

May 3

Sister Marie Eileen O'Connell  
1920 - 1955

Sister Marie Eileen was born June 9, 1900, in Detroit. She was baptized Mary Agnes. Mary "after the Mother of God" her mother used to say. When her grandfather came from Ireland, Mary Agnes was about ten years old. He was impressed with her quiet manner and remarked, "Indeed the child is well named; she is gentle as a lamb". And when it came time for her confirmation, she chose the name of Teresa. Perhaps she had a premonition that one day Saint Teresa would be one of her holy patrons and that "Little Therese", who had died only a few years before, would be her exemplar.

Sister belonged to Holy Redeemer parish and early in life was imbued with a tender devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help whose name was frequently on her lips and whose image was often found before her on her desk and in her cell. All during her religious life, and for many years before, she recited daily the prayer of Saint Alphonsus asking our Lady to "assist me always but particularly at the hour of my death". She died early Tuesday morning, May 3, 1955, Our Mother of Perpetual Help day. This day also commemorates the Finding of the Holy Cross by Saint Helena, Sister Marie Eileen's patron saint. Sister was always loyal to the Redemptorist Fathers. On a little slip of paper found in one of her note books after her death was written a list of petitions for those she loved and the "Redemptorists". In the hospital during her last illness, Father Forbes, C.Ss.R., came to see her. Very confidently she said, "Oh, Father, please give me a great big Redemptorist blessing". Sister was likewise devoted to her teachers at Holy Redeemer. Gifted with a prodigious memory, she remembered each one together with various incidents that occurred

to herself or others. These she loved to recount with minute detail in later community recreations.

On graduation from Holy Redeemer High School, Sister expressed her desire to become a religious. Her parents gave their consent but asked that she wait until her sister Catherine (Sister M. Frances Elizabeth) finish school. Most obediently Sister complied with their wishes. During the first year she taught the second grade at Holy Redeemer and the second year she worked in a business office. At long last her time of waiting was over and she entered the postulate June 25, 1920. It was God's will, however, that she have another time of waiting before receiving the holy habit. Sister was sent, as a postulant, to the University of Michigan which for her was a particularly difficult assignment. It meant the postponement of her heart's desire to be clothed in Mary's blue, and never having attended a public school, the atmosphere was most distasteful to her. Taunts of teachers and jeers of students could have been borne only by one thoroughly grounded in her vocation. Chemistry was her major field of study. Sister graduated in June, 1924.

Reception day was August 15, 1924. As a novice Sister taught in the Academy. During the second year of her novitiate she was missioned to Saint Mary of Redford and remained there two years. Her next mission was Saint Philip, Battle Creek, for three years. She went to Marygrove for a year and back to the Academy for seven. When the new St. Mary Academy opened in September 1932, Sister was in charge of the chemistry and she did much in the original planning of the present chemistry laboratory. In 1939 she went to Our Lady of Lourdes, River Rouge. In 1943 she returned to St. Mary of Redford and remained there seven years. After a year at Blessed Sacrament, she went to St. Martin's, her last year on mission in 1949.

Sister taught principally Religion, Chemistry and Mathematics.

That she was considered an excellent teacher by her co-workers was shown by the number who went to observe her. Sisters whom she had taught in summer school were aware of her fund of knowledge and her generosity in sharing it. Her excellence as a teacher was also recognized by her pupils. Students who wrote to her during her sickness would ask "When are you going to return so we can learn some chemistry? , or "We haven't learned any Geometry since you left." True to the injunction of her Holy Rule, Religion was exceptionally well taught. She was frequently found reading articles in magazines and papers that would embellish her explanations and make the class more interesting. Children looked forward to these classes. They felt that while they were guided in the simple, practical ways of life, they were drawn imperceptibly to God.

Besides being very tactful in the presentation of class material and interspersing theory with pertinent stories which sustained a general good spirit, Sister understood children well and appreciated their problems. Her pupils were attracted to her by her general good humor and sympathetic understanding, and by her they were led to God and His Blessed Mother. One of the Academy students wrote the following epitome of her associations with Sister. "Many a time she dried my tears when I was lonesome, scolded me when I needed it, and praised me when she thought I deserved it." Several sought her counsel regarding their vocations. The number that entered our community and other religious orders testifies to the effectiveness of her guidance. The following excerpt from a letter received by her Sister after her death likewise proves the result of her influence.

Menaus, Brazil

Dear Sister,

When I first received the news that you were sick, Sister Marie Eileen, I was pretty close to being sent home to recuperate. In fact, it had already been decided. Seeing you was the only consolation of being sent home. Quite inexplicably, I got better . . . . another one of the many graces I believe you have won for me. When you get to heaven and talk to Our Lord, you'll find out what a miserable investment you have in me. I used to think of you very, very often when studying in Kirkwood. To me it was always so evident that your prayers were making it so easy for me. I watched my friends, much worthier than I struggling and over two-thirds of them leave through the years. Now when things are not so easy any more you are going up closer to the feet of Mary to pray for your priests and especially for me. The others you have helped, guided to their vocations, in the world and as religious, might perhaps have gotten there anyway . . . . for certain I would have been nothing without you, Sister. Never a priest . . . I never dreamed of it till you shaped the dream for me. You were truly the greatest grace of my life. I think very shortly you will have to admit the truth of all this.

All I can do for you is what you have made possible for me to do--say Mass for you. . . . I don't think my mother has seen me weep for many, many years, but I am weeping now. Most probably you will not be able to read this. I have spoken with you for the last time on earth.

I have just come back from the houses of the very poorest of our people. I love the children and have charge of them and the young men. The children run screaming my name, to fling themselves on me. The men follow me. You have done this - sent a Padre to these most abandoned of God's people. How great must be your reward! An now my last blessing to you, Sister Marie Eileen, I send it from here, the jungle. May the blessing of Almighty God descend on you and remain with you forever. Amen.

Your most devoted son,

Padre Filipe, C.Ss.R.

(Reverend Vincent deBaldo from Our Lady of Lourdes)

Sister Marie Eileen's spirituality was most ordinary, modeled upon that of her loved patroness, the Little Flower of Jesus . In a talk to the Novices, Reverend Father Forbes, C.Ss.R., described her as a "relaxed religious ", always joyful, always smiling. Her friends remember her best perhaps for her unusual sense of humor, her ever-ready Irish wit. There was always a story, always a joke, a witty saying, a humorous interpretation of a commonplace thing. She was welcomed at recreation, at table, or in any group because her presence heralded laughter and a good time. Even when she was sickest, her remarks were humorous. One night when she was very ill, two sisters stayed up with her. After a rather bad spell she awakened to find the sisters staring at her in wonderment. She took in the situation and remarked casually, "You look like two foreign ministers." Many a time she cheered the hearts and lightened the burdens of others with her joyful disposition.

Her jovial exterior hid a great depth of soul. She was very prayerful. Many a time she would be found in chapel a few minutes before or after a spiritual exercise, saying the rosary or some extra prayers. She practiced acts of special devotion for Our Lady's great feasts, especially for the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. She loved her vocation as a Sister, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. She was exact in asking permissions required by rule. In her mortification she practiced detachment. She disliked anything unnecessary for herself or in her room. Any letter, card, or trinket received while she was in the infirmary she disposed of quickly. She had but one thing, a small shrine of the Little Flower, which she kept and loved, and her one concern was to keep on her person at all times a relic of the Little Flower.

Sister's last summer was spent at the University of Chicago. While she did not feel very well, she attributed her condition to fatigue after a busy school year, distance and transportation to school, and the excessive heat. She returned to the Motherhouse for her annual retreat in August and left with the others for St. Martins. Sister began the year as usual, attending the community exercises regularly and taking the ordinary quota of classes. As time went on she became more and more exhausted and was failing noticeably. In November she was admitted to Mt. Carmel Mercy hospital. After several diagnostic tests, she had surgery on December 7. Her condition was malignant and too far advanced for any possible assistance. She improved to such an extent that she was taken to the infirmary at Monroe before Christmas. From then on her strength gradually failed. All during her sufferings she did not utter a word of complaint. Much could be written of her great concern not to cause trouble for others or make extra work for them. When Sister was informed of her serious condition, she was perfectly resigned and asked to be annointed on the feast of St. Joseph. Those who knew her well had often heard her say how fearful she was of death. To them her perfect peace and calm was a miracle of grace. Truly in her case, as is so aptly expressed on her memorial card, the Words of Wisdom were verified, "The souls of the just are in the hands of God, and the torment of death shall not touch them

Sister's one great human consolation during the days of intense suffering was the constant, tireless, loving care of her own sister, Sister Frances Elizabeth, then a novice. Sister had prayed much for her Sister's

vocation and her joy was unbounded when Sister was received into the congregation after years of caring for their parents. When Sister was aware that her days were few, she expressed regret that perhaps she would not live to see Sister professed (profession was June 29). Sister was conscious to the end receiving her dear Lord in Holy Communion each morning. Often she thanked God for His divine Providence in giving her so many graces. She longed to wake up and find it Heaven, her eternal home. Her parting counsel was to do everything in faith and to love and revere your superiors doing all you can to be helpful to them.

Right Reverend Monsignor Marron was the celebrant of the funeral Mass, May 5. He was assisted by Reverend William Pettit, a former pupil, and by Reverend Frank Burns, assistant pastor of St. Martin's. In the sanctuary were Reverend Elmer Nacy and Reverend Donald Dacey, another former pupil. Reverend S. Bowers was master of ceremonies. All the Sisters, Seniors and many students from St. Martin's attended the funeral as well as a large number of relatives, friends and classmates. There were many offerings of Holy Masses sent by students of former years and all feel confident that in heaven, like her holy patroness, she will continue to do good upon earth. All mourn the loss of a loved Sister, a loyal friend and a devoted teacher, but as an associate has so aptly said, "Heaven has gained such a happy saint!"

Sister Marie Fidelis Remski