood up and proudly proclaimed, "I am now his mother." She has claimed others too. Because of that, for the next twenty Mother's Days, Christine and I spent every one together no matter where she was living. Last Mother's Day, I came to Mount Carmel to visit her. It was right after her stroke and she was very feeble at the time, very frustrated at her condition. You will remember this. One of the last things she said as we sat at the table outside of her room was

“I’m going to stick around long enough to vote against Trump.” My final thoughts on Christine is that the President better really watch out now! She was a dear friend. I love her and I will miss her dearly.

### **Sister Carol Spiegel, BVM**

I think Scott is an example of the friendships that Christine had over the years. In 2016, when she moved to Phoenix, I had the privilege helping her move from her apartment. I was overwhelmed by the correspondence that she had with a variety of friends over the years. A real tribute to her! We followed with the road trip to Phoenix. I must tell you it was wonderful. I never felt frustrated by her talking. It was a very peaceful road trip. The only hitch in it was that we got such a late start that we couldn’t stay with Jean Marie Brady, BVM that night in Iowa City; we had to find a motel. The rest of the trip was fine and we did stay with another old friend. I am going to miss her.

### **Patty, Friend**

I am here with my brother Father Rick Banker, my sister Amy and brother-in-law Tom. It is our third visit; we love visiting all of you. We had a fun relationship with Sister Chris that goes back thirty plus years. She was a teacher when she and my brother first met at the University of Illinois. The rest of the family got to know her and love just as much as he did. We’ve spent many Christmases and Easters together. She used to come and join us for Mass. She would always be the last one in so we always save her a seat. She was the busiest woman I ever knew. She always had a calendar that was extremely booked. Rick would be walking up the aisle and she would breeze in right behind him and sit down with us. That is one of my favorite memories. I had to laugh the Saturday that she passed. I heard that she had passed and was on my way to 5 o’clock Mass at my brother’s church. I’m never late to Mass ever, but I was late that day and followed him up the aisle just like she did. I just flew in and sat down. It occurred to me that that was exactly what she would do so many times and I giggled. She was a dear member of our family—Aunt Sister Chris—and we are going to miss her.

### **Sister Colleen McGinnity, BVM**

Several years ago, I met a priest from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. When he learned that I was a BVM, he asked me if I knew Christine. Of course I did. He said, “She was one of my professors in the seminary. For our final, it was an oral exam where we each had fifteen minutes. It didn’t take us long to figure out that if we turned the tables and asked the question, she would fill in the fifteen minutes. (*Shout from the crowd: “It’s true!”*) I have pondered that situation for a while. I thought, *Christine was a smart woman. She knew what they were doing.* I wonder if part of the final exam was what quality of question did they ask her. We will miss you, Christine.

### **Sister Catherine Ornellas, BVM**

I really don’t know Christine that well. However, I met her in Berkley, Calif., when she was studying out there. When she came here, I went up to her and said, “Hello, Christine. Welcome to Mount Carmel.” She called me by name. I couldn’t believe this woman knew me from over 30 years ago. Thanks, Christine, for your love.

### **Sister Karen Conover, BVM, Support Services**

This is a story that has nothing to do with her erudition or her conversational nature. About a month ago, outside my door was a laundry basket with a little note that said, “Red lipstick went through the washer and the dryer. These are the clothes of eleven different people on the floor who have been blessed with an inordinate amount of red lipstick.” There were a few items that we could rescue with lots of washing. However, everyone knew whose lipstick it was that found its way into a pocket and didn’t get out. Of course, the laundry person was very chagrined at the look of those items. Some of the sisters knew when I showed them that a particular article of clothing was irreparable. We didn’t need to say anything; it was obvious whose red lipstick is probably was, so please pray for her in these days.

**David Heimann**

Nicole Sotelo and I met about ten years ago and have been in a ten-year courtship trying to figure things out. Sister Christine was helping us in that process. During her time of spiritual direction with us, we would meet and she would do most of the talking, but were taking our time with things. We thought we would come up and share out memories together.

**Nicole Sotelo**

We have a memory that Father Bill Creed, SJ, from Chicago wanted us to share.

**Father Bill Creed, SJ, Diocese of Rapid City** *(Read by Nicole Sotelo)*

What a great woman! I so much enjoyed her friendship. At first we were acquaintances, then Christine made the seven-month spiritual exercises which I led. Then she was a student in my class on Ignatian spirituality, and finally, she sought my assistance in writing her book on Mary and her Jewish roots, a very well-received and acclaimed publication. I found her to be an amazing woman of faith, an intelligent, creative, courageous, compassionate visionary. She was insistent on naming and strengthening the relationship between Jews and Christians.

**David Heimann**

I could talk about many things the way she was such a connector. When Nicole and I would go to Mass at Madonna della Strada, she would find the president of the University and say, "Do you know Nicole? You need to know Nicole." I thought I would lead with what it was like to be a student of hers. I had her for one class at grad school at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola. The title of the class was something like "The History of Catholicism in America." The first class was about her Greek father and Greek history and philosophy in which she mapped out Plato and Aristotle and the conversation between the two of them. She proceeded through the remainder of the class, when she finally got to American Catholicism, about how most of the church's history is a conversation between Aristotle and Plato. When things get far into the Platonic years and we get into Augustine, then there is a correction and it moves into the Aristotelian. When it gets to Thomas Aquinas and out of whack, it moves back. The class was about that conversation rooted in that Greek philosophy of which she was so perceptive. What I took away from that is the importance of an historian like Sister Christine to know that when things move in the wrong direction, there is always hope, there is always another conversation. We need history and historians to remind us of that. When we are in times of despair, I think of Christine because she reminded me from history that there is always hope.

**Nicole Sotelo**

I knew Sister Christine through David, but she also taught at my high school Xavier in Phoenix. She would keep me abreast of everything happening there when she went back most recently. One of my favorite memories of Christine was when she was telling us about a time when she was in San Francisco that was very difficult time for her. After a particularly difficult day, she went to the chapel where she was and she placed a single rose on the chapel altar and recommitted herself to her vocation to God. I always go to the Mary chapel at my parish in Chicago. Last Sunday after I heard the news of her passing, I prayed there for her. I went again this Sunday and there on the little altar was a single white rose. I thanked God for Sister Christine and her example in my life and her reminder to all of us to continue to recommit ourselves to God as our true love in our lives and to remember God's love in one another. Thank you, Sister Christine, and thank you to the community who helped to bring her to our world and our church.

**Sister Bertha Fox, BVM**

This is another angle of who Christine was. One year I was housesitting while finishing my dissertation at the University of Illinois-Champaign and she was the visiting professor. Neither of us had much money. However, she used to come over to where I was living where there was a nice sunporch on the second floor. We would talk until well after midnight frequently. On Sunday evenings, Uncle John's Pancake House would have all-you-can-eat pancakes for \$1. They bussed students from the dorms over to Uncle John's and we went regularly. We didn't have to eat for a while. That's Christine, too; she liked pancakes and she liked history.

**Sister Jean Beste, BVM**

I went to Christine's anointing. She planned the time and day and invited a lot of people she knew. We all gathered in the room and she is telling us what is going to happen. It took her maybe ten minutes while Father Barta is waiting. Finally, she nods at Father Barta that he can start the ceremony. Obviously, she was in good form at this time. After the anointing, we sat there for 45 minutes. She was asking questions, but she also answered them. Very few of us said anything. That was the first thing that came to my mind when she died. Christine, thank you for your voice.

**Dien, San Diego, Calif.**

I am a friend of Sister Christine and also a friend of BVM sisters. My memories of Sister Christine are many over nineteen years of friendship. She has taught me to claim the Bread of Life, to claim our stories in life, and to give God thanks for them and to bless God and bless other people by sharing them. Sister Christine was one of the many, many people who have come and stayed at my family's house, my parents' house. Their breaking of the bread and sharing continued. My parents are here today. They send their respect and their love. My friends from Minnesota Christian Life Community friends also send their respect and love. When she was with my family in San Diego, there was this bringing to the table her Jewish-Christian dialogue with my father's Buddhist-Christian dialogue and also Irish-Greek American and Vietnamese American to the table. She helped me to see together, to embrace our stories and continue to claim them, to bless God, to give God thanks and to share it with other people through all the ups and downs, all the experiences of life, and to make it more life giving. That is Sister Christine to me.

**Bishop Richard Pates, Retired, Diocese of Des Moines** *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

My heartfelt condolences are extended to all the BVM community on the death of the beloved Christine. She was an enormous blessing from so many perspectives. I will offer a Mass for her and keep her family and community in prayer at this time of loss. May Christine Athans enjoy the fullness of life with the Risen Savior forever.

**Victor Klimoski, Former Colleague, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas** *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

She found her star  
in the way many do—

    half by choice,  
    half by good chance.

Together they lit her path.

And she, ready for adventure,  
grabbed hold of a future  
that would reveal itself

    bit by bit,

as she, with gift, wit, and labor,  
held steady, joy her companion  
even when clouds formed,  
and faith her assurance  
the Mystery would never fail.

Narrator of the past,

    its lessons and clues, she stepped boldly into life, her long perspective hopeful and her stride ever forward, until the time came to fall, with only a little regret, into the generous arms of God.