

Reflection on the Life of Sister Mary Donald Cusick
January 20, 1915–November 6, 2015



Have you noticed how bright is the splendor of the night sky and how the stars shine so brightly since the death of Sister Mary Donald on Friday? No, it is not due to a full harvest moon, nor climate change. It is the fulfillment of Chapter 12, verse 3, in the Book of Daniel, where we read "But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever."

Certainly, Sister Mary Donald ranks among the wise who lead so many students, teachers, administrators and parents to justice through her long life as a Sister of Charity. She entered the community from Saint Stephen Parish, Hazelwood, where she attended elementary and secondary schools. In his letter of recommendation, addressed to Mother Evelyn, Father Philip Dugan, the pastor, described her as a very sensible girl who comes from a good practical Catholic family. Catherine, her baptismal name, was the daughter of William J. and Nora (Butler) Cusick. She had one sister and four brothers, all of whom are deceased.

So anxious was she to enter the community in 1933, that in her letter to Mother Evelyn, she wrote, "Mother, I'll be happy to take a second-hand dress." Due to her skills of sewing and excellent taste, I am certain that this was the only time Sister Mary Donald wore anything that was second-hand!

After the canonical year of the novitiate, Sister began her ministry at Sacred Heart Elementary School in 1935. After teaching middle and upper grades and training altar boys, under the critical eye of Father

Coakley, the pastor, she was appointed principal in 1954. She immediately welcomed children with special needs and integrated them into the curriculum where appropriate. In 1957, she was named the Community Supervisor of Elementary Education. In this position, she supervised more than 40 schools, staffed by the community in eight dioceses. She served with grace, creativity and humility. In her letter, announcing her appointment as principal of Saint Jane de Chantal School in Bethesda, Maryland, and addressed to all with whom she had worked for sixteen years, she wrote, "I want to thank you for all that you have done to make these many years as your supervisor, years of happy memories. If at any time, I was successful, it was because of you."

That success of leading others to justice through Catholic education, followed her to Saint Jane de Chantal where she served for 15 years. During her tenure, both she and the school won countless awards. Saint Jane de Chantal was the first elementary school in the Archdiocese of Washington to obtain Middle States Accreditation. The United States Secretary of Education, William Bennett, called Saint Jane de Chantal "one of the country's best schools, and named Sister Mary Donald as the "principal figure" in the citation. In 1988, the school won the Presidential Award, which was presented to Sister on behalf of President Reagan. In 1994, she became the first recipient of the Distinguished Ministry in Catholic Education Award. After 53 years of educational ministry, she enjoyed a sabbatical at the University of San Diego. She concluded her "R and R" with a memorable trip to Hawaii—another example of a wise woman!

Upon returning to Bethesda, she began to serve as an administrative assistant at SOAR, Support Our Aging Religious, a lay organization which awards grants to religious congregation throughout the United States. She served there for six years. The organization gave her an award for giving full-time attention to a part-time position and called her an "outstanding woman."

After 60 years of being wise and leading many to justice, she returned to Greensburg, not to retire, but to serve as a volunteer in the finance department of the community. An article in *Celebration*, the community newsletter, quoted her as saying, "I love to get up in the morning, and I delight each day in my volunteer work." Finally, after 14 years of updating files, keeping records and cutting checks, Sister Mary Donald, at age 94, was listed as retired in the community directory.

These past few years were not golden for her. Her decline and diminishment were rapid. The hearing and memory loss prevented her from imparting wisdom or leading the many to justice. But, now "The strife is o'er. The battle done." The Risen Lord has set her free. Look up and see. She shines for all eternity. Amen. Alleluia!

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Patrice Hughes
November 10, 2015