

**Remembering Mary McCann, IHM
January 18, 1944 - June 23, 2023**



Good morning. As Christians, we are a Resurrection People. We know that from death comes new life. No matter how we imagine what that might be, it is the fullness of life that we embrace after death.

Mary is living within this fullness and continues to be present in ways that are unfathomable to us. That is why it is difficult at these rituals for we are both grieving and celebrating the life of a loved one.

For these many years during which Mary's cognitive abilities diminished she was not always able to remember or understand what we said as we tried to celebrate who she was. This remembering, then, is as much TO Mary and FOR Mary as it is About Mary.

So, I will be talking to Mary as well as to all of us gathered to help us remember and celebrate the incredible gift she was to each of us and to so many more. We each knew Mary differently, some more personally, and others during the years she served in leadership for us, the IHM community. This reflection gathers remembering's from various areas of her life. It is impossible to capture everything or mention everyone she cared for, and so I thought it would be fitting for all of us to be a part of this reflection.

To do so will entail a little choir practice. The Leadership Council of 1994-2000 used a chant during our years in office, and subsequently sang every year these close to 30 years as we gathered to reconnect and share our life. Over time more and more of us sang it for various occasions. I felt it was a good refrain to frame Mary's remembering.

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

It can be found in the program. Gloria Rivera will sing its first use.

Let us pause and simply remember Mary as you knew her as we prepare to celebrate who she was for her family, the IHM congregation, the Church and the world. Let us sing,

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

Mary, we **affirm** your leadership as President of the IHM congregation from 1994-2000. It was a new moment as we transitioned from provinces to one congregation with a deep commitment to collaborative leadership. To make such a new vision a reality demanded a leader who could lead by facilitating the leadership of the other members of the Leadership Council; a leader secure in herself and not needing the usual trappings of the office for validation. You used your mantle of leadership to envelope every one of us in the congregation. We needed someone to model and create new ways of being President. Mary, you were the perfect person.

Mary, every one of the Leadership Council affirmed your gift of leadership. We all echo Paula Cathcart's love of how you were always open to new ideas and supported every team member in their various responsibilities; and in Mary Agnes Ryan's reflection that for many, not just the Council, there was a feeling that the community as a whole was 'more fully alive' during your presidency with a greater sense of 'ownership of our membership.' We truly were "WE," loving being "US!"

We affirm your educational background in administration and organizational development from the University of Notre Dame which enabled you to understand the value of creating new structures to try to embody the vision of shared leadership. What fun we had when Josephine Sferrella gave you and me Margaret Wheatley's book, Leadership and the New Science, even before we took office to expand our thinking-- and expand it, it did.

We affirm how you were willing to move quickly to begin the implementation of the Theological Education process which encompassed the entire six-year term. This educational process called on the leadership of Margaret Brennan and the IHM theologians and it deepened our Gospel call to mission, more finely attuned to the liberation at work in the world.

Mary, we affirm your willingness to pursue the renovation of our buildings through a congregational wide process that led us to commit to the value of sustainability, seeing it within the broader context of theology and spirituality.

We affirm your invitation to the Oblate Sisters of Providence to come to Monroe for the first time during our Sesquicentennial. I am sure you can still feel the energy which was explosive when they walked into the dining room and we all stood and clapped. That was the beginning of all three IHM congregations and the Oblates beginning to understand that we would never know Theresa Duchemin without each other.

We affirm declaring at the Chapter 2000, Theresa Duchemin our Co-founder with Louis Florent Gillet. Let us sing,

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

Mary, we **encourage**...I want to turn this around to how you encouraged us.

When your Mother came to our health care center in 2003 suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and just a few months later your Father joined her here, your love for them radiated as you encouraged them to enter this phase of their life in this new place with gentleness and love. In your remembering of your Mother, you wrote "that although her disease erased yesterday or a few minutes ago, it did not erase her innate graciousness and generosity of spirit." I think, Mary, those words stayed with you, encouraging you in these later years, for you, too, did not lose your innate graciousness or generosity. Candy Rekert recalled how even in your cognitive decline, you may not have remembered her name, but your eyes still sparkled when you looked at her and said as a good-bye, "You are a good friend."

Being the third of 11 siblings, Michael, Rita, Mary, Tom, Bill, John, twins Carol and Kathy, Ed, Maureen, and Bob, you certainly encouraged them in so many ways. I remember you talking about how Rita and you helped your Mother with the responsibility of taking care of the younger ones. Rita recalled how your Dad put together a couple of desks and blackboards so you all could play school. The oldest three being the main ones in charge. It is not hard to believe you loved playing the teacher. Tom, math being more his subject, remembers that you taught him diagramming, and Carol loved the way you read to her. She thought that if she ever had to read out loud, she wanted to read like you. What a great way to encourage your younger siblings by helping them with their schoolwork.

You believed in the future of religious life and encouraged women who showed interest in the Congregation. During the years 1979-1982 you worked with the new members of the Congregation. Later as President, Anne Crimmins and Fran Mlocek remember how you welcomed all who wanted to join us as vowed, associates, and volunteers. The IHM Puerto Rican community was an integral part of the formation community during that time. Welcoming Carmen Armenta Lara, Maria Antonia Aranda Diaz and Jenni Discher for their canonical novitiate. The Puerto Rican community loves you dearly. Lisandra Pedraza Burgos wrote reminding us of your gift to get in touch with the essence of a person, honoring and holding that person in your heart. She also remembered how you loved dancing not only with music but also with life circumstances.

Through the years you encouraged all the countless women and men you taught in junior high as teacher, then as principal, and later at Marygrove College in the Education Department. Following that, a major shift occurred which opened another dimension of your life and your gifts, adult formation and spirituality, in your Toronto years, 1982-1994. You were faculty at Regis College, part of the University of Toronto School of Theology and Co-Director of Spirituality and Ministry Programs. As Director of Field Education, a required course for the Master of Divinity program, you led students to integrate what they learned in theology and scripture with their practical experience in parishes, hospitals and schools. It was the integration of contemplation and action. Mary Ellen Sheehan says 'you excelled in' this area.

Mary, on a very personal note, I remember how you encouraged me in risking to say what I believed at the 2000 Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and later to help me launch the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue as you served on the Design Team and as part-time staff until 2006. Let us sing,

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

Mary, we bless your commitment to justice, and when as Principal of Christ the King elementary school in Detroit, you resigned your position in 1970. In a beautifully crafted letter to the Pastor, you explained why you came to this decision. Although there were many reasons, a key one was his approach to a black student possibly registering at the school. His position and your position differed, even though the parish committed itself to the development of racial harmony.

Mary, we bless your willingness to deal with conflict directly. The concluding paragraph of that same letter could be read today considering the church's commitment to synodality. "Greater than any of the above reasons is the mistrust which characterizes our dealings with one another. The many real problems besetting the church and Christian education, if they are to be faced honestly and sincerely, require the concerted energies of all concerned—priests, sisters, and laypeople. Where mistrust prevails, as I feel it does between us, personal conflict tends to consume time and energy."

Mary, we bless you in your decision to bring Sister Borgia home from Denver, Colorado. Kate O'Brien, who was sent to accompany Sister's body, remembers the event well. Perhaps best captured in your own words at Borgia's remembering service. "Borgia lived within herself in a space which was often inaccessible to our understanding...I believe, she stretched us to struggle with the meaning of unconditional love and left us humbly conscious that this quality of love is of God...Borgia called us to careful and painful discernment...In 1972 the congregation made a painful decision that was searingly difficult for everyone involved. Borgia continues to call us to a simple, faithful, honest love of one another rooted in the simple fact that we are sisters—blessed and loveable and with dignity simply because we are, because God has gifted us with life, and called us to share life in this congregation." Let us sing,

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

Mary, we celebrate your ability to have fun. Mary Ann Markel loved that you loved parties. Remember our first meal together after election? A Thanksgiving meal that Mary Ann pulled together of turkey and all the trimmings. That certainly became a tradition whenever we had multiple day leadership meetings.

We celebrate your courage to swim in the frigid waters of Lake Huron's Georgian Bay with your good friend, Jane McDonald, to enjoy the Raisin River outside of your apartment in Monroe, and Sterling State Park. Let us not forget your love of herons whose beauty captured your heart and your imagination.

Mary, we **celebrate** the many women with whom you shared life: your 1961 entrance class of 73 women; those with whom you lived in Detroit, both IHMs and an

intercongregational house with Sisters of Loretto, Dominicans, and Religious of the Sacred Heart; as IHMs creating a new community without a superior in 1973; with our women in Chicago, and especially all those with whom you lived in Toronto. The IHM Toronto community welcomed many of us over those years with gracious hospitality.

Mary, we celebrate all the women and men you accompanied through spiritual direction and long friendships throughout the years. I was impressed how you continued this ministry by phone even after you came to the Motherhouse.

Mary, we celebrate your gift of writing, especially your contribution to IHM history in Building Sisterhood, the Monograph *Ecological Consciousness: a 21st Century Imperative*; and the *Time to Sow* series.

Mary, we celebrate, with you, all the nurses, nursing assistants, doctors, and hospice staff who through the years accompanied you, and especially those in these last years in McGivney Way who were with you in the good days and not so good ones.

Finally, Mary, we celebrate your insights which still have a message for us today. Let us listen to what you said to us at the transfer of leadership in 1994.

In choosing to explore our deepest hopes and convictions in light of the monumental changes occurring at this time in history, in light of contemporary theology, and in sustained interaction with one another, we risk encounters with our own poverty, unfreedoms, blindness, imprisonments even as we open ourselves to profoundly good news, and to a greater freedom, vision, and liberation than we may previously have imagined.

Deep down, I think we know that the quality and direction of our shared future together, and our capacity for effective and meaningful mission in the 21st century, depends to a significant degree on this exciting, yet vulnerable journey together. We know that we need to open ourselves more fully to those movements in our world which are most at the service of life and liberation. We know that together we need to look with love and discernment at both our church and our world in all their complexities, contradictions, and possibilities. We need to ask, what is the Spirit laboring to do on the threshold of the 21st century? What does this ask of us as a religious congregation? What does it mean for our mission, for membership, for the structure of religious life as we have known it? These are risky questions for us because they may lead us in ways that we cannot now imagine.

Not to ask the questions, however, is riskier yet. What is at stake is not only the quality and direction of our own shared future, but also our participation in the transformation of religious life and, in turn, of church and society. Let us move forward together; let us not only hear the word but do it."

Mary, we give you thanks for who you are and who you have been as sister, friend, aunt, colleague, IHM. How fitting that today, June 29, is the day that IHMs traditionally professed their vows. In 1969, 36 of your classmates took vows. Seventeen of them

remain in the congregation. Those of you here, please stand if you are able, and remain standing.

On that day you gave yourself completely to loving God and the liberating mission of Jesus. Today, Mary, you are living in the fullness of that love.

Would everyone who can please stand? Let us sing our chant for the final time.

**Amen, We Affirm, Amen, We Encourage, Amen, We Bless and We Celebrate,
Amen**

Written and delivered by Nancy Sylvester, IHM, June 29, 2023.