

## REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER CECILIA McCLAIN

November 14, 1923—September 19, 2016



Sister Cecilia herself planned this beautiful funeral liturgy for the time when she would leave us, and so we all felt her presence here this morning. Seventy years ago, on July 2, 1946, she entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. It was the Feast of the Visitation, the reminder of the Virgin Mary's generous and loving three-month visit to help her aged cousin, Elizabeth, who was preparing for the birth of her child.

Such connections were very much a part of Sister Cecilia McClain, whom we first knew as Sister Mary Lawrence. She once wrote that she became a Sister of Charity because, as she says, “I just felt that was what I was supposed to do! Based on the examples of the sisters we knew, you just wanted to live the kind of life they had.”

Yet her little sister Mae (Mary Patricia), was astonished when Cecilia told the family about her plans. “*I’m* the one who wants to be a nun!” Mae cried. “I’ve been telling *everyone* about it ever since I was in first grade!” “I know,” Cecilia replied, “but I wanted first to go to movies and dances and have fun. So I waited till I was ready to go!” And so she entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill on July 2, 1946. Four years later, Mae also entered the congregation.

Sister Cecilia was the first of the three daughters of Martin McClain and Rose Ann Miller McClain—Cecilia, Mildred, and Mary Patricia whom everyone called Mae. The infant was baptized “Cecilia” at Saint Bartholomew Church, in the tiny town of Crabtree, Pennsylvania, where the family entered into all the activities of the town and the church.

“We knew everyone, of course, and everyone knew us. It was a wonderful place to grow up!” Cecilia, Mae, and Mildred were always close. They loved their town and they loved their church—“but so,” Cecilia claims, “did everyone!” They especially loved their sister Mildred, whose name Mae later took and kept as her own religious name.

Growing up in a loving family and in an ideal environment, Cecilia told me she was a naturally happy person—and remained so throughout her life. “Why do you say your hometown was ‘ideal?’” I once asked her. “Well, everybody knew everybody and cared about everybody,” she explained. “Nearly everyone in Crabtree was Catholic and our lives centered around the church. And it was the same thing when entered the Sisters of Charity. I’d thought about entering all my life but I never told anyone, while my little sister Mae talked about becoming a sister ever since she was about six years old! So it caused quite a stir when I told them!” she grinned.

“As a teenager, I wanted to have fun at parties and dances, so I didn’t tell anyone what I was planning until it was time for me to do it!” So at 22, she became a Sister of Charity, and from that time on she whole-heartedly loved Seton Hill and her life as a sister. Cecilia's sense of fun and her love of music remained throughout her life as she developed new ways of integrating music into the regular school curriculum and the lives of her pupils.

Cecilia’s life was like a drama in three acts—Crabtree, Seton Hill, and Raleigh, North Carolina. This morning’s liturgy, with the readings she chose, make it clear that her deepest values lay in accepting God’s love—totally.

The reading from the First Book of Kings stresses how the Lord expects indefatigable searching from those who wish to know God’s will. Then we heard Saint Paul’s exhortation to those who want to serve as the Lord’s “holy and beloved ones.” Cecilia's vocation was to follow Paul’s instruction—to “put on Christ.” She sought sincerely to treat all her friends as well as her co-workers and students generously and lovingly by, as Paul said, “putting on Christ.”

The gospel story of Christ with the Samaritan woman at the well indicates how Jesus taught gently and thoroughly a habit that Cecilia spent her life trying to emulate. As she expressed her vocation, she compared it to the words of today’s gospel. “Like the woman at the well, I’m also seeking the water of eternal life. . . . “The woman wasn't there yet but she was definitely well on her way—just like us Sisters of Charity!”

From her earliest days as a sister, Cecilia taught music as well as other subjects, especially religion, in both grade school and high schools—Saint Mary Magdalen, Saint Irenaeus, Visitation in Johnstown, Sacred Heart in the East End, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Augustine in Lawrenceville, and

Geibel High School— for over 40 years.

By then it was the mid-eighties, and the sisters were seeking more and more to follow the insights of Vatican II. Cecilia applied to Infant of Prague Parish, Jacksonville, North Carolina, where she would spend her remaining years of ministry as Director of Religious Education. She introduced parishioners to the Seton Family so well that they remain faithful members still. When Cecilia arrived at her mission in North Carolina, she loved her work there so much that the following year she talked Sister Mary Mildred into applying to work at another North Carolina parish. Although for many years, they lived in separate cities, they often got together to plan classes and methods. The years went by rapidly and peacefully for both sisters.

After over 18 years in this ministry which she called her second career, Cecilia found she was no longer well enough to continue full-time work at Infant of Prague. She asked the pastor to consider having her sister share the work. And so it happened—Cecilia and Mae were working together at last at Infant of Prague Parish.

When their health began to fail in 2003, she and Mae returned to Greensburg but continued their friendship with their beloved Infant of Prague parishioners. A few years at Caritas Christi told them it was now time to get ready to return to their Maker.

Can it be just a coincidence that God called Sister Cecilia to heaven on the tenth anniversary of Sister Mary Mildred's death?

Always gentle, always gracious, Ceil remained so throughout her life, as her obituary noted:

*Capable, dedicated, quiet-spoken, Sister Cecilia embodied the model set by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, "Through piety and gratitude, we come to the deepest recess of peace and true contentment."*

No wonder we will miss Sister Cecilia as she leaves us now. May her sweet and gentle soul rest forever in peace!

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection  
Sister Mary Noël Kernan  
September 24, 2016*