

SISTER MARIA do Céu

MENDES



*BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:
APRIL 7, 1944*

*BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:
JULY 19, 2016*

Sister Maria do Céu Mendes
Province of U.S.A. & Canada
1944 – 2016

Born in Braga, Portugal, Maria do Céu spent much of her early life in the little village of Sobreposta. With a twin brother, she was the oldest of eight children, four boys and four girls. Her parents, Augusto Mendes and Maria Adilia de Melo, saw to it that her family was very religious. Always deeply connected with the Church, they attended daily Mass and were very involved in many aspects of parish life. A beloved pastor was also very much a part of their at-home life.

As this home-Church connection gradually gained importance in Maria's eyes, so did the Sobreposta primary school. It provided her with wonderful memories of teachers and friends, but more significantly, it proved to be a greenhouse, as it were, for her love for learning and her missionary vocation. Many priests visited that primary school, and each one shared with the eager students their own enthusiasm and love for the missions, especially Africa. A deep desire, hope and dream grew strong within Maria to also one day go as a missionary to other lands and peoples.

During her teenage years this dream was put on hold. Sisters came to stay with the Mendes family while they were making appeals in the area. Maria's mother insisted that she accompany the sisters as they went from door to door begging for food and money for the missions. When some friends and family members began to ridicule Maria, she immediately felt ashamed and, whenever possible, avoided being seen with the sisters. From then on, the future became unclear and she struggled with God's call to her.

Never to be outdone in generosity, God beckoned her in a uniquely new and fresh way. One day Maria found herself at the Cluny Novitiate for Mass. Although a great many sisters were there, God

needed only one to touch her heart. She described it thus: “I saw all the sisters, but one looked at me with such a look of kindness and love, I believe something changed in my heart right then.” Shortly after that graced moment, Maria told her mother she wanted to enter with the Cluny Sisters.

In 1965, Maria entered the Cluny Novitiate in Braga, Portugal, from whence she became Sister Maria do Céu. Two years later, her childhood dream came true as she was sent to Mozambique to teach in the primary school. She said these years were some of the most wonderful ones of her young religious life.

Sister Maria returned to Portugal in 1973 to prepare for and profess her perpetual vows. After updating her studies, she very happily resumed her ministry in Mozambique. However, this time, things were very difficult because the country was struggling for independence. The people suffered from lack of food and the terror of war that surrounded them. This went on for three or four years. People were not only starving, they were dying in the street. For the rest of her life, Sister Maria had very vivid memories of terror, fear, and death. She recalled one night sleeping in the closet waiting for the soldiers to come. It was a night when all the sisters thought their life on earth was coming to an end. She said of this experience, “It was at this time that I truly felt I was living my missionary call. We were united as one with the suffering and the poor who surrounded us.”

In 1990, Sister Maria was missioned to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in response to the needs of the Portuguese immigrants who settled there. Having very little English, she began her studies to speak and write English. She joined the Cluny Sisters, especially Sister Maria Rocha, in a variety of activities and ministries assisting the Portuguese community in Hamilton. She began with ministry at the local Portuguese Information Center where the focus was on such things as employment, doctor/hospital support, translations, immigration and advocacy as well spiritual support and counseling. For Sister Maria,

the focus was involvement in the cultural Portuguese Heritage classes, and from there she quickly moved into full-time ministry at St. Mary's Parish. In no time, Sister Maria became the heart and soul of St. Mary's parish and the Portuguese Community. With love, discretion and the holding of many confidences, she served as a joyful disciple of Jesus, supporting their many festivals and events, and planning and listening as a friend and counselor.

Though Sister Maria eventually became a proud citizen of Canada, she always had a deep love for her beloved Portugal and her dear family. She experienced deep joy whenever she travelled back to her roots, especially the years visiting with her aging mother and sharing the lives of her many nieces and nephews. She also enjoyed participating in workshops, studies, retreats and visits to Fatima and the Shrine of Our Lady.

During her years in the St. Joseph Community, Hamilton, Sister Maria came to be known as someone who had a keen sense of justice. She had a passion for the rights of peoples and the dignity of their humanity. She was gifted with the creativity, planning and organization of a teacher and educator. Attentive to detail, Maria loved to learn and periodically took classes in technology and computer science to be more effective in her ministry at St. Mary's.

She had a gift for decorating, hospitality and welcoming others. She loved to walk everywhere and took simple delight in the gift of God's creation. Sister Maria enjoyed planting, harvesting and composting in the sisters' backyard garden. Everyone truly enjoyed the fruits of her labors: beans, squash, lettuce and tomatoes. When the community moved, Sister Maria no longer had her own piece of earth to nurture and develop. No problem, she then enjoyed the gardens of friends and parishioners who shared their flowers, fruits and vegetables with her. Through her pastoral ministry, Maria became the heart and soul of St. Mary's parish and the Portuguese Community. With love, discretion and holding many confidences, she served as a joyful disciple of Jesus,

supporting the many festivals and events, planning and listening, as a friend and counselor.

Throughout the years, Sister Maria found happiness in simple things: walking and shopping at the Farmers' Market; sitting outside a café enjoying a cup of coffee with sisters and friends; picnics at a park; a game of cards with the community; visits to the zoo, the ballet and nearby Niagara Falls with its awe-inspiring beauty and majesty. She loved these vacations and outings with her sisters in Hamilton and the Province of the U.S.A. & Canada.

In May of 2016, Sister Maria was diagnosed with a final-stage pancreatic cancer that had spread to her liver. Everyone was very shocked and surprised because Sister Maria was always proactive in maintaining her health, eating well and exercising. After this diagnosis, Sister spent several weeks in St. Joseph Hospital, Hamilton, to find the best way of managing her pain. While she was there, her sisters, the clergy, friends and parishioners all prayed and spent time with her. She also received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and daily communion.

On Friday, July 8th, Sister Maria came home to prepare for her final journey. Surrounded by her sisters, she died peacefully eleven days later – on July 19, 2016. Her gentleness, gratitude and ultimate 'Yes' to her loving God was a gift for everyone who journeyed with her. Céu, as she wanted to be called, had a pottery plaque on her bedroom wall that expressed her joy and gratitude for her call to serve as a missionary Sister of St. Joseph of Cluny. This plaque reads, "Obrigado Senhor, pela minha consagração ao serviço do Teu povo. " - Thank You, Lord, that the gift of my consecration places me at the service of your people.

Sister Maria's friends, parishioners and Cluny Sisters gathered at St. Mary's church on July 22, 2016 to celebrate the gift of her life. Many clergy joined them. Mass of Following the Mass of Resurrection, many

travelled to the new Gate of Heaven Catholic Cemetery in Burlington for her burial. Sister Maria do Céu Mendes is the first Cluny Sister to be buried in Canada. She rests in the Grotto of Our Lady of Fatima surrounded by the creation she loved and the deceased members of the Portuguese community she served with such dedication. May she rest in peace.