

Reflection of Sister Mary Jean Petrarca, SC

January 16, 1933 – April 19, 2024



Good morning.

Here we are. Gathered today to celebrate Sister Mary Jean's passage from earth to heaven. A great day.

I want to recall a casual conversation among a group of us sisters at Elizabeth Seton Convent several years ago. There was talk about Mary Jean did this, Mary Jean did that, Mary Jean was going to take care of this, etc. Sister Brigid Marie observed with a clear directness, *"There will never be another Mary Jean."*

Sister Mary Jean Petrarca was indeed alive for her 72 years as a Sister of Charity, 91 years as the loving daughter and only child of Louis and Anna Mae Petrarca. Her parents were a lovely and generous couple who delighted in their daughter's life, her friendships, and visiting the different places in which

she lived. Personally, I have often thought of the Mother and Father Petrarca and how proud they could rightly be of how their Jody lived out her dedicated life.

Those of us who have known and loved her these many years immediately think of Mary Jean as a "gentle woman, a quiet light." **In essence, that's who she was – gentle, quiet, unassuming.** However, if you read her obituary in local papers this week, you might have been struck by the contrast. A highly accomplished woman, a woman of surprisingly intense energy and outreach. **Essentially, this, too, describes Sister Mary Jean.**

Over the past few days, we've heard many ways to describe Mary Jean. Was it really many ways? Or was it many people describing her in the same way? We seem to hear almost the same thing from everyone. Mary Jean: "kind; gentle; a woman who gave herself to others; a quiet behind-the-scenes person who never wanted credit for what she did for you or me or anyone."

Maybe you were around our kitchen on a Saturday morning and were greeted by the fragrance of homemade pecan rolls baking or homemade vegetable soup brewing. She was a star in the kitchen knowing just when to give even everyday meals a special touch.

Mary Jean was always aware of needs about the house. “Did the dining room rug need cleaned or was it about time to replace the chapel drapes? She observed it all. Quietly and confidently, she made her moves to address the need. Mary Jean had just the touch to keep the second-floor former classroom and school building a comfortable, attractive, and livable **home**. *There will never be another Mary Jean.*

About Mary Jean’s energy and outreach. I’ll speak briefly of three of these. First there was her fifteen-year period at Pioneer School, so conveniently located a few blocks from the convent. Pioneer is a Pittsburgh Public School dedicated and equipped for serving children and teens who have multiple medical disabilities. Having studied and been certified by the Universities of Pennsylvania and Georgetown, Sister Mary Jean was “prepared to prepare.” I say she was prepared to prepare because she spoke in those days of being inspired by St. Elizabeth Seton’s often quoted educational philosophy, “I would wish to fit you for the world in which you are destined to live.”

Sister Mary Jean’s involvement in the setting up of our Korean sisters’ Eun Hae School is quite remarkable. Before she embarked on her brave four-month sabbatical from Pioneer School in 1983, she took photographs of equipment at Pioneer and made scaled down drawings of equipment she knew would have to be made for the children in Eun Hae. She couldn’t speak Korean, but she could speak through Sister Jane Ann about such things as designing floor sitters for children who needed support to sit up – and the best ways to handle children for feeding and positioning them for class instruction. In a reflection written about thirty years later about her time at Eun Hae, she writes, “As I read about Eun Hae School today, I’m proud I did what I did in sharing my experience with them. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life and I shall never regret it.” *There will never be another Mary Jean.*

In 1989 came the crowning glory of Mary Jean’s life dream, her natural inclination, and the immeasurable opportunity to give of her very being, the Emmaus Community. I say the Emmaus Community because without its focus on community, Emmaus wouldn’t be the Emmaus it is, and it may not have been the place Mary Jean would have embraced with all her heart – for 27 years and then some.

The Emmaus philosophy is built on the familiar Bible story where strangers meet, feel comfortable together, and share stories --- of their lives, their questions, and their suffering. What happens next? These one-time strangers break bread together. Sharing stories, however simple, and breaking bread together, these are the staples of everyday life that Emmaus Houses embrace, the staples that build their community. Seeking to improve the quality of life for adults with intellectual and physical disabilities inspired the founding of Emmaus. From her youth, Mary Jean was a natural at sharing people’s lives, and by the skills she had developed, she was a natural among these adults with multiple disabilities.

And the Emmaus House, like Pioneer School, was close by, just a few miles the convent. Elizabeth Seton convent is another place she loved, another place where her caring ways nurtured her community of sisters, her friends. With a few brief interruptions, she was there for more than fifty years.

A few weeks before her death, her dear friend, Sister Jane Ann visited Mary Jean. Mary Jean, speaking almost conversationally, asked her friend, “Why is this happening to me?” This, I believe, was a fair question coming from Mary Jean, lying there almost helplessly. This was a woman accustomed to being on the move for others. These kinds of days had never happened to her before. No wonder she asked “Why is **this** happening to me?”

In 2011, at the time of her 60th year as a Sister of Charity, Sister Mary Jean humbly noted in writing, “I rejoice especially in the new **beginnings** of which I was a part, namely Greensburg Catholic High School, Eun Hae School in South Korea, and the Emmaus community.”

New beginnings. Last Friday, when it may have seemed Sister Mary Jean was coming to the end, she was actually **beginning** once again, beginning to rejoice in the biggest and the best of all her beginnings, dramatically bigger, indescribably better than the Petrarca family, the Sisters of Charity or Emmaus or Eun Hae School – bigger and better than these were ever meant to be.

Please pray for us, Mary Jean, as we pray for you, our beloved *quiet woman, peaceful dove*.
Send us your wisdom, share your love. Amen

Sister Mary Clark, April 23, 2024