



## **Eulogy of Sister Kathleen Spurlin, BVM (Bernardone)**

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Sept. 5, 2023

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

Kathleen Therese Spurlin was born on May 3, 1925, in Nevis, Minnesota. She was the eldest of twelve children born to Fred and Lydia (Guderian) Spurlin of Wadena, Minnesota. Although the family had a great appreciation of God's creation, there was little mention of religion in their home.

At age six, Kathleen started to attend church on her own. At age sixteen, she moved with her family to Michigan City, Indiana, where "I had my deepest roots and challenges in education and religious faith, thanks to my Godmother Lorraine Noeges." Her godmother was the sister of BVM Sister Colette Ayers. Soon Kathleen was baptized a Roman Catholic and daily Communion became part of her life.

After two years of high school, Kathleen went to work full-time as a clerk, but eventually earned her high school diploma at the age of 21. She was enrolled at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa for the fall semester when, one month before classes were slated to commence, she went to a mission given by "a missionary priest on fire with the love of God." After discussing her desire to enter religious life, the priest advised her to enter immediately, "the next day if possible!" Kathleen entered the congregation on September 8, 1946, and received the name Bernardone upon her reception on March 19, 1947. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1949, and died only a few days short of her 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a BVM.

Kathleen ministered in Catholic education for 29 years. She taught intermediate and junior high grades at St. Brigid in San Francisco; Holy Cross in Kauai, Hawaii; St. Ann in Butte, Montana; St. Francis Xavier in Phoenix; and St. Anthony in Missoula, Montana. During these years, Kathleen earned a bachelor's degree in teaching history and English from the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio, and a master's degree in mathematics education from Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa.

Kathleen moved to Houston in 1971 to attend graduate school while continuing to work. She served one year as campus minister at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, and then returned to teaching at the Harris County Boys' School, followed by St. Francis Assisi School, and Pius X High School, all in Houston. She completed her master's degree in religious education from the University of St. Thomas in Houston in 1975.

Kathleen's interest in people began at an early age. As the oldest child in the family, many home responsibilities, especially caring for siblings, fell upon her shoulders. During her first two years of high school, she cared for her grandmother. This concern and caring for others permeated her life as a BVM. Kathleen involved her students in mission projects such as collecting supplies for an orphanage and a hospital in Laos or collecting and packing medical and dental supplies for missions in Guatemala. She

even spent the summer of 1968 in Guatemala working with the Mayan Indians to better assess their needs.

While teaching in Montana, Kathleen volunteered at the Montana State Prison which “deepened my awareness and sensitivity to the conditions that exist in our penal systems, the abuse of human rights, the oppression, the degrading and demoralizing condition in which so many have to ‘do time.’” After being immersed in the spirit of St. Francis during a trip to Assisi, Kathleen felt compelled to simplify her life. She moved to the Mississippi Delta where she taught religion and social studies at Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In short time, she began volunteering at the prison. Kathleen later shared that during this time, “The Lord revealed clearly my calling; my ministry was to the incarcerated and their families. . . My motto now is to live out to the best of my ability what is written in Micah, ‘...to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God.’” (Micah 6:8).

Kathleen ministered for ten years as a chaplain at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. An inmate shared, “Sister Kathleen Spurlin is . . . warm, loving, caring, concerned, compassionate, understanding, sympathetic, kind, merciful, patient. [She] wants to help, [is] motivated by God’s love, perceives human suffering and needs, injustice, mistreatment, racial discrimination, and helps provide for the spiritual well-being of inmates. . . She serves . . . as the ears, eyes, and . . . voices of inmates . . . in a spirit of Christian gentleness and integrity. Inmates revere her as a special representative of God among them.” In 1985, Kathleen received the President’s Award from the Prison Fellowship Ministries, an international organization whose purpose is to assist prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.

Kathleen also spent fifteen years as chaplain at the Southern Mississippi Correctional Institute (SMCI) in Leakesville, Mississippi. While at SMCI, she initiated the literacy program “Operation Lift-Off” designed to help inmates attain a sixth grade reading level before entering the GED program. She commented that the program “strengthened the ultimate goal of rehabilitation and motivation of inmates so that they leave the prison environment better prepared for life in the free world as contributing citizens.” Kathleen was named the Mississippi Department of Corrections 2002 Employee of the Year. The new SMCI chapel completed in 2003 was named after Kathleen in honor of her 27 years in prison ministry.

After retiring in 2004, Kathleen continued to live in Leakesville and volunteered as a Hospice chaplain in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She moved to Mount Carmel in 2012.

Kathleen wanted to be remembered as a person who loved and cared about others and respected the dignity of all people. After her death, a BVM sister shared that she envisioned Kathleen arriving at the gates of heaven and being welcomed by the former inmates whom she served with the words, “We wouldn’t even be here if it were not for you.”

Kathleen directly touched numerous lives and, with the ripple effects of her good work, countless more. She truly is a committed and dedicated servant of God. Rest in God’s peace, Kathleen.