

Carolyn Farrell, BVM Eulogy
Marian Hall, June 24, 2020

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our sister, Carolyn Farrell, BVM.

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Carolyn Kathleen Farrell was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on Nov. 2, 1934, to James Lester and Catherine Carroll Farrell. She was the oldest of seven children with siblings Dolores, Jim, Margaret, and Tom; Freddy, who died as a child; and John, who died in 2006. Reflecting on her family, Carolyn noted that she was born into “a fine Catholic family” that was an influence on her vocation. “Because of my parents, we just grew up Catholic. We would say the rosary during Lent, after dinner, or in May—it really wasn’t our favorite activity, but since our parents wanted it, that’s what we did.”

Carolyn attended Holy Trinity Elementary School and St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines. She began exploring her vocation during her junior and senior year of high school when, in her words, “a woman’s choice was to become a teacher, social worker, or nurse.” She commented that she didn’t “particularly want to become a nurse,” and for a brief moment thought, “for a little excitement, maybe I could be an airline stewardess.” However, it was because of that notion of adventure that religious life appealed to her, as well as the sisters at the academy who were strong role models. She wrote, “They were good women, they were smart, they were friendly, and they had a sense of community that appealed to me.”

Carolyn entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1953. She received the name Mary Lester upon her reception on March 19, 1954, professed first vows on March 19, 1956, and lived 66 years as a BVM. She taught elementary school at St. Paul in Davenport, Iowa, and later at St. Tarcissus in Chicago, when the racial tensions of the late 60s, the protests against the war in Vietnam, and the whole question of justice and equal treatment of people came to the fore.

Her service as principal at Dubuque’s St. Patrick Elementary School was totally different from her previous experiences, one where the mix of very disadvantaged children and with those of professionals required a new approach. So, in collaboration with her faculty, Carolyn designed the Meet Needs Now program in which students were grouped according to their needs—and it worked! Later when Carolyn reflected on what she learned as an elementary school principal, she attributed her administrative and leadership skills to that experience.

After five years, Carolyn was invited to take the lead for Special Programs and Summer School at Clarke University. She recalled, “I realized I had administrative qualities and enjoyed it. While it was fun to have the freedom to make decisions, one also had to handle the ‘free advice on what to do’ given by others.” It was during this time that Carolyn began her involvement in politics. As her familiarity with the Dubuque community grew, first at St. Pat’s and then at Clarke, Carolyn began to ask, “Where are the women?” She became more involved with civic groups. First she was appointed to the Dubuque Civil Service Commission, and then was selected to serve on the Iowa

2000 Study led by the president of the University of Iowa. Carolyn quipped, “I was the ‘token woman,’ the single woman on the committee that represented Eastern Iowa, Democrats, Catholics, and whatever else.” Subsequently, she was cajoled into running for City Council, and served as mayor in 1980. When running for election, she recounted the Dubuque Radio Show “Sound-Off”, in which people would call in and say, “She looks like a housewife,” and someone else would call and say, “What’s wrong with looking like a housewife?” or “How can any woman with a vow of celibacy wear earrings?” Like so many of her endeavors, Carolyn led the way for women to have a place at the table then and in the future.

In 1982 she left her position at Clarke and other civic duties to serve as BVM Regional Representative from 1982 until 1988. It was a shift she described as moving from “kind of a heavy duty out there in society to serving within the community—the sisters, central administration, president, and the senate.”

It was not surprising that when her term as regional ended, Carolyn would be called on to found the BVM Office for Women’s Issues and serve as its coordinator. She was active in Women-Church Convergence, the BVM Women Network for Women’s Issues, and many other committees and forums dedicated to achieving equal rights for women. A friend commented, “Her commitment to the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and to women’s full participation in the Roman Catholic Church went hand in hand with her commitment to immigrants, racial justice, and human rights.”

However, another call to serve as the interim president at Mundelein College who would work with Loyola University interrupted what she described as a position in which she had the freedom to do some creative work. Reflecting on this move, she commented, “I went there for the sake of the community, because it was a BVM college, and for the sake of women, as it was a women’s college. I really learned that when you’re talking about administration, the higher you go the more involved it is and the more decisions you have to make even after you collect input.” Carolyn remembered the “process was hard for everyone, but the agreement was signed; some things were lost.” But after five years and the work of many, the Ann Ida Gannon, BVM Center for Women and Leadership was established, “capturing the spirit of Mundelein and the BVMs. The center continues to thrive today; it is a testimony of our BVM heritage.”

Carolyn never did anything half-heartedly and in no arena was this more true than her nearly 40 years of living the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In recovery, she knew a “new freedom and a new happiness” and worked tirelessly to share her experience for the benefit of others. She literally saved dozens of lives. Daily, she reached out, encouraging, challenging, listening, accompanying others shackled by addiction, inviting them to lives that were “happy, joyous, and free.”

Carolyn had a remarkable gift to be able to move out and about in an ever-widening world, from Des Moines to Chicago, Dubuque to Beijing, from primary teacher to college president, from mayor to friend and confidant. Similarly, Carolyn moved out and about within the congregation where her love and service were facilitators of the evolution of

the post-Vatican II BVM congregation. In a recent conversation about the future of the congregation, Carolyn quipped, “If they survived us, they can survive anything!”

Even in her retirement in 2007, Carolyn continued to use her keen administrative skills as director of the Roberta Kuhn Center until she decided to “retire again” in 2015. While much of Carolyn’s life seems to be engaging in private schools or public ministry, she served on more than 15 different congregational committees or commissions; as an elected senator three different times and later as mode 3; and as regional representative for two terms.

Whether in internal or external ministry, Carolyn was always nudging women to assume leadership roles and engage in greater involvement in justice activities. As recently as two weeks ago, she emailed an invitation to local BVMs and friends to join an anti-racism rally in Dubuque’s Washington Park.

A friend commented that “one key to Carolyn’s rich and productive life was her on-going openness to learning” and this held true for new technologies. Whether conference calls or faxing, email or Zoom, “each time she embraced the new, not for novelty’s sake but as additional resources to help make a better world. In her last few weeks, it was reported that Carolyn engaged in a private tutorial with a tech savvy and patient intern from the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual to learn the finer points of Zoom, after which she Zoomed with the best of them! Two days before she died, Carolyn participated in a Zoom conference with a group discussing racism.

Theologian Mary Hunt described Carolyn as a “friend’s friend who took her relationships seriously, valuing the many people from all walks of life with whom she interacted. No occasion was too small for Carolyn to send a card, note a birthday, encourage with a call. She was not a glad-handing politician, but a trusted, genuine companion to the many friends, including her family, who were lucky enough to be in her circles. Her signature pins that she wore virtually every day were often gifts from people who shared her stylish, upbeat, hopeful way of living.”

Carolyn lived in hope, believing that life is a process that unfolds, that “keeps on keeping on.” She lived for the day, letting tomorrow take care of itself. She sought God first; she seized every opportunity to live God’s justice and extended it to others, doing so with passion.

While Carolyn left us all too quickly, we know that love goes on among friends. Today we reiterate an Emily Dickinson quote used on Carolyn’s invitation to her Silver Jubilee: “My only sketch, profile of heaven is a large blue sky . . . and in it are all my friends—every one of them.” Carolyn, we thank you for a life well lived.