



Eulogy of Sister Martha Ryder, BVM (Briant)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Nov. 29, 2021

Good morning. It is good for us to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Martha Ryder.

Martha Jane Ryder entered this world on May 25, 1927, the eldest of two children born to Frederick and Myrtle (Stockton) Ryder of St. Louis. Her brother Bill completed the family. Tragically, in 1954, Bill was a second lieutenant in the army serving in Korea when he suddenly collapsed. He was diagnosed with leukemia and brought to the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., where he died, leaving a wife Jo and one-month-old daughter Susan.

While growing up, Martha enjoyed playing golf, tennis, and the harmonica, as well as building things with her father. In high school, she loved chemistry and decided to follow in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother and become a teacher.

Martha was raised as a Presbyterian, but when she was twelve, she announced to her family that she “didn’t need this stuff about religion anymore.” Her mother commented, “She’ll get over it.” And she did. By the time she was in high school, Martha was reading the Bible after reading that a psychologist had stated that educated people should read the Bible. Martha commented, “I thought of myself as a Christian going into college although not too excited about it.”

At the University of Illinois - Urbana, Martha befriended Joan, another chemistry major and a Catholic who felt called to religious life. “She told me things about the faith that really made sense to me,” Martha explained. Through Joan’s example, their discussions about religion and reading the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Martha decided to take instructions and was baptized Catholic in 1946. This created tension in her relationship with parents that lasted decades. Shortly afterwards, Joan graduated from college and suddenly became ill and died from intestinal cancer.

Around the same time, Martha met BVM Sisters Mary Martinette Hagan and Mary J (Hortense) Kelly who were studying at the university. Both sisters made a lasting impression and offered timely advice that solidified Martha’s decision to become a BVM. After completing a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry with physics and mathematics minors, Martha entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1948. She received the name Briant upon her reception on March 19, 1949, professed her first vows on March 19, 1951, and lived 73 years as a BVM.

After profession, Martha taught at The Immaculata in Chicago for the remainder of the school year. That fall, she was sent to study at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, during which time she did elementary practice teaching at St. Anthony. She completed a Master’s of Science degree in physics and mathematics at St. Louis University in 1954 and then returned to Clarke College to teach physics and physical science mathematics. In 1965, Martha, serving as the director, opened the Clarke planetarium. She created monthly programs geared to persons with little science background as well as specialized programs for both elementary and secondary science classes. Martha traced her interest in astronomy to “a time in my high school library when I stumbled across the astronomy section by mistake.” This inspired her to build her own telescope while still in high school. That same telescope was used on the Clarke observation deck to view the actual sky after the planetary program. Martha

also served as chair of the physics and physical sciences departments several times during her nineteen-year mission at Clarke.

In 1972, Martha moved to St. Louis to care for her aging parents, a time blessed with reconciliation and healing. After their deaths, she moved to Clinton, Iowa, to teach physics and mathematics at Mater Dei High School, now known as Prince of Peace College Preparatory. She aimed to teach Catholic high school math and physics students how to be serious thinkers about their faith as well as their studies. "She's a wonderful example," commented the Mater Dei principal. "The students respect her and learn a great amount from her . . . She does not draw attention to herself, but when she talks people listen." A school board member added, "She's a remarkable woman . . . She's always meeting with students before school and then again after school. What an educator!" Martha shared, "Teaching is important to me, so I will help as long as I can . . . I have learned easier ways to do things [and] to say things more simply. . . I want to make use of that knowledge." In 2005, at the age of 78, after 22 years at Prince of Peace, she retired to Mount Carmel.

C. W. Ceran wrote, "Genius is the ability to reduce the complicated to the simple." Although she might object to the designation of genius, Martha spent five decades making complicated subjects of physics, calculus, and chemistry understandable for her students – truly Martha's greatest gift as a teacher. Martha served as chair of the physics division of the Iowa Academy of Science and had several articles published in *The Physics Teacher*, the journal of the American Association of Physics Teachers. One explained how she used the 1833 poem "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe" by Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins to review some of the properties of light. Another article described how Martha incorporated take-home experiments performed with common household items and borrowed laboratory items. These experiments not only saved laboratory time, but allowed the students, their families and friends to grow in understanding of physical concepts. In 2005, Martha received a well-deserved U.S. Presidential Scholar Program Teacher Recognition Award by the U.S. Department of Education.

Martha was never one who garnered attention. Usually she would shake her head and try to change the subject. Her interests and activities beyond teaching were varied. She was a great supporter of Amnesty International and worked to establish a group in the St. Louis area. She was deeply concerned about the Mississippi River and preserving the bluffs for over 30 years and was recommended for a position on the Upper Mississippi River Commission. She participated in several 5K runs to support a cure for ovarian cancer and repeatedly finished in first place for females 70 and over. She also supported a multitude of extracurricular school activities with her presence for many, many years.

Martha took St. Paul words to heart: "Rejoice in hope; endure in affliction, persevere in prayer." (Romans 12: 12) The pastor at Prince of Peace shared, "I think Sister Martha's presence has been an enormous value, not only her ability as a teacher, but beyond that, her witness to the religious life. Her beautiful way of proclaiming the Gospel, not always in words, but always in actions, her lifestyle, dedication, joy and commitment to the Lord, have served as an inspiration."

Martha is a beautiful woman, a beloved teacher, a faithful BVM, a person of patience, forgiveness, understanding and serenity, and one deeply admired by all, especially her set. May she enjoy the fullness of everlasting life.