



Eulogy of Eileen (James Leone) McGovern, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Jan. 14, 2026

It is so good to be together with all of you, Eileen's BVM sisters, family and friends, to remember and celebrate the life of a remarkable woman.

Eileen was a woman full of hope, joy, and deep gratitude to God, her family, her BVM sisters and the many others who accompanied her along her life path. Her journey began on July 18, 1929, in Dubuque, Iowa, as the fourth child of Michael and Leonilla (Wiemold) McGovern. She joined siblings Virginia, James and William with sisters Mary Ann and Rose Marie completing the family. Sadly, brother James died in Germany during World War II.

Eileen graduated from St. Raphael Cathedral School and St. Joseph Academy, both in Dubuque. She entered the BVM congregation on Sept. 8, 1947. "Looking back to my early community experiences I realize that even as a postulant, I valued the presence of joy in my life. I must have brought that desire to live a full and joyful life with me from home." When Eileen was received on March 19, 1948, she was given a small card with her religious name printed on it. It was the name she requested, James Leone, in honor of both her brother and her mother. On the back of the card Eileen wrote, "I will sing to the Lord all the days of my life. I will give praise to my God while I have being." (Psalm 104: 33). "That was my favorite Scripture quote," she commented. "The intervening years have deepened in me my zest for living fully, and the BVM way of life provided me with a focus as I strived to live out our BVM mission to be free and to help others enjoy freedom in God's steadfast love."

Eileen professed first vows on March 19, 1950, and lived 78 years as a BVM. She was missioned as a junior high teacher for her first eleven years of vowed life. Her missions included St. Paul in San Francisco; St. John and St. Ambrose in Des Moines, Iowa; and Sacred Heart in Lincoln, Nebr.

Eileen completed a bachelor's degree with a history major at Mundelein College in Chicago in 1961. That same year, she received a letter from Mother Mary Consolatrice (Helen Wright) requesting that she consider a mission to South America. It would be the first time BVMs would be missioned (working) in a foreign country. She accepted and was sent with Sister Veronica (Ruth Ann) Moore to Bogotá, Colombia. Eileen taught English as a second language at Universidad Javeriana for three years and studied Spanish in her free time.

"We were in full habit, and we were limited in the kind of activities, not church or school related, that we were allowed to attend. The first time we were invited to some activity for which we thought we needed permission to attend, we wrote to Helen Wright. We did not receive an answer, so we presumed permission. After a short time, we stopped seeking permission, and we just did what seemed sensible to do. We were going out to eat and then to a movie long before the BVMs in the States were doing it!"

Eileen completed a master's degree in sociology in 1966 and returned to Bogotá to teach at the university for two more years. She earned a doctorate degree in sociology from St. Louis University in 1968. After teaching the 1969 spring semester at Clarke College, Eileen and Sister Joan Newhart journeyed to Salta, Argentina, to teach during the summer and fall sessions at the Jesuit Universidad Católica.

In 1970 Eileen became the chair of the Sociology/Social Work Department at Clarke College. Lacking in a social work background, Eileen decided to take courses at University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. In her words, "I got hooked." She completed her master's degree in social work at Iowa in 1975. Two years later Eileen resigned from Clarke to become a school social worker for the Grant Wood Area Education Agency located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She resigned from that position when she was elected to congregational leadership as second vice president in 1980.

In 1984, at the end of her term, Eileen felt called to move into the mental health field. She was awarded a fellowship at Menninger Hospital in Topeka, Kans., the leading mental health facility in the country at that time. She was assigned to the Crisis Admission and Special Evaluation Unit (CASE) which she felt was the most interesting unit. After completing the fellowship, Eileen returned to Dubuque to be near her aging mother. She accepted a position as a therapist at the Dubuque County Mental Health Center. During her 15 years at the mental health center, she was often invited to speak on current mental health issues, she trained and served as a hospice volunteer, and she volunteered with the Red Cross disaster response team that included two weeks in the Virgin Islands after a devastating hurricane. It was there that Eileen truly realized the resilience of the human spirit.

When Eileen turned 70, she considered retiring from her position as therapist to pursue less demanding employment. She traveled to Ghana at the invitation of Sister Mary Ann Hooke to present a workshop at the pastoral center in Kumasi. While there Eileen contemplated how her counseling skills might be used in Ghana. However, sensing a strong call to work once more with Hispanics, Eileen was persuaded by the director of Catholic Charities to minister as a counselor for Hispanics in the Dubuque Archdiocese. After eight years of traveling the highways of eastern Iowa, Eileen resigned from her position at Catholic Charities to become part of the Pastoral Care Team at Mount Carmel.

Reflecting upon her life, Eileen shared, "In my ministry as counselor I have helped others to break loose from the bondage of fear, shame, worry, guilt and anxiety and I have helped them move toward greater self-acceptance. . . I have become convinced of the importance of awareness, of living in the present moment, and of radical acceptance of self. . . to live a full human life."

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you. . . For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says our God—plans for your welfare, plans to give you a future full of hope." (Jeremiah 1:5, 29:11). God did indeed have wonderful plans, a future full of hope in mind for Eileen. And through her ministries, she helped others realize a future full of hope as well.

Imagine the fullness of Eileen's joy as she is welcomed home, embraced by her family, BVM sisters, friends, the people she served and by our loving God.