

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY NOLAN
August 8, 1926–October 18, 2016



WHO DO THEY SAY THAT I AM?

Who do *YOU* say that I am?

I invite each of you to think for a moment how you would respond if Mary were to put this question to you today?

Over the next several minutes, I hope to let Mary answer the question in her own words, using a few of the writings she penned over the years. Mary was a prolific writer—an artist—whose medium was the written word. Whether poetry or prose, each piece created a vivid image.

Thomas Aquinas wrote: "It is first and primarily in nature that God is revealed." We were challenged to select only a few of Mary's numerous haiku verses which reflect her view of Nature:

**Golden fingers spread
the daylight of God's here-ness--
the morning sunrise!**

**Pink petunias wave,
white impatiens stretch to touch
the Hand that makes buds.**

**Tulips stand tight-lipped,
sequined with dew drops, wary
of Spring's enticement.**

From time to time, Mary's writing reflected life's harsh realities.

**Distant thunder warns
picnickers at life's table -
death is lightning like.**

**Life's ebb and flow stills.
Now doing is suffering,
and hard to bear.
God nods, "I'm here."**

In July 1946, Mary Louise Nolan applied to enter the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. In response to the question, "Why do you wish to become a religious?" Mary wrote:

To become a Spouse of Christ in a religious community and to strive for perfection and union with Him by complete abandonment of self.

Thus she embarked on the journey that would span more than 70 years. Mary composed a lengthy poem entitled "Nowness: A Commitment."

To quote just a few verses:

"I live, now, not I, but Christ liveth in me."

Now I am Christ:

Christ the shepherd

**gathering the doubtful, the naked, the
harborless into the embrace of a
let-me-help-you love.**

Christ the Samaritan

**binding the wounds of the sorrowful, the
hungry, the sick with the support of a
let-me-help-you love**

Christ the teacher

**instructing the ignorant, the sinner,
the obstinate with the wisdom of a
let-me-help-you love.**

Nowness -- the fulfillment of the

"...with thy whole heart,

soul,

mind,

strength . . ." commitment!

Mary's reputation as a good cook and baker was well known. For several summers she cooked for the sisters who vacationed at Marymount. While there, she wrote, "A Morning at Marymount."

**Single-file nuns chapel-bound
leave the lodge and look around:
 "Thank God for the flowers
 and much-needed showers.
 Thank God for the bunk beds
 and their lumps on our heads.
 Thank God for the staff
 and their cooking craft."**

She also contributed her culinary skills to feeding the staff and volunteers at a summer's Appalachian Work Camp. At 5:00 a.m. each day, she prepared breakfast for 116 hungry workers, arranged the makings of lunch which they would take to the job, and had a substantial dinner waiting for their return. In a light-hearted recollection titled "From Privacy to Tears," Mary recalled that it wasn't the kitchen work that worried her; rather it was the realization that she would have little or no privacy in daily living at the camp, a major priority in her life. Looking back at the experience, she wrote:

"At 86 years of age, I am happy to say that one of the moving experiences of my life was to be present when one of our teams turned over the keys to a house they built to a family of five. All of the team and the family were crying. So too was I—and it wasn't for lack of PRIVACY!"

Mary's quest for abandonment was not always a straight and easy road. In 1985, Mary requested exclaustation and began a nine-year detour. During this hiatus, Mary visited her friend, Sister Mary Stephen, a Sister of Mercy, who was dying of cancer. Toward the end of the visit, Sister Mary Stephen said, "Go back to your community. You know you never left it." It took Mary another four years to follow the advice. Finally, in a letter to a friend, she wrote:

“I wish to share the news that I am returning to the Sisters of Charity. Along the road of my odyssey, there have been many signs pointing in this direction. Signs that were ignored, but the thought has stalked me for the last ten months, night and day. Recently, I visited the shrine of Father Solanus Casey to ascertain what I should do. In the chapel I felt a presence of the love of God and the yes that bridges it with now.”

Mary returned in 1994. After four years of living in community, she asked to make final vows. In her letter to Sister Gertrude Foley, she wrote:

“I am requesting to make final vows- again! Why would I want to do that? This time of year, bedding plants are advertised as best for planting in the sun, shade or partial shade. Most of them will grow in any environment, but not as well as in the one recommended.

Similarly, my experience has been that I need the Sisters of Charity environment which challenges to live intentionally, encourages to walk in the spirit, and prompts to remember that our life is a process of becoming. My request to make final vows certifies my belief that vowed commitment as a Sister of Charity is God's plan for me.”

Now, let us return to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” and listen to Mary's words that might provide an answer:

**Christ must rise daily
in us, through us, and with us,
or He remains tombed.**

**His birth was the seed;
your living of the Christ life,
proof that it took root.**

**The Shepherd chooses,
entices, embraces---then
fences in His ewe.**

In conclusion, does it really matter how you or I chose to answer Mary's question? I doubt it! I believe that only two responses matter: Mary's and God's when they came face to face and each queried the other,

“Who do you say that I am?”

We'll let Mary have the last word:

**Birth and burial
the beginning and end of
God's own test pattern!**

Rejoice Mary. You passed the test. Now rest in peace. Alleluia!

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sisters Patricia Mary Wilson and Patrice Hughes
October 22, 2016*