



Eulogy of Sister Helen Marie Macatee, BVM

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, April 27, 2021

Good morning. It is good for us to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Helen Marie Macatee.

Mary Grace Virginia Macatee was born on Sept. 11, 1927, in Hollywood, Calif. She was the eighth of 10 children, three boys and seven girls, born to Claude Ignatius and Helen Adele Schmitz. Virginia recalled growing up in a “nice, American home.”

Even though her father was frequently without work during the Depression, her mother managed to keep them fed. They were also blessed to have an aunt and uncle in Texas who were able to assist the family. Through their generosity, the oldest brother, Claude, and oldest sister, Rose Marie, were able to attend private high school in California. However, great sadness visited the family when the middle brother, Robert, who quit high school to join the Merchant Marines during World War II, died in China in 1946.

While some of the Macatee children remained in California, others made homes in Colorado, Hawaii, and Alaska. On a trip to visit her sister Patricia in Anchorage, Alaska, Virginia was blessed with the opportunity to visit Denali National Park. Anchorage is also the home of Leonard, the youngest and last surviving sibling.

Virginia completed both her elementary and secondary education at Holy Family in Glendale, Calif. After graduation, she attended Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles for one year and worked briefly as a file clerk before she answered the call to religious life. She entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1947, and received the name Helen Marie upon her reception on March 19, 1948. She professed first vows on March 19, 1950, and lived 73 years as a BVM. In 1960, she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics and history at Mundelein College in Chicago.

Helen taught in elementary schools for 32 years. She was missioned at St. Callistus and Our Lady Help of Christians in Chicago; Sacred Heart in Fort Dodge, Iowa; Our Lady of Loretto in Hempstead, N.Y.; St. Thomas Apostle in West Hempstead, N.Y.; All Saints in Tucson, Ariz.; St. Francis Xavier in Phoenix; St. Charles in North Hollywood, Calif.; St. Anne in Santa Ana, Calif.; and St. Francis Xavier in St. Louis where she taught mathematics and computer sciences. She was an excellent teacher, very strict, but also very enthusiastic, effective, adored by her students, and recognized by administration as “one of our highly gifted teachers.”

Helen loved sports and was quite the athlete. She proved to be a fabulous basketball player in high school. Years later, she coached a volleyball team in the St. Louis Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) league to win the championship. Along with most of her family, Helen was blessed with artistic talent. Her artistic expression produced simple, yet lovely, pencil sketches of people that beautifully captured their faces, especially their eyes.

Through the BVM Third World program, Helen and Sister Mary Ellen Caldwell spent the summer of 1983 ministering to children in Kenya. Helen returned that fall to teach at Hayes Catholic Elementary School in Muscatine, Iowa. However, her summer experience sparked a desire to return to Africa—this time to Zimbabwe—where she ministered for two years teaching girls at two different mission schools. She arrived only a few years after Zimbabwe gained its independence from the United Kingdom. She recalled a great divide between the

British and the native people evident in the homes, cars, and dress. But she mostly remembered that the people were so very friendly.

During her first year in Zimbabwe, Helen taught elementary classes at Mount St Mary's Mission in Wedza. She immediately felt at ease with her African colleagues and quickly embraced the concerns of the mission communities—the lack of supplies, textbooks being foremost, to which the BVM community generously responded. Her students took to her at once. They knew that Helen loved them and was concerned about their progress. They sought her help relentlessly, even late into the evening. Yet, she carved out time to have a little fun with her students. Using BVM-donated equipment, Helen taught them how to play the sports she so loved. Her supervisor commented that there were “only smiles and cheerful teasing on all sides.”

During her second year, she was assigned to teach secondary classes at Assisi Mission in Chivhu. It was a challenging year for Helen, who felt unprepared to teach at that level and who was troubled by the violence in the area. She returned to the States after that year. Although the end of her African mission was disappointing, Helen loved the experience and focused on remembering the good times. She had so many good stories and she would light up every time she shared one. Part of her always desired to someday revisit Africa.

After returning, Helen lived in St. Louis, Mo.; St. Paul, Minn.; Rock Island, Ill., before moving to Dubuque, Iowa, to minister at Marian Hall as a nurse and a driver. Later, she lived in San Jose, Calif., and Wright Hall in Chicago, before returning to make Mount Carmel her final home. As long as she was able, Helen remained an avid and diverse reader and loved to indulge in long walks. She enjoyed computer puzzles, card games, and Scrabble. Many afternoons she popped into staff offices en route to the computer for a quick chat or to share a story.

Helen was a very private and quiet person who at times struggled with self-esteem. Yet, she was more than happy to be interviewed in 2016 for the oral history collection, though details eluded her at times. One poignant story was about a speech class that Helen took at Immaculate Heart College seven decades earlier. When it came time to for Helen to give her first speech, she said one line before drawing a blank. While some classmates began to laugh, Helen drew herself up and began to recite Edgar Allen Poe's “Annabelle Lee” verbatim. The interviewer wrote, “It was like being in that 1946 classroom as Helen straightened up and in a clear voice recited the entire poem flawlessly. An impressive performance.”

Gratitude was an integral part of Helen Marie. She was grateful for her life as a BVM. Even in the last months when she rarely spoke, she always said “Thank you.” She also was appreciative for the times of prayer and reflection Mount Carmel provided. In Psalm 63, the psalmist prayed, “O God, you are my God – it is you I seek! For you my body yearns; for you my soul thirst like a land parched, lifeless, and without water” (Psalm 63:2).

How wonderful that Helen's thirst has been satisfied during this holy season of Easter! How wonderful that she is reunited with her parents, deceased siblings, and friends! How wonderful her joy! Alleluia!