

# REFLECTION

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## 50TH Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Sr. Mary Antoinette, DW November 19, 2014

This morning we gather **to remember, to celebrate, to give thanks for the life** of Sr. Mary Antoinette, DW. We do so, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her martyrdom in Isangi, Congo on November 19, 1964.

**It is only right that we remember her** - her burning desire to be a missionary. We recall her astonishing words: *I desire to be a martyr, but that's probably not possible. At least I want to go to the missions, to teach, to work in a hospital, even just to cook.* Her desire was realized. In February 1952 she sailed for Africa where first she served as a teacher for six years in Nyasaland, now Malawi. In September 1961, she was sent to Congo where she continued to teach young women in our secondary school at Isangi.



**We remember her words** during an interview with the Long Island Catholic in 1964 during her last missionary leave here at home. *I do not know what is facing me in Congo . . . but I have to go back. What will happen to those people if we abandon them?* Convinced that God was waiting for her there, she returned to witness to and share the faith that motivated her life.

**We remember the story of the final months of her life** - On her return, Isangi, like much of the country, was surrounded by rebels and the government in turmoil. She wrote: *God alone knows what will be the end of this chaos.* The chaos worsened. As the revolution became more violent, the harassment and menaces grew. In Isangi the Missionaries were imprisoned in a large house near the Congo River. Thanks to the courage and perseverance of the few young Congolese Daughters of Wisdom, the Sisters and the Montfort Fathers received their meals daily.

One day rebels and missionaries alike were surprised by the sound of planes overhead. The end was near – would it be liberation or death? That night before going to bed Mary Antoinette prayed the customary night prayer to which she added the community's traditional *Prayers before a Journey*. She said to her fellow missionaries: *This time the journey will be to heaven.*

**We remember the fateful day**, November 19, 1964. In the morning at 6:15am, the rebels came for the prisoners. They were led to the village square, mocked and tortured throughout the day.



In the afternoon Mary Antoinette was stabbed twice. At 52 years of age she died a martyr. Her body was dragged away and thrown into the Congo River. Today the market place is called: La Place des Martyrs (Martyrs' Square).

**Then came** the text of the dreaded telegram that arrived from the US State Department to the Provincial of the Daughters of Wisdom in the US, Mother Mary of Divine Wisdom:

***Radio reports from Stanleyville indicate . . . two (missionaries) were killed and their bodies thrown into river. These are reported to be American nun, Sr. Mary Antoinette . . . Anne Lucy Donniacuo, and Belgian nun, Sr. Anne Françoise\*. . . The Department of State agrees you notify family. . . Walker Diamanti, Office of Central African Affairs, Dept. Of State. A gruesome task for the provincial; a tragic loss for the family. We will never forget the pain that ensued.***

**We remember**, oh yes, we remember, but after 50 years, the shock and the intensity of our mourning has changed. **Today we celebrate** a valiant woman, her courage, her commitment, the unbelievably great love of a holy woman who gave her life to God without looking back, a saint, yes, a saint; one many of us were privileged to know.

On the occasion of her golden jubilee with the Lord, I invite you to discover what she knew so well. She understood the words of St. Paul to the early Christians in our first reading. Paul reminds them of their calling. His words shed light on the meaning of her life. Like them Mary Antoinette *was a child of God, filled with the Spirit*. Even to the last moment of her life, despite the tumult of human emotions that must have filled her heart, *she did not cringe in fear, but cried out in confidence to God*. In her too the *Spirit bears witness with her spirit* that she is indeed a beloved daughter of God. Truly she could say with St. Paul:

*In all these things, we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.*

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life,  
neither angels nor principalities,  
nor present things, nor future things. . .  
nothing will be able to separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.*

*Romans 8,38-39*

Perhaps, the witness of her life is best summed up in her prayer:



*O Wisdom come,  
anoint me with your love;  
accept my total commitment to you.  
Grant me the grace to serve with fidelity in the  
missions,  
and the courage, if necessary, to give my life.*

In the gospel this morning we heard:  
*Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground  
and dies,  
it remains just a grain of wheat;  
But if it dies, it produces much  
fruit.*

*Jn. 12, 24*

Over the course of these 50 years those  
touched by her legacy have given expression  
to how she touched their lives.

- **From Indonesia** 1964- Shortly after her death- Rev. Eugene Lynch, a Montfort Missionary serving in Jakarta, Indonesia wrote: May Sister's sacrifice be the seed of Christians for Congo, may it lead us to greater fidelity. I cherish the memory of her, her simplicity, her vivacity. May we be as generous.
- **In Congo** in the mid-90's- I had the privilege of following the way of the cross of Sister Mary Antoinette in Isangi with our Congolese Sisters and a handful of missionaries. We began in their community room where an eyewitness, a Montfort Missionary priest, told the story. He was imprisoned with the others and was among the missionaries in the square on the terrible day when several of his companions were martyred.

We left the room in a silent procession led by two Sisters who had brought the imprisoned missionaries their meals each day. We went forth praying and singing hymns. Each time we reached a significant place the two leading us stopped to tell the story of what had happened there. We listened in silence. Then the cross was passed on to the next group:

- 1st station – the checkpoint where the soldiers had stopped the young Congolese Sisters every day to inspect their baskets of food.
- 2nd station – a crossroads where Sr. Anne- Françoise, a Belgian missionary, was brought to the house of a tribal chief who wanted her as one of his wives. She refused and was killed.
- 3rd station – the house near the Congo River where the missionaries were imprisoned and tormented by the soldiers.
- The 4th – the market Square where all were tortured and two made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. In the center of the square, re-named Martyrs' Square, three steps lead to a large stone cross. As we sang and prayed there, the people in the market became silent and the soldiers bowed their heads.

The youngest Sisters of the province carried the cross along the return path to their home.

Sr. Mary Antoinette's memory was alive in our hearts that day. The witness of her life, her passion and death reminded us that we too were called to take up our cross and follow the Lord wherever he might lead us.

Her memory continues to bear fruit closer to home. **In Litchfield Ct.** - During a retreat at Wisdom House, William Hart McNicols, S.J. was angered by a line he read on Fr. De Montfort's Cross of Poitiers. It read: WISDOM IS THE CROSS AND THE CROSS IS WISDOM. It made no sense to him. At the same time he discovered and was taken by the story of Sr. Mary Antoinette. During the retreat he made the connection between the two. To express it, he wrote the icon



we have before us. In it Sr. Marie Antoinette is visited by Wisdom in the form of an angel bearing a blood-red cross. The martyr's right hand is raised in a gesture of prayer and receptivity. Her eyes are wide open and her face serene. The inscription reads Haggia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, and new holy Martyr. Through it, the artist passes on her legacy to all who contemplate it.

- Her words encourage us to join her in prayer from the heart to a martyr from our time and place:

*They flung your battered body into the river.*

*But your soul, Mary Antoinette,*

*and your great loving spirit,*

*journeyed to the heart of God,*

*and Wisdom welcomed you, daughter,*

*into the bliss of eternal life.*

*Blessed are you, Mary Antoinette—*

*Daughter of Wisdom,*

*Martyr for our time—*

*Blessed and beloved are you.*

As we give thanks to God for Sr. Mary Antoinette's victory over evil and death, and her eternal life with the Lord, let us remember

- those many Christians living in situations of war, persecution and violence today
- let us remember, too, the worry and grief of their family members and friends
- and the many missionaries who continue to labor, who cry out to God and cling to hope.

And with them, let us cry out in hope:

Merciful God,

**THY KINGDOM COME . . . THY WILL BE DONE . . . ON EARTH!**



November 19, 2014, marked the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the death of Daughter of Wisdom, Sr. Mary Antoinette (Ann Lucy Donniacuo) a missionary and martyr in Africa. Sisters, family, former students and friends gathered at a special mass of commemoration held at the Montfort Spirituality Center in Bay Shore, NY to remember her. Click here for a [brief history of Sr. Mary Antoinette's ministry as a Daughter of Wisdom.](#)