



## **Sharing of Memories of Theresa (Grace Michele) McNerney, BVM** Caritas Studio, Dec. 3, 2020

### **Barbara Gaul, BVM**

Theresa loved life. She lived her life trying to make life better for others. Others, for her, included much of the world. When Theresa saw injustice, she said and did something about it. So many people have said, "She told it like it is." Recently, someone asked what she would like for a birthday gift. Recalling John Lewis, she said she would like a button to wear that said, "Make Good Trouble." Among her involvements were the BVM Social Justice Network, the Hispanic Ministry Network, and the BVM Network for Women's Issues. She also marched for the United Farm Workers and participated in demonstrations at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga. She also participated in the 20th anniversary observance of the women martyrs in El Salvador.

During the 1980s, her spirituality was enriched through participation in the Master's Program of Feminist Spirituality, held on weekends at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. Theresa loved to visit her relatives in the Seattle area and in Saratoga, Calif., and my relatives, too, who welcomed her as part of the family.

She loved to explore the world. Some examples include: camping on beaches in Southern California and campgrounds in Europe; studying Spanish in Mexico; volunteering at Nuevo Mundo in Guayaquil, Ecuador; and cruising on the Volga River in Russia with her brother and sister-in-law.

She said she took Spanish I thirty times, but she communicated well with first grade children in Los Angeles, whose primary language was Spanish. For several years, she taught English language skills to Spanish speaking adults in a one-on-one program in Cicero, Ill.

She was an ombudsperson—an advocate for the elderly living in nursing homes in Orange County, Calif., and later in the western suburbs of Chicago. She also regularly called several BVM friends after they had moved to Marian Hall, until they were no longer able to talk on the phone. She became an adopted daughter, as well as friend, to my mother in the last years of her life.

Theresa enjoyed cooking and inviting guests for dinner. Frequently for prayer at the beginning of a meal she would call attention to the fact that Eucharist meant Jesus was sharing a meal, and his life, with his friends, and indeed we were celebrating Eucharist in our gathering together for a meal. In her later years, as she met increasing health challenges, Theresa continued to love life, and in spite of limitations and pain, tried to communicate this love of life to those whom she encountered.

At Mount Carmel, before isolation due to COVID-19 became necessary, she would call out a greeting to just about every person passing by her doorway and would frequently invite the person in to visit. Theresa laughed when she would tell someone she had chosen "When the Saints Go Marching In" for her funeral liturgy. So go on marching in now, Theresa, and rest in peace and joy.

### **Mary Jean Ferry, BVM**

I lived with Theresa all together about 17 years. Four phrases that describe Theresa for us are: risk taker, creative, speaking out for justice, and generous. I often call Theresa "Gracie" because when I first lived with her at St.

Francis Grade School in Phoenix, her name was Grace Michele. At that time, we all called her “Gracie” So Gracie, is still my name for her.

In Phoenix, Theresa was a most creative teacher. I remember how she made the ceiling of her classroom into a model of the solar system with the sun and planets floating above her students. Mary Frances Clarke encouraged us to pay attention to the poorest little ones. This is exactly how Theresa taught. Recently, she was in touch with a former student named Tom, whom she taught about 64 years ago. Tom still remembers how Theresa was always there for him.

Theresa was a courageous risk-taker. When a situation was a matter of justice, Gracie would be there speaking out for what was right. One Sunday afternoon when the school was quiet about one dozen heavy duty cars took over our playground. Gang members with tattoos and bandanas gathered on the porch of the school. Theresa was not intimidated by them; she was amazing and fearless. Without hesitation, she marched over to the gang meeting and asked, “What are you doing here?” Gracie found out that one of the gang members had been shot. The meeting was about how the gang would retaliate to the killing. Theresa left the meeting telling them that they could stay but, next time, they should ask for permission to gather at the school.

I am so grateful for Theresa and all she has been for our sisters. Generous is a word that describes both Theresa and Barbara. No matter the distance or the time, whenever a BVM in Southern California had a problem of any kind Theresa and Barbara would be right there to help. I remember one night I was alone with one of our sisters who was dying in a hospital far away from where Theresa and Barbara lived. It was late at night. All of a sudden into the waiting room walked Barbara and Theresa. They stayed and spent the night with me and the sister who was dying. Their presence brought the sister and myself the support of our BVM Community.

Theresa is known as woman who spoke out strongly for justice. Whenever any situation was not just, Theresa would speak out strongly to make things right. A few months ago, Mary Ann Zollmann stopped by Theresa’s room. She told Theresa that she felt that she was a mover and shaker. Theresa was so very proud and happy to be called “a mover and a shaker,” for that is what she was. Theresa, we give thanks for all that you still are for us. Please keep moving and shaking us to work for justice. We love you and give thanks for all that you did to help others.

### **Patricia Bombard, BVM**

Theresa, and her good friend, Barbara, have been a very special gift in my life from my early days as a BVM. When I was still finding my way toward belonging in the BVM Community, they freely spoke of their faith, beliefs, and values with me at a meeting, and encouraged me—promising to be companions on the journey. This continued during many annual meetings, and even a short stay at their home in Southern California during my final vow preparation year.

Barbara recently said it was Theresa who inspired their practice of visiting the sick, and in 2003, one of those people became my mother, Peggy, who during her recovery from a stroke had fallen and broken her hip at her home in San Diego. Living near Chicago, I could not always visit my mother, but Theresa and Barbara did, even helping her celebrate her 80th birthday.

But then, the gift grew even more special, as shortly after my mother died in 2005, Theresa and Barbara moved here, to live only five minutes away. What a grace! An ongoing connection with some of the few BVMs who knew my mother. That connection turned into frequent dinners, birthday celebrations, and nights of game playing. One of those games, Rack-O, includes those cards you can draw that will ruin another player’s best-laid plans. Theresa always played fair and really struggled with the choice of whose rack she would ruin—at the same time taking great delight in her own growing chance to be a winner. Thank you for it all, Theresa!

### **Deanna Myer, niece**

Theresa has been a very, very dear family member to me. She was a big part of our family. Family meant a huge amount to Theresa. Along with family, she shared the BVM Community with me. I shouldn't sound sad, for I am thankful for all she shared. She shared her spirituality, her experience, and relationship with God with me. With family, she was the family member who lived far away and still the hub of the family. When she came to town, we all gathered—her brothers and sisters and their families, cousins, aunts and uncles. Barbara would come along accompanying her and became a part of our family. That means a lot to everyone. When they came to town, I had the privilege of driving them many times. Through that I got to know my family members much better because I went with them to visit. She really brought my experience of family to much greater heights.

Sharing her BVM Community with me meant everything in the world to me, and still does. I spent three summers at Assumption with the programs she ran. All of the sisters there I loved. I don't have a ton of friends on Facebook, still I put on my Facebook page, "Please pray for Theresa. She is having a hard time. She has been sick." What I found out was that all of these people knew Theresa. She came to Colorado when I lived there and got to know the other teachers. When I was at Assumption I had a friend there and one who came to visit. Just one way or another, all of my friends knew her. She is a very integral part of my life and will continue to be.

When I went to a woman's conference a few years ago, I was ready to become an Associate, but Seattle is not that close. I appreciate so much. After hearing about Mount Carmel for so many years, it was wonderful to go visit there and see all that I had heard about and meet so many people, especially to meet some of the people I knew from Assumption. She expanded my life in so many ways.

I asked her one time with the sickness and pain she has had, "Where do you find your joy?" She said, "With people. It's all about people." She had such a wide array of people who mattered to her and her to them. My cousin Adele's grandchildren sent a birthday greeting to Theresa. The three little ones said, "Happy Birthday, Aunt Theresa. Thank you because you help those without a voice to be heard." Another one said, "You take action where it is needed." These were the things that meant so much.

She loved deeply. She was so sensitive to everyone around her. She talked strong and felt gently. That was very, very special. I am very thankful for my relationship with her and her relationship with me and her love for me. She knew me well enough to know my faults, but it was all good. I appreciate that so much.

*(Note: Deanna lost her father, Theresa's brother Thomas, on Dec. 2, 2020, the day before this Sharing of Memories. We offer her and the McNerney family our condolences and prayers.)*

### **Kathleen Conway, BVM**

In 2006, when Barbara Gaul was elected a Congregational Representative, she and Theresa made the very difficult decision to move back to the Midwest and leave their warm palms and move up to our oaks in Brookfield, Ill., in winter. As they were looking for a house to live in, one of Theresa's stipulations was that it would be a house close to a major medical center. Here in Brookfield we do live very close to Loyola Medical Center. Fortunately, Barbara and Theresa found a house here. When they moved in, they became our nearest neighbors. You heard some of the story already. During those 14 years, we had multiple opportunities to play and pray and celebrate with Barbara and Theresa, and it has been a joy.

The story I really want to share today is how I first met Theresa. She was the principal at Assumption Grade School, as you have heard. Assumption is in East Los Angeles and largely an Hispanic neighborhood. Most of her students spoke Spanish as their first language. Theresa, in her efficient and creative way, created a win-win situation. She invited BVMs from all over the country to come and teach English as a second language to her students in the morning, which we did. As a perk, we got to take Spanish classes in the afternoon. I think BVM Theresa Marie Gleeson was primarily our teacher. In addition to the classroom teaching, we also were paired up with person from the neighborhood. I remember walking around and talking to a native speaker. We talked about her family and her culture and the food in the area. It was a wonderful experience for me.

Theresa, with her creativity, had designed a win-win for everybody. The students had the chance to learn English and we had a chance to learn Spanish. She gave me in that program a very firm foundation to go on and live for a short time in Guatemala and later for a much longer time in Ecuador, while feeling very secure in my ability to speak in Spanish.

I credit Theresa for getting me on the path of my own journey that has been both meaningful and successful for me. I thank you, Theresa, for your life, your creativity, your energy, your strength, and mostly I thank you for the way you modeled the core values of justice and education for us.

### **Joellen McCarthy, BVM**

When I reflect on Theresa's life, the memories that come to me are her generosity, her delight in being with people, her honesty, and her energy to engage with the BVM Community.

Theresa's generosity touched me in multiple ways. She demonstrated for me the aspect of friendship that goes the extra mile when the opportunity presented itself. In the years when I lived in Nicaragua, in my visits back to the United States, or returning to Nicaragua, I traveled through Los Angeles. No matter the time of day, Theresa and Barbara were readily available to meet me at the Los Angeles airport or to get me there to return. I saw Theresa's generosity extended to many other BVMs, especially those who were somewhat isolated from the congregation.

Theresa truly loved to be with people. When she had the energy, she was the one organizing the gathering of people. I could only imagine the deprivation Theresa felt in these last months when she was so limited in the opportunity to interact with people.

I experienced Theresa as a very honest person. She did not waste energy pretending to be someone other than who she was. I saw this honesty evident in her life in the clarity and courage with which she faced the last weeks of her life.

And then lastly, Theresa had inexhaustible energy to engage with the BVM Community and the activities associated with our life together. When she lived in California, she often was present for events that took place in Dubuque or Chicago. Her love of the community was remarkable.

I truly feel blessed to have had Theresa as a friend.

### **Diane Eastman, niece**

Aunt Theresa lived an intentional life and enjoyed every minute. I was one of the lucky ones to have her in my life. Growing up, she was a special guest in our home whenever she came to town. Theresa joined in all the outdoor fun—the flowing layers of her habit did not deter her. I can also recall many lively discussions with our dad, Theresa's brother, as they often were on opposite political sides. It was a good lesson to us kids that we can agree to disagree in a loving, respectful manner.

During Theresa's time in Los Angeles, I spent a summer helping in the summer school program. I had the opportunity to see Theresa in action with the children, their families and the greater community. I marveled at her ability to connect with everyone on such a basic human level. And her Spanish was effortless. What a gift she was!

The past few years, my sister and I and our spouses flew from Seattle each year in May to spend time with Theresa and Barbara. We planned baseball games, the architectural boat tour, and other touristy adventures. It was something to which we all looked forward. This year, regretfully, our plans were canceled. We were all so disappointed.

As we all know, Theresa was very social and loved nothing better than to chat with you and find out about what is going on in your life. She was a caring and sympathetic ear. However, she did not spare her advice! I will miss her dearly and keep her close in my heart always.

#### **Karen and Ron Corbin, niece**

I would just like to say what a wonderful person my Aunt Theresa was. I have nothing but fond memories of her. She was a strong human being and was not afraid to stand up for what she believed was right and always tried to help those in need. I can remember her always coming to our family gatherings and getting right in there for baseball games, volleyball, and other games we would have at our summer picnics and family get-togethers.

She had a great loyalty to her family, always taking care of them without being asked. I had the utmost respect for her being a nun. I always felt I had an "in" with the Lord through her and was very proud through all of my life to have a nun as an aunt. I will miss her dearly, but I know she will not suffer anymore and she and the other members of her family are having a picnic and enjoying each other. We love you, Aunt Theresa!

#### **Adele Kennedy, niece**

To me, my Aunt Theresa was a superhero. Clothed in black, with an alias, Sister Grace Michele, she helped the "underdogs." She did give a little hint to her identity by taking the name of her parents, Michael and Grace, which I thought was cool.

When she would come to town, friends and relatives would come out of the woodwork to celebrate her visit, there was always a party. Even after she dropped her "costume" and revealed her identity, she used her powers for good. To quote my granddaughter, "She stood up for people that don't have any voice."

She liked to fish. When we went salmon fishing, the three sisters on the trip caught fish; no one else did. She gave me "birthday spankings" on my sixth birthday. I was mad at her for a while after that. I will miss talking to her; she had so much knowledge to share, so much kindness, so much spunk!

She loved to argue. I think my dad would claim an opposite view just to rile her up. We would talk for hours about everything and about nothing. I looked forward to our visits. She was always there for me growing up. At times, I felt she knew me better than I knew myself. I took the name Theresa at my confirmation and always wished I had her dimple. She will always be a part of me.

#### **Máire and John Hourigan family, friends, Cork, Ireland**

Theresa, your earthly journey 1932-2020

Created cherished memories of which there are plenty

Your kindness and big heart, oh what treasure

Your Irish wit and sense of humour so big in measure

You regaled us with stories and entertained swell

Orange County barbecues, we ate so well!

We enjoyed your fun and zest for life

Even when you had some strife

Your compassion, your loyalty, your friendship supreme

Theresa, one-of-a-kind, a unique human being

You have been called home, your earthly task complete

Free of suffering and pain, spiritually replete

I know one day we will meet again

Of that I am certain, it's a win-win

We'll hug and catch up and yap like before  
Your divine sparkle will illuminate once more

From your Irish friends in Cork. Love always.

### **Teresa Tanner Tiffany**

I have a multitude of fond memories of my years with Sr. Theresa McNerney. She was my sixth grade teacher at St. Francis Xavier in Phoenix, and my first principal as an educator at Assumption in East Los Angeles. A memory that truly brings a laugh and smile to my heart was the day in the year of 1979 when she set off the fire alarm only to get me and my classroom out in the schoolyard where the rest of the school and staff were waiting to throw me a baby shower. I had no idea. Theresa was clever, thoughtful, and truly filled with surprises!

### **Gwen Farry, BVM**

My earliest memories of Theresa are of summer school in the late 1950s and early 1960s at San Diego College for Women, now USD. She often hosted "study sessions" in her room. Then, she was changed to Holy Redeemer, Montrose, to teach fifth grade, where I taught fourth grade.

Theresa was known for standing up for those she felt were being treated unjustly. This made for some interesting faculty meetings and parent-teacher meetings, as well as for some misunderstandings. But more than that, Theresa was known for her kind and generous heart. I personally experienced her kindness during the fall of 1966 when my mother was dying in a Los Angeles nursing home. Fortunately, I was able to visit my mother almost every day after school. Several times Theresa offered to come with me and, during the last week, made custard for her when eating became difficult. I will always remember Theresa's kindness with gratitude.

### **Theresa Marie Gleeson, BVM**

Theresa McNerney was my principal at Assumption School in Los Angeles for only one year, but her generous spirit and excellence at what she did was very evident. Theresa was a fun and loving person and I am grateful for having had her in my life.

### **Katherine Heffernan, BVM**

With the passing of Theresa, I have lost a much beloved relative—my cousin Theresa. Yes, I think, yes, my cousin!! We both *thought* we were cousins. We both called each other cousin, but neither of us checked it out officially. Theresa's grandmother was also a Heffernan. It would be very difficult to find any records from the mid-1800s in Ireland. The main documents at that time were the baptismal records and many of the churches were burned down. But it was all right with the two of us! My Grandfather Heffernan died when my father was 9 years old. Theresa's grandmother was gone a very long time also. Besides, Theresa and I were satisfied just the way things were. We liked being self-proclaimed, unverified cousins. I'm certain that our two Heffernan grandparents have it all checked out by now. I'll wait down here until Theresa can Zoom the info to me.

### **Carol Cook, BVM**

My memory of the details has faded but I can clearly see Theresa at an early School of the Americas (SOA) gathering. She has moved to the front of the group and is speaking just after a Jesuit has read a long statement about Jesuit values of justice and explained how they, after years of nonparticipation with the SOA, would join with their own style of prayer and actions. Theresa is speaking the truth to what many of us are thinking. Our communities have joined together without the need for long statements. Why do we need to listen to the Jesuits who have their own plans? I so admired Theresa for speaking up.

### **Mary Ann Fremgen, former BVM**

In thinking about Theresa, I realized we lived and taught together at Our Lady of the Angels (OLA) in Chicago, my first mission, 1968-1969. OLA was a very large house at a time of much change in the community, so we found

time to share some of the humor in the situation. Our paths crossed again when I was in Colorado and we were both in Region I and then when we were in the "Thrivers Group."

After many years apart, we connected again when Theresa came to Mount Carmel and liked visiting with my dog Bronx. Theresa loved those visits and would tell the staff how Bronx would lay down on her lap and kiss her. This brought joy to her during those months and an opportunity to talk about our past. Those were happy times for both of us. Theresa, I'm glad Bronx could bring you some happiness. Hopefully you're playing with your dogs in doggie heaven.

**Carol Spiegel, BVM**

Theresa showed resilience and enjoyment of life, even though she must have suffered from her health challenges; she was fun to be around. While admiring her exuberance, I've often been aware that she had years of ministry before moving to Chicago. She must have influenced and changed the lives of many. May Theresa's faithfulness now lead her to endless joy and love.

**Rose Mary Meyer, BVM**

Theresa was welcoming and generous. When I was in the Women's Office, she and Barbara invited me to California to speak to BVMs in the area. I stayed with Theresa and Barbara and experienced their gracious hospitality. We have stayed in touch through the years.

**Rose Marie Lorentzen, BVM**

When I hear the phrase, "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted," I think of Theresa. She was such a feisty woman! She sought truth boldly, rejecting easy answers and half-truths. She railed against injustice while working relentlessly in pursuit of justice and peace for our country and our world. As an advocate for those in nursing homes and, later, for her sisters and staff at Mount Carmel Bluffs, she spoke out on behalf of other's needs.

Yet she was equally blessed with the gentle gift of tears-tears shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, or the loss of all they held dear. And always her hand and her heart reached out to comfort the afflicted and to transform their fears into hope, their tears into joy. Rest in God's love and in our love, Theresa. Rest in power!