

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER ROSEMARY FLEMMING

October 4, 1935–December 1, 2021

**Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one finds a treasure.
Faithful friends are beyond price, no amount can balance their worth.**

Sirach 6:14-16



More than 100 years ago, two young mothers, raising children in the 5100 block of Carnegie Street in the 10th Ward of Lawrenceville, forged a deep and lasting friendship that was passed down to their children and their children's children to the third and fourth generation. Those two young women were Rosemary's mother, Marg Fleming, and my grandmother, Tess Dougherty. The Fleming family has been part a significant part of my life since my birth. They were the big sisters and brothers, the nieces and nephews, great nieces and nephews that this only child never had and Rosemary was always so kind to share them with me.

Rosemary was the youngest in a family of six: Tom, Margie, Jack, Ellen, and Joan. Two of Joan's eight children, Missy and Pam, and two granddaughters, Christine and Avery, have come from Minnesota to be with us today. As are many others viewing via live-stream. Of the six Fleming children, only Ellen survives at age 94. Family was always important to Rosemary; they were her jewels and her treasure. Rosemary was the apple of her father's eye and her mother's "little girl".

Following graduation from Elizabeth Seton High School, Rosemary worked for 9 years as a secretary in the Chancery Office of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. There she forged many lasting friendships, one special one with Bishop Anthony Bosco who, along with Fr. Joe Knorr, assisted her as she discerned next steps in her life journey. Finally, after nine years, she entered the Sisters of Charity on September 8, 1962, with 33 other young women. She was one of the seniors in our group. Always upbeat and funny, we weren't aware of the struggles that she experienced in the transition from independent working woman to pre-Vatican II Novitiate life. In April of our Canonical year, she made the decision to leave the Community. For three years, she worked as a stenographer for an Insurance Agency. During those

years, she continued to discern where God was calling her to serve. Lo and behold, on January 1, 1967, she returned “home” as a Canonical Novice and, again, received the name, Sr. Juliana. Rosemary lived the words of St. Vincent de Paul: *“All comes at the proper time to the one who knows how to wait.”*

Her interpretation: God’s time, not ours.

She successfully completed the Novitiate and in 1969 was assigned to teach 7th and 8th grade at St. Jane de Chantal School in Bethesda, Maryland. Let me just say that it was not her “cup of tea”. At the same time, I was teaching 7th and 8th grade at Sacred Heart School in Pittsburgh and I thought that 7th and 8th graders were the best thing since sliced bread. When we would meet up on her occasional trips back to the area, she would ask: “How can you stand it”? At the conclusion of that school year, she shared with Mother Richard Ann Watson that education was simply not her thing.

She dabbled in the world of Adult Religious Formation with Sisters Eugene O’Donnell, Mary Clifford Soisson, and Francina Skergan, while living in New Kensington. In spite of the fact that adults were a more attentive audience than the 7th and 8th graders in Bethesda, she just didn’t find it fulfilling.

In 1972, Rosemary, along with our former Sr. Mary Kristin Spell, was assigned to the new initiative on Clyde Street in Oakland, following the closing of Rosalia Foundling. We know it as Rosalia Manor. Kristin and Rosemary were a dynamic duo, but it was a demanding ministry. She loved the women and served them with understanding and compassion, spending many hours at Magee Hospital when the women gave birth to their babies and, then, gave them up for adoption.

Finally, in 1973, Sr. Sara Louise Reilly informed Rosemary that the Diocese of Pittsburgh was beginning a new initiative, training lay persons and Sisters to serve parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh as Parish Social Service Ministers. In her wisdom, she suggested that it might be a good fit for Rosemary. She completed the program in the first cohort and was placed at St. Joseph Parish in Port Vue.

Bingo! She embraced that ministry with enthusiasm and commitment. She had found her niche, in God’s time! She loved the people and they loved her! At the same time, she was assigned to be Sister Moderator of the Ladies of Charity of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, a role which she embraced until her retirement in 2010. I believe that she may have been the first Sister Moderator of the organization in the Pittsburgh Diocese. Rosemary worked tirelessly with Grace

Eckhardt to establish what is now recognized as one of the premiere Chapters of the Ladies of Charity in the United States. During her years as Sister Moderator, the organization grew not only in membership but in services as well.

In every parish to which Rosemary was assigned, an important aspect of her ministry to the poor and elderly was to establish a chapter of the Ladies. The Ladies are, indeed, partners with us in the work of Charity as St. Louise and St. Vincent had envisioned back in the 17th century in France.

Rosemary loved the people and her coworkers in every parish where she ministered, but there has always been a special place in her heart for the people of St. Luke's in Carnegie where she spent 13 years. As she often said, "they're our kind of people", so similar to the people of St. Kieran where our faith was nurtured and grounded. The parishoners at St. Luke's loved the Sisters of Charity and they supported Rosemary in her ministry, working with them to address the needs of the poor and the elderly.

In Rosemary's own words:

"As a Sister of Charity rooted in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition of service, I strive to see Christ in every person I meet. I strive to be a welcoming presence to those in the parish and the local community who are poor, needy, lonely and oppressed."

That was her commitment and her gift to the people whom she served in Port Vue, Carnegie, Mt. Oliver, Mars and, finally to those at St. Sylvester in Brentwood.

These past years have been challenging ones for Rosemary, for her family, and for all of us. I'll never forget our conversation in the parking lot at St. Joseph House of Hospitality when she shared with me the results of her assessment at the Benedum Center. Having watched her sister Joan struggle with the same diagnosis, she knew what was ahead of her. We talked, we cried and agreed that we would be in the fight together. And, we have. She endured the long, slow death of Alzheimer's disease. Through it all, she maintained her deep faith in God's love for her. The realization that if one is linked to God, the storms will come, but they will not destroy you.

Rosemary held many positions of distinction throughout her life, but the one that she cherished most was her call to be a Sister of Charity of Seton Hill. Living the charism to serve the poor in the spirit of humility, simplicity and charity was her greatest recognition.

As I spent these last days in quiet reflection, accompanying Rosemary on her final journey to God and recalling her ministry and love for the poor, I've thought of the many ways that she lived the words of St. Vincent de Paul:

"You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry, heavier than the bowl of soup and the full basket ... It is not enough to give the poor soup and bread ... You are the servant of the poor ... They are your masters, terribly sensitive and exacting you will see. It is only for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them."

As you passed into the peace and joy of God's eternal presence, early Wednesday morning, you were greeted by your beloved family and friends. I believe there was a special group waiting for you; all those many souls that you served with love and devotion throughout your life. They welcomed you to the joy of God's timeless love.

We love you, Rosemary, and will miss you, but we rejoice that "God's time" has finally arrived for you.

Be at peace, my dear and faithful friend.

Sr. Maureen O'Brien
December 3, 2021