



## **Sharing of Memories of Mary McElmeel, BVM (Eugene)**

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Oct. 30, 2023

### **Katy Jenkins Courtney, Niece, Daughter of Sister Beatrice (McElmeel) Jenkins**

Growing up, I was always somewhat in awe of Mary. I still am. She would come to visit, and I would hear stories of the places she had travelled and the good work she was doing. I admired her as a strong, independent, and courageous woman. Yet, she was the nicest person with a heart of gold who always saw the best in everyone. Mary is certainly the sweetest and holiest person I have ever known and a true vessel for God's work on earth. I enjoyed her dinner table discussions challenging my father whose views on social justice were not as enlightened as hers. Mary was courteous, but steadfast in her comments and would not back down. You go, girl!

When my son Michael was born in 2000, I told Mary that my life goals for my newborn son were very simple. There were three H's that I wanted him to be – happy, healthy, and helpful. Quick minded Mary immediately added, "You forgot the fourth one – holy." I can still picture her sweet smile with that little bit of Irish impish sparkle in her eyes.

I think the picture I sent of Mary with Michael captures a lot of Mary's essence. It's from 2017 when Michael and I were doing a cross-country drive and stopped to visit Mary at Mount Carmel. Ever the educator and lifelong learner, Mary asked Michael to show her how to use her iPad. Michael passed away in 2019 and I have a feeling that Michael and Mary are going to be restarting their lessons soon. May God bless you and give you peace.

### **Madison Durscher, Grandniece**

We were very fortunate to have Sister Mary bless our first child, Theodore James Durscher. Theo was able to visit with Sister Mary a few times and faceted her on her 99th birthday! We will forever cherish the memories and know that she blessed our second child, due in March, in our hearts. We will miss her and the visits we had with her.

### **Jean Larkin Evangelista, Cousin, Sister to Sue Larkin Pier**

Sister Mary was my mother's cousin and best friend. One of my earliest memories, when I was only four, we were invited by Sister Mary to come here. It was New Year's Day 1965. We went down to the Roberta Kuhn Center in the barn and went bowling! I will never forget it. I was only four years old and still remember it. There was just one bowling alley. I have five sisters. I'm number five of the bunch and she (*Sue Larkin Pier*) is number two. We would set up the pins. But there was a sliding glass door directly behind the bowling alley. My dad – I don't think he had ever bowled in his life – was winding up. Sister came running up, "Wait, wait!" She opened the door just in case the ball went backwards. When I got married, she made a beautiful banner that hung on the altar. She was always a part of our family.

### **Sue Larkin Pier, Cousin, Sister to Jean Larkin Evangelista**

Coming to visit Sister Mary on New Year's Day was a family tradition while she was here. We looked forward to it. It was a highlight. Like Jean said, we got to go to the big green barn to bowl and play basketball. One of our fondest memories is Sister Mary and our mom having a shoot-off playing basketball. Here's Sister Mary in her full habit. She's charging down the court with Mom after her. We were all like, "Oh my!" We didn't know nuns

could run! Wonderful memories. She was a part of our family and we cherished her. I came to visit her a couple of months ago. The first thing I saw was that smile. I would have recognized her anywhere if I saw that smile.

### **Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM**

When the Gables building was completed, Mary was the very first BVM to arrive in the building. I got to wheel her in. I remember that she carried a little box that had a sign that said, "I love Mount Carmel." I visited Mary frequently. There were two times when I visited her that she told me how often her family met with Jesus down on the river side. I don't know if that was a dream, but I think it is a reality now.

### **Elsie McElmeel, Sister-in-Law, Wife of Jim McElmeel**

Sister Mary was my sister-in-law. I married Jim, her brother. When I heard a couple of weeks ago that Sister Mary was going to see Jesus, I said, "I hope she holds in there until the 30th so she will go to heaven and celebrate with her brother. She's up in heaven today celebrating her brother's birthday with him as we celebrate her too. They loved each other so much. Now they will be happy together up there.

### **Ann Durscher, Niece, Daughter of Jim & Elsie McElmeel**

Today is my dad's birthday. Happy 96<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Dad! How the Macs loved to get together. I'm sure there were some shenanigans going on to get Sister Mary to heaven to celebrate my dad's birthday today.

My dad and Sister Mary had a very, very strong bond. I knew that from the very beginning. They loved each other very dearly. My story is of my dad and how much he adored and was so proud of his older sister.

I was in on a couple of birthday shenanigans for Sister Mary. One was for her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. She was also celebrating her 50 years of her devotion to God. My dad mentioned to me that Sister Mary had never received diamonds. So, we went on a hunt for some diamond earrings. They weren't your ordinary diamond earrings. They had to be a star.

Every five years or so we had a big McElmeel family reunion here in Dubuque. At that reunion, my dad presented her with these diamond earrings. Of course, Sister Mary was taken back by it all. She did not like being the center of attention, but my dad loved it. He got her! It was a little shenanigan for him.

Every August, Sister Mary and a couple of her friends enjoyed a week at our cabin. They loved sitting on the porch. There was a heron there that they named Henrietta. Even now, we would see Henrietta and say, "Oh, there's Henrietta!" On her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, she thought she would be enjoying a relaxing birthday at the lake, but my dad had other plans. For weeks, even months, prior, my dad found this beautiful pendant in a magazine and ordered it. When it showed up, he didn't like it. Again, I was involved in helping him find the perfect gift. He wanted a pendant that she could wear on her coat. He went to a local jeweler and had a blue sapphire pendant made with a small star in the middle. It was beautiful. We had a gathering at the cabin. When Dad presented the pendant to her, he said, "The day you were born, a star was born." Her response, "Jim, you are full of blarney." So, on this day, I can only imagine the party that is happening in heaven with all the Macs reunited, celebrating my dad's birthday. I'm sure they are under a tree having a picnic. I was told that Sister Mary's favorite song was "Shall We Gather at the River." When we were singing that on Thursday, there was a verse that really touched me. "Soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace." I can just imagine all the Macs together wanting to celebrate my dad's birthday, and there is Sister Mary running up and down that river, jumping with joy and with a happy heart, that she is finally reunited with her family and that she has use of her legs. Until we meet again, I love you. Give my dad a big birthday hug.

### **Sister Judy Callahan, BVM**

It was in the early 1990s that I was beginning a new mission with Father Tony Taschetta in Kankakee, Ill. It was a brand-new ministry there. I thought I needed somebody with some heart and some soul and some fun. I called Mary and asked if she would join me in this work in Kankakee, Ill. I had been there for a couple months. She said, "I don't speak Spanish." I said, "You don't need to speak Spanish. The smile is the same in every language." That

was no more true that in an experience in the subsequent months when a young woman was abducted and raped and taken by her own brother-in-law. Mary, not knowing Spanish, helped to comfort this family and work through the legal, physical, and emotional experiences. She followed it through for years in that case.

Mary had a little bit of a temper sometimes, a little bit feisty. The best example I can think of is when she and I were in Hawaii and staying at a convent in Oahu. There was no glass on the windows, just screens, so every sound from the night came in. Mary was in a room right above a rooster. The rooster began crowing at about 1 o'clock in the morning every 20 minutes or so. She came in the morning so blurry-eyed and so upset with that rooster that she wanted to have chicken noodle soup for supper.

After I left Kankakee, there were still three Marys left there – Mary Kelliher, Mary Crimmin, and Mary McElmeel. Now the Hispanic people were not very good remembering last names. Everybody was “Sister Mary.” The phone would ring, and they wanted Sister Mary. We would have to say, “Do you mean the tall Sister Mary who doesn’t speak Spanish, or the short Sister Mary who doesn’t speak Spanish, or the short Sister Mary who does speak Spanish?” So we could distinguish which one of the Marys it was. Mary, we love you and we miss you and we celebrate the fact that you are with our God.

### **Sister Karen Conover, BVM**

I am one of the few people in the community who did not know Mary personally because I am from the novitiate in Los Gatos in Guadalupe. But her reputation was definitely something.

I met Mary when I came to work here about eight years ago. In the last seven years as we visited together in Gables, her inability to stand and walk was a great cross. Something she said to me more than once. She held out her hands and said, “They bring Communion, and this is Jesus in my own hand.” She seemed almost transfixed by that. So, I say, “Now, Mary, Jesus has you in his hands.”

### **Sister Roberta White, BVM**

I was blessed to live with Mary for seven years at Cardinal Spellman in Omaha, Nebr. There are so many stories to tell about Mary. Her great sense of adventure, sense of humor and sense of the beauty of creation, as we sang in the opening song. Stasia Stafford, Judine [Bruch], Raymunda [Clark] were blessed to be on that five-week camping tour from Omaha to Yellowstone. We left Yellowstone very quickly because the second day we woke up they were telling us that the bear had clawed the tree. So, we were out of there fast. We went up to Glacier then Banff and Lake Louise in Canada, down the coast. We picked up Raymunda Clark in San Francisco, then to my family in Los Angeles, and to Mary’s sister Irene’s house in San Diego. One of the funniest parts is that we couldn’t fit any place with our camper, so we put it in her garage and camped in Irene’s garage. To say we had been in three countries, Irene took us on the trolley to Tijuana, so we got in Mexico. On that camping trip, we were blessed. We saw such beauty on the way back. We saw Grand Canyon, Zion. It was a glorious, wonderful trip. Mary was so very, very special and so wonderful to live with. It was a great blessing to be there at Spellman with her.

### **Sister Lynn Winsor, BVM**

Mary Mac was the novice director when I had just become a novice. It was 1967. Joanie Nuckols, Linda Roby, and I are still here. Mary was in charge of us that summer of service in Chicago. Linda went to St. Constance, and Joanie and I went to Our Lady of the Angels. We were running a recreation program for all these different schools. She was in charge of us all. She was firm with us because it was a wild, crazy neighborhood and we had to be careful where we went. She was very motherly. My job, because I was older, was to drive the arts and crafts to all the different places. The problem was that Budweiser Corporation gave us a Budweiser beer truck. We were in this beer truck driving around the city and people were always trying to get free beer. Mary McElmeel would come with me. I would say, “Mary Mac, come on in. This Bud’s for you.” We continued all around the city, helping all these kids do arts and crafts – posters, paints, crayons, you name it. We really got to know the city. It was a really great program.

One time we took 30 of the kids down to the beach on the "L." There were three of us responsible. We started out with 30 and ended up with 29 back at Our Lady of the Angels. Mary Mac was very firm that day with me because we had lost one of the kids. We immediately went back down there in cabs and found the child who was having a great time. The girl who was responsible for her didn't watch the kid. We got back and Mary Mac said, "This was a wonderful example of learning to take care of each other, to share, make sure you are responsible young women. You are now novices, and you must behave that way." She was very firm but thanked God that the child was saved. Mary Mac, I know you are up in heaven and this Bud's for you.

### **Gene McElmeel, Nephew, Son of Jim McElmeel**

Sister Mary was a rock in our family. Since we were little kids, I remember her coming to see our grandpa. She would stay with us and work in the garden. If we ever got together, she was part of it. If she wasn't, it felt like we weren't all together. I remember the bowling alley. She was around with us all the time growing up. My dad was burned very badly in 1992. We called her; I believe she was in Kankakee, Ill. She was there right away and spent time with me, Mom, and Dad, as she could. It meant the world to Dad to have her there to help him through that.

My wife and I had triplets. Mary was there immediately again to help us. We had a routine. I would wash each child in the sink. I would hand him to my wife to dry off and then Mary would bundle them on the counter in their swaddled clothes. My children really wish they could be here today. They loved Mary very much. She loved being here. She was very happy here. She will always be a part of us in the heart and soul of our family. I hope she is celebrating with the family up in heaven now.

### **Mary Hardiman Desmond**

Mary Mac was my friend. I first met Mary when I entered Mount Carmel as a member of the Set of 1965. Mary was then the assistant novice mistress and also helped out with the postulants when needed. She was warm and welcoming and always had a smile on her sweet Irish face. She kept a protective eye on me and Pat Keane as we had a bit of trouble following the rules. Mary never got angry; there were several instances when I was a novice that she gently stepped in and put me on the right path. Mary went with our set to the Spiders, and we had a wonderful time, and she did too.

Over the years I kept up with Mary through Ginnie Spiegel and the many reunions our Set had. Mary attended all our reunions and listened to all our stories and told some of her own. She had a great sense of humor! I've kept up with Mary for all these years through cards and visits. She was always interested in my family and to hear about my traveling adventures. One time when I was visiting with Mary, she had just turned ninety. She said to me, "Mary Hardiman, can you believe I'm 90?! I'm 90 and that's really old!!" I told her that was a pretty big number. She then said, "give me your hand." I did and she squeezed it hard! Then she said, "Now that's the strength of a real Iowa farm girl." And it was!! I got to visit Mary a couple of weeks ago for our last time; she was so ready to go to God. I will miss you, my friend, you were truly a blessing in my life. Until we meet again may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

### **Sister Isabel Conchos, BVM**

Mary, my heart was filled with gratitude as you walked with me on my spiritual journey each day I was living and working with you and Eileen Powell. You integrated your faith with the charism of Mother Mary Frances Clarke and the Core Values of Education, Freedom, and Charity in our mission in Kankakee, Ill. They were special days, set apart from all the rest, in which God smiled upon us as we were establishing His reign here on earth. Your compassion went out to the men and women who immigrated to Kankakee and left their families in Latin America. Our immigrant families shared that they were united in prayer with their families every day at 3:00 p.m. So, I continue to be connected with our mission in Kankakee through prayer at 3:00p.m. Thanks for your love, support and understanding. Mary, may our companionship continue going strong from earth to heaven until we meet again. May you rest in peace. Amen.

**Nancy Hogan Augustine, Former Coworker**

Mary and I taught together at Cardinal Spellman [in Omaha, Nebr.] the fifth and sixth graders. She taught math and I had them for science. Mary was a great mentor and friend! We had a fun visit at Mount Carmel a few years ago with my husband and son. I had hoped to visit again last summer but it didn't work out. I will miss her. Know that she is no longer suffering.

**David Suley, Former Student**

I will never forget Sister Mary Eugenne who was my beloved eighth-grade teacher at Incarnation Parish in Glendale, Calif., during the 1958-1959 school year. As her students, we used to call her "Mighty Mouse" for – though she was a bit small – she was an amazingly strong and determined person! She worked with us that important year so we would all be accepted into one of the local Catholic high schools. And we did! She was a wonderful teacher. She was my favorite teacher who opened so many doors for me and made me believe in myself and what I could accomplish in my life. I owe Sister Mary Eugenne so much! She was an inspiration to me. I will always remember her as my eighth-grade teacher, as a wonderful friend, and always as "Mighty Mouse" who could do anything! Thank you, Sister! May God speed you on your way! I will miss you always!