

# **Sister M. Clare Alfred, CSC**

(Blanche Ann Bill)

November 1, 1935–November 13, 2021

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**These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Suzanne Patterson, CSC, with assistance from Sister Catherine Osimo, CSC, other Sisters of the Holy Cross, and staff. Sister Suzanne read the memories at Sister Clare Alfred's funeral on November 23, 2021.**

Sister Clare Alfred, CSC, was born Blanche Ann Bill on the feast of All Saints, November 1, 1935, in South Bend, Indiana, to Alfred C. and Clara M. (Scheibelhut) Bill. Blanche had two siblings, with whom she was close, Rev. Thomas L. Bill, CSC, and Marilyn Strebinger, and 10 nieces and nephews.

Blanche's religious vocation was awakened very early. Sister M. Leon (Ewen), CSC, her first and second grade teacher at St. Patrick's, instilled in her the desire to become a sister just like she was. Next came Sister M. Geralda (Lamping), CSC, who taught her briefly in the third grade. Sister M. Charles (Schauers), CSC, taught her in the seventh and eighth grades. She helped Blanche prepare to come to the community, although Sister Geralda made Blanche's first habit. Sister M. Anita Jane (Twombly), CSC, principal of St. Joseph Academy, made it possible for Blanche to receive a scholarship to the academy after her father died.

In September 1954, Blanche entered the convent and began her formation at Saint Mary's. Sister M. des Victoires (Bognar), CSC, described Blanche as a "true child of Mary with a depth of spirituality" needed to mature as a woman and Holy Cross

religious. Upon reception of the holy habit, August 5, 1955, Blanche became known as Sister Mary Clare Alfred, in honor of her parents. She was happy to have their names.

Clare's family was central in her life. She loved each member of her family and enjoyed any time they could spend together. She joined them on holidays and for family events whenever possible. Her nephew-in-law, Ed McMillen, always made sure that Aunt Blanche had a ride to the gathering. After Clare's stroke, her niece Marcia McMillen and nephew Paul Strebinger came to the hospital each day to help her with meals. Fortunately, they were able to get permission to come despite COVID-19 restrictions. Nothing was ever too much for the family to do for their aunt.

Sister Clare was proud of her 20 years as a primary school teacher. She also served for 17 years as director of religious education in parishes in Illinois and Indiana. Being a religious educator was Clare's favorite ministry. She wrote, "I loved enriching the lives of the teachers as well as helping the students have a greater love of God." In addition, she enjoyed participating as a member of the CSC Hispanic Committee.

Her bandmate Sister Eileen Dewsnup, CSC, observed that Clare was totally involved in her ministry. For example, while working with the Hispanic community at St. Stephen's Parish in South Bend, she attempted to learn Spanish to be better able to serve the people.

Eileen also mentioned that in her later years Clare was always grateful for her visit, no matter how brief it was. She loved her Pius X bandmates and kept in contact with former members, especially Marilyn Spomer. Two of her other good friends in community were Sisters M. Joanna (McGrath), CSC, and

M. Gerald Francis (McNamara), CSC, both of whom were strong supports to Clare at different times in her life.

In 1999, Sister Clare asked to take a sabbatical to renew herself holistically. Clare said the sabbatical was the best thing she ever did for her health and well-being. Hers was a quiet ongoing conversion and transformation during which she came to a new appreciation of herself as a woman with a voice. She agonized if she had to speak in front of a group, but she did not want anyone to speak for her either. She was easily cast as the worker behind the scenes, often volunteering for summer service at the motherhouse and for other events. She was the greeter at the front desk, welcoming sisters to institutes or general chapters. Sister Frances Mary (Werland), CSC, remembers that Clare always had everything a sister could need in her office at Regina Hall. She was ready for any request.

A new self-confidence flowered in Clare during that sabbatical. In spring 2000, she was appointed assistant superior of Rosary Convent for three years; she then served on the Angela Area team, ministering to the oldest members of the Congregation. Later in life, when she was far less active, she kept her seat in the choir at the Church of Our Lady of Loretto. When she could no longer sing, she took her place in the assembly. At the sign of peace during Mass, she would take another's hand, smile and whisper, "May you know God's love and peace." She called herself "a gentle feminist."

After Sister Clare died, we received heartfelt messages about her. Everyone had a similar, but unique experience of Clare. Many called her a gift, a gentle spirit, a loving woman.

Companion Paula Lent shared a snapshot of Sister Clare gleaned from her journal entry from her first week working in

Saint Mary's Convent. Paula wrote, "My first official day as a companion, I immediately ran into Sister Clare in the hallway. She has light pale blue eyes, is super sweet, gentle and pure—there's a holy truthfulness when talking with her. There's no guise or pretense. She just speaks honestly from a pure heart. Sister Clare and I connected immediately. She refers to me as her friend; we light up when we see each other. She always remembers me by name. Early in our first conversation, she told me, 'You're part of our community now, and we're so grateful to have you.' It meant so much to me."

Elayne Scott, also a companion, told the story: "Sister Clare had a picture of her aunt that she admired because her aunt was so pretty. Clare said everybody said she looked like that aunt, and she always smiled because she was so proud to look like her."

Companion Natalie Cruz told the same story about the photograph, remarking on Sister Clare's happy smile when the comparison between the two was made.

Companion Maija Herring said, "Sister Clare Alfred was a gentle soul. She had that comforting spirit. I can see that smile as I remember it now—so special."

Many other companions and sisters expressed thoughts similar to those Paula Lent wrote in her final comments: "I've witnessed the continued presence of the Lord in Clare—in her constant kindness and thoughtfulness to those around her throughout her day; in the way she carried her cross of chronic pain, with belief that Jesus could take it away if he willed it, but unwavering love for him even if he didn't; and, after her stroke, in the extreme spirit of peace that filled her bedroom as she laid in it. Jesus, indeed, shone very brightly through Clare."

This final note is from Sister Clare's dear friend Marylyn Spomer: "God brought Clare and me together to be close friends for 67 years. We met on September 7, 1954, the day we entered Holy Cross. Even though God had different plans for us along the way, our friendship was steadfast, and we supported each other with our prayers and spirituality all through the years. Clare became a very dear friend to my husband... . When she had her heart surgery, I called her every day for months. We always counted on each other's prayers daily and could experience their efficacy. In our later years growing old together, we talked about dying and going to be with God... . When Sister Karla [McKinnie, CSC] called to tell me Clare had died, I was filled with joy because I knew Clare had reached her goal, what she had strived for all her life. When I got off the phone, I said to her, 'Clare dear, I am so happy for you. You are now with God. My turn will come. Thank you for being my dear, dear friend all these years.'"

Clare, just like your beloved butterfly, you have flown away to be with God. May you now be rejoicing with all the saints!