



Eulogy of Sister Mary McElmeel, BVM (Eugenne)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Oct. 24, 2023

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

Mary McElmeel was born in Delhi, Iowa, on Aug. 18, 1924, to Peter and Cathryne (Byrne) McElmeel who were farmers. She joined older siblings Irene and Raymond and was followed by Elmer, James, and Beatrice. The family moved to a farm near Manchester, Iowa in 1933.

Mary's early memories included the nightly recitation of the Rosary from October through May and one of her brothers always kneeling out of parental sight and taking a nap. She also recalled piling into their Model A Ford once a month on a Saturday night for a trip to town to go to confession. Of course, Sunday Mass attendance was a given.

Mary thoroughly enjoyed the country life of gardening, harvesting the crops, horseback riding, building a tree house, skating on their frozen creek – truly any outdoor activity. However, reading, especially biographies and historical fiction, was then and continued to be her favorite activity.

Mary attended a one-room country school through eighth grade. Her religious education was a two-week session with the Mercy Sisters during the summers. She attended St. Xavier High School in Manchester, but since the school only taught up to tenth grade, she transferred to the public high school where she played on the school's basketball and softball teams. Weekends often found her at the local Roller Dome. Two constants remained throughout high school: mathematics was her favorite subject and thoughts of a religious vocation frequently entered her head. However, she did not want to wear a long black habit and live her whole life in a convent away from her family, so she pushed those thoughts out of her mind and focused on her studies and her teaching career.

Mary graduated from Manchester High School with a teacher's certificate at age sixteen. Too young to begin teaching, she attended Clarke College for one year and then taught in a one-room school for two years. During this time, she completed a summer teacher education program at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

But God was persistent. Mary wrote in her autobiography, "When I would least expect it, the thought would run through my mind, 'Why do you keep putting off my call?' [So] I entered the Sisters of Charity [on Sept. 8, 1944] and I am so glad that I did." Mary received the name Eugenne upon her reception on March 19, 1945; professed first vows on March 19, 1947; and lived 79 years as a BVM.

Mary ministered as an elementary teacher for 28 years and taught all grades from kindergarten to eighth. She was missioned at Holy Family and Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago; St. Philip in San

Francisco; St. Bridget and Cardinal Spellman in Omaha, Nebr.; St. Anthony in Dubuque, Iowa; Incarnation in Glendale, Calif.; and St. Patrick in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Her mission in Glendale stood out because of the non-teaching duties assigned to her. She coached girls' basketball, volleyball, and softball teams and the cheerleaders; assisted with special sports programs; and attended all games and pep rallies. On the academic side, she spent after school hours preparing the eighth graders for the high school entrance tests required by the Jesuits. But her most memorable mission was her eleven years at Cardinal Spellman located on a strategic air command base. She wrote, "The school was built and supported by the Catholic members of the Air Force. The students had experiences from all over the world and we could fit the curriculum to the needs of the student."

Mary also served as superior and seventh and eighth grade teacher at St. Paul in Davenport, Iowa. When she questioned her provincial about this assignment, the provincial confessed that she was sent because the pastor had requested a superior shorter than he was!

Mary took advantage of summers for a variety of experiences and a little fun too. She worked with the YMCA program in Inner City Chicago and with Vietnamese children in San Francisco's Mission District. She did remedial tutoring in Clarksdale, Miss., and helped at the Working Boys Center in Quito, Ecuador. On the side of relaxation, she completed a five-week tour of the western United States and Canada in a camper, toured the southern and eastern United States sleeping in a tent, and camped in Glacier National park for three weeks. A few years after all this adventure she enrolled in a career assessment class where she discovered that her "perfect" job would be park ranger. That came as no surprise!

Mary served the congregation as the Assistant Novice Mistress and as both Assistant Administrator and Administrator of the Motherhouse. She called the latter "one of the richest periods of my life" and wrote, "This BVM house contained an amazing gathering of wisdom, peace, and grace-filled living. . . It was a humbling experience . . . to witness a former superior waiting on her less-able sisters. . . [to] witness their patience and forbearance."

After completing her congregational service, Mary worked five years as a pastoral associate at the Cathedral of St. Raphael here in Dubuque. She then spent 16 years serving the Hispanic community in Kankakee, Ill.; teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults; and directing outreach programs. This was her favorite mission and working *for* the poor, her most meaningful work.

Mary wrote, "As I look over the years, I have been doubly blessed by the Lord with the faith of my Irish parents, with a vocation to the religious life, with a desire to promote the growth of God's kingdom on earth, with good health, with a sense of humor, and with many friends." In conversation during National Catholic Sisters Week in 2017, Mary commented, "It's been a good ride; I've had a great time."

With love for Mary and gratitude for the great gift she has been to us, let us rejoice as we send her off to "Praise God from the heavens; [and] give praise in the heights." (Psalm 148: 1).