

Reflection on the life of Sister Marie Sullivan April 11, 1920–April 8, 2013



Good morning. I feel especially privileged to share these reflections for Sister Marie Sullivan, a sister who has quietly influenced my life since I was in the second grade. It was Sister Marie who prepared both my brother and me for the sacraments of penance and Eucharist and, I truly believe, it was she who nurtured a love for the Eucharist in my heart during that special year.

Let us begin this reflection with the words that Sister Marie shared with the community when asked to describe her ministry on the occasion of her 65th anniversary in religious life. I quote Sister Marie:

“Often I ponder the parable of the sower and seeds. The seeds fall into different places. I feel I have been especially blessed to have been planted (called to) the Sisters of Charity; to inherit traditions of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Vincent de Paul, and Saint Louise de Marillac, to be challenged to be a servant, a handmaid in the Kingdom of God; to be encouraged to live in the presence of God with humility, simplicity, and charity; and to be welcomed with my strengths and limitations to serve the Church.”

Marie Elizabeth Sullivan was born on April 11, 1920; today she is celebrating her 93rd birthday in her new and eternal life. Her parents, Henry Patrick and Johanna Maloney Sullivan, welcomed their fourth child and only daughter. Eventually Marie would have seven brothers. She said when anyone asked her father how many children he had, he replied, “I have seven sons, and each one has a sister.”

Marie was baptized at Saint Mary Church on 46th Street on April 18, 1920; the family moved when she was about two years old to Swissvale and became members of Saint Anselm Parish. Marie attended Saint Anselm Grade School. When she completed 8th grade she went to Saint Joseph Academy in the second class of the Juniorate, which the Sisters of Charity started in 1933 and discontinued in 1937. This short-lived chapter in the history of the Congregation was very fruitful for vocations in that time. Of the 26 young women enrolled between 1933 and 1937, eleven became Sisters of Charity. Sister Marie went to the Juniorate in 1934 and stayed until it was discontinued in 1937. She completed her high school education in the community. Sister Marie said her father wrote her a letter every day describing what was happening at home. She said it was like he was writing a book. When asked how she got to the Juniorate she said, “I am not sure. Someone asked me. I had Sister Mary Samuel in eighth grade. I think she might have done it. They knew I wanted to be a sister. I used to love to be close to the sisters and even touch their capes.” With this she gave a little chuckle.

Marie entered the Sisters of Charity on September 8, 1937, received the habit on January 1, 1938 and made her first profession on January 1, 1940. She spent a short time at Resurrection in Brookline, and it was in 1941 that I first met Sister Marie at Saint Philip in Crafton. I remember a very soft spoken, gentle, kind sister who made everyone comfortable. When the name of Sister Marie is brought up in the community, one hears words like: very special, so kind, a wonderful sister, a community person, so quiet, so gentle. Many remarked that Sister Marie never said an unkind word about another. It is no wonder that she had such success in the primary grades and with children with special needs. Children were gently made to feel special, unrushed, and peaceful.

As quiet and unassuming as Sister Marie was, she was a community pioneer in many ways. She was first of the Juniorate success stories. She was a successful primary teacher. She studied Special Education and assisted in further developing the special education program at Sacred Heart Grade School which was innovative for its time. From 1971 until 1975, Sister Marie was an exchange teacher with the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans. She admitted that she was very sorry to leave that mission and did so only because someone else wanted her place. In her humility she said, “I went there thinking that I would do much good. But it was good for me. I loved being here.”

Sister Marie held permanent teaching certificates in Pennsylvania and Arizona. She was certified to teach classes in special education in Pennsylvania and Louisiana. She participated in an educational travel program in Rocky Mountain in the summer of 1961. Additionally, Sister Marie often spent her summers working in the infirmary. She worked with the sisters in Elizabeth Ann Hall and – no doubt, because of her gentle quiet way – she brought peace and calmness to their lives. As a member of Council, I asked Sister Marie if she would consider going to Assumption Hall and assisting Sister Mary Florence in Elizabeth Ann Seton Hall. She began that ministry in 1992 and actively served her sisters as long as she was able.

But Sister Marie was much more than her works in ministry. She was a loving member of the Sullivan family. During her oral history as she recites her moves to various missions, she marks the years with the marriages of her brothers, the births, the deaths, and the significant moments in each of their lives. Although she found it was not easy being the only girl in the family, she grew to appreciate her brothers and their families as life progressed. Early on she complained that her mother thought she should never be on the street alone and sent her brothers to accompany her. She said, “I didn’t like it and neither did they.”

Sister Marie also quietly kept track of happenings in the community. As Sister Servant and Principal she made the convent a happy home. Sister Marie now joins her parents and Joe, Tom, Ed, Ray, Paul, and Don and her sisters in the Company of Charity. We join today with Bill and Ann, Sherie, nephews, nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces, and her loving relatives to ask her to remind Jesus to remember us as we continue our journey. We are grateful that the seed of Marie was planted in the Sullivan family and the Sisters of Charity.

As we say our farewell today to Sr Marie, it seems appropriate to send her with this Irish Blessing:

*“Deep peace, pure white of the moon to you.
Deep peace, pure green of the grass to you.
Deep peace, pure brown of the earth to you.
Deep peace, pure grey of the dew to you.
Deep peace, pure blue of the sky to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the Son of peace to you.”*

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Louise Grundish, SC
April 11, 2013*