



SISTER MARY DENIS MC KINLEY

April 11, 1916 — July 31, 2005

*“I pray for the wisdom to see all things in my life
as calls to confidence in God’s ever-present love.”*

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

These are the words of Mother Seton, and they are words that Sister Mary Denis lived.

There is an old saying that good things come in small packages. And Sister Mary Denis is a prime example of this.

Mary Frances McKinley was born on April 11, 1916, one of eight children of Archibald Joseph McKinley and Martha Jane McCall McKinley. She was baptized at Saint Francis de Sales Church and attended Saint Francis de Sales elementary and high schools.

After graduation, Sister Mary Denis spent two years in Saint Mary, Dominican Novitiate in Columbus, Ohio. Because the Dominican Congregation believed she was physically unable to bear the responsibilities of the religious life, and would do much better in the “air of her native state,” she left the order. *Did They Not Know Sister Mary Denis?* She returned to her “native state,” and thank God, did very well in the Pennsylvania air. After a few years she entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill on April 12, 1936, where she prayed, ministered, loved and was loved until she died this week.

“Education worthy of the name trains the whole person—physically, mentally, and morally—to his or her fullest capacity.” These were Sister Mary Denis’s words explaining what she believed was Catholic education.

Sister Mary Denis received a Bachelor of Education degree from Duquesne University, and then continued her education through various continuing education courses, workshops, institutes, and conferences. She received a Master Teacher certificate in teaching elementary math from the Dr. Schott program, and a certificate in teaching reading from Marquette University.

Before she began to teach school, Sister Mary Denis ministered to the babies—or as they were fondly called, the run arounds—at Rosalia Foundling.

But in 1950, she ventured into the wonderful world of teaching . Sister Mary Denis taught primary grades at Saints Peter and Paul School in the diocese of Tucson, Arizona, Saint Stephen, Sacred Heart, Saint Anselm, Holy Innocents, Saint Luke, and Carnegie Catholic in the diocese of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Mother of Sorrows in the diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Sister Mary Denis proved to be such an excellent teacher she became a mentor for many new primary teachers.

I had the good fortune to meet Sister Mary Denis in 1984, when I was assigned to be principal at Mother of Sorrows, in Murrysville. Before I arrived at Mother of Sorrows, Sister taught the first grade, prepared the children for the sacraments of Holy Eucharist and reconciliation, taught in the school’s Enrichment Center, prepared the students for first grade in the readiness program and trained the boys as altar servers.

When I arrived, Sister Mary Denis was ready to be the librarian. This would be sister’s first time as librarian, and like everything she did, she approached it with great enthusiasm. She searched the catalogs for new books, scheduled story hour for the little ones, helped the older students with research projects and kept everyone interested in new additions.

But it wasn’t always work with Sister Mary Denis. She enjoyed a good time and was always ready to go. She had a wonderful sense of humor and enjoyed fun as much as anyone. One particular time I recall was an invitation to an awards dinner sponsored by Forbes Health System. The evening consisted of dinner and river cruise. Late in the day someone gave Sister Lyn an extra ticket. She called to ask if Sister Mary Denis would like to go. Since we had to be there at 5:15, and it was already 4:30, and Sister Mary Denis was still at school, I said , “I’ll call, but that will really be a rush. She may not want to go.” Well, I called, asked, and her answer was, “Of course, I’ll go! Just plug in my curling iron, and I’ll be right there.” So we went and she had a wonderful time.

By this time the community was no longer wearing the traditional habit. This entailed a little change and thought on the subject of clothes. Sister Mary Denis always wanted to look her best. She loved clothes, and she loved to go shopping. No matter how long and hard her day had been, if you said let's go shopping she was in the car before you got the keys. She had a stamina for shopping of a person half her age.

Sister Mary Denis was always on hand for Communion visits. She went with the priest to Murray Manor each week. Sister would go into the rooms before the altar boys and priests to be sure the residents were not in disarray. One time, after going into one of the rooms, sister came out and said to the priest, "Don't go in there and don't let the altar boys go in, either." She went to the nurses' station and told the nurse, "You have a dead resident in the room." The nurse said, "That cannot be, I was just in there!" Denis looked at her with those big brown eyes, and said in all seriousness, "Looks dead to me." And she quietly walked away. The patient was certainly dead!

One Friday, I arrived home from a Seton Hill Board meeting to learn that sister had been taken by ambulance to Forbes Hospital. On her way home from the school, sister had fallen on the ice. Because it was a cold, snowy, icy winter day, no one was outside, and no one saw her fall or heard her cries for help. After sitting on the cold ground for awhile, she somehow managed to get her bag of books under her so she wasn't directly on the ice; she then settled down knowing someone would come and help her. Well, someone did come, but not for fifteen or twenty minutes. The computer teacher finally heard her cries, but he could not see her because it was dark. Denis just kept yelling while Bruce followed the sound of her voice and finally found her. When she arrived at Forbes Hospital, she had a broken leg.

After that episode, she never really felt like herself. She never complained, she never asked for any special treatment, but she knew her energy was not like it used to be, and decided perhaps it was time to go to Assumption Hall.

The day we took sister to Assumption Hall was one on the hardest days of the year at Mother of Sorrows School. You would have thought we were the ones leaving. She, as always, was ready to do what she knew was best, even if we were not. And so, no matter how hard it was for her to break away, she would never let us know.

However, don't think her life ended, or even slowed down. At Assumption Hall she was the local councilor for three years, assistant director of finance, secretary to the plant manager, business office coordinator and coordinator of transportation. She moved to Caritas Christi when the building was completed. Then her record says she retired. But we know better. Until her health said stop, she continued to do as many little jobs as she possibly could, serving her sisters as best she could.

There are many things that I admire about Sister Mary Denis: her zest for life, her love of people, her joy in working with little children, that twinkle in her eye when she had a secret or knew better, the dark hair that never turned gray, but most of all, I admired her ability to take what life dealt her and enjoy and be happy with it.

Denis, it is our pleasure to have known you. As your niece said last evening, we will always remember you as a great person in a small body. But even more we will always remember you as someone who taught us to, "pray for the wisdom to see all things in life as calls to confidence in God's ever-present love." St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Dorothy Dolan
August 3, 2005*