



Eulogy of Sister Mary M. O'Connor, BVM (Bertille)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Oct. 12, 2023

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Mary M. O'Connor.

Mary Margaret O'Connor was born on July 30, 1931, in Des Moines, Iowa, the youngest child of William and Bertille (Broderick) O'Connor. She was welcomed by siblings Edward, James, and Catherine. "I am so very proud of my family," commented Mary. Her father was a civil engineer who worked on Iowa highways, which necessitated moving frequently. Her mother was a country schoolteacher who volunteered to play organ and piano in every new parish where they landed. Her brother Edward enlisted in the army during World War II. He had the dangerous job of checking for mines in caves but later was reassigned to rebuilding destroyed bridges. Jim, "a free spirit" as Mary called him, had a less taxing WWII career as a drummer in the Air Force band. Her sister Catherine "Kay" earned a degree in nursing on a voice scholarship. Mary remained close to her siblings and their extended family her entire life.

By the time Mary was old enough to attend school, the family was living in a rented house in the German part of New Hampton, Iowa. The O'Connor children had to walk many blocks to attend St. Joseph Grade School, the Irish BVM school. "I had a wonderful first and second grade teacher, SM Edwardia [Robinson]. From the time I started to school, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher," Mary commented.

The family moved to Davenport in 1940, where Mary attended St. Paul the Apostle Grade School. "I learned much about prayer and service from SM Bridgetta [McNamara]. My eighth-grade teacher, SM Catherine Ann [Fay], later became my postulant mistress. She too was very supportive of my personal and prayer life. She gave me my first Daily Missal."

Mary shared, "While attending high school at the Immaculate Conception Academy, my thoughts were filled with the many activities I enjoyed. I loved music and played the flute." Her musical interest started with piano lessons when she was a girl, but transitioned to the flute when her brother Jim gave her a flute that he bought from an army buddy. Every Saturday, Mary made the trek to Immaculate Conception Academy for lessons. She played in the orchestra for four years.

SM Helen Theresa Kiley and SM Jerome Therese Normoyle talked frequently with Mary about a religious vocation. She soon made the decision to become a BVM. "I know it was very hard on my family, but once I made the decision, I could not turn back."

Mary entered the congregation on September 8, 1950, and received the name Bertille upon her reception on March 19, 1951. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1953, and lived 72 years as a BVM. She brought her flute with her when she entered the community and occasionally played for programs during the novitiate. "Funny thing though," she wrote, "I was not asked to be a music teacher."

Mary ministered as an elementary teacher for 26 years. Recalling her first mission at St. Tarcissus in Chicago, she wrote, "I enjoyed my third-grade class of 60 students and after Christmas I was 'asked' to add twelve fourth-grade boys. The reason given was 'If you don't take them the elder fourth-grade Sister might have a stroke.' So,

I enjoyed the new students." Mary also taught at St. Agatha and Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago; St. John in Seattle; St. Patrick in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and St. Catherine in Kauai, Hawaii.

When asked about her favorite mission, Mary shared, "I loved teaching. There was something favorite about each . . . [but] Hawaii was tops. My parents visited me there since I was committed to stay for six years." While in Hawaii, Mary completed her bachelor's degree in history with an English minor from Chaminade University in Honolulu.

In 1977, she accepted the position of associate coordinator of religious education at St. Patrick in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "I have had the unique advantage of working in many avenues to unite parish religious education." Mary appreciated her time in Cedar Rapids which allowed her to be close to her elderly parents, sharing meals, working on projects, and having fun together in their final years.

In 1983, Mary completed a master's degree in religious education from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. She moved to St. Anne Parish in East Moline, Illinois, where she ministered as the pastoral associate and the director of religious education. In addition, she taught fifth grade at St. Anne's for two years and served six years on the Peoria Diocesan Commission on Education. Mary continued her duties as pastoral associate providing grief support; leading Bible study groups; and visiting the homebound, hospitals, and nursing homes after retiring as director of religious education. "I love the ministry of bringing Eucharist to others," she shared.

Mary liked to travel and enjoyed the excitement and anticipation as the sisters at St. Anne Convent planned their summer adventures. She always had a smile on her face. She saw the humor in her experiences, including mishaps, and would break out laughing as she told her stories.

During the time Mary lived in East Moline, her sister Kay lived in Davenport. Together they enjoyed playing for liturgies and other events with Kay playing the piano or organ and Mary the flute. After moving to Mount Carmel in 2005, Mary asked Diane Forster to be her flute instructor. "With the help of Diane and Marilyn Thomas, as well as the liturgy team, I [had] a wonderful opportunity to praise God with my flute. Thank you to all . . . who have encouraged me to continue making music for God and others."

Mary loved her BVM life and was proud to be a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her life focus was on spirituality and religious education. With gratitude to the congregation for nurturing both, she wrote, "We have a variety of gifts, [and] our BVM community allows us the inner freedom to use these gifts. . . The Sisters who have gone before us have given us a great gift of faith which continues to bear the fruit of many blessings."

Let us imagine the words of Isaiah beautifully depicting the moment Mary joined her deceased family, friends, and BVM sisters in the full presence of God. "For you, there will be singing as on the night of a feast, and joy of heart as when one is marching along with a flute, going to the mountain of the LORD, accompanied by timbrels and lyres." (Isaiah 30:29).

Play on, Mary, play on!