

## Sister Margaret Brennan, IHM

### *Eulogy*

Delivered by Dr. Patricia Cooney Hathaway ~ May 2, 2016

It is so good for us to be here to celebrate our dear Margaret's final liturgy in this holy place, which she loved so much, built by her father, Henry J. Brennan. As I have listened to people speak about Margaret these last few days, especially at the Remembering Service yesterday, the word I kept hearing over and over is, to no one's surprise, "special." There was a stream of visitors to her room in the infirmary these past few weeks, thanking her for the positive impact she had on their lives. Margaret had an incredible capacity for making, nourishing and sustaining relationships with people of every walk of life. She had a gift of making all of us feel special and good about ourselves, and in turn, she was very special to all of us.

As evident from the reception yesterday, where members of the Brennan clan shared poignant, funny and heartwarming memories of Margaret, it is clear she was very special to her extended family as well. She was first and foremost "Aunt" who over the years became for many of us a spiritual guide, teacher, confidante and friend. She would call, send cards and travel to every event she was invited to: baptisms, first communions, confirmations, graduations, family gatherings, saying the grace before the meal at wedding receptions and giving the eulogy at funerals for our loved ones who had died. This was no small accomplishment given the fact that Margaret was Aunt not only to the children of her six brothers and sisters, but over time to their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren - at last count, 78!

From Boise, Idaho, to Seattle, Wash., Traverse City, Port Huron, Florida, Minnesota, Washington DC, California, New York, Cloverdale Beach in Canada, and of course the metropolitan area, Margaret delighted in getting to know and spending time with her extended family.

Margaret also kept us connected to our roots. She was an engaging story teller who held us spellbound with stories about what it was like growing up in the Brennan household. One particular memory is her description of Sunday night dinner. While they ate dinner as a family every night, Sunday night was special as there were often guests - Monsignor Harold Markey, brother of Margaret's mother, Ann; Father Vincent Brennan, brother to her father, Henry; as well as other guests who enjoyed the Brennan hospitality.

As children they were told to be seen and not heard, but as young adults the dinner table was the place for lively, spirited conversation, getting louder as one voice tried to speak over the others to make his or her opinion heard. This tradition, I am happy to say, continues to flourish in several households, though I have learned there are certain topics that have been banned from the dinner table, due to the heated debates that played havoc with people's digestive system!

Another memory that I recall is one Margaret shared in her memoir, *What was There for Me Once*. It concerns her mother, Ann, whom Margaret describes as, "very much her own person." She writes, "My father's mostly unarticulated attitude of equality for women comes through clearly on my mother's tombstone in the Brennan plot at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Detroit. It simply reads, "Ann Elizabeth Markey, wife of Henry J. Brennan. He insisted that her maiden name was important even in death." I find myself wondering if Margaret's dedication, especially

in her formation work, to helping young women own their own voices and take responsibility for their own lives, found its beginning here.

As Sister Mary mentioned yesterday, Margaret loved beauty. No matter where she lived, she always had flowers. When you visited her in her room here at the Motherhouse, she would show you the flower boxes outside her windows, or take you to the veranda where she loved to entertain, proudly displaying various arrangements of plants and flowers.

Margaret had a real sense of fashion. She has a simple elegance in her choice of clothes and she seldom passed up an opportunity to go to Coldwater Creek or Talbots - her favorite stores - to shop for a new outfit.

Margaret had a healthy dose of what I call "Brennan vanity," especially when it came to her hair. When she moved to the infirmary, she was concerned about having a beautician come and fix her hair so as to be presentable to those who came to visit her. When no one was available for a few days, I offered to bring my electric rollers and set her hair. As I began this endeavor, I found to my dismay that Margaret's hair was bone straight! I could not get it to bend around a curling rod. So in desperation, I got tissues of toilet paper from the bathroom which, thank God, did the trick. When all was said and done, I was quite proud of how Margaret looked. I gave her a mirror, she held it up and, in typical Margaret fashion, fussed with her hair, looked at me and commented, "It'll do!"

Margaret was a gifted teacher of the spiritual life. She would occasionally remind me, "I'm a pastoral theologian". By that she meant her gift was to unpack our faith tradition in such a way that it really helped people interpret their life experiences within the context of our faith.

Margaret never preached to us or at us. She was a master of the art of the question through which she drew us out, engaged us. As one of my brother's remarked, "She would look you straight in the eye, letting YOU know you had her full attention." She sincerely wanted to know what everyone was doing: their pursuits, struggles, views of God, the Church, issues of the day. We, in turn, sought out her opinions and views on issues and she left us with perspectives we would not have considered on our own. As one of my cousins remarked: "She was such an incredible inspiration!"

Margaret always listened without judgment or criticism. And I think these conversations with family and friends were one of the ways she stayed grounded - real- connected to peoples' life experience which in term made her teaching all the more authentic, powerful and effective.

Margaret delighted in sharing her love for the saints - the ones she called the great friends of God. She felt that many of them had insights to share about the meaning and purpose of life that would help us deepen our own spiritual lives : Ignatius of Loyola, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, and of course, her beloved Teresa of Avila, 16th century mystic and reformer.

Margaret identified with Teresa in many ways: her vivacious personality, her flair for the dramatic, her practical realism, her deep love for God and for the Church and her relentless effort to reform the Carmelite religious order in her day, as Margaret was engaged in the reform of religious life in hers.

Upon hearing of Margaret's impending death, I received an email from Rev. Howard Gray SJ, a former Jesuit Provincial and now Vice-President at Georgetown University. Rev. Gray worked

closely with Margaret on the renewal of religious life for men and women. He reflected on Margaret's legacy:

"So the sad drums of farewell and gentle gratitude are sounding for us folks -- so many- who knew her and what she did and represented for religious life."

He recalled when the bishops conference was meeting the summer before the synod on religious life, he and Margaret were asked to present papers for discussion by the bishops on where religious life had been since Vatican II and where it was going. Margaret told Rev. Gray she was weary of looking back, so he told her he was fine in describing the historical portion of their presentation and she could speak about its future.

He remembers Margaret emphasizing the prophetic role of religious life and noted that some bishops were quick to assert that the bishops were the prophetic voice in the Church. But Rev. Gray said Margaret struck the chord she wanted to emphasize: Prophecy is a gift of the Spirit for which bishops are not its only custodian; the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills and finds expression in a variety of ways, particularly in the prophetic voices of religious women and men who witness in a special way to the gospel values of Jesus Christ: love, compassion, mercy, justice and forgiveness. "This whole event", he said, "testified to her iconic role as a woman-leader of vision, and courage. For this witness we are most grateful."

The charisms of leadership, vision and courage that Rev. Gray valued in Margaret found their source in Margaret's hard earned wisdom. The psychologist, Erik Erikson, looking back on life from the ripe young age of 85, made the following observation:

"When we look at the life cycle in our 40s, we look to old people for wisdom. At 80, though, we look at other 80 year olds to see who got wise and who did not. Lots of old people don't get wise, but you don't get wise unless you age."

The gift of wisdom refers to the qualities of having experience, knowledge and good judgment. Margaret had each in abundance and put them in the service of us all. She was a discerner of hearts; she could read your soul, scary at times. She always knew what to say as she shared in your joy, comforted you and provided solace in times of tragedy, struggle, or loss. And she could gently admonish (ok, sometimes firmly!) in what some of us refer to as her "mother general voice," when she felt there was something that needed to be addressed, always though within the context of deep love and genuine concern for your well-being.

In the stream of emails that have come across my laptop these last few days, there is one, in particular, that comes close to capturing Margaret.

"The meaning, origin and history of the name 'Margaret:' derived from the Latin, Margarita, which was from the Greek, Margarites, meaning "pearl." Indeed Margaret is a pearl of great wisdom, grace, integrity and love. We are extravagantly blessed to have shared God's Spirit in her; what a joy that we are able to carry on some of her gifts!"

Such is the challenge and the privilege that lies before us.

Margaret was a woman of extraordinary gifts and talents which she placed in the service of God, the church, the world, her beloved religious community, friends and family. Each one of us knows we are better women and men for having been graced by her presence.

I must admit that after she died, I found myself thinking that possibly all of us will have less fear of death, comforted in knowing Margaret will be there to welcome us home.

While she is no longer with us physically, the words of one of her favorite theologians, Rev. Karl Rahner, SJ, remind us that she is close by:

"The great and sad mistake of many people... is to imagine that those whom death has taken, leave us. They do not leave us. They remain! Where are they? In the darkness? Oh, no! It is we who are in darkness. We do not see them but they see us. Their eyes, radiant with glory, are fixed upon our eyes. Oh, Infinite consolation! Though invisible to us, our dead are not absent.... They are living near us, transfigured into light, into power, into love!"