

Sister Marie Julie, CSC

(Helen Virginia Shea)

May 4, 1917–May 13, 2021

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Grace Shonk, CSC, and read by Sister Ann Therese (Sinclair) at Sister Marie Julie’s funeral on May 18, 2021.

Sister Marie Julie, CSC, Helen Virginia Shea, our 104-year-old treasure, was born on May 4, 1917, in Washington, D.C., when the first World War was astir in Europe. She helped shape her part of the world with her happy spirit during a century of most interesting history.

Helen was the firstborn of five children to Eunice Steele Shea and Thomas J. Shea. Her father had a position with the federal government. The Shea family was loving and joyful and included Helen’s two sisters, Frances and Rita, and her two brothers, Thomas and Charles. The children grew up in the heart of the nation, attending St. Aloysius School. Sister Marie Julie has said, “Every day we saw our beautiful national Capitol before us as we walked to and from school.”

When it was time for high school, her mother heard about St. Patrick’s Academy in downtown Washington, D.C., and its famous business curriculum that prepared students for government office employment. She decided this was the school for Helen. She told Helen: “You will be set for life.”

When Helen met the Sisters of the Holy Cross at St. Patrick’s Academy, their concern, friendliness and joyful spirit inspired her to decide the Congregation was the place for her. Helen entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Saint Mary’s, Notre Dame, Indiana, in July 1936. Her father’s great love for his oldest daughter showed not only in his kindly teasing of her but also in the tears he shed on her first Christmas away from home.

Helen received the religious name, Sister Marie Julie, when she received the holy habit. “Marie” in her name recognized her devotion to Mary while “Julie” recognized her devotion to St. Julie Billiart, co-foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Sisters of this order had taught her at St. Aloysius School.

The following quote from Sister Marie Julie offers insight into her approach to the apostolate: “To me the apostolate in general is trying to bring Christ to the world around me—to everyone with whom I live or with whom I come in contact,” adding, “I try to be loving and kind to all.” The testimonies of her devoted family members, religious sisters, friends, co-workers and students speak to how well she lived out this life of love and concern for others. She had a special devotion to Mary and the rosary.

After making her initial vows in 1939, Sister Marie Julie received an assignment to the business office of The Academy of the Holy Cross in Washington, D.C. The next year brought the first of her assignments as a high school teacher. From 1940 to 1957, she taught religion and history as well as business courses in six high schools staffed by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. During the summers, she attended Dunbarton College in Washington, D.C., earning a bachelor’s degree in history. Sister Marie Julie loved the opportunity she had while teaching at St. Mary’s Academy in Austin, Texas, to work with the Mexican missions in addition to her classroom teaching, calling this one of her most memorable experiences. She also spoke of the seven years she lived and taught at Holy Cross Academy in Brookline, Massachusetts, as another highlight of her teaching career. She said the sisters had a wonderful community life, all working together, and having great rapport with students, lay teachers and staff, as well as one another.

Mother M. Rose Elizabeth (Havican) named Sister Marie Julie as one of her assistants at Dunbarton College in 1957. For the next six years, she was in charge of the dietary department. This was a challenging responsibility and she met it with seemingly tireless energy.

A highlight of her ministry years was Sister Marie Julie's assignment as a teacher at St. Patrick's Academy, her alma mater. By the time she left St. Patrick's Academy in 1975, she had been administrator, teacher and principal for a total of 11 years. She took with her a devoted following of alumnae grateful for her loving concern for their welfare. Sister Marie Julie wanted her appreciation for their loyalty to her through the years to be acknowledged in this memento. Many of "the girls" have kept in touch with her over the years and visited her when possible. Alumnae of St. Patrick's Academy, she applauds your loyalty and thanks you.

In 1975, Sister Marie Julie moved to The Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington, Maryland, first as a business teacher then working in the registrar's office. These were years when, for a period of time, she lived with her mother in Silver Spring, Maryland, taking care of her while serving at the school. She considered it a great blessing that she could be with her mother during her final years. She spoke of the peace she experienced at the time of her mother's death in 1992.

Soon after retiring from the school, in 2003 at the age of 86, she moved to Saint Angela Hall on property adjacent to the academy. For the next 15 years, she contributed to the Saint Angela community while keeping in close contact with family members, friends and former students by visits and phone calls. One special ministry she had was writing thank you notes for gifts received by the local community. Many lovely expressions of gratitude resulted. Sister Marie Julie always had family members and friends who needed special prayers, and she was quick to solicit concern and prayers for them from those with whom she conversed at the time.

Throughout her life, Sister Marie Julie participated wholeheartedly in community activities and contributed generously of her time and talents whenever there was a need. She was not fond of meetings but was often able to bring clarity to a topic. For recreation, she enjoyed visiting with others, walking, and reading historical novels, mysteries and history. She found knitting and needlepoint relaxing. She liked music,

especially the Army and Navy band concerts given in Washington, D.C. It was a great pleasure for her to visit historic places. She was also a crossword puzzle fan.

When asked in 2010 to put on paper some of her most memorable experiences, she included the following:

“The evening benediction at St. Aloysius Church—the Novena of Grace—the feeling I had when God spoke to me about my vocation; my retreat with Father Chuck Connor, SJ, in 1937; my first profession day; watching Niagara Falls from a helicopter; my Diamond Jubilee celebration in April 2014 at Saint Angela’s Hall.”

At the age of 101 in 2018, Sister Marie Julie moved to Saint Mary’s Convent, Notre Dame, Indiana. By then her brother, Charlie, had recently gone to God, leaving her as the one remaining immediate family member. Her many other family members maintained their frequent communication with her by phone calls and visits. She continued her ministry of prayer and concern for all until called to the heavenly kingdom.

Now she lives in close communion with God, Mary, all the saints, and her family after a long and beautiful life of loving prayer and ministry to others.