



Sharing of Memories of Mary M. O'Connor, BVM (Bertille)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Oct. 12, 2023

Sister Yvonne Mattioli, BVM

(Originally submitted to the BVM Heritage Society as a "BVM Hidden Figure" Tribute in November 2018.)

I met Mary on my second mission, Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago. She was the third-grade teachers' coordinator. She informed me that all the third-grade teachers taught religion and reading to their classroom students. Each teacher also taught a specialty. Since I was the new teacher and there was a need for an art teacher, Mary explained that my specialty was art. I told Mary that although I liked learning art when I was a youngster in grade school, I had no further experiences with it.

When asked if there were any teaching art books, Mary replied that she had an idea. She would teach me a lesson each week that I would then teach to my students. My students included a total of 125 boys and girls. Prior to the beginning of school, I completed my first lesson. It was fun! Happily, we were both pleased with the arrangement. The children were very proud of their artwork displayed in their classroom and the school hall.

When I told Mary that I would like to share this story with others, she said to make sure they knew she was not an art teacher. Congratulations to Mary M. O'Connor, BVM a very talented and generous mentor who loved to teach.

Mary McCauley, BVM

As many of you are aware I never lived with Mary, I never taught with Mary, I never knew Mary until I retired and returned to Mount Carmel in 2008, willing to simply offer my presence and service in response to whatever the need might be.

Well, one day there was a call for letter writers. I responded positively and was asked to do so for Mary O Connor. What a joy and privilege this has been. For through this ministry, I not only got to know Mary very well, I also got to know her family, friends and former students. All was gift! I might also add that this letter writing ministry led to many other additional services and finally to the fact that I had the privilege of serving as her Durable Power of Attorney.

To know Mary was to love her. Mary had many gifts. Permit me to name a few. She was warm, friendly, spontaneous, firm in her convictions and as we know she loved to sing and play the flute. These were gifts she shared generously with others. And during her final weeks and days, the gift that she shared most generously was her love. Whenever a nurse or aide would assist her, she would say, "I love you." Staff members are going to miss her spontaneity, as well as her singing of whatever song came into her mind such as "God Bless America" and "When the Saints Come Marching In, or, as her niece reminded me, "I Am Forever Blowing Bubbles."

I might also add that I am very aware of how Mary appreciated the opportunity she had to serve as a special visitor to the sick and homebound at St. Anne's in East Moline. And I must guess that she cherished her days in Hawaii because she continues to hear from former students, and from a faithful friend from her days at St. Tarcissus in Chicago. Now, guess what letter writer is a friend, not only to Mary's family members, but also to her many friends! What a Blessing!

I will close with Mary's words to the nurses as she speaks to all who have gathered for her funeral liturgy and simply and most sincerely say, "I LOVE YOU!"

Tom O'Connor, Nephew, Son of Jim O'Connor

Sister Mary was a lot of fun. Growing up in a home with seven kids and our parents, Mary came to stay with us. I went to Catholic grade school and Catholic high school, so I was very familiar with nuns. When she showed up, she had her habit on, very dignified, very wonderful. She goes upstairs and changes into slacks and shirt. I'm like, "WHOA!" This is still my aunt, but I thought she was a nun before. Anyway, it was a lot of fun having her in our house. She gave us a little concert with her flute. But also, there is a game that goes back to the 1960s called Twister. Here we were on the floor. We would spin the dial, and it would land on a color, and we would have to put a hand or a foot on it. Well, she was right in there with us playing Twister. I had a whole new respect for nuns after that. Anyway, I loved her.

Jo Clauer, BVM Associate & Mount Carmel Bluffs Employee

I have worked at Mount Carmel for 21 years. I knew Mary very well. I want to share a story I thought of this morning when I woke up and saw the rain. Mary and her sister Kay were very close. Mary told me that she and Kay were together somewhere where she was living. They decided to walk to the grocery store since it was a nice day. While they were checking out, it started to rain. The man said, "Oh, do you need a ride?" They said, "No, it's not raining very hard." You know how Mary was, always joking around, laughing and singing. She and her sister went out into the rain and started laughing and singing, "Singing in the rain, just singing in the rain." They did that all the way home, all the way back to Mary's apartment. The funny part of the story, Mary said, was after they were home for a while, they got a call from the store. The man said, "Sister, you forgot your groceries." Mary, I can see her right now. She laughed so hard when she said that they had forgot her groceries. When I think of today that we are giving Mary a sendoff, I think of her and her sister Kay out in the rain singing and dancing all the way home.

Marcia O'Conner, Niece-in-law, Wife of Tom O'Connor

I am fairly new to the O'Connor family. I didn't grow up with Sister Mary. I want to share a thing about her sense of humor. We were all at Father Brian [O'Connor's] ordination. Afterwards, the whole family is sitting around a table talking and laughing. Later in the conversation, we are talking about bees' wax and why the candles need to be bees' wax. We weren't really sure about that. Someone called over from the next table to ask Sister Mary a question. "I don't know," she replied. "Mind your own bees' wax." Because we were talking about the candles, I just thought that was so funny. I also wanted to share that she played her flute at Tom's father's birthday party. She brought her music stand and played her flute.

Carol Ann Eccleston, Niece, Daughter of Jim O'Connor

It was mentioned that Mary attended St. Thomas University in Houston, Texas, and received a degree from there. At the time, my husband Paul and I were living in Corpus Christi. I'm not sure how many of you know the map of Texas. Corpus Christi is down the coast from Houston. It was about a four-hour drive. While Sister Mary attended during the summer, I went up to visit her. We went to a Houston Astros game. I am a big Cubs fan. It was my first time at the Astrodome, so I went, of course. Then she came back to spend a few days with my husband and me. One thing she liked about our visit was a really good Mexican food restaurant just down the street from us. She had learned to like Mexican food when she was in Houston. They also served really good margaritas. She did enjoy coming and visiting us a couple summers. We had a good time when she spent a weekend. She was really fun. One thing my brother Tom didn't say was that when Sister played Twister, she also brought her ukulele and played for us and sang the song "Yellow Bird." "Yellow bird, up high in banana tree." She did it so perfectly. We all got the biggest kick out of her. One thing I'm going to miss is that her sense of humor was so much like our Dad's [Jim O'Connor]. The same expressions, the same wit, the same cracking jokes. We truly loved our aunt.

Rosemary O'Haver, Niece, Daughter of Jim O'Connor

I am the oldest of Sister's nieces and nephews. When I was born in 1949, Sister had not yet entered. She shared with me later in life that when she decided to come to Mount Carmel to be a sister, she told her mother Bertille. Bertille said, "You are going to have to tell your father." He was resistant to that. He decided that he was going to take them on a vacation to try to change her mind. He booked a place in Colorado. She said it was a cabin and it was a fishing trip. She said, "Well, how in the world was I supposed to change my mind. There weren't any activities or any boys around and Dad was out fishing all day long." I started to laugh. She was really persistent. She knew what she wanted to do, and she held firm. Once he got up here and realized how wonderful it was up here, and what holy ground it was, he was OK with that. He knew she was following her vocation.

I was just one- or two-years-old when she entered. My parents would come up to visit when she was allowed to have visitors. I was so excited to come. I've been coming here since 1950. I said, "I want to see Mister Bertille. I have to see Mister Bertille." They all laughed at me for calling her "mister" instead of "sister." I really enjoyed her gift of a sense of humor. I must confess that whenever I go on a trip, I always get lost. I think it is an inherited gene. Yesterday on my trip here, I ended up in Wisconsin. I pulled off and all I could do was to start laughing. I thought of Sister Mary. Whenever she and Kay would go on a trip, they would always get lost. I thought, I'm following in my aunt's footsteps.

I am really impressed with Mount Carmel. I absolutely loved coming here to visit her many times. The staff and the sisters have all been so wonderful. I've made so many connections. I thank Sister McCauley. She kept us informed every step of the way during Sister's declining health. When I would come, I always felt so welcomed and so loved. All her students and everyone who kept in touch over the years. That was a great tribute to a woman who was put into teaching when there was no student teaching. She had a class of 60 students. She told me that she had to do a lesson plan. So, someone helped her. Then she said, "After one hour, I had gone all through the whole week of lesson plans. I thought, what am I going to do now?" She said, "We started singing." When she was having a little trouble with one of the students, one young man, who was kind of the boss of the class, stood up and said, "Whatever Sister says, this is what we're gonna do." She had made a friend and he took charge. She really shined after that.

I just want to thank all of you so much for everything you have done for her and how welcoming you have been to our family. It means so much. Thank you.

Sister Emelyn Malecki, BVM, Set of 1950

Mary and I were in the same set. We were assigned to the sewing room. We looked at each other and I said, "Do you sew?" "No." "I don't either." Well, circumstances happen. One Saturday as we were cleaning, I won't go through the whole story, but our consequence was a little severe. She laughed through the whole consequence. I was so nervous because we had to wait until Sister Leo [novice mistress] came home. She had been away, and we had to wait to tell her what happened. Mary laughed through the whole thing. She thought it was a joke, but I didn't.

When we entered and were still in postulant street clothes, she got ill and walked out of the Chapel and went to Sister Leo and said, "Where is the fainting room?" We knew right then that we would have a good time with Mary O'Connor.

Bea Lemke (Newman), Kapaa, Kauai, Hawaii

I wish we had a chance to speak in person. You were one of my favorite teachers at Saint Catherine School in Kapaa, Hawaii. I love you. May your soul be in Heaven singing with the Angel Choirs! Aloha ke Akua. (*She sent the flowers in front of the ambo.*)

Paul Corrado, Former Student, St. Tarcissus, Chicago

Sister Mary Bertille will always be in my heart. When ten of us were moved to her classroom, we all flourished. She had faith in us, taught us, and most of all, loved us. I very much look forward to being with her on the other

side of life. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26).

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

When Mary moved to Mount Carmel some years ago, she wanted to join music for liturgy with her flute. I had heard her play at meetings over the years, and was delighted to have her play at Mount Carmel. She knew she had some gaps in her knowledge and skills, so at her request, we had some coaching sessions, which I enjoyed doing with her.

For several months, I came to Mount Carmel after school for the weekly choir rehearsal. Mary asked if she could do anything for me when I arrived. The first week, I asked if she could bring me one of small cans of ginger ale. Every week after that, when I arrived, Mary met me with a small can of ginger ale.

Since both of us had relatives in Davenport, we were able to travel together on several Sundays to visit. These were always very pleasant trips to and from Davenport.

In later years, I learned that Mary was quite fond of ice cream at just about any time. One Saturday afternoon, as three of us were headed for one of the kitchenettes for an ice cream snack, we met Mary, who was quite concerned about being on time for the rosary. We assured her she would be back in plenty of time if she would like to come with us for ice cream. There was no hesitation in her response, which made all of us, including Mary, laugh a bit at her enthusiasm.

Norm Freund, BVM Associate

My wife and I would not have met and known Mary O'Connor, BVM at all except for a fortunate confluence of events. Some years ago, when the OLA [Our Lady of the Angels] Church in Chicago had been restored, Marabeth and I decided to go to the rededication Mass and dinner. Not wanting to waste a half empty car we offered rides to any BVMs who might like to go. Mary, who taught there in the years after the fire, took us up on the offer! What a delight it was getting to know her in the ride there and back. She was so enthused about the many wonderful memories that being present on the campus again raised upon her time there. We were able to have dinner at table with Marion Murphy, BVM, a former principal there. A great time was had by all!

Sister Kathleen Mullin, BVM

Mary paid no heed when I mentally asked her to wait a bit longer so I could be at her services. I just learned that she died before we left for retreat. Anyhow, I rejoice with my longtime friend and pray-er. When the Quad-Cities lost almost all convents to recycling or deconstruction, Mary and Lydia Buntmeyer, BVM welcomed guests to St. Anne convent in East Moline. Otilie Sana, BVM spent a week there when making retreat. She delighted in the trips Mary provided to parks and the Mississippi River. Great hospitality!