



Eulogy of Sister Dolores Doohan, BVM (Sarah James)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Dec. 2, 2021

Good morning. It is good to be here to celebrate the life of our Sister Dolores “Dolly” Doohan.

After the initial greeting, the letter of James begins, “Consider it all joy, my sisters and brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” (James 1:2-3). One day when Dolly was a novice, she visited the infirmary and felt compelled to stop at the bed of an elderly sister. The sister summoned all her strength to say one thing to Dolly, “Pray for the grace to persevere.” For years the message made little sense, but eventually “perseverance” not only became her favorite word, but a summary of her life.

Marguerite Dolores Doohan was born on June 15, 1928, in San Francisco to James and Sarah (Cannon) Doohan, both of whom had emigrated from Ireland. Dolly was the eldest of two children and was later joined by her brother John who died in 2019. Dolly weighed just over four pounds and was not expected to live, but live she did. However, when Dolly was old enough to learn how to walk, her parents noticed that she kept falling. Clearly there was something wrong with her right leg, but doctors were baffled. Finally, when Dolly was seven, a doctor discovered that her hip had been dislocated since birth. Surgery corrected the problem, but the damage remained leaving Dolly with a permanent limp. The Doohans lived only a few blocks away from St. Paul, their parish church. Since Dolly was unable to attend school while convalescing, her mother convinced the principal of St. Paul Primary to tutor Dolly at home.

Years later when graduation from St. Paul HS approached, Dolly felt called to the religious life as a BVM despite concerns by the sisters at the school that her bad leg would make a lifetime of service difficult. Dolly was not deterred and traveled halfway across the country, against her father’s wishes, to Mount Carmel.

On her application for admission, Dolly wrote, “I love God very much and want to teach other people all about Him so that they may love Him as I do.” Dolly entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1946. She received the name Sarah James, in honor of her parents, upon her reception on March 19, 1947, and professed her first vows on March 19, 1949. Her father died two weeks prior to her profession, but had managed to save enough money to buy Dolly a watch which was engraved “Sister Mary Sarah James.” Dolly shared, “Giving me the watch was one of the last things he did in life. He’d accepted my choice.”

Dolly spent 58 of her 75 years as a BVM in elementary education. She was missioned at St. Anthony in Missoula, Mont.; Holy Family in Chicago; All Hallows in Sacramento, Calif.; St. Catherine in Kauai, Hawaii; and St. Clare in Portland, Ore., where she ministered for 38 years. Soon after being sent to All Hallows, she witnessed a life-changing event. Looking out a window during recess, she saw a junior high boy with spina bifida fall and noticed that one came to help him. She watched as he slowly picked himself up and kept moving toward the building. She thought, “If he can do that, then I can keep on.” From that moment, the advice she received from the elderly sister made sense and perseverance became the mantra she shared with all of her students.

It is a well-known fact that Dolly was an avid sports fan, especially for her San Francisco 49ers. However, that she coached flag football and basketball and even served as athletic director is somewhat surprising. Recalling her

time in Sacramento, Dolly shared, "I loved teaching the boys to play football. I used to get the plays from one of my student's father who was a football coach at [a nearby] high school. I would diagram them on the chalkboard [and] teach them to the boys. We would all go outside and I would tell them, 'Now do what we learned . . . and they did!'"

Dolly was also involved in parish ministry which included training the altar servers, leading faith-sharing groups, being attentive to parishioners who simply needed a kind word or a little company, and serving on both the Liturgy and the Peace and Justice Committees.

Dolores was everyone's social conscience. Who would dare drink bottled water or anything from a Styrofoam cup in her presence? She even used her great persuasive power to convince students to send their Halloween candy bars to the president of a major candy company accused of securing chocolate from Africa using child labor. Their packages even included an explanation why they wouldn't eat it. In Dolly's view, all of these issues had far-reaching consequences that negatively impacted our planet and its people, especially the poor. Perhaps she was most pleased by the groups of students and parents she organized to visit and eat lunch with the homeless in downtown Portland. Many lives were deeply touched and changed by these contacts and Dolly's influence.

Eventually the constant pain from her deteriorating hip forced Dolly to retire. She moved to Mount Carmel in 2007 where she enjoyed playing cards, singing in Schola, taking classes at the Roberta Kuhn Center, volunteering in the development office, and serving as mentor and tutor to children at the St. Mark Community Center and St. Columbkille ES.

Several years ago, John Canzano, a sports columnist and radio talk show host in Portland, Ore., wrote about Dolly and her lingering presence at St. Clare. "[She] was strict and commanded respect. [She] exuded love and kindness. [She] took extra time to work with students, . . . she wouldn't accept excuses, [and] you never heard her complain. 'When it was icy in the winter, she'd wrap her feet in chains before she came walking down that big hill,' a former student [said]. 'There was nothing that could stop her.' Even though she left years ago, the people she influenced most still ask about her all the time. They do it in droves. They do it smiling. They do it because they can't help but recognize how deeply she mattered to them."

Dolly had a generous spirit. She was always willing to share whether it be See's candy from her beloved San Francisco or an abundance of blueberries shipped to her from Oregon. She lived simply, preferring to donate her stipend to charities that supported the poor, especially children. Her cherished "collections" consisted of a full address book and friends to surround her. In her quiet way, she connected with people, remembering birthdays, sending little notes or calling just to say hello – all ways that quietly said "I care."

Besides God, Dolly loved her family and the ocean. Her love of family was and remains deep. She was doubly blessed and delighted a few years ago when her brother came for a visit. Her nephew accompanied his father to Dubuque and then her niece came to visit and accompany her father home. Her love for the ocean was born and nurtured by growing up in San Francisco, teaching in Hawaii and living close to the Oregon coast. She delighted to see the fog roll in, breathe in the ocean air, watch the waves come in, and embraced every offer to spend time at a beach house or to visit Gwen Farry in Seaside.

Dolly truly was remarkable. Yes, she persevered through physical challenges, but also persevered in loving God and teaching others to know and love God as well. We rejoice that Dolly, without physical limitation, now abides in God's great love.