

Sister Mary Elizabeth Boyle
November 29, 1931 - January 12, 2009



We pause now, before we take our Sister Mary Elizabeth to her final resting place, to gather our memories of her presence among us. A eulogy is about the one who has died. But it seems that we create eulogies more for the sake of those of us who remain. The Indian poet Tagore wrote, “Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.” And so, Betty is even now rejoicing with the dawn. Her going, though, her death, has caused, at least for a little while, a certain extinguishing of the light in our world. We pause, then, to remember together and to thank God for the gift of her life and the light she brought to us.

This year, we have been reading and pondering the document, “The Spirituality of the Charity Tradition.” We try to make our own the richness of that spirituality. What the words describe seems so familiar and yet so new that we come away inspired, enlivened for the mission. Each time we gather, as we do this morning, to remember and give thanks for the life of one of our Sisters who has gone before us, we find not just inspiring words. We find the evidence of a life lived “striving for perfect Charity in the service of God and of the Church.” And our hearts are filled with gratitude.

On November 29, 1931, Joseph and Alice Sheehan Boyle welcomed a fourth child, the third daughter, to their family. At Saint Kieran’s Church, Father Clougherty baptized their little girl with the name Mary Elizabeth. She joined her sisters Kathleen, Loretta, and her brother William (“Bucky” as we learned last evening.) Two years later, her sister Joann came along. Mary Elizabeth went to elementary school at Saint Kieran’s and high school at Ursuline Academy.

With twenty-seven other young women, Mary Elizabeth entered the Sisters of Charity on September 8, 1950. The community referred to them as the “Holy Year Group,” since the Pope had declared 1950 a holy year of jubilee for the universal church. When she received the habit on March 19, 1951, Mary Elizabeth also received her religious name, Sister Raymond Marie. For the next 38 years—from 1952, when she was a second year novice, until 1990—she served in elementary education in the dioceses of Pittsburgh and Greensburg as a primary teacher and then as principal. In 1975, Sister Mary Elizabeth was named among twelve teachers in the Greensburg diocese as Outstanding Elementary Teachers of America. In 1986, a parishioner at Saint Jerome School in Charleroi wrote a letter to the pastor. She had heard that Sister Mary Elizabeth was leaving Saint Jerome’s after six years and appealed to him to prevent that. She wrote, “Sister Mary Elizabeth has upheld her reputation as being one of the best teachers that has ever come down the pike. That was the expression relayed to the parents here at Saint Jerome before she arrived. In fact, she had been here only a few short months when we found this statement to be consistently true.”

Throughout our lives, Sisters of Charity cultivate the practical spirituality we inherited from Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac, and Saint Elizabeth Seton. This spirituality prepares a Sister of Charity to be “open to appeal and ready to respond in whatever way the Church needs us.” After so many years as teachers, Sister Mary Elizabeth and her blood sister, Sister Joann, began to hear a new appeal from within their own experience nursing their mother and their sister Kathleen through lengthy illnesses.

They had discovered the scarcity of in-home care for the elderly in Florida. These two excellent Sister of Charity educators were quick to see that teaching is only one way of telling about God's love. Jesus had made real the Good News of God's love to people through his works of healing and reaching out to the poor and abandoned. And so, Sisters Mary Elizabeth and Joann received permission to begin a new ministry in Lakeland, Florida. For the next 16 years, from 1992 until the present, they have been co-laborers with VISTE, (Volunteers In Service to The Elderly), serving needy people in their own homes. During these years, they have been joined in this mission by their sister Loretta Bice and by Sister Carmel Rose, a Sister of the Holy Family.

Interviewed by Sister Jean Augustine for an article in *Celebration* in 2000, Mary Elizabeth spoke about her work with VISTE: "We can see the hand of God directing us every day. Through the love we have and show, we bring much to these people. I'm proud to be part of this work." Sister Jean wrote: "Neither Sister is afraid to risk her personal comfort and is ready for whatever is asked. Their lifestyle is simple, their spirit positive, despite the physical pain, poverty, and depression they witness." When I was on the council several years ago, I visited the Boyle sisters one year. We had decided that our visitations that year would be to the Sisters where they ministered and not just where they lived. To be present with these Sisters in their ministry, I had to be ready to start work with them around 5:00 a.m., as they began their rounds to the homes of the elderly poor who were waiting for a variety of care from insulin shots to help with bathing. And they remained "on call" for twenty-four hours a day. What struck me with such force during that visit was the real joy in their ministry. They served those men and women as though they were members of their own family. And the people received them into their homes in the same way. I have never forgotten this experience. In this "Sister Act" (as Jean Augustine dubbed it), Mary Elizabeth tended to the everyday necessities of cleaning a neglected home, going to the bank, paying bills, shopping, providing respite care for a family member caring for an elderly relative, and ever so much more. As a certified nursing assistant, Joann provided in-home health care, seeing to the nursing needs of the people they visited. Reflecting on the ministry of Mary Elizabeth, Joann, Loretta, and Carmel Rose brings to mind a line of Mahatma Gandhi: "A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave." Last evening, many memories of Mary Elizabeth were of her sense of humor. This was the gift that made her brave in her ministry and in facing the challenge of cancer. One writer has noted, "A keen sense of humor helps us to overlook the unbecoming, understand the unconventional, tolerate the unpleasant, overcome the unexpected, and outlast the unbearable." And another says, "Nothing in a human being is more serious than her sense of humor; it is the sign that she wants all the truth." In our spirituality of Charity, we know that humor has to do with being down to earth and the virtue we cherish as humility.

And so, as I mentioned at the beginning of this reflection, Mary Elizabeth has entered into the dawn which she has long awaited in hope, and our world and the world of those she served in Lakeland will be darker for a time. God understands our grieving. Soon, we will notice again that the light that has come into the world through Mary Elizabeth's love continues to brighten our lives and our world.

On the occasion of her fiftieth jubilee, Mary Elizabeth wrote, "As I reflect on my life, I am grateful to God for the gift of faith, the grace of perseverance, and the generous support of our community, my family, and friends." As we reflect on your life today, dear Mary Elizabeth, we are grateful in turn for you. Thank you for showing us so clearly that "to love another person is to see the face of God."

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Gertrude Foley, S.C.
January 19, 2009