



Eulogy of Sister Nicholas “Nic” Catrambone, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 20, 2021

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life and “homegoing” of our Sister Nicholas “Nic” Catrambone.

Rita Doloris Catrambone was born in Chicago on April 8, 1936, the youngest child of Nicholas and Theresa Catrambone. Her parents were distant cousins born in Gasperina in southern Italy who first met in America. Nicholas immigrated as a teenager. Theresa was 10 when she joined her parents who had immigrated several years earlier. Nicholas and Theresa were married at St. Callistus in Chicago’s “little Italy.” Rita joined seven siblings –Tessie, Anthony, Joseph, Eugene, Kay, Arthur, and Letty–and was proud to be a first-generation Italian American and a Chicago Cubs fan.

After completing her education with the BVMs at St. Callistus Elementary School and St. Mary High School, Rita entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1954, and received the name Nicholas at her reception on March 19, 1955. She professed first vows on March 19, 1957, and lived 66 years as a BVM.

After profession, Nic spent the next two years completing a bachelor’s degree at Mundelein College with a major in mathematics and minors in history and elementary education. She later earned a master’s degree in educational and pastoral ministry from Emmanuel College in Boston.

During her early missions, Nic taught intermediate grades at St. Eugene in Chicago; Mary, Queen of Heaven in Cicero, Ill.; and St. Patrick in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She brought to these missions her wonderful philosophy of life: “The most important thing to me is treating people with respect, being open to where they come from, their points of view, their religious beliefs, and understanding of God . . . In the novitiate Sister Mary (Leo) Hogan often said it doesn’t matter what work is done, it is the amount of love brought to it that counts.”

In 1964, Nic was sent to what she called her life-changing mission at Immaculate Conception (IC) High School in Clarksdale, Miss. Because of its small staff, teaching at IC required versatility, creativity, and hard work. Nic combined these with an enthusiasm and sensitivity that inspired and impressed others.

Her duties included mathematics teacher, choir director, liturgical planner, manager of accounts and tuition for both the grade school and the high school, and faculty sponsor for the senior class, the yearbook, and student clubs including Community Outreach and the Bicycle Club.

While the classes she taught were essential, her involvement with the students and their families was far more important. Her great care and concern for the poor and disadvantaged drew people to her to the point that the convent seemed to be open around the clock.

“The honesty of the students about who they were and wanted to be moved me every day,” she said. Nic connected so deeply with the African-American community in Clarksdale that they truly became her community, whom she lovingly called “my people.”

Her other secondary missions included St. Mary High School in Clinton, Iowa; Immaculata High School in Detroit; Bishop Hogan High School in Kansas City, Mo.; and Memphis Catholic High School in Memphis, Tenn., where she taught religion, served as team chaplain, and managed the bookstore.

It was in Clarksdale that Nic became involved in the civil rights movement and volunteered at a prison for the first time. When the onset of a debilitating disease hastened an early retirement from teaching, she turned to prison ministry as one of many new ministries. At the Shelby County Jail in Memphis, she shared centering prayer and scripture reflections with the inmates and led them in song. "I realized how loved they are by God, in spite of whatever crimes they may have committed," she shared.

At the St. Vincent De Paul Soup Kitchen, Nic helped prepare and serve meals to over 200 people who lived in poverty. In addition, she taught short courses to homeless women in her "Street Academy," always concluding with a day retreat. "Our philosophy has always been to greet them with reverence," she commented.

Nic also tutored middle school students, served on the diocesan religious vocation committee, and spoke about vocations in Catholic high schools. She ministered among the people of St. Augustine Parish by visiting the hospitalized and homebound.

When she could no longer drive, her visiting ministry became a phone ministry. She also participated in a discussion and prayer group that focused on both scripture and social justice readings at the Caritas Community Center in nearby Binghamton, Tenn. "My years in Clarksdale and Memphis were very important to me," said Nic. "The people taught me the importance of human dignity."

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." (Matthew 5:6). Nic had a passionate commitment to social justice and put herself on the line for her convictions. Yet, she had the capacity to dialogue honestly with those who did not share her views. She contributed great energy, insight, sensitivity, and yes, even a sense of humor to every cause.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9). Even before her commitment to social justice, Nic prayed and worked to be a person of peace, a follower of the nonviolent Jesus. To advance peacemaking efforts, she joined the Nonviolent Education and Advocacy Resource in Memphis. She planned and conducted workshops for students, faculty, and administrators to make them aware of the principles of nonviolent behavior and to give them practical skills to conduct themselves in a nonviolent manner.

"Jesus calls me to love persons, accepting them, affirming them," wrote Nic. "[The people] who come into my life touch me and I try to reach out to them, loving them, and calling them to growth, to self-acceptance, [and to] a realization of how God loves them."

Blessed are you, Nic, dear, gentle, loving, faithful, servant. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward [is] great in heaven." (Matthew 5:12).