

Sister Mary Clennon, CSC

(Sister Miriam Paul)

August 23, 1936–February 10, 2021

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Jeanne Clennon, CSC. Sister Maureen Grady, CSC, read them at Sister Mary's memorial Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Loretto, Saint Mary's, Notre Dame, Indiana, on February 10, 2022.

Mary, the youngest and spunkiest of the three Clennon sisters, entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross in 1954.

Her application stated clearly her desire to serve God as a nurse.

The novitiate superiors, recognizing her expertise with needle and thread, assigned her to the sewing room. She and another novice spent the year adjusting bridal dresses and making habits for the next group of novices.

Once she completed the novitiate, she began the nursing program at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, graduating in 1960. Her first assignment as a nurse was to St. Joseph Hospital here in South Bend (Indiana). Similar assignments to other Holy Cross hospitals followed. Gradually, her responsibilities expanded.

For several years, she was the assistant administrator of hospitals, then director of nurses at a retirement facility, a nurse-therapist for Cambodian refugees in Thailand, a Catholic Relief Services' agent in emergency service, and finally the director of the St. Agnes Holy Cross Center for Women in Fresno, California.

Her life as a nurse in Holy Cross literally took her around the world and back. Along the way, she survived an earthquake in San Fernando, California, and a war between Lebanon and Israel. Common sense, practicality and faith enabled her to surmount these and other challenges on the journey.

Ordinarily, Mary and I were able to get together once or twice a year for a visit. We talked about our family, our ministry, our life in community, and all the other things that sisters share. Occasionally, these conversations gave me a glimpse of the spirituality that undergirded her life and ministry, especially her willingness to accept challenging assignments.

- One such glimpse came years ago. She was a young nurse at St. John's Hospital in Anderson, Indiana. One of her patient's was struggling with why God allowed him to have so much pain. Mary told me, "I pointed to the cross on the wall and said, 'Look at what he did for you.'"
- When she was trying to decide whether she should volunteer to go to the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand, she called our mother (probably to test her reaction). My mother's reply, "If you don't, who will?"
- Her favorite hymn, "Here I am Lord, I Come to Do Your Will," captures the passion of her life.
- Mary's favorite Gospel passage was Matthew 25, a description of the Lord gathering the people of all nations and saying to those on his right, "Blessed are you, for when I was hungry"

Her gift was not only to provide physical necessities for the poor, but also to nourish and heal both wealthy and unfortunate by the example of her life, a model of faith and practical common sense.

Her eagerness to minister was balanced by a deep need to be alone with God.

- The diagnosis of myelomonocytic leukemia in 2005 shocked Mary herself, as well as her family and friends. That winter, I spent afternoons with her in her hospital room. After an hour or so, she'd tell me she needed to be alone.
- Within three days of being dismissed from the hospital, she told me she wanted to drive to Yosemite. I said to her, "Because that's where you meet God?" She said, "Yes."

- She loved to drive alone and listen to music.
- The Saturday morning she was dying, I asked her, “Mary, are you trying to beat all of us (family) to seeing God?” Her response was “Yes.” Then, without much other conversation, she said, “I need to be alone for a while.” What I understood was that she wanted to thank God that I’d come to care for her and to see that her wishes were carried out.

These glimpses are like threads of Mary’s spirituality. Metaphorically, she spent her life sewing the seams of her experiences and relationships with God.