



Eulogy of Sister Ellen (Rose Evelyn) Morseth, BVM
Caritas Studio, Sept. 29, 2020

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister, Ellen Morseth.

Ellen Elizabeth Morseth was born on Sept. 3, 1942, in Seattle, the first child of Louis and Evelyn (Bulmer) Morseth. Her brother Louis James—Junior as she called him—completed the family. Ellen’s father was born in North Dakota of Norwegian descent and was successfully self-employed in Seattle until his death in 1969. Her mother was born in England, completed her RN degree in Canada and practiced nursing in Seattle for almost 30 years. Junior died in 1994.

Ellen attended St. John Elementary School where Sister Irene of Lourdes Drummond, BVM was her sixth grade teacher. Years later Ellen could still recall “the love of learning she instilled in me that year . . . It was evident that she loved us.” Ellen visited SM Irene many times over her next two years at St. John and throughout her years at Bishop Blanchet High School. “I have no doubt,” she shared, “that the seeds of my own religious vocation were nourished by her example and by the faith which she shared with me during our visits.”

Ellen entered the congregation on July 31, 1960, but left in 1961 due to her parents’ intense disapproval of her desire to be a religious sister. She reentered on July 31, 1962, and received the name Rose Evelyn upon her reception on Feb. 2, 1963. She professed first vows on Feb. 2, 1965, and lived 58 years as a BVM.

Ellen did not let the pain and sorrow of her parents’ rejection keep her from forming life-giving relationships with others. By 1985, Ellen was the only remaining BVM from the Set of 1962, which only deepened her relationship with the Set of 1960 and made Ellen feel “twice blessed.” Many years later, with incredible peace and courage, she was able to reconnect with her mother shortly before Evelyn’s death in 2001. At the time of her Golden Jubilee, Ellen wrote, “My years as a BVM continue to be good and filled. BVM life continues to be . . . the right choice.”

After profession, Ellen earned a bachelor’s degree in English with a theology minor from Mundelein College. Her first mission was to St. Paul in San Francisco where she ministered as an elementary teacher and assistant principal.

An unexpected call from BVM President Joan Keleher Doyle in the spring of 1976 presented Ellen with an opportunity she could not refuse. She returned to Dubuque to serve as personal secretary for Joan’s second term. It was during that term that Joan also was president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. “[Those] four years . . . were full of learning experiences,” wrote Ellen. “[They] also helped me clarify my future direction in ministry.”

After completing a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Emmanuel College in Boston, Ellen served as the first pastoral minister at St. Catherine Parish in Fairview, Mont. Besides training liturgical ministers, she was instrumental in the implementation of *RENEW*, a three-year parish renewal program. A parishioner shared, “[Sister Ellen] had many obstacles to overcome, but she persevered . . . [She] had a way of asking that was so gentle, you wouldn’t want to say no—and we usually didn’t!”

In 1984, Ellen and BVM Deanna Carr were the first women named as pastoral administrators in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Mont. Ellen was assigned to St. Joseph Parish in Big Timber, and St. Joseph Mission in Reed Point, while Deanna served Sts. Cyril & Methodius Parish in Stockett. Ellen and Deanna became good friends during these years and were a great support to one another. During her time in Big Timber, Ellen built a sense of community and empowered leadership among the people by developing an active pastoral council, enhancing the liturgy and providing ongoing education that emphasized the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

In 1988, Ellen was named coordinator of leadership development at the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry. In this role, she supported existing parish councils and staff and promoted *New Wine*, a diocesan lay ministry formation certification program. "The opportunity to be involved in empowering and affirming persons to share more fully in the church's work in the parish neighborhood is personally challenging and fulfilling," she commented.

Concurrently, Ellen was invited to join a national advisory panel for a Lilly Endowment-funded study of the relationship between spirituality and leadership on church boards and councils within 19 different denominations. This panel laid the foundation for what was perhaps Ellen's most significant ministry—practical ecumenism. She teamed with Rev. Charles Olsen, a Presbyterian minister, and together in 1995 they founded Worshipful-Work, a Center of Transforming Religious Leadership.

The study Ellen had been part of identified both a hunger for spiritual growth opportunities among individuals on parish committees, councils, and boards, and a shortage of persons willing to serve in those roles. Worshipful-Work was an ecumenical group that addressed both of these issues via the integration of spirituality and administration. When conducted in the context of worship, meetings became prayers—truly worshipful-work. "If we're not focused on God," Ellen commented, "there is definitely something amiss."

During her seven years at Worshipful-Work, Ellen offered seminars, conferences, and workshops, led retreats, provided spiritual discernment sessions, and authored a number of books, handbooks, and guidebooks about transforming religious leadership. Traveling across the United States and in Canada, Ellen proved to be adept and creative in facilitating church leaders of all denominations through a process of discerning the Spirit's voice as guide to addressing leadership needs in their ministries. She also led BVM discernment processes on several occasions.

Her effectiveness in this ministry is apparent in the feedback she received. From a Methodist minister in Nebraska: "Your visit with us as a spiritual leader was a most welcome gift . . . Your quiet strength and presence was calming as well as strengthening." From a Catholic priest in Massachusetts: "What a gift your ministry has been . . . You have empowered our church to more fully participate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst." From a member of the Worshipful-Work's Board of Discerning Overseers: "Indeed, we especially thank God for calling Ellen, our 'beloved sister,' to this ministry and equipping her for such effective service on behalf of the whole Church." After leaving Worshipful-Work, Ellen continued her ministry as a self-employed leadership consultant.

Ellen was a resilient woman of deep faith who peacefully accepted the hardships and challenges in her life. She was stalwart, conscientious, and dedicated with a very thorough, analytical approach. At the same time, she had a good sense of humor, common sense, and was mindful of how decisions affected the lives of others. She was a firm believer in building relationships while completing tasks, and preferred consensus decision-making whenever possible. She was a welcoming spirit with a listening heart who truly cared about others.

"I know that God has given me many gifts," Ellen wrote, "and a desire to use them well for the good of others in my lifetime." Indeed, Ellen worked tirelessly as one of those "given by Christ to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain the *unity of faith* and knowledge of the Son of God to maturity" (Ephesians 4:11-13). Well done, Ellen, well done. Rest now in peace.