

# **Sister M. Elena, CSC**

(Helen Joan Malits)

July 3, 1934–March 10, 2022

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**These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Eva Mary (Hooker), CSC, who read them at Sister Elena's funeral on March 15, 2022.**

I will begin with a series of little vignettes taken from Elena's long life. Try to imagine them.

- Elena as the young college student called in to see Sister M. Madeleva (Wolff), CSC, who said, "Miss Malits, a lady does not raise her leg so high as the can-can."
- Elena standing in line at the brand-new Lincoln Center to buy the cheap ticket to whatever opera was on. Think of her in the brand-new building, taking in all that gorgeous sound.
- In front of her class, Elena bending her students' minds, helping them to make gold out of their confused thoughts of God; she was alchemist of the sacred.
- Elena learning to cook. Sister Mary Louise Gude, CSC, in the kitchen at Bajer Lane (South Bend, Indiana), saying "Now, Elena, imagine a tuna fish salad." As you think about this, remember Elena wrote a whole essay on the necessity for training the imagination for a new understanding of religious life. I am not sure that helped her cooking. Kitchen duties remained a mystery; Mary Louise remained cooking coach.
- Her struggle with diabetes often led to accidents of various kinds. One evening she drove the car into the garage door at Bajer Lane. Sister M. Marcella (Connelly), CSC, opened the door and looked out. Her comment: "What will the spouses of Jesus do next?" Elena was fine; the car and garage door didn't fare so well.

- Elena at faculty meetings and assemblies of the Congregation, cutting through murky argument with her marvelous synthetic mind: sharp as a Japanese knife.
- Elena walking her dog every day.

I could go on.

I have always envied my friends who are theologians. A wee bit. No, more than a wee bit. My reason for envy was simple: They got to study God. Usually in multiple ways. They studied how to pray, who made the Psalms, the history of biblical texts and early Christian texts, who was Ezekiel and what was his problem, why was Jeremiah so grumpy, how did the earliest Christian communities talk/write about Jesus, how did the Gospels represent Jesus, who actually wrote them and what do they mean? The questions of theology are simply marvelous. My envy was based on the not so smart assumption that studying God “directly,” as theologians do, would yield special knowledge: the Holy of Holies. With a capital H. I saw myself reading *Hamlet* (the text I teach tomorrow), thinking, yes, this is really good stuff, but in the end “To be or not to be” is only a giant economy-sized question about what it means to live, not, I think, what it means to be given to God. Theologians also get to wear gorgeous red gowns and hoods at commencement. So here I am stuck in theologian envy. And I am no spring chicken. I need to get this straight. Soon.

Elena was an unusual theologian. She studied systematics (what they used to call dogmatic theology) at Fordham (University, New York, New York) and at Hebrew Theological Union (New York, New York). At that time, her blending of theologies was unusual. It, in a way, softened the edges of her thought so that what I will call theological weaving could take place: the Hebrew Shekinah, Yahweh, the prophets, the Psalms, the Book of Wisdom—all in a registry of thought with the theologies of the New Testament, desert fathers and mothers, Pauline epistles, and the beginnings of the feminist theological movements in the United States and Europe. She was also interested in how contemporary holy people

lived their lives: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Simone Weil. In her usual eclectic fashion, she also read and taught Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena. Given her intellectual urge to weave theologies, it is not a surprise to see that she wrote a book on Thomas Merton: *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey*. In her work on Merton, Elena gathered the variety of his religious experience into herself. Her book concentrates its argument upon Merton's theology of contemplation. Merton writes:

God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us ... Our mind swims in the air of an understanding, a reality that is dark and serene and includes in itself everything. Nothing more is wanting. Our only sorrow, if sorrow be possible at all, is the awareness that we ourselves still live outside of God. (Malits, *The Solitary Explorer*, 124)

Elena writes in explication of this passage from Merton that the awareness that we still live outside of God does not “dull the anxiety that accompanies [the] recognition of one's contingency” (124). I was struck by her focus on anxiety.

Anxiety was Elena's cross. She suffered from serious bouts of depression and explosive anger. I am certain that the ups and downs of diabetes caused her energy for being with others to be muted. Her loneliness, even with a deep experience of God, caused her intense suffering. Despite all this, she stands as one of the pillars in the history of great teachers at Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana). Imagine being at the mercy of a body that plays tricks on you and having to get up every day and teach. The discipline of diabetes was merciless. Nevertheless, she loved the college and rejoiced in the kind of intellectual work and teaching that was her gift and her privilege.

Where did this very particular intellectual journey begin? I think her experience as a student at Saint Mary's was probably more important than even she realized. The college she attended in the middle '50s was in an explosion of new, newer and newest theologies, Norman

Laliberté's creative "revisions" of Biblical narratives, stern teaching of logic and rhetoric in the Trivium (itself an example of the binding together of disciplines), the founding of Christian Culture. The college's teachers of theology rejoiced in the re-vision of Church that was just beginning. Then there was Sister Madeleva's sometimes stern leadership. (It was Madeleva who insisted that Mr. Laliberté draw shepherds for her Christmas card that looked like shepherds. That was for starters.) And it was also Madeleva who gave a weekly lecture on ideas she thought necessary for the perfection of young women's minds. Elena prospered in this environment. She studied, she wrote, she danced. And did she dance! She studied abroad in Vienna and cultivated a love of opera. It was also in college that Elena found models of inquiry for her own teaching: stellar lay and CSC professors. I have often thought, despite her naysaying, that they were part of her call to religious life, a call she resisted with strength and even anger.

After the closings of both Dunbarton (Washington, D.C.) and Cardinal Cushing (Brookline, Massachusetts) colleges, Elena returned to Saint Mary's as a faculty member in the Department of Religious Studies. Elena also taught in the summers in the novitiate. She gave a liturgy course for the novices. Some of us here in this church were her students. And we considered ourselves blessed. Somehow, she persuaded the library to let her bring over all the issues of the journal *Worship* so we could read for ourselves the work being done to dig up original sources for the history and remaking of liturgy. Her joy in what was about to take place in the Church was contagious. Decades of work at Saint Mary's followed. Her retirement citation describes her calling the college "to the highest ideals of the Church's tradition of social justice." She was an internationally recognized Merton scholar and an active member of the College Theology Society and the Society for Values in Higher Education. Elena received the highest award the college gives in recognition of excellence in teaching, scholarship and service: the Spes Unica Award.

Life in community was always a challenge for Elena. It didn't matter which kind of community. In some ways, she was a loner who relished her independence. She enjoyed center stage, not stage right or stage left. Her natural generosity did allow others to excel and even shine, especially in faculty and student groups. In religious life, she often ran into self-made roadblocks. She could talk us under the table and give detailed movie summaries. Her anger, grumpiness and talk hid another very real deeper self. That deeper self showed up with generosity when she worked with our young sisters in the Loretto Community; she helped them, not only with writing, but also in untangling their theological thought.

At heart, I think Elena yearned to be a mystic. However, yearning does not a mystic make. Yearning is the sign of hunger for God, the sign God has made a wound within. Wound is the mark of grace. Think of Isaiah; his mouth, burned and charred (Isaiah 6:6-7). Jacob wrestles with an angel (or God) and for his troubles gets a broken hip socket. After God-wrestling, he limps. Elena's God-wrestling occurred many times in her life, but in its last stages that wrestling was most manifest. My hope is that within her painful desolation and body collapse that some holy, grand repair took place.

In repair we risk that the structures of things will come apart all over us. Repair of soul requires want for alchemy, not just of "salt brine and sun and fog" (all those delicious aspects of winter in South Bend), but exactitude of hand and eye: revision, a re-seeing of the internal geography of the self and the world. In her last days and hours of severe pain and exhaustion, Elena's self gradually disappeared. She was silent, yielding finally to the grace of hospice. I think of Sister Joan Marie Steadman, CSC, and Molly Gower, our interim vice president for mission at the college, bearing witness to her eyes opening wide in her last minutes.

David Tracy reminds us in his essay on tragedy and the self that it is important to know what words you use (or have used) to describe what happens to you. So let me try some last words. Sometimes words ARE

good for everything! For God: “The Ravishing Far Near” (Marguerite Porete). For fiat: “If it be now, ‘tis not to come. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (*Hamlet* 5.2.158-160). For taking upon us the mystery of things: “Moving on in the dark like loaded boats at night, though there is no course, there is boundlessness” (Emily Dickinson). For desire, Elena’s deepest desire:

Come then, my love,

my lovely one, come.

For see, winter is past,

the rains are over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth.

The season of glad songs has come,

the cooing of the turtledove is heard

in our land.

The fig tree is forming its first figs

and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.

Come then, my love,

My lovely one come ...

show me your face,

let me hear your voice;

for your voice is sweet

and your face is beautiful.

Song of Songs 2:10-13, 14-15