

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY JEAN FLAHERTY

April 15, 1927—June 12, 2015

Sister Mary Jean experienced a return of the symptoms of her illness on June 2, 2015, the fourth anniversary of the death of her longtime friend, Sister Virginia Marie Waudby. Like Sister Virginia Marie, Sister Mary Jean had a long and full life. She was a Valley girl, born in a company house in Clairton, Pa, the second daughter of Agnes Bradley and Vincent P. Flaherty (VP). Two more daughters would follow; Margie Flaherty Donovan is here today. Her other sisters, Pat and Lou, Sister Marie, a Sister of Mercy, are with God. Pat and Margie's children and grandchildren are here along with her Bradley cousins, former students, good friends and the Spiritan priests from Duquesne University, her alma mater.



As a child, Mary Jean watched from her bedroom window as the tug boats traveled up and down the Mon (Monongahela River). She attended Catholic grade and high schools, and entered the School of Nursing at Pittsburgh Hospital as a cadet nurse after she finished Saint Peter's High School at age 17. Her nursing education was interrupted by the sense that God wanted her to give more. This year, she is celebrating her 70th anniversary as a Sister of Charity.

As a sister nurse, she served at all of our health care institutions: Pittsburgh and Providence Hospitals, Roselia Foundling, Jeannette District Memorial Hospital, where she was one of the pioneers, and Assumption Hall. Her specialty was maternity nursing and she spent hours with women in labor in community hospitals before fetal monitors, smart medications or high tech ways to assure mother and infant safety existed. She was an expert clinician. When she was graduating with honors from Duquesne University in 1956, she was offered a full tuition scholarship for the nurse midwifery program at Yale. But her superiors asked her to go to Providence Hospital in Beaver Falls to head the maternity unit and teach maternity nursing in their hospital school.

When she did return to school, she earned a master's degree in maternity nursing at the University of Pittsburgh. Sister Mary Jean was a gifted student. Her education at Pitt was supported by a federal traineeship and a nurse scientist grant. Under the guidance of the international expert on maternity nursing, Reva Rubin, her life

took a different turn. Reva viewed pregnancy as a process of becoming a mother. It was not just a physical experience; it was a psychological and spiritual process. It involved the mother's coming to know the other, her newborn, and learning how to establish a relationship, a bonding, with her baby. During her doctoral study and after graduation, she taught at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing.

But her heart was with childbearing women. She accepted the directorship of a new Department of Education at Magee Woman's Hospital. In this role, she enhanced Magee's "Three Rivers Care delivery model" by developing not only theoretically based staff orientation and development programs, but also programs oriented to prepare families for different modes of preparation for childbirth, breastfeeding, roles as parent and grandparent, and education to help nurses in outlying hospitals care for high-risk mothers and their newborns. Sister Mary Carol Murphy went to work with her each day and assisted the staff as well as the mothers.

In the fall, 1980, Sister Mary Jean accepted a position as chair of Nursing of the Developing Family at The Catholic University of America. This large department enrolled about 70 new graduate students each year; many were international students. In the nineties, Ordinary Professor Sister Mary Jean Flaherty served two successful terms as Dean of Nursing. During her tenure as dean, she spearheaded the development of an innovative graduate program in Community/Public Health Nursing that focused on community based care of vulnerable populations. She and her colleagues obtained over \$3,200,000.00 in federal grants to expand and develop this program. She continued her teaching and research with doctoral students, directing over 80 dissertations. She was a teacher's teacher. Some of her former students traveled to comfort her during her last illness, at the time of her death, and others are with her tonight. But with all of this, Sister Mary Jean never lost her interest or commitment to mothers. Her most important contribution to maternity nursing was her research on early mother-child interactions and her studies of grandmothers in Black families. Her work was federally funded, published in referred journals and widely cited.

She was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Nursing, the year they selected a class of 16. She was honored with the Alumni Achievement Award from Pittsburgh Hospital School of Nursing and was a charter member of the Duquesne University Alumni Hall of Fame. For over a decade, she worked at the policy level with the accreditation processes of the National League for Nursing.

She was an active member of the China Medical Board and several health system boards. She was on the editorial board of several maternity and nursing education journals.

In the early eighties, Sister Mary Jean was invited to be a consultant for the World Health Organization. Her major work was in Indonesia, the largest archipelago in the world. She established the first baccalaureate program for nurses in Indonesia. Distant places and strange names entered her vocabulary: Kalimantan, Sumatra, Sulawesi, Bali and Irian Jaya. In 1991, *The Journal of Cotemporary Health Law and Policy* dedicated Volume 7, Issue 1 to acknowledge “her lifetime work of service not only as a Sister of Charity, but also as a distinguished scholar and teacher.”

But who was she really, this dark eyed Mon Valley girl? She was determined, independent, private, incredibly talented and loyal. She valued her friends, her family and her students; she assisted in the delivery of eight nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews. She was especially close to her youngest sister, Margie and her four boys. Margie was with her during the 11 weeks of her illness. For the last 45 years of her life, she traveled, as her mother used to say, with a pack: Sister Mary Carol, Sister Virginia Marie, our former Sister Joan Conway, Sister Camillus and me.

She was also a citizen of the world, educating nurses and presenting papers in England, Western Europe, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China, Spain, Morocco and the Philippines. When we could gather enough Frequent Flyer miles, members of the pack came along and we experienced the art, culture and food of the world. She painted, she loved history, she was a skilled seamstress, and she knew a lot about art and music, especially the opera. She was politically sophisticated and an avid consumer not only of the political commentators on TV, but also of the opinions of the editorial staff of the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. When we moved from Pittsburgh Hospital in 1976, she learned to cook and bake. She also managed the house, the finances and the animals. Chloe and Ben will miss her.

As you realize, the pack is smaller, but we are bound together. It comforts me to realize that her illness returned on the anniversary of Sister Virginia Marie’s death, June 2, 2011, that the time of her death, 3:45 AM was the exact time of Virginia’s

death and that her funeral liturgy is on the fourth anniversary of Sister Camillus' death.

Jean, I hope that this eulogy is accurate and that it has not embarrassed you. You lived a simple, quiet life. I, as they say in the spy novels, "have blown your cover." May you enjoy eternal life; you made it home.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Rosemary Donley
June 16, 2015