

SISTER LELIA

OF THE HOLY FAMILY

CLARKE



*BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:
APRIL 23, 1925*

*BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:
JANUARY 27, 2008*

Sister Lelia Clarke
Province of U.S.A. & Canada
1924 - 2008

In the ancient monastic town of Kells, Co. Meath, Ireland, under the shadow of the High Cross at the junction of the roads, Eileen Clarke grew up. Theirs was a lively household of eight girls and two boys. Charlie Clarke raised them by himself after the premature death of his beloved wife, Catherine. Sister Lelia loved her father and often quoted him. To know her mother was a deep and constant longing in her life.

People and their ways were of great interest to Eileen. She sought out the odd characters of the countryside and could recall their funny, quaint sayings all her life. Her vivid imagination and keen perception captured the inner beauty of people and the awesome splendor of nature.

For some time she was a legal secretary in Dublin city. She loved living in the city with the freedom of riding her bicycle around postwar Dublin. She actively participated in the vibrant devotional life that was common at that time: novenas, weekend retreats and Eucharistic devotions. She was slow to answer the Lord's radical call but never lost sight of it either.

Eventually in February, 1949 Eileen set her face towards total dedication and presented herself at the St. Joseph of Cluny Novitiate, Ferbane, Co. Offaly. A whole new phase of her life began: for two years she prepared herself to make the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience with a readiness to go to the ends of the earth to spread the Gospel. When America became her assigned mission she did not question. With three Cluny Sisters she sailed from Cobh, Co. Cork, like thousands of emigrants before her. Philadelphia and the Holy Ghost Fathers' Home for Boys was her first stop. Soon it was into the classroom in Wilmington and Torrance, Southern California. Six years later, Newport, Rhode Island was blessed with her presence where Sister

Lelia taught Nursery school and Kindergarten for the most part of twenty-one years.

When Sister Lelia saw a need she simply thought of ways to meet it. The concept of something being impossible was foreign to her. The result was that she turned her hand to many different things. She was what is called a born teacher and her ability to sing, recite poetry, tell stories and take imaginary trips made her kindergarten class a magical place.

Sister Lelia was esteemed by both parents and students. The initial contact of four and five year olds with school life had a lasting and treasured memory for many of them. She made them feel at home, and while loving them dearly, she elicited the best in behavior and courtesy. Sister's energetic movements and comportment kept them alert and "on the ball". She encouraged quality and excellence in their studies and though young, they knew what was required and measured up. The yearly "graduation" ceremony from Kindergarten was well choreographed and each child came forward in miniature cap and gown to receive the Kindergarten "diploma" and shook hands saying, "Thank you, Fr. Maguire".

A successful Kindergarten gave a good start to Cluny School and proud parents were anxious to support academic and financial endeavors. The US Navy had a base in Newport at that time and many officers' children came to Cluny. News spread by word of mouth to US Navy families abroad whose upcoming assignment was the Naval War College that Cluny School existed in Newport, Rhode Island. To garnet a place, reservations were often made well in advance of coming into port. The school did well and has maintained its standards up to the present.

Sister Lelia had the wonderful gift of "multi-tasking". While being responsible for her class, she was often called upon to provide community services in cooking, decorating, hospitality and at times even caring for the sick. She honed her cooking skills at Fanny Farmer School in Boston and had an amazing skill in using leftovers—no food

was ever wasted. Her delicacy in arranging flowers was amazing and decorations always had a “Lelia touch”. Her deep faith, personal prayer life, sense of humor, dedication to duty, and gracious personality made her a loved community member.

After a prolonged time of serious illness, Sister Lelia returned to Ss. Peter and Paul, Wilmington, in the early eighties to coordinate the Poverty Program, which Sister Angela Mannion had started a few years earlier. This work became the love of her life. Her sense of order, organizational skills, and total intolerance of dirt or germs ensured a spotless storage and distribution area at the south end of the convent. Her compassion for the needy made her explore every avenue for funding and procurement of food. Her volunteers knew they had to come on time and work as hard as she did. When doctors and dentists offered free clinics, she asked our Methodist neighbors for the use of their church hall and thus began a lasting friendship. She welcomed every civic and church group that wanted to alleviate the suffering of the disadvantaged. The Taiwanese Buddhist Tzu Chi Charitable Outreach group in Palos Verdes adopted her program and since 1998 brought “bonus bags”, as she called them, once a month for her clients. She made wonderful things happen through her hard work, openness and dedication.

In November 2007, there was a sudden and serious deterioration in her health. She accepted that this was the end of her earthly journey. Understanding that she would need special care, she wished to be in the nursing home of the Little Sisters of the Poor in San Pedro. They graciously accepted her and on January 27, 2008 she died peacefully with Cluny Sisters and friends praying around her bed. Her funeral from Ss. Peter and Paul Church was an image of her life’s relationships and her mission. The gathering, which filled the church, included different faith traditions - other Christian denominations, Buddhist, Jewish - and people from the wealthiest areas of the South Bay to very poor day laborers, each with their own story of how the “little Irish nun” had touched their lives and hearts.