

Memento for Sister Mary Therese Coursey, CSC (Sister M. James Therese)

June 7, 1933—September 24, 2018

These memories were shared by Sister Frances B. O'Connor, CSC, at the funeral on September 26, 2018.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed, citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

Sister Mary Therese Coursey was born in Brooklyn, New York, on June 7, 1933, and was baptized Mary Theresa. She was the oldest of six children born to James Patrick Coursey and Nora Therese O'Toole Coursey. There is no doubt, Mary was Irish through and through! Her father emigrated from County Galway, Ireland, as a young boy. Her mother, Nora, also of Irish descent, was born in Brooklyn. Like a number of our sisters from the East, Mary identified with, and was proud of, her New York upbringing.

Mary attended Holy Name School in Brooklyn until the third grade. Her family moved to Flatbush and she traveled by trolley to Holy Cross School, where she was taught by the Sisters of Saint Joseph through the eighth grade. She attended Bishop McDonnell Memorial High School, a diocesan high school staffed by five different orders of sisters.

From this background we might wonder just how Mary came to choose Holy Cross as her religious community. As Sister Catherine Osimo writes in Mary's obituary, “Both Miss Coursey's pastor and the high school sister principal called her the ‘right type of young woman to become a religious’ in letters of recommendation when Mary was applying to the Congregation.”

Records also indicate Mary had a distant relative in our community, Sister Mary McDonough. As a child Mary's aunt took her to visit this sister and, after the visit, she announced she felt called to enter the Sisters of the Holy Cross. I wonder how many of us had a similar experience — be it a relative, teacher or friend who had a profound influence on our own decision.

Mary entered the Congregation on September 7, 1951, and she recounts in her journal that the hardest part of her decision was leaving behind her family, with whom she was very close. However, Mary returned to the East where she received her bachelor's degree in French from Dunbarton College in Washington, D.C., in 1965 and her master's degree in religious education from Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1972.

Mary's teaching career began in Saint Ignatius School in Austin, Texas, in 1954, where she taught first and second grade. In 1955 she again returned to her beloved East, teaching first grade at Saint Peter's School in Washington, D.C. She was moved frequently to various elementary school assignments in the East until she was assigned to Bangladesh in 1966. Again, like so many of us (sisters), Mary was asked to teach in the primary grades while pursuing her degree in French, which speaks to her flexibility.

In Bangladesh Mary was missioned at the Bottomley Home Orphanage in Tejgaon, where she was an elementary teacher. She taught there from 1966 to 1971, when she returned to the States to complete her graduate studies. Mary was one of our sisters who was sent home during this time because of the internal war in Pakistan. Six of us remained to protect the Congregation's property.

Sister Margaret Ann Shield recalls that Mary had a wonderful singing voice, but was very reluctant to sing on her own. Her rendition of "Danny Boy" was one of the sisters' favorites.

When the war was over, Mary returned to Bangladesh, this time to Jalchatra, 90 miles north of Dacca (now Dhaka) where she was a parish supervisor at Corpus Christi Convent. Mary was known to keep excellent accounts and was particularly attentive to detail. Margaret also recounts that Mary loved to dress up and always looked like she was going to a party when they had supper with the priests on Sunday.

Mary returned home in 1986 where she took a much-deserved sabbatical in San Antonio, Texas. Upon completion of her sabbatical year, Mary became a teacher of English for aspirants in Ghana, West Africa, where she remained until the fall of 1990. Although her heart was with the people of Bangladesh, Mary considered her work in Ghana her greatest accomplishment. She loved the catechists with whom she worked. She felt they brought out the best in her.

Mary's last years in full-time ministry were spent in her beloved New York

until she transitioned to semi-retirement at Saint Angela Hall, Kensington, Maryland, in late 2005.

On a personal note, I can verify that Mary was not good at giving directions or estimating distance. In 1992 Becky Drury and I traveled to interview a group of women in her parish in Tarrytown, New York. She sent directions telling us to turn right just beyond the Tappan Zee Bridge and their church was right down the road. Well, we drove for 20 miles around many twists and turns before we finally arrived at our destination. Mary asked, "What took you so long?"

In 2006 she made her permanent move to Saint Mary's Convent where she spent her final years. Perhaps Mary's greatest legacy is that she believed that anything was possible. It may be her Irish heritage that gave her this strong conviction. As those of us who lived and ministered with her know, Mary was serious and headstrong. She will be remembered for her commitment to people as a group and as individuals, her intelligence and unflagging optimism, and her strong faith. She set an example of courage and compassion that inspired everyone who knew her, especially in her many years of diminished health here at Saint Mary's.

Mary's suffering is over and we can rejoice that she is at peace. So as we commend her to God, I would like to close with this prayer.*

Now the laborer's task is o'er,
Now the battle day is past;
Now upon the farther shore
Lands the voyager at last.

Lord, in thy gracious keeping,
Leave we now thy servant sleeping.

"Earth to earth and dust to dust,"
Calmly now the words we say;
Left behind, we wait in trust
For the resurrection day.

Lord, in thy gracious keeping,
Leave we now thy servant sleeping.

**Excerpted and adapted from John Ellerton's hymn, "Now the Laborer's Task is O'er"*