



Eulogy of Sister Jean M. (Jean Francis) Byrne, BVM

Caritas Studio, Oct. 1, 2020

Good morning! It is a joy to be together virtually to celebrate the life of our Sister Jean Byrne. Friday the 13th of November 1925, ended with the birth in Chicago of Doreen Margaret Byrne. The doctor indicated to her mother that he could record the birth date as the 14th if she desired, but she cheerfully demurred. ‘Reen joined her brother Cliff as the only children of Frank and Anne (MacLellan) Byrne. She never knew her father. Her mother was born in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada, and crossed the border as a young woman seeking employment. She remained undocumented throughout her life.

Raised by a single mother during the Depression, ‘Reen became self-reliant. She attended St. Callistus Grade School, and wrote later, “The school was staffed largely by very young BVMs who liked each other very much and had a lot of fun although their living conditions were very primitive. . . I am certain that their dedication and appreciation of each other were a major factor in my entering the BVM Congregation.”

Already in first grade, Jean was perceptive. She wrote that her BVM teacher “sold us sections of nickel *Milky Way* candy bars, cut into sixths. I was no math wizard, but I knew profiteering when I saw it, and figured that the Sisters must be very poor to do that to gain a penny.”

She attended St. Mary High School, and was one of 10 graduates of the Class of 1943 who entered the BVM congregation. Her sponsor was Sister Ann Davida Buser.

Jean was received into the congregation on March 19, 1944, and received the name Jean Francis. She professed first vows on March 19, 1946, and final vows on August 15, 1951. She lived 77 years as a BVM.

Her first mission was to St. Francis Xavier in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where she learned more about poverty. The sisters “lived in a dorm with a side wall that had buckled some years before and was held in place with buttresses and bolts. We were never quite sure that we wouldn’t awaken one morning with nothing between us and the street, like a doll’s house with a removable wall . . . One night we were at recreation and noticed how clean the window was. What had happened was that the glass had slid out of the rotted window frame so nothing obscured our view of the night sky. I’m glad I started out there.” Jean taught in Chicago at St. Gertrude, St. Bridget, Holy Family and Our Lady of Lourdes. She also tutored a community of Mexican sisters learning English. An assignment to St. Joseph’s in Butte, Mo., fulfilled a dream.

After a summer teaching at all-black Miles College in Birmingham, Ala., Jean began a 26-year tenure as a high school educator at St. Joseph Academy and Dowling High School in Des Moines and West Des Moines, respectively. She chaired the history department for many of those years. Her passion and gift was as a stimulating, creative teacher. She introduced courses such as Asian History and Communism,

with high expectations of her students. She also made learning fun, and had an endless supply of little-known stories and quirky details.

Always a voracious reader and life-long learner, she sought grants for summer study. When she received information about a month-long study tour of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s, Jean took a second job for a year supervising students cleaning the school in order to pay for the trip.

That marvelous experience became the impetus to write her own textbook on communism because she could find nothing suitable. In the foreword, she noted she was including readings of widely varying positions, because “the only way to arrive at truth is to study the alternatives and make a decision.” Always, her goal was to get students engaged, vigorously debate one another, develop critical thinking skills, and become independent thinkers while reaching clarity about their own value system. For her text, *Inside an Enigma: A Study of Communism*, Jean received the Valley Forge Teachers Medal Award. A former student wrote, “You cannot believe how much your class has helped me. In all my classes, communism is discussed constantly—and sometimes I am the most informed person there.” Jean was also the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship to study at China’s Beijing University in the summer of 1983.

After 47 years in the classroom, Jean moved to Dubuque in 1993, and spent the next two decades volunteering. She taught history for more than 15 years at Roberta Kuhn Center, inventing new courses because many of her devoted students signed up for her classes year after year. She managed the BVM Personnel Office, and did research in the Mount Carmel Archives. For 16 years, she wrote Archival Clips for *BVM Center News*, covering 125 topics! An excellent, lively writer, she also authored articles for *SALT*.

Jean had many talents: an excellent cook, a plant lover who had a way with African violets, speaking to them tenderly. Family history was a delight, especially when she was finally able to meet her cousins in Nova Scotia and make several visits there, forging lasting bonds of friendship.

Jean was practical and direct, decisive, no-fuss and totally without pretense. She never complained, and was blessed with a marvelous sense of humor and deep peace. She had a special radar for those struggling in any way, especially those thirsting for knowledge. It was important to her that no youngster be afraid of her or of learning. Today’s Gospel, Matthew 25, was her lodestar.

“Your wit and wisdom were always inspiring,” wrote a former colleague. “You are a genuine woman of substance.” This wit and wisdom did not fail her in these past years, as she moved to Caritas Center and engaged in loving repartee with staff, along with singing whenever the spirit moved her, and sharing her lifelong love of cats. Staff brightened her days immeasurably with their loving care.

Lighthouses held a special attraction for her—signs of her maternal geographic roots along the rugged, Atlantic seacoast of eastern Canada. But it was their essence that spoke to her—that lighthouses never hurt anyone. Their sole purpose is to illumine, to guide, to prevent harm and lead to safe harbor. For many of us, Jean herself was a lighthouse whose only purpose was to do good—a tower of learning who scanned the horizon and shared beams of truth and love in a world filled with shoals.

One of her favorite hymns was “Amazing Grace,” the story of a slave trader who “once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” She, who helped so many to see—the scope and complexities of our society, our own congregational history—now herself sees the face of God, who is all light. She is now enfolded into that divine radiance.

We give thanks for the illumination that Jean so generously shared. May the glow of that light continue to guide us to our safe, eternal shore.