

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARIE PATRICK SULLIVAN June 17, 1924–May 19, 2017



Almost ninety-three years ago, on June 17, 1924, Catherine and Patrick Sullivan gave birth to their twelfth and youngest child, Elizabeth. Eighteen years later, July 2, 1942, Elizabeth entered the Sisters of Charity. She was one of two girls from Saint John the Baptist Parish in Lawrenceville. The pastor Father Davin writes, “Elizabeth has been the better student. . . . You can be sure it is a pleasure to be privileged to send two more of Saint John’s own to the Charity Community. Am certain they will hold up tradition.”

Elizabeth became Sister Marie Patrick, and four years later began her mission life in Ajo, Arizona. Sister Marie Patrick went on for fifty years as teacher, principal, and Sister Servant—many of those years in Arizona—then in Pittsburgh, ending her active years with ten years as librarian at Sacred Heart. Her long list of recorded assignments ends with six years as a volunteer at Doran Hall and here at Caritas Christi.

Last evening during the vigil, we shared and enjoyed the kinds of stories that make the long dreary list of assignments come to life. It’s why we have the vigil and why we have the custom of the eulogy at the funeral Mass. We are saying a loving good-bye to a wonderful, living person, and only stories will serve, not statistics.

This coming July, Sister Marie Patrick would have celebrated her 75th year as a Sister of Charity. The Pittsburgh Catholic sent questionnaires to the celebrants. Asked to describe herself in three words, Marie Patrick replied, “kind, loving, thoughtful.” Asked what aspect of her life she found most satisfying or rewarding, she replied, “In my religious life, I always knew that whatever I was asked to do came from ‘the voice of God.’ I was never a big shot. I always just wanted to be God’s ‘little shot.’ I have found great joy in teaching children about Jesus. In my retirement, I find great joy in celebrating the Eucharist with my community and serving each other’s needs.”

As we listened to one another last evening, I reflected on the “whole” of Sister Marie Patrick. We heard about so many loving, kind, enthusiastic ways she had with everyone—people she just met or people she has known for many years. How did she do that so consistently? Her faith, hope, joy, integrity, and happiness in serving God and people. Story after story and in the end, I think, all pieces of one grand narrative.

Preparing for these words today, I came across a beautiful paragraph in a book review that seems to me to describe this ‘one grand narrative’ we have known as Sister Marie Patrick, this living word.

Amin Maalouf is an Arab Christian who in 1999 wrote *In the Name of Identity*. “A person’s identity,” Maalouf wrote as he contemplated what he so poetically called the genes of the soul, “is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound.” The reviewer continues, “And yet today we are increasingly pressured to parcel ourselves out in various social contexts, lacerating the parchment of our identity in the process. As Courtney Martin observed ‘It’s never been more asked of us to show up as only slices of ourselves in different places. What does it really mean to be a person?’”

As we shared the joy of Sister Marie Patrick’s life last evening, I think we were seeing the “pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment.” If we touch just one part of that parchment, the whole drum of that life will sound. Marie Patrick wasn’t a different person to each one she met. She was the same parchment resonating in harmony with the person in front of her. She was a person who continued to grow more and more whole as her life went on. The resonance grew stronger and broader. Her identity did not require the exclusion of others. In her growing identity, others flourished and grew.

Marie said, “I was never a big shot. I always just wanted to be a little shot.” Indeed, Marie, a ‘little shot’ that made a beautiful sound!

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Gertrude Foley, SC
May 23, 2017