



Eulogy for Sr. Eileen McGowan, DW

Sr. Ann Gray, DW



It was early in the morning of Nov 26 when we first learned that our Sister Eileen had died, it was she who entered the Novitiate of the Daughters of Wisdom at the age of 19 on Jan 31, 1945 and it was she who had received the name of Sr. Eileen of the Holy Face and it was she who had crossed over the threshold to become the newest member of the Communion of Saints.

As the poet, Emily Dickinson declares: "There's a bustle in the house the day after death." I guess it's the poet's way of saying nothing's ever the same again! I remember that morning I opened the Gospel reading for the day. It was Luke's account of the Widow putting in her two small coins to pay the Temple fee. Strange but there was a kind of "bustle" in my own brain as the words of the Gospel narrative changed before my eyes The words of the text read like this:

"And Sister Eileen entered that "place of giving." Jesus looked up and saw this wonderfully generous woman humble in so many ways who held two small coins. It was all she had. She could give no more and would give no less. And Jesus said: "Those two small coins are a priceless gift given out of love for me" And suddenly I heard Eileen's voice answer: "Lord, you know me, I always have to give my two cents worth!" Jesus smiled and the two went off together. Some two cents worth! I and put down the Gospel reading, and thought I'd better get a cup of coffee. One thing was sure we always enjoyed listening to Eileen's two cents worth. Call it the gift of the gab her words were always filled with witticisms and yes, much wisdom. We shall miss "her two cents worth."

When we gathered for prayer yesterday afternoon, we were reminded that every life is a mix of deep joy and deep sorrow. We pause here, for in her young life Eileen carried a deep sorrow when her parents Nellie and Cornelius were killed in a tragic car accident. She was 12 years old. Looking for family, I believe, was a lifelong search of hers. Eileen was sent to Our Lady of Wisdom Academy where she was destined to be a boarder. On holidays her Aunt Nora Curtin included her in the family. We have to pause now and recognize that this was no ordinary family. Her cousins were: Catherine, Mary and Theresa Curtin who all became Daughters of Wisdom. Eileen often spoke lovingly of this family especially of



Catherine whom many of us remember as Caddy. Eileen thought she was really holy, especially when she prayed aloud the often repeated Mantra (one you might be familiar with): “Omnipotent God make me a saint!” Eileen would say that was what inspired her to follow a vocation into religious life.”

And so that vocation actually flourished and at the end of her novitiate in Ottawa Canada, ten who made profession, 9 went back to New York, and one went to a place called Grenville in Quebec Canada. Yes, Our Sister Eileen was chosen to teach English to all the grade levels in a boarding school setting. She was stationed in a variety of places including Montreal, Dorval, and Edmunston. She remained in the Canadian province for a staggering total of 22 years! During this time she got several degrees qualifying her to teach English to French Canadians. During this time our paths crossed when she was in Dorval in the late fifties. I was sent to teach English to young women in Montreal, but for a short term. I was so glad to meet up with a fellow American. We even sang patriotic songs together; it mattered not that we were both slightly tone deaf, if we remembered the words, we sang those songs with gusto. You see we were both quite isolated because in those days French Canadians refused to speak a word of English because English was the language of the oppressor, the rich, the Protestant. I noticed that Eileen spoke French fluently, but with an unmistakable New York accent which didn't seem to bother her. I asked her how she did it. I smile now remembering what she said: “Ann, I had to learn how to speak French; you know I could never keep my mouth shut for that long a time.” I remember we had a bet going as to who would get back to NY the sooner. Eileen really wanted to come home. I won that bet, while Eileen stayed in Canada for another eight years. Now as I reflect on our desire as an American Province to connect more deeply with our Canadian Province, I suggest that we ought to make Eileen our patron saint to whom we pray to for guidance and insight. She sure has earned the honor!

1968 became the shining year of Eileen's return to the US and to her new life of ministry, back to the familiar, back to the language and culture of all that was dear to her. It was pure joy for her as well to be reunited with her only brother, Neil, his wife and family. That's why when Neil died that summer of a massive heart attack, there are no words adequate enough to tell of the pain of her loss. In the months that followed, numb with grief herself, she went home to live with her sister-in-law, niece and nephews to help them get through the shock, to help them find a way to live normal lives, keep ordinary routines going, and find a way to go on living. Returning home after 22 years meant both enduring loss and yet finding newness of life all over again.



So now we turn the page to the next chapter of our Sister Eileen's life. Let us title it simply Christ the King High School: A Love Affair which lasted from 1968 to 1997 and beyond. I added "beyond" because based on the loving witness of the group of students who came to yesterday's wake service, we learned firsthand the influence Eileen had on their young lives. They called themselves, "The Boys of '78." How did she do it? She simply loved them and led them to believe in themselves. These were the hallmarks of a great teacher. She earned an MA in Religious Education, and she was named head of the Religion Department where she formed minds and hearts and oriented them to lives of service.

Our paths crossed one more time while she and I were both teaching at Christ the King High School. I was serving as head of the Language Department and became interested in an organization called the American Institute of Foreign Studies. I realized what an enrichment their program would bring to our curriculum as it organized travel tours for High School students to all the cities of Europe, centers of language and culture. It was a wonderful opportunity, but chaperones were needed for this plan to work. Chaperones would go for free, though their responsibilities were heavy. So I put out feelers to see if anyone was interested. As I recall it, it was less than a nano second after that Eileen and her fellow faculty member, Diane Larson rushed into my office to assure me that they would organize the chaperone part of things for as long as ever needed. That program continued long after I left the school, sustained by Eileen's undying love for travel. Once I overheard her saying: "It's true, I have been to London four times, Paris twice and Spain three times. As a matter of fact, Eileen never missed a single trip ever organized except one to Russia that was canceled. Not bad for someone who stayed in place for 22 years! Having so many profound joys and sorrow in her life, I feel safe to say travel to places afar was one of her abiding joys.

She hosted the Mothers Club, and before retiring in 1997, she was inducted into Christ the King Hall of Fame, an honor reserved for Teachers who exemplified integrity and educational leadership. Her photo will reside there for posterity.

But to the question, Is there life after retirement? The answer where Eileen was concerned was a resounding yes. For the next ten years, she did a telephone ministry to the elderly, reassuring them that they were not alone, she hosted the hospitality committee and served in an organization called Rachel's Helpers that provides counseling to women suffering from the results of abortion.

I know I must conclude so I would like to return to that early morning of Nov 26, and to the text that emerged before my eyes: "Jesus looked up and waited to accept our Sister Eileen's "two



cents worth,” as a gift that was priceless—priceless because Eileen could give no more and would give no less, priceless because Eileen fulfilled the task of paying attention to the gifts she had been given, of cultivating them and giving them back in the service of others. In doing so, our Sister Eileen of the Holy Face will surely see the face of God.