



Eulogy of Sister Mary Alma, BVM (Robert Emmett)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 7, 2023

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Mary Alma Sullivan.

Mary Alma was born Jan. 2, 1930, in Chicago, the first child and only daughter of Daniel and Alma (Freehill) Sullivan. Brothers Daniel, Robert, and John followed. Her father owned a law practice and her mother was a legal assistant.

"When I think about home. . . the immediate response is gratitude. It was a place of warmth, security, faith, learning, and hospitality," shared Mary Alma. The evening meal was a special time when the family gathered, and her parents questioned the children about their day. "We got to know one another in a deeper way because of it." The Sullivan home also was a gathering place for both sides of the family.

"Music has always been important in my life. I grew up in a home in which music was a valued practice," commented Mary Alma. Her father was a fiddler and her mother a pianist who could play any request if a person simply hummed a few bars. "I was part of an extended family that made music part of holiday gatherings. Children learned traditional [folk] songs by hearing them sung . . . and were encouraged to have a 'signature' song with which to entertain my grandparents. I have been part of one choir or another since my college days, including my years [in Schola] at Mount Carmel. Making music in religious rituals is my way of worshipping God."

After graduating from The Immaculata, Mary Alma attended Mundelein College, majoring in English and minoring in history. She was a feature writer on *The Mundelein Review*, a quarterly literary magazine, and was appointed editor during her senior year. Her responsibilities included helping young writers advance their skills. After completing her bachelor's degree, Mary Alma worked at a retail store for two years training new employees. Although she had previously discounted teaching as a career, she realized that "teaching" was exactly what she had done as an editor at Mundelein and what she was doing at her current job. . . and she liked it. She realized it was time to respond to two callings – teaching and religious life.

Mary Alma entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1953, and received the name Robert Emmett upon her reception on March 19, 1954. Her novitiate years were marked by two significant events. As a junior novice, she was approached by senior novice Ann Christine Heinz about writing a voice-choir presentation in honor of the Marian year. After weeks of preparation by the senior novices and under the direction of SM Xavier Coens, the day of the public performance arrived. Even the Archbishop of Dubuque attended the performance which was so successful that two encore performances were given. Mary Alma remarked, "I hope Mary's role in Christian life was served by the project. It was certainly a memorable activity for me."

Another memorable event, the infirmary fire, occurred the following year. As a senior novice and an infirmary sacristan, Mary Alma was allowed to accompany the Infirmary into what remained of the round and the chapel to retrieve items that survived the fire. "It was heartbreaking to look around and realized the 'round' was gone and the BVM residents dispersed all over the city of Dubuque."

Mary Alma professed first vows on March 10, 1956, and briefly taught elementary students at Holy Cross in Chicago; St. John in Seattle; and St. Joseph in Rock Island, Ill. In 1957, she was missioned as an English teacher at

St. Dominic High School in Chicago. This was followed by teaching English and journalism at Regina High School in Iowa City, Iowa; Our Lady of Peace (OLP) in Saint Paul, Minn.; and Cathedral High School in Chicago where she also taught guidance. She later taught at Bellarmine-Jefferson High School in Burbank, Calif. Mary Alma wrote, "I count my five years at OLP among the richest. The students challenged me and helped me grow intellectually. I hope my students can say the same thing of me."

While at OLP, Mary Alma earned a master's degree in English from Loyola University-Chicago. In 1973, she completed her second master's degree, this time in Speech-Motion Picture. That same year, she began her 17-year mission as an instructor of cinema studies at Mundelein College. "My entire teaching ministry at Mundelein remains a treasure. Whether remembering colleagues, students, [or] the atmosphere of support and community. . . those years are unspeakably 'brilliant,' as the Irish say of anything whose reality has no words to define or explain it." When Mundelein merged with Loyola University in 1991, she became an assistant professor in the communications department at Loyola and was named professor emerita in 1996.

Mary Alma served the BVM congregation as Communications Commissioner, chair of the Multimedia Board, and a member of the SALT Editorial Board, Communications Advisory Committee, and the Language Committee. She had many desktop publishing endeavors including publications for the Great Lakes Region, the graduates of Loyola's Institute for Pastoral Studies, the Heifer Project International and the Gannon Center's Women's Network. She also contributed to a collection of essays on the history of Mundelein College.

Mary Alma was well-traveled having visited Spain, Japan, France, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Ecuador, and multiple trips to Ireland to research her family tree. In 1999, Joanne Mullee accompanied Mary Alma to Ireland and then to Ecuador where Joanne died on a beach in the Galápagos Islands, and Mary Alma accompanied her deceased friend home. "It would be disingenuous for me to be sad for Jo. The place in which she died was exquisitely beautiful. . . I believe that, even in what proved to be her last conscious moments, her thoughts were of life and not death. That was the Jo Mullee I grew to know and love."

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul wrote, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to each of us" (Romans 12: 6). Mary Alma was blessed with many gifts. Her interests, activities, and talents were extensive. She was able to read before starting school and remained an avid reader for life. She wrote poetry and collaborated with Eliza Kenney to compose cherished songs for the community. She enjoyed nature programs, educational documentaries, and British mysteries. Later in life she took up painting, often transferring to canvas photographs taken on her many trips, and she took classes at the Roberta Kuhn Center. Even as her mobility decreased, she worked for social justice by signing petitions, writing letters, and financially supporting organizations focused on women's issues and peace initiatives.

Through a generous gift from a former Iowa City Regina student, the Sister Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM Scholarship was established last year at the Gannon Center for Women and Leadership at Loyola University – Chicago. "Education has always been primary in my life," commented Mary Alma. "I'm happy that the funds will be used to help women who feel the same way I do about the importance of education."

Mary Alma was a warm, caring, quick-witted, and deeply spiritual person who faithfully lived 69 years as a BVM. Certainly, many friends and relatives were anticipating celebrating her Diamond Jubilee in September. In a letter addressed "To those who survive me" dated "Independence Day 2002," Mary Alma wrote, "As I wrote the date on this memo, I was struck by its appropriateness: I *am* free of all those things which remind me of my mortality, my fragility in an ever-complex world and finally, my fear of passage to new life in my Creator. . . I am, even now, reuniting with my parents, my brothers, other beloved family members and dear friends, and my BVM sisters. . . I shall be busy – and free. Imagine! the joy of making sense, finally, of the experiences of my life, of the miracle of loving relationships, of the purpose of goals realized and the pain of disappointments, of *everything*."

With deep gratitude and love, we celebrate Mary Alma's entrance into eternal life rejoicing that her joy is now complete.