

*SISTER MARGARET MARY*

*OF THE HOLY SPIRIT*

*RIGNEY*



*BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:*

*APRIL 27, 1911*

*BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:*

*NOVEMBER 30, 1992*

**Sister Margaret Mary Rigney**  
**Province of U.S.A. & Canada**  
**1911 -1992**

"Hold yourselves ready for the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him." (Mt. 24:44) Whether or not Sister Margaret Mary was expecting Sister Death, she was certainly ready, but her dying was a shock to all of us who remained behind. We knew her health was failing but no one expected her sudden departure on the evening of November 30, 1992. Yet, in retrospect, there were so many signs, not the least of which were the many notes she wrote at Thanksgiving to many of the Sisters and to her friends and acquaintances.

"During her last week she wrote to all of us," Sister Marie Cooper notes. "Many people brought me her letters and said, "See, she wanted to encourage me." The letters were like her testament to us, her legacy. She reminded us how much God loves us, how good we are, and how pleased God is with our efforts. May we all be able to be so encouraging and affirming of others to the end!

Sister Margaret Mary died as she had lived: quietly and without a fuss. One of the founders of our Province, long-time member of the Provincial council and local superior for some eighteen years, she was a formative influence on our Province. Her going was all the more traumatic as one more link with our roots slipped away into eternity.

Alice Rigney was born on April 27, 1911 in Newbridge, Athlone, Ireland. On March 14, 1933, she made profession in the Mother House in Paris, receiving her obedience for Guadeloupe where she taught English. Having contracted tuberculosis, she returned to the British Isles in 1936, seemingly to die. Girvan needed a Sister so she was sent to Scotland where the rugged climate was matched by the severity of the superior who was not delighted at receiving a 'sick' Sister. Valiantly, Sister Margaret Mary struggled to do the work a 'well' sister would have done. Sister Philomena McCann who lived with her in Scotland writes:

"Each morning she was so ill she had to make it fast to the sink to vomit, but she insisted on getting up. The doctor gave her five months to live. She certainly fooled us all!

She was put in charge of a few girls who did the housework. The Convent and School being very large, there were never enough girls to do the work in the time allotted. She sometimes came to me in the kitchen in desperation asking for the loan of the girl who worked there to help her out. She was always so gentle in asking and so very grateful for the help that I could never refuse her."

In 1947, Sister Margaret Mary was among the small group of Clunys led by Mother Claire Whelan to the North American continent for a third trial at putting down roots here. Though they came to the land of plenty, little had been done to prepare for their arrival and the beginnings at St. Joseph's house were hard.

Nevertheless, after the arrival of the Sisters, St. Joseph's Home for Homeless Boys was considered to be a special place by the social system personnel as well as their clients because of the presence of women with whom the boys could relate.

As would the children in Saints Peter and Paul School, Wilmington many years later, the St. Joe's Boys soon discovered Sister Margaret to be an untiring source of Tender Loving Care - one who willingly treated cuts and bruises and often healed a headache with a hug. But she readily sniffed out those who were just trying to get out of a class or an unpleasant task. Soon her ministry to sick and dying Spiritans became legendary. The depths of her faith and the unstinting love she lavished upon these priests and even the most difficult of hundreds of St. Joseph Boys anointed them all, making both their dying and their living easier.

In 1953, Mother Claire's mandate as superior having come to an end, Sister Margaret Mary was appointed to replace her. For twelve years she brought to this ministry to the community her gifts of compassion, broad-mindedness, and great common sense. Mother Margaret was a

very giving and practical woman. The rule was never the ultimate factor in her decision-making. Her choices were based on need: the needs of the people being served, of the Congregation and of those who supported our ministry.

Sister Immaculata Murphy, also one of the pioneers, describes her as "an understanding superior who made no hasty decisions. Her patience always won out. She never asked a sister to perform a task; she just expressed what she thought might have to be done. Each of us anticipated her wishes and the job was done. We were a happy, united community and she contributed much to that."

Sister Margaret Mary was deeply loyal to the Congregation and loved its missions. She worked hard to make Cluny known and to support financially both the province and the novitiate. The annual St. Patrick's Day card parties in Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Community's on-going participation in the diocesan Missions Appeal are cases in point. With her unflinching sense of humor, Mother Margaret Mary cheerfully led the community in the distasteful task of begging at church doors. She marveled at the fact that the poorer parishes always seemed the most generous. One Sunday, as the Sisters stood at the doors of a particularly wealthy parish, a mink-caped woman dropped a quarter into her basket. Looking her directly in the eye, Mother Margaret Mary sweetly chirped, "May you be rewarded in kind, my dear!"

Over and over again, our memories of Sister Margaret Mary describe her as a generous, magnanimous, big-hearted, inclusive and joyously hospitable woman. Wherever she went, she made people feel appreciated, warm and special by her unassuming willingness to serve and her welcoming simplicity - a veritable incarnation of the Cluny spirit.

The Sisters write:

"I recall my first meeting with her in 1960. I felt so welcome!"

"Her whole being exuded welcome. People felt special in her presence. She had the ability to praise generously, and affirm and uplift by a word or smile."

"In all the years I have known Sister Margaret Mary, I have found her a prayerful, gentle, hospitable person."

"She was always welcoming of all who came to the convent and concerned about their having their cup of tea."

"Sister Margaret Mary had a wonderfully big heart and a grand sense of humor."

"It was Maggie who helped to break down the barriers and make my dad feel at home among these strange women called nuns!"

Her generosity was famous both within and outside of the Congregation. Sister Anne Marie Liston's story is one of many.

"When I was living in Philadelphia and studying for my B.A. I used to stay at a local convent during the week and come home weekends to St. Joe's. The place where I stayed was a residence for elderly women, an old building and not always too clean. Some of the bedding left much to be desired. I asked permission to borrow one of the pillows from St. Joe's and was cautioned not to lose it. The very next weekend while I was away, the pillow disappeared.

That Friday afternoon, Sister Margaret Mary arrived for a visit and in the course of the weekend, I must have told her of my plight. On Monday morning, as I prepared to leave, she said good-bye and wished me luck. As I opened my book to begin reading on the trolley journey back to school, an envelope fell out ... a little note from Maggie and money to purchase a new pillow with the message, "Just a little secret between us two."

After her death, the Sisters of Jesus Crucified sent a transcript of a taped interview with Sister Margaret Mary in which she described the arrival and early days in the United States of their foundress, Mother Marie des Douleurs. Out of the blue, the Prioress phoned Philadelphia from New York seeking hospitality "for a prolonged length of time". With her arrival that same afternoon began the saga of two strong women living out faith in Divine Providence and generosity tested to its limits. Mother Marie expected Mother Margaret to provide for her every need. Without hesitation, Mother Margaret responded generously. Never once did she fail to get back what she had spent on the very day she spent it!

Those of us who lived with "Maggie" also remember her gift for and love of story-telling, and the fact that everyone was her 'cousin'!

Sister Pius Moore recalls, "I always enjoyed her stories and she told many. She was great for details which made the story much longer. After she came to Stella Maris in Newport, I spent a few days' vacation there. We went walking to town one day. She started a story when she left the house. We got to town and did our errands. She continued her story, and we were almost home when she finished. I can still see where she stood and said to me, "Wasn't that a long story!"

Be it New Jersey, or New York, and even in West Virginia, Sister Margaret Mary found someone she was related to or who was related to someone who was somehow connected to her. During her visit to West Virginia, she accompanied Sister Regina on a visit to a burned-out family. To Regina's amazement, the woman's ancestors had come from Maggie's part of Ireland, and she knew the woman's relatives!

In 1965, after eighteen years in Philadelphia, Sister Margaret Mary was asked to leave the place which had become, in every sense of the word, home. That was a cross that must have weighed heavily on her shoulders, but it was not evident as she packed her bags, laughingly calling herself a bird on the branch. Courageously, she went to Stella Maris to what proved to be a very difficult situation. In time, she created here, too, an atmosphere of openness and warm hospitality.

Special times like Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas and graduation at the Naval Chaplains' College, (they provided daily Mass at Stella Maris) were occasions for a big party. She gathered in the lone and the lame from the highways and byways for these events, always concerned that no one be neglected.

In spite of her sunny disposition, Sister Margaret Mary's religious life was not easy. Marked early on by the cross of physical suffering, over the years her nurturing nature led to misunderstandings which were very painful to her. She was a woman of peace. She hated conflict. To some, it seemed she gave in too easily to Fr. McGlade, the director of St. Joseph's House. But she saw him as a benefactor to the community and a very lonely old man who needed the nurturing she could give.

That relationship created friction between some Spiritans and Cluny. But Maggie treated them all with the same generous gift of self. The Spiritans were our brothers. They were always welcome in our house. More often than not, the convent was their first stop when they came in from the missions or needed a shoulder to cry on.

1976 found Sister Margaret Mary traveling west to the community of Sts. Peter and Paul in Wilmington, California. Until ill-health brought her back east to Newport in 1981, she ministered to the children in the school health room and library. Like the Good Shepherd, she called them each by name and loved them all and they loved her. Nevertheless, late books were charged and she kept after them, writing them reminders in her lovely penmanship. In community, her unassuming service resulted in renewed luster to long-dull door knobs and closets magically restored to order.

In 1983, the Province joined in her celebration of her Golden Jubilee with a Mass of Thanksgiving at St. John's Church in Providence, followed by a reception in the church hall. Surrounded by community and friends, she enjoyed a memorable day in which she truly rejoiced.

True to her calling to develop the interior life of a Carmelite, Sister Margaret Mary had always been above all a woman of prayer. This became most evident in the last hidden years of her life spent at Cluny convent. She loved the Eucharist and particularly enjoyed worshipping with the parish community. Daily, she spent many hours in prayer, giving free reign to her great devotion to the Eucharist, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Mary. In between, her nimble fingers washed, ironed, sewed and mended leaving behind a trail of evidence to witness to her passing.

Her retirement in Cluny Convent brought out a new dimension to Maggie's compassion: her caring for and ability to heal all God's creatures ... the wild duck with the broken wing; the stunned bird who flew into the window glass; the potted plant on its last leaf. "Give it to Sister Margaret Mary; she'll nurse it back to life," became a community by-word. And she did.

Like the ebb and swell of the Newport tides, Margaret Mary in retirement established a rhythm of reaching out through service, visits and correspondence, ever returning for sustenance to the Center of her life and the Source of her energy.

In September, 1992, she had the joy of being present at the dedication of the new St. Joseph's Home for Boys in Philadelphia. Hundreds of the "old boys" were there to celebrate and renew memories. On the return journey, she fell as she left the train. She thought her leg had given way, but the doctor believed she might have had a mild stroke because her blood pressure was so high. But she improved during the next few weeks and by Thanksgiving she was ready to go again.

On the weekend before she died, she went out shopping and visiting and even attended a wedding. On Sunday, she gleefully shared her stories of the Philadelphia trip with the Provincial of the Sacred Heart Fathers who was visiting the community. Monday, however, was not a good day. By evening, she became very ill. She was rushed to the hospital where an attempt to revive her using CPR was made to no avail. "Our dear Maggie left us so quickly and quietly," writes Sister



Eugenia Brady, “we believe, just as she would have wanted. She gave no trouble in life or in death. She seemed to be saying to me as I cried by her body, 'Sure, I wouldn't want to be any trouble!'”

Faithful to the end, she who so loved parties must have delighted in the celebration that awaits the wise virgin who keeps in store a supply of oil for the waiting. And now

(Her) spirit, newly freed from earth  
is all amazed at the surprise  
of her belonging: suddenly  
as native to eternity  
to see herself, to realize  
the hermitage that lets her be  
at home where all this glory lies.

By naught foretold could she have guessed  
such welcome home: the robe, the ring,  
music and endless banqueting,  
these people hers: this place of rest  
known, as of long remembering  
herself a child of God pressed  
with warm endearment to His breast.

(Jessica Powers: The Homecoming)