

# **Sister M. Perpetua, CSC** **(Frances Joan Meyer)**

July 13, 1929 – April 19, 2018

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**These memories were shared by Sister Frances B. O'Connor, CSC, at the funeral on April 25, 2018.**

Today we say goodbye to Frances Joan Meyer, the oldest child, and only daughter of Olivia and Anthony Meyer, better known to all of us as Sister Perpetua. Following Joan's birth in 1929, the Meyer family welcomed four younger brothers. (Just when you think you know someone, there is often a surprise! In my 70 plus years in community with Perpetua I did not know we shared the same name of Frances!)

Joan graduated from Villa Victoria Academy in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1948 and entered Holy Cross in 1950, receiving the habit and her religious name Sister Perpetua. Prior to entering religious life, she worked in the Princeton University Library catalogue department. Her first ministry in the community was as an elementary teacher at Saint Paul the Apostle School in New York. She remained there for four years before returning to Saint Mary's College to complete her bachelor's degree.

In 1958, she experienced a "career" change when she began, what could not have been known to her at the time, her missionary work in Bangladesh which continued for more than 50 years. She was assigned to teach in the high school and work in the Bottomley Home Orphanage in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where she remained for seven years before becoming a teacher in Holy Cross College, also in Dhaka.

In 1971, she returned to Saint Mary's for her sabbatical year and spent the next year teaching at Blessed Sacrament School in Alexandria, Virginia. This time on the East Coast, meant she was also able to spend time with her mother and four brothers and their families who were in Princeton, New Jersey.

Sister Perpetua lived just shy of 89 years, most of the time in tireless activity. As we look at Perpetua's history in Holy Cross it is easy to focus on the factual data—where she served, what she did, how she lived, etc. Perhaps, far more significant, however, are the following questions. What

wisdom does her life reveal that provides relevance to our daily lives, ultimately guiding us to be better people? What wisdom would we impart if we knew that it was our last chance? If we were to die tomorrow what would we want our legacy to be? These are but a few of the questions I would like to reflect on with you today.

In considering these questions I consulted with Sister Margaret Ann Shield who often walked in tandem with Perpetua in their ministries in Bangladesh. Of course, Margaret had countless stories to tell. All of us who were American missionaries in Bangladesh are near or surpass the age of 90. Our stories may not be full of accurate details, but, for sure, they are full of deeply meaningful memories.

Sister Margaret Ann writes, “Sister Maria Gracia (Wemhoff), Perpetua and I were on vacation in Shillong, India. It was the year that Sisters M. Bruno (Beiro) and Joann Havelka were to arrive in Dhaka. We went to Sweet Falls in Northern India. We scrambled down to the base of the falls and had our picnic. Around four in the afternoon we started to scramble back up to the road and couldn’t find the path. The climb was perilous and we remarked on the way up that an archive entry might be, ‘Maria Gracia, Perpetua and Margaret died climbing a cliff on the day that sisters Bruno and Joann arrived in Dhaka!’ We did make it back, each with skinned knees and leeches stuck around our middles! (All of this in the full habit, mind you.)”

While working at the orphanage Perpetua was the first one to get an idea for the widowed mothers to earn a living. She made a design of poinsettias that women could appliqué on to pieces of burlap with a napkin made of the same material as the poinsettia. She knew a lady who had a boutique where people of means shopped who sold items the women made.

Of course, there are so many more stories I could share and so much more I could say about who Perpetua really was, but time does not permit. So, I will give you a glimmer of what really mattered to her:

Her love for gardening and nature

Her love of poetry and art

Her keen sense of humor

Her dedication to Holy Cross and the missions in particular

Her love of animals

And lastly, her simple lifestyle

When we look at how Perpetua lived, we get a glimpse of how she faced the health challenge she was presented with in her later years. A challenge that caused her to leave her beloved Bangladesh and India in 2012 and return to Saint Mary's. One can only imagine what an adjustment that was having been halfway around the world for 50 years of her life in Holy Cross.

Perpetua had a heart condition that greatly restrained her activities. Nonetheless, she didn't dwell on it nor did she let it interfere with what she wanted to do. Perpetua's faith gave her the strength to just keep moving forward. Here at Saint Mary's she took on many tasks, always keeping busy, willing to help. One of her greatest enjoyments was video chatting and emailing with Sister Bruno in India and the sisters in Bangladesh. You could always find her at her laptop computer smiling as she typed or talked to her friends.

A short time ago Perpetua was hospitalized with complications of the heart. While there, doctors discovered that she also had cancer of the pancreas. She elected not to be treated and told no one, preferring to deal with it on her own terms. So as many of us who knew and loved her watched her begin to lose weight and become weaker, we knew that something was seriously wrong.

There is little doubt that Perpetua gained her strength and resilience from her deep faith and her faithfulness to her religious calling as a Sister of the Holy Cross. It has been said that to face death with dignity we need to be at peace with our yesterday, today and tomorrow. Perpetua was indeed an example of that. Perfect valor, they say, is to behave without witness, as one would act were all the world watching.

Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore believed our effort should be to reveal God in our actions; this, he said, is true worship. In our relationship with the divine what is important is the total self-surrender so that we may accept God as everything. Those of us American sisters who served together in Bangladesh and later also in India came to love Tagore's poetry because it spoke directly to our hearts.

Perhaps the most beautiful thing about Tagore—and also Perpetua—was a belief in unity in diversity. Tagore asks, "If God happens to meet us, will He ask us which religion we belong to? The answer is 'No.' He will not even ask how many times we went to worship Him in the temple, church or mosque.

But he will definitely ask, 'Did you see my face in the poor, humble, lowly and weak?' He will ask, 'Did you experience me in your daily life?'"

We can all be confident that Sister Perpetua gave a resounding "YES" to each of these questions!

Rest in peace Perpetua, you have completed your life work and have done it very well!

*Written by Sister Frances B. O'Connor, CSC*