

Sister Marilla (Dyer), CSC

(Mary Marie Dyer)

September 3, 1920 – May 9, 2020

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Suzanne Patterson, CSC, in collaboration with Linda Diltz. Sister Suzanne read them at the memorial Mass on November 12, 2020.

Born on September 3, 1920, in Kemmerer, Wyoming, Mary Marie Dyer was the eldest of Nellie McRae and Herbert Clinton Dyer's three children. When Mary was young, the family lived on a homestead ranch along the Green River in Wyoming, where she remembered riding horses (and being unceremoniously dumped off) and attending a one-room schoolhouse.

It was during these early years that she had her first experience of, as she titled it, "God calling me through the white fluted cap." It happened after a picnic in the canyon with family and friends at, of all places, a gas station. An 8-year-old Mary happened to look up and see three white fluted capped Sisters of the Holy Cross walking down the mountainside. She later wrote, "At that moment I felt I had seen a vision, a sign from God telling me where he wanted me to be. I just knew it. I felt such joy and gratitude from God for such a call."

After the family moved to Ogden, Utah, Mr. Dyer was killed in a horse accident when 17-year-old Mary was a junior in high school. Years later, Sister Marilla would speak of her father's death and how his loss greatly impacted her, her mother, her sister Dorothy and her brother Herbert (Bud). Even during the Great Depression, as Sister Marilla wrote with her typical

positive attitude, “We were lucky because we would help out by working in the fields picking beans for four cents a pound, but,” she added, “they held half of that wage so that you would be sure to stay until the end of the season.”

With her father gone, Mary needed to help the family and was not able to enter Holy Cross immediately after finishing high school as she had hoped. For a year she taught third, fourth and fifth graders in a rural school in Wyoming with no inside plumbing and no central heating. When the United States entered World War II, she took a position at the large army supply depot in Ogden, working on IBM machines recording supplies that were ready for overseas shipment.

After an automobile accident in 1943, Mary resolved to follow the Lord’s call and join Holy Cross. She arrived at Saint Mary’s on January 30, 1944; made first profession on August 15, 1946; and professed her final vows three years later. Throughout her almost 74 years as a Sister of the Holy Cross, Sister Marilla taught in elementary schools in California and in secondary schools in California, Idaho, Nevada and Utah. She ministered in the purchasing office for Holy Cross Shared Services and was a member of the sister-presence program at Our Lady of Holy Cross Care Center in San Pierre, Indiana. She retired to Saint Mary’s 16 years ago.

Her life was rich with experiences and even miracles. During her first teaching mission at Saint Paul’s School in Los Angeles, she, together with the other sisters and the students, began a novena prayer to Father Basil Anthony Moreau for the cure of a baby critically ill with encephalitis. The little girl was healed through the intercession of Father Moreau, and that healing became the first miracle documented on Father

Moreau's road to sainthood. Sister Marilla's devotion to Father Moreau continued to be constant throughout her life. Although she had hoped to live to see the day Blessed Basil Moreau would be canonized, it is not too much of a stretch to think she is probably nudging the correct people in heaven right now to get that job done.

In her written reminisces of her life, she looked back lovingly on several highlights: receiving the name Marilla, which means little Mary, when she got the habit; opening a new school in Compton, California, and preparing the students to participate in a living rosary; serving as yearbook moderator in Boise, Idaho, when the yearbook earned state honors; being one of the first religious to have the privilege of being a eucharistic minister; and being a historian and elected treasurer for the Utah Women's Legislation Council.

There were low points, too, but Sister Marilla even saw those trials through her ever-optimistic eyes. She was diagnosed with lung cancer in the mid-1960s and given six months to live. She later wrote, "I was either misdiagnosed or was cured by the prayers of the students. Any way you looked at it, it was a miracle." When her brother died in 1975 leaving a pregnant wife and two small children, she was able to change schools to move closer to them so she could help the family on weekends. Her mother's death and funeral in November 1963 was sorrowful, but also another graced moment. She wrote, "At the end of my mother's funeral Mass at the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, Utah, about 60 sisters formed an honor guard for her. I will never forget that strong community of women supporting me at that time."

In retirement Sister Marilla felt strongly about her call and the need to support the calls of young women in formation. Again, she turned to her strong suit — prayer — and worked with the Vocation Office to begin the monthly Vocation Prayer Calendar. In the beginning, she cut out and taped a picture of a novice or candidate on each day of the month and had the calendars copied. She affixed the calendars to colorful poster board and tacked them around the convent on any bulletin board she could find; she also sent them to formation houses around the world. Initially she wanted 10 copies. A couple of days later she needed three more, then five more, then maybe 30 would do it. Sisters responded positively to the calendar and she didn't want to say no to anyone who wanted one. Technology improved as her dexterity decreased, so the calendar was soon simply a mailing job. Then she decided each novice and candidate should have a professed Sister of the Holy Cross pray for her daily. Soon it was three sisters praying for each young woman, then four sisters. Next thing you know, cards with color photos of the novices and candidates were created and distributed to the sisters so they could see the woman they were praying for each day.

Sister Marilla had her projects, but she also loved to have fun. She would keep her room decorated for Christmas until at least the Presentation, and she kept her birthday balloons taped to the wall long after the last bit of helium had dissipated. She enjoyed every birthday, but her 92nd birthday was an extravaganza, complete with a full marching band. Sunee Fleshman, a Saint Mary's College and University of Notre Dame graduate who had become friends with Sister Marilla, surprised her with a ticket to the Notre Dame-Purdue football game. Sunee rolled Sister Marilla in a wheelchair from Saint Mary's all

the way to Notre Dame stadium to cheer the Irish on to victory. Reflecting on their adventure, Sister Marilla said, “We had so much fun. Sunee pushed me all through campus. I didn’t get home until nine at night!”

Even the small things gave her pleasure. A couple of years ago the women who volunteer on her Saint Mary’s Convent floor brought ice cream bars for each of the sisters. With chocolate flaking off the bar and ice cream dripping, Sister Marilla’s face looked like any 3-year-old with a frosty treat. After she licked the last drop from the stick, she admitted she had never eaten an ice cream bar before, but she sure hoped to eat another one someday!

Though she didn’t quite make it to that 100th birthday celebration, Sister Marilla will be remembered for the profound joy she radiated as she shared photographs of family members or of the newest baby born. She will be remembered for her squeals of delight whenever she received visits and phone calls from friends and relatives, especially her nieces and nephews and their families. She will be remembered for her bright-eyed enthusiasm as she welcomed everyone into her room and even more so for her wonderful, wide-armed good-bye hug (or two or three). She will be remembered for her heartfelt gratitude, her exuberant laughter, and her undivided attention and thoughtful advice. And Sister Marilla will be remembered most for her fervent assurance of heartfelt prayers for all of our intentions. Thank you, Sister Marilla, for almost 100 years of joy and love.