



Sharing of Memories of Cora Keegan, BVM Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 2, 2021

Judith Callahan, BVM

As a novice who joined the junior novice set of 1958 in January, Cora was a whirlwind of activity. She walked with the speed of light everywhere she went. She was so quick to do her serving jobs, her "duties," and was solicitous to do her "duty" quickly and completely.

Her experience in Dubuque upon retirement is highlighted by her very solicitous care for and advice for sisters with any kind of physical ailment. Cora accompanied many sisters to doctor visits, and her reputation for holding doctors and nurses to professional and complete account to questions, conditions, etc., is folklore at the medical facilities. With doctors she was a *force*!

She fielded countless questions and concerns of sisters facing serious or not-so-serious conditions before doctor visits, during treatment and recovery, insisting that they follow medical protocols. She knew the right questions to ask and could explain it in no uncertain terms! Many a BVM patient hoped that she would be their advocate and companion as they dealt with difficult physical disabilities and pain.

Classic is the case with Carmel Zserdin, who came to the Caritas Center with two broken arms! Cora shared with her practical advice and tips, like how to scratch your nose, how to get out of a chair, etc. Being extremely gregarious and hospitable, Carm, on arrival to her bedroom was quickly filled to the wallpaper with friends and staff wishing her well. Cora flushed them all out unceremoniously so that the nurses could do their thing!

As challenging and direct as she could be with doctors and nurses in medical facilities, it would be thought that her own personal medical needs (broken bones, crippling arthritis, stroke, chronic pain) would produce a most reluctant and difficult patient. The opposite proved true. She was completely compliant with the care given her. She did not object to the manner of her treatment or give the least complaint about her own pain and suffering. This was a surprise to me!

In her painful last months, her response to "How are you?" was always, "Marvelous!" or "Wonderful!" Not one for self-pity or attention, she accepted her condition with courage and strong faith. I am certain that she is now greeting, and possibly even advising, the many sisters in heaven that she helped with earthly health problems. We will miss her directness, her strength, and her loving service to all.

Elsie O'Brien, sister

I cannot glean from any specific memory from my life with Irene. We called her Irene because Mom's name was Cora and it was less confusing to the family. Cora has left me a treasure, a legacy not made of gold, but has left me the richest person on earth. I have inherited from her the ability to care for others. Caregiving was in Cora's DNA. It's all she knew how to do; it was a part of who she was.

For her last mission, the decade she spent in the intensive care unit taking care of babies born too soon whose parents desperately wanted them and babies born to mothers on crack cocaine and heroin who suffered terrible withdrawal. They were all Irene's babies. She cared for each one of them, wishing them a life of fullness as one of

God's creatures. She didn't confine her caring to the walls of the intensive care unit. It spread out to everyone, each person that she met. She was their caregiver. She did so without asking for thanks or expecting any compensation. It was simply her gift. I've been told that at times Irene could be a tad bit insistent, maybe a little bossy, but it all came from her heart. She never wished anyone ill.

The second part of her legacy is precious also. It's Cora's beautiful smile. It extended from ear to ear and was given freely. She took her smile to her deathbed. On our last visit, to see Cora so frail, so tiny, so short of breath and in so much pain was very, very hard. But then, when Cora would open her eyes, she would flash that smile. Somehow it took away the sadness and lightened up the room with her brightness. So that smile is one of my treasures.

Perhaps the most significant, the one that means the most to me, it that my Cora taught me the legacy of the most important lesson of my life—how to carry the cross God gives us and to carry it no matter how heavy, no matter how hard. On the first of January when I called Cora (we had daily conversations) she told me of her "incident," it was just an "incident." The fact was that she was paralyzed. I thought to myself, what pain—emotional and psychological pain—that this must be for her. Pain that no amount of morphine could ever take away because Cora had loss her ability to be a caregiver. Now she who cared for everyone must accept care from everyone else.

Never once in all our daily conversation did Cora ever complain. There was no "Woe is me," or "Why me, God?" There was just a determination to work Monday through Friday in physical therapy to reverse the effects of the stroke. Then in one phone call Cora simply said, "I'm being discharged. I get to go home to Mount Carmel." Never did she say, "I tried my best and it got me nowhere." That was not who she was. She accepted what God had given her with graciousness and love and patience.

These are the treasures I received from her—to be a caregiver, to smile in life, and to carry a cross no matter how heavy. There is a song that I have always loved. The lyrics that so appropriate here say, "Just remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows, lies the seed that with the sun's love in the spring becomes the rose." I think of Sister Cora and all of you BVMs as sowers of the seeds of God's love. You have planted roses in the hearts and souls of all you have ministered to. I am sure that God is looking down and seeing the beautiful bouquet that you have presented to him.

On behalf of Cora's nieces Carol and Ann, her nephews Greg, Mark, Mike, Christopher, and myself, we wish to extend to each and every one of the BVM sisters our sincere gratitude for the love you have lavished on Cora during her 62 years as a BVM. It is a comfort for us to know that Cora will rest with the BVMs that she loved so much and in the beautiful place she called home—Mount Carmel.

I know it is inappropriate for me to extend any personal thanks to any one sister, but I wish to deviate here from what is proper to thank Sister Margaret Zimmermann. Margaret was Cora's roommate in the Circle. They lived together for years sharing chores—Cora the cook, Margaret the cleaner. But their friendship was not based on household chores. It was based on a love and mutual respect for one another.

It was Margaret and some of the other BVMs who came to Irene's deathbed when breath became so hard to take and fright entered and they would sit with her giving her soothing messages of love and prayer. They were with her until God decided that she should breathe easy, to be pain free, and to accept the reward due to all BVMs.

Please accept our heartfelt thanks and please allow me as Cora's sister to continue to be Margaret's friend and a friend to all the BVMs who were so loving to Cora and to my family.

Anne Marie McKenna, BVM

Twenty-six years ago, my sister Mary experienced signs that her second pregnancy would not go full term. Her doctor sent her across town to UCSF Medical Center, where they could hopefully postpone her labor and which was known for excellent neonatal care. Ten days later very tiny Roisin Shannon was born.

Cora Keegan was on duty in the neonatal intensive care unit. She noticed the mother's name was Mary McKenna (which she kept when she married) and after her shift went to Mary's room to ask if she was a St. Paul's McKenna from Church Street, and to assure her that Roisin would pull through. When Cora got home, she called my mother to assure her also that her new, tiny granddaughter would pull through, which was a great assurance to my mother who had lost two children in early deliveries.

Later, during Roisin's very long stay in neonatal ICU, Cora again touched base with both Mary and mom to assure them that Roisin's very slow weight gain was a positive rather than a negative sign. Cora said she was possibly the most active baby she had ever seen, so she was burning off her calories! Mary remembers Cora describing how three-pound Roisin would try to push herself up on her knees, and salutes Cora as a nurse who cared not only for the babies, but for the parents and grandparents as well.

Margaret Zimmermann, BVM

I have always known it to be a gift to know Cora and have her as a dear friend. She was such a generous and loving person, so anxious to be of service to others.

Because Cora was a nurse, sisters and staff members would often seek her help and/or advice. Cora would be pleased to be of assistance. When she was no longer able to do this, Cora was devastated. That was a real part of her suffering, not being able to do for others.

By the same token, when Cora expressed how things should be done or about what was happening, that was it! In my experience, if I disagreed with her, Cora said I wasn't thinking straight! Cora was very firm in her ideas and beliefs!

God bless and reward Cora for all she has been for her family, for us and her many friends, as well as the numerous people with whom Cora was in contact in her various ministries. God love and bless you, Cora.

Alice Kerker, BVM (As told to Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

This happened about 20 years ago. Sister Eileen Galvin was in the hospital in Oxnard in southern California. Alice and her housemate, Sister Catherine Leonard, were to take Eileen to their apartment when she was released from the hospital. Then, Cora would come from San Francisco to accompany Eileen on the flights to Dubuque for her move to Mount Carmel.

However, on the day Eileen was to be released, she needed to remain in the hospital. Cora was already in the air. When she learned that Eileen had not been released, Cora, while still at the airport, was able to get a return flight to San Francisco immediately. It was a time when the 9/11 restrictions for air travelers were still in place. The airline searched Cora's suitcase thoroughly, she got a full body scan, and her intended gifts of See's candy were confiscated. Alice tells that this last—the loss of See's candy—distressed Cora the most. When Eileen was finally released, Cora returned to accompany Eileen, but this time, she brought no See's candy, lest it be confiscated again!

Monica Seelman, BVM, Set of 1958

One of my favorite stories about Cora dates back to our days as novices. One of my duties was to slice bread before every noon meal. Cora was my partner. She was very fast and efficient while I worked at a much slower pace. She'd have a whole loaf of bread sliced and on plates while I had only sliced one third of a loaf. She was constantly saying, "Come on, Alvin, work faster or we'll never finish in time." We ended up laughing about the

bread room every time we met. The community always had their bread, so I might have gotten faster, but I could never keep up with her!!

Also when Doris Walsh was a patient at Marian Hall, Cora was very attentive to her. She visited her often and was her companion to the doctor many times. She was so kind to those who were sick and suffering.

Mary Nolan, BVM, Set of 1958

Cora, whom we always looked up to, was one of the senior members of our Set of 1958. She always looked very serious, yet she had a fine sense of humor. She always spoke her mind, yet it was okay to disagree with her. She cared a lot about everyone and was at her best serving as RN and companioning at Marian Hall. I appreciated her many acts of kindness to our sisters. I will miss her.

Karen Conover, BVM

I lived with Cora for almost a decade in the 1980s at St. Paul convent in San Francisco. My remembrance of her is that she never did anything slowly. She seemed to be driven with a kind of energy that sometimes made me breathless. She was, at times quite serious, but she also had a great laugh.

During that time she was working as a nurse in the infant intensive care unit of a major San Francisco hospital and continued when two hospitals merged. As with any merger, there were stressful parts of that transition, but she “hung in there,” I think knowing that she was at the upper end of the age spectrum of nurses and wanted to retain her position and seniority. I always marveled at what it would take to work in such a high-pressure environment. She did not share details of her work, as certainly confidentiality was at play here, but I could tell she had a real heart for the sickest little ones.

Cora was always generous and willing to be of service. She acted as a companion on a number of cross-country flights to bring sisters to Mount Carmel. Those trips could be fraught with anxiety or confusion on the part of the sister moving, and Cora would have been concerned for the Sister’s health condition that necessitated the 2,000-mile journey.

Her friendship with Margaret Zimmermann dates from when they lived here in Dubuque with others on Southern Avenue, and then together in the Circle. As I came to work in Support Services six years ago, and they were both in Caritas, I could tell that Cora looked out for her good friend, but as her own health was challenged, the tables seemed to be turned. The last few months following her stroke and then returning to Mount Carmel Bluffs after the “big moves” were discouraging for her. I am grateful that now her normal energy and zest for life are restored in God’s eternal love.

Diane Forster, BVM

Among Cora’s funeral plans were two items that she provided. One is a poem prayer “Here Are My Hands,” no author given. The second is an excerpt from the writings of spiritual author Henri Nouwen.

Here Are My Hands

Let them be instruments of touching
Sensing both the pain and joy which
Make up this being before me.

Here Are My Hands

Let them channel the abundant healing
Energy which is for every being.

Here Is My Heart

Let it radiate unconditional love for

This being before me, and to all of creation
Including myself.

Here Is My Breath

May it guide the life energy within me
And teach us how to live fully.

Here I Am

Let me be fully present in this and all moments,
In humility, gratitude and love...

Living Our Passage Well

Death is a passage to new life. That sounds very beautiful, but few of us desire to make this passage. It might be helpful to realize that our final passage is preceded by many earlier passages. When we are born we make a passage from life in the womb to life in the family. When we go to school we make a passage from life in the family to life in the larger community. When we get married we make a passage from a life with many options to a life committed to one person. When we retire we make a passage from a life of clearly defined work to a life asking for new creativity and wisdom.

Each of these passages is a death leading to new life. When we live these passage well, we are becoming more prepared for our final passage.

Taken from *Bread for the Journey*
Henri J. Nouwen