



Eulogy of Sister Kathleen (Johnine) McGrath, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Sept. 2, 2021

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Kathleen McGrath.

Kathleen Ann McGrath was born on July 10, 1937, in San Francisco. She was the first child of John and Mae (Culhane) McGrath and was followed by siblings Eileen, Eugene "Gene," and William. Eileen joined the Sisters of St. Dominic and received the religious name Jarlath.

Kathleen completed her elementary and secondary education at St. Paul in San Francisco. A few months later she, along with seven other young women from San Francisco and two from Hawaii, boarded a train for Dubuque, Iowa. Kathleen entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1955, and received the name Johnine upon her reception on March 19, 1956. She professed first vows on Feb. 3, 1958, and lived 65 years as a BVM.

After profession, Kathleen was missioned as a convent cook at Our Lady of the Angels in Clinton, Iowa. With eight years of experience, she returned to Mount Carmel to work in food services at Marian Hall, a job she held for 15 years including the year of the great 1965 flood. Kathleen recalled, "The National Guard was here. When they had a break they landed their helicopters in the alfalfa field [now the Circle Apartments]. They used Loyola Hall as a resting place [with] comfortable chairs and footstools, also a television . . . We had coffee, cold drinks, cookies, and other munchies for them . . . When they got word that they would be leaving, they offered to take anyone in the kitchen on a helicopter ride to see how Dubuque and the area up and down the Mississippi was devastated by the flooding . . . It was my one and only ride in a helicopter. It was amazing what we could see from the air. Dubuque, East Dubuque, and areas in Wisconsin were under water . . . far beyond what I did see."

Kathleen worked in the nutrition department at Mercy Medical Center in Dubuque before returning to Mount Carmel to serve as the food service manager. During that time she centralized food purchasing for Marian Hall and the BVM Center. She also volunteered at the St. Stephen Food Bank.

BVM President Helen Maher Garvey wrote, "Few persons have served with the dedication, the professionalism, the commitment which you evidenced. You have been faithful to the congregation and faithful to each one of us living and working on the hill. [You are] a sign of God's presence among us."

In October of 1989, Kathleen traveled to Washington, D.C., joining tens of thousands of people for a march on the Capitol to protest the shortage of decent, affordable housing. "I know it has had an impact on my awareness of this form of oppression," she wrote. "I was also blessed with having seen the AIDS quilt which has more meaning for me now than I could believe it ever would have." Her brother Gene had been recently diagnosed with AIDS. The following year, Kathleen returned to the San Francisco area to take care of him while also volunteering at a food bank in San Rafael, Calif. Following her brother's death in 1991, she received a ministry grant to work at the Marin Community Food Bank in Rohnert Park, Calif. At her parish, she transported seniors to and from Mass, served as a lector and a communion minister at Mass and to the homebound, and was on the planning team for numerous fundraisers.

Kathleen ministered at the Catholic Charities Family Support Center, a shelter for homeless families, in Santa Rosa, Calif., for 20 years. She began as food service coordinator designing meal plans and purchasing food. After eight years, she became the manager of the Rural Food Program, to which she added the role of program manager for the Family Support Center just two years later. A Jesuit volunteer wrote, "In the Rural Food Project, Sister Kathleen McGrath has been just a super supervisor . . . Her blend of compassion and 'horse sense' . . . have kept the Rural Food Program running smoothly and serving more [people] than ever."

Kathleen "retired" in 2006, but continued volunteering for the Rural Food Program. Two years later, she was re-employed at the Family Support Center as the safety and food services coordinator and remained in that position for four years. Her presence was always marked by an energetic willingness, a good sense of humor, and maximum flexibility. She offered the clients not only reassurance, but also love—unconditional always and "tough love" when needed.

After her second "retirement," Kathleen volunteered at the Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital with its "No One Dies Alone" program and as a communion minister. She also spent countless hours at the Redwood Empire Food Bank distributing food to immigrants. She served on its board of directors for nine years. Her involvement with immigrants led to a boarder immersion experience to witness firsthand the sufferings endured on their journey to the United States. In a note to Kathleen, the food bank director wrote, "All we do is a reflection of the caring, generosity, compassion, and empathy you have brought to our mission."

Kathleen was passionate about feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless. It truly was her life's mission. The California Dietary Managers Association recognized her professional contributions and volunteer efforts on several occasions, and named her their 1999 Member of Year. Both the California State Senate and her United States Representative presented her with a Spirit of Service Award for her participation on the Sonoma County Task Force for the Homeless. A member of the task force commented, "Sister Kathleen has made big differences for many people in her own quiet way. For many years, she has made sure people who were hungry or without homes had nutritious food. She also did whatever she could to see that families had shelter. She is love in action."

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10: 27). When asked how she would like to be remembered, Kathleen simply replied, "That I loved." She certainly did.

Kathleen was deeply grateful for the people who enriched her life with their presence, laughter, and concern. We, too, are grateful to have known her. To quote the welcoming remarks from her golden jubilee liturgy, "Kathleen has been gracious, generous, and caring as she [lived] out our BVM values of freedom, education, charity, and justice . . . [We] have been richly blessed by her presence, her willingness to share her giftedness, and her faithful response to God's call."

Thank you, Kathleen, for being a gift to us. May you know the fullness of love, peace, and joy in in God's presence.