

SISTER CATHERINE

OF MARY IMMACULATE

FINN



*BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:
SEPTEMBER 10, 1913*

*BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:
OCTOBER 16, 1988*

Sister Catherine Finn
Province of U.S.A. & Canada
1913 - 1988

Death, its finality and the separation it brings, reaches out to all those who have known and loved the one whom it touches. Only faith in the resurrection, in death as a door to new life, can, in time, transform the grief into comfort, the loneliness into hope. The closer we are to the deceased, the stronger the bonds, the more intense is this experience of dying and rising ourselves along with our loved one.

Such is the experience of a province which gives back one of its founders into the hands which formed her. Even for those who may not have known her intimately, Sister Catherine Finn's death was a special dying. More than just an "end of an era", her going from us is an experience of letting go of the "beginnings", of a certain sense of oneness with the past through the presence of so many of our founding sisters among us, of a challenge to look toward the future to continue the work begun.

Mary Finn was born on September 10, 1913 in County Cork, Ireland. She was born into a happy home where she was surrounded by love and given a Christian background. Her father, who was an Irish scholar, taught countless generations of children in the school of Youghal. Unfortunately, however, her young mother died and Mary was adopted by an aunt who continued to surround her with love and solicitude during her formative years.

Mary loved country life - the beautiful Irish hills and fields, walks in the Glen, closeness to the earth. When she heard the Lord call she entered the Novitiate in Ferbane on February 2, 1935. At reception she took the name of Catherine, and she was professed on September 2, 1937. Her novitiate companions were fond of her and enjoyed her sense of humor.

Her first assignment was to Mount Sackville Convent in Dublin, where she worked in the kitchen and the farm yard. She loved this work and her contemplative soul found God in the silence and beauty of nature. Later she was given charge of the boarder's dining room and supervision of the

staff. The students found solace in her cheerful kindness during their bouts of homesickness and the staff appreciated her firm but kind direction and concern for their welfare.

Just a little over forty-two years ago, Sister Catherine left homeland, family, friends and her beloved community of Mount Sackville in Dublin for the unknown shores of the United States. Her assignment was to help found a new province with Sisters Claire Whelan, Margaret Mary Rigney, Immaculata Murphy, and Philomena McCann. When the sisters arrived in Philadelphia after seven days at sea in 1947, there had been little preparation for their arrival at St. Joseph's Home for Homeless Boys. Although they received a warm and rather spectacular welcome from the two hundred or so boys out in formation at the entrance, their living quarters and work areas were still far from ready to receive them.

Thus, although Sister Catherine and her companions came to a major city in a "developed" nation, their founding work included the most basic organizing. For some time she and Sister Immaculata shared what they called the "prison" - the small isolation room in the infirmary. Eventually a house was readied for the community. Sister Catherine also undertook the modernization of the laundry, learning the intricacies of pressers and steamers and training her staff. She was always straightforward with them, always kind, cheerful and encouraging

She welcomed the boys who were sent to help with great warmth, and they found in her fairness and interest, a sense of security and self worth. Sister Joseph Edwards remembers:

"She would press the graduation gowns herself for each one, sometimes 20 to 30 gowns. She would also help to dress them for the Halloween parties. One fellow stole the show and won first prize as "Aunt Jemima" with a frying pan and a real pancake freshly made by Sister Catherine a few moments before he took his place in the Grand March!

Another boy, with a religious vocation, felt too insecure to go to Washington, DC alone for his interview with the Vocation Director.

Sister accompanied him herself to the Franciscan Monastery where he became a brother. He never forgot her, and this past Christmas he sent us a perpetual Mass Enrollment for the repose of her soul."

She would always begin the work session with prayer, gathering the workers and boys together. One of her favorite invocations was: May the Divine Assistance be always with us. One of the boys, a Michael Divine, understood this phrase to refer to him and was very proud to lend his assistance!

Sister Catherine continued to hear from many "past boys" who would phone or write to her in gratitude for what she had done for them and for the lessons of life she had taught them.

If she was so successful with these orphan boys, perhaps it was because Sister Catherine lost her mother at a very young age and went to live with her aunt. It seemed as if this loss became a gift of understanding for her and allowed her to reach the troubled and the lonely among her youngest workers.

In 1965 she was named superior of the community. Although she felt incapable of assuming this charge, she placed her confidence in Our Lady of Perpetual Help and she went ahead. God blessed her three terms of office in a visible way.

The Spiritan priests who worked with her remember her as a strong woman, nurturing, faithfilled and optimistic. Father John Skaj who was at St. Joseph's in the late 60's and early 70's reminisced, "She was always so encouraging, even when things seemed bleakest. She had great faith and it made her optimistic. She would always give you a boost. She was never flustered and had great trust in God..."

During those years, Sister Catherine was very ill and experienced constant pain. Her several short hospitalizations gave only temporary relief, but she continued to work in the laundry even in the heat of summer. Eventually her condition was resolved with long and intricate

surgery and after many weeks in the hospital she came home to recuperate and eventually take up her post in the laundry again.

Sister Catherine is also remembered for her warm hospitality. She was never too busy to be interested in people and as she sat chatting or listening her face would come alive with a hint of a smile and a twinkle in her eye as she leaned toward the other with expectation.

After long days on her feet in the laundry she would arrive at recreation with a story to tell, an incident to relate, some new development in the local or world news, or the life of the Mafia which she had gleaned from the papers, and always a chuckle for the others. Sister Brigid Costelloe remembers:

"Sister Catherine had a great sense of humor and always found humor even in the worst situation. She made us laugh at ourselves. Catherine had a real sweet tooth and in later years when her health was not good it was a real effort for her to keep away from desserts. I remember cooking for a retreat in Newport and enjoyed myself making specials for tea time. Catherine couldn't resist. Each day she stole into the dining room before tea time, enjoyed the forbidden fruit, had a great laugh and then swore me to secrecy! She also suggested I make some favorite of hers for the following day.

During my first year of community life I lived with her. She was for me a mentor, friend and someone I have always looked up to. I compare her to the strong woman of the scriptures. She was indeed strong, but hers was a strength impregnated with a real tenderness and humanness. I saw her both laugh and cry about the same situation. She understood both the compassion and humanness of Christ. In the face of another's weakness and brokenness she would always remark that God understood, and that God does not expect the impossible of us. She was keenly aware of and sensitive to the pain of others and was the first to notice if there was anything wrong with you. I experienced this

sensitivity during my first year of loneliness in this country. She also in her own words 'helped to knock the corners off me'. This may sound harsh, but there was certainly no harshness in the way it was done. She was sincere and forthright. One always know that Catherine's challenges were given with love.

If there is one virtue that stands out in my mind with regard to Sister Catherine it is her strong faith."

Sister Catherine was very attached to her beloved Philly, but her missionary spirit reached far beyond the concrete and mortar of the city. Each year she plunged into the work of the Card party, a major fundraiser, to help support the fledgling novitiate in Newport where young American women were discerning their vocations. Several Sundays each year, she would go off with some of the other sisters at 4.00 a.m. to different parishes to take up the mission collection. She spoke enthusiastically about the Cluny Club, a group of high school students from Little Flower Catholic High School which Sister Regina Brunelle gathered to work for overseas missions. In 1971 she got a slot for Sister Marie Cooper to speak on the Catholic Hour on the Mission Sunday broadcast. In the 80's when the sisters went to our first home mission in West Virginia, Sister Catherine followed their activity with interest and wrote encouraging letters and gave them the support of her prayers.

Probably one of the most difficult times for Sister Catherine was the withdrawal of the community from St. Joseph's Home. In 1976, as Philadelphia was celebrating the bi-centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in that city and with the Eucharistic Congress meeting there, the sisters began to pack twenty-nine years of work, memories and personal belongings. It is always difficult to close a house, but this was the first foundation, and the province was still in its infancy. It was also a house from which came some of the most wonderful stories, stories of a shared experience which enriched our province in the telling and retelling, stories which are woven into the very fabric of our lives together.

But times were changing. Children were being placed in foster homes or in small group homes instead of orphanages. The numbers of boys at St. Joseph's drooped drastically, and the Spiritans decided to close its doors.

With the same straightforwardness with which she met each day, Sister Catherine faced this decision and graciously settled into her new work in Providence.

As Bishop Louis E. Gelineau brought out in the homily at her funeral, Sister Catherine's work was not confined to the housework around the Cathedral Rectory. She went out into the community. She arranged for Masses to be celebrated at the Bannister House nursing home, and at Dexter Manor, a senior citizen's apartment complex. She worshipped with the people, took them Communion each week and could be seen wheeling patients in for Mass.

In 1979 she became a member of the Provincial Council. Sister Teresa Kenny, who was provincial at that time, recalls: "Sister Catherine revealed to me an image of wholeness, a simplicity of vision. She had a 'no-nonsense' spirituality and was a person of joy and peace, affirming the good, radiating love and caring."

The Sisters who were closest to her over the years all share similar memories of her: "She was a most loyal friend ... someone you could depend on ... she knew how to listen and encourage you, how to cheer you up...and how to keep a secret," said Sister Immaculata Murphy. "She was a wonderful companion all through the years, from the novitiate right to the end," Sister Margaret Mary Rigney remembers. "She never made a display of piety, but she was a woman of prayer, centered on our Lord." And well these two sisters can speak, for they are co-founders who were with her in Philadelphia and later in Rhode Island, sisters who shared the ups and downs, good times and bad and saw her in all of them.

Sister Catherine's last illness took us by surprise in its severity and its swiftness. During the winter of 1987-88 she seemed to have gotten a

cold, or was it bronchitis? She could not shake it and went to the doctor who gave her antibiotics. But it hung on. In the spring she looked very worn and tired and went to the hospital for tests. She was told that she had a non-malignant, but incurable lung condition and that she could expect some relief and some crises. Certainly it was not an overly alarming diagnosis.

In June, while she was on vacation with the other sisters in her community, she had another attack and was hospitalized again. This attack was more severe, but the doctor still did not indicate that her condition was terminal. Nevertheless, after she was discharged from the hospital, her temporary stay at the Mercy Sisters' health care center lengthened through the summer and into the fall as she kept losing ground. During the summer, Sister Catherine's sister Nellie came up from New York to spend time with her and the two had many long chats.

As Sister Mary Glynn, our Provincial, wrote shortly after Sister Catherine's death:

"Sister Catherine was on oxygen all the time to help her breathing. She experienced some stress around the lungs at times, but for the most part she had no pain and was very comfortable. She was able to get out and sit on the chair up to about three weeks before she died. She loved to see us come to visit her and maintained a good sense of humor up to the very end. At times when we thought she was very weak and unaware of what was going on around her, she would say something very funny which would make us all laugh and she herself smiled a knowing smile and enjoyed the chuckle.

We visited her everyday and she looked forward to these visits. During the last three weeks we were with her day and night. She ate very little. We talked about dying and she who was always so full of life now awaited the coming of the Lord. We often prayed "Come, Lord Jesus, come," and at

times when we would slowly begin this prayer, she would finish it for us...

Her speech began to get weaker and on the 13th she slipped into semi-consciousness. She knew we were there right up to the end and from the movement of her lips we knew that she was praying with us. An old friend from Philadelphia, Father John Skaj visited her. She knew he was there, gave every sign of recognition and tried to speak. Her sister Nellie also arrived.

On the morning of the 16th Sister Catherine was very weak. We had stayed up with her the previous night and she had slept most of the time. Bishop Gelineau came to pray with us. He prayed Psalm 23... gave her absolution and a blessing and was preparing to leave when she opened her eyes, drew her last breath and went home to God very peacefully. It was so very quick that it took us all by surprise. It was as if Sister Catherine waited for all the prayers to be said and then she was ready."

On the 18th Sister Catherine's wake was held in the bishop's chapel at the Cathedral Rectory. The chapel was full of friends as we sang and prayed the psalms. During the afternoon and evening many came to pay their respects to Sister Catherine - the sisters, Nellie's daughters, Midge and Cathy, priests who had lived at the Rectory through the years, priests and friends who worked in the Chancery, senior citizens from the surrounding area to whom Sister Catherine had brought communion and many others. There was much reminiscing and laughter intermingled with our tears.

On the 19th the Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated in the Cathedral. We then traveled down to Cluny Convent in Newport where we laid Sister Catherine to rest in our little cemetery. After the singing of the Salve Regina, we invoked St. Joseph and Blessed Anne Marie as the coffin was lowered.

As we said our last good-bye the leaves all around us were at their peak of color - rich reds, yellows, oranges, browns, and greens - a final blast of beauty before the death of winter.

As we let go to summer's warmth and autumn's riotous colors, we tried to let go of Sister Catherine, to let her return to the One who first called her by name and formed her and sent her to us. Our memories of her bind us together and are a source of consolation for those closest to her. She was a woman of staunch faith and great generosity. We are reminded of the wise woman in Proverbs, but Sister Catherine's works have met her, not at the city gates, but at the gates of heaven. It is our task now to carry on the challenge; to look forward, not back; to continue the work of our province into the next century.