

Sister Rita McQueeney, CSC

(Sister M. St. Hugh)

January 4, 1921–June 13, 2022

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Suzanne Patterson, CSC, with additional commentary by Sister Rita’s friend, Mara Irish. Both women spoke at Sister Rita’s funeral on June 21, 2022.

Good morning. I had the good fortune to get to know Sister Rita McQueeney when she came to live at Saint Mary’s (Notre Dame, Indiana) in 2013. Sister Rita was a joy to spend time with, as many sisters have attested. Honestly, part of me wanted to begin this morning’s reflection with the question, “Would any of you like to play a game of Rummikub this afternoon?” because one of my own fondest memories of Sister Rita is her playing a hot game of Rummikub with Sister Dorothy Marie (Langlois), CSC, during the evenings. They were both competitive and enjoyed their frequent games together.

There are stories galore about Sister Rita which illuminate her personality and attitude toward life and the people she encountered. She was recognized as a direct and honest person who spoke the truth to whomever. She was genuinely open and kind to all with simplicity and a warm heart. She also knew her own mind, her own likes and dislikes. Sister Rita could not easily be swayed from her position once she took it! Even with food—if she didn’t like it, she just wouldn’t eat it! At the same time, Sister Barbara Marie (Kleck), CSC, confirmed that Sister Rita was a very good cook; she provided many a good meal for the community!

Sister Rita began her ministry as a teacher of primary and junior high students. She enjoyed the students and was beloved by them. After 10 years at St. Thomas the Apostle School in Washington, D.C., Sister

Rita was transferred to St. Pius School in Redwood City, California. How could this be? Her parents prevailed upon the provincial superior to reconsider. Two pages of signatures on a petition did not dissuade Mother M. Loretto (Conway), CSC. Mother wrote the parents that it was Sister Rita who had requested the change! She wrote, "Sister Rita wishes to spend some time in our schools in the West. Since her home is in the East, we can hope that she will soon return." Simply put, Sister Rita was always very interested in getting to know people, including her own Holy Cross sisters in the West, and that was that! Sister Rita did return to the East eventually.

In 1975, after 34 years of teaching, Sister Rita became a hospital chaplain. She had a kind manner toward those in grief and pain and responded intuitively in crises and emergency situations. As she said, "I worked on all the floors, but the emergency room was my favorite." She felt so at home at Holy Cross Hospital (Silver Spring, Maryland) that she received permission to use funds from her family to commission a statue of St. Joseph the Worker in honor of her father, Hugh McQueeney. The statue was placed in a wooded garden area of Holy Cross Hospital in 1979, and it continues to comfort the sick to this day. Sister Rita wrote, "The highlight of my ministry was ministering to the sick and dying at Holy Cross Hospital."

Sister Rita had a wonderful talent for cultivating plants. She could make any ragged plant come to life and be restored. She had a special way with Christmas cactus and elegant Easter orchids. Often during Rita's days at Saint Mary's, one could see her checking out the plants on the windowsills and watering them carefully. As Sister M. Adria (Connors), CSC, wrote in Rita's obituary, "To observe her tender loving care of plants was itself a meditation on mutuality in love and healing. There was something reciprocal between the planter and the planted that made them both able to bloom."

Katheen Shipley, Sister Rita's niece, shared many wonderful memories of times spent together. She wrote that Sister Rita loved walking along

the ocean for hours at Duck, North Carolina, and she also enjoyed going crabbing at the southern Maryland home of her nephew, Bobby McQueeney.

Kathleen wrote this about her personal experiences of her aunt: “In 1999, we went to Europe together, visiting France, Switzerland and Austria. We visited the Holy Cross motherhouse in Le Mans, France, and spent a few nights there. Aunt Rita’s French wasn’t very good, but she loved visiting the sisters there. I was able to speak to them in French. We also went to Paris, and Aunt Rita was always telling me to watch my purse because of pickpockets. She wore a fanny pack around her waist and always had her hands on it to keep it safe. We had just gotten on the metro in Paris and suddenly a young man pushed the stop button on the train and told us to get off. Aunt Rita said no! He then showed us a sign that said ‘police’ and told her again to get off. Again she said no! Then he held up a small change purse that said Notre Dame on it and asked if it was hers. She said yes and he said that this gentleman had taken it from her fanny pack and now we needed to go to the police station and file a report. So, the plainclothes policeman, the pickpocket with a heavy wool coat (it was August in Paris), Aunt Rita and I all got in the police car together! What memories I have of that trip! We were also able to visit Interlaken, Switzerland, where Aunt Rita’s brother, Joe, was stationed for a while during World War II. We were even able to find the hotel pictured on the postcard that he had sent to his family while he was in the war. Aunt Rita loved this trip!”

Kathleen continued, “While Aunt Rita was at Saint Angela Hall (Kensington, Maryland), I came many times for lunch, visiting with her and the sisters there. Since I had gone to Holy Cross Academy (Kensington, Maryland), I knew many sisters who were now at Saint Angela’s. Aunt Rita took wonderful care of all the flowers. She loved the flowers and the flowers loved her. After Aunt Rita came to Saint Mary’s, I was able to visit her each year, staying in the guest house. My cousin, ‘little Rita,’ came with me many times and we took Aunt Rita and some of

her friends shopping and out to dinner. They loved that, especially Sister Dorothy Marie. For Aunt Rita's 75th jubilee, 17 family members were able to come and help her celebrate. She was the only sister celebrating her 75th who was able to walk into the church on her own. I am so happy that I was able to come and see Aunt Rita while she was at Saint Mary's. I have wonderful memories of all my visits. Thank you for taking such good care of her!"

Stephen Utley, a longtime friend of the sisters, shared on Facebook that "Like Sister Rita, I 'fell in love' with the Holy Cross sisters when I was a boy. Their teaching skills and devotion to our Lord were an inspiration. I recall each and every one of them and renew my strength and faith thinking of their example. Sister Rita's obituary reads like the Beatitudes and the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. She lived a life in the fullness of Christ's love and shared that love with others."

In closing, I now invite Sister Rita's friend Mara Irish to share her memories.

"I have so many stories of my friend, Rita, that it is hard to pick a few to share. I first met Rita my junior year of college. I have to be honest; it is very difficult to stay faithful at such a busy time in a young woman's life. But I have never looked forward to Sundays more in my entire life than I did for the two years I was at Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana), and the two additional years I spent in South Bend, Indiana, after graduation. Each Sunday was the same for me. I always got to 11 o'clock Mass and found my place between Sister Rita and Sister Dorothy Marie. Afterward, we'd all have lunch together in the cafeteria, always taking what we called 'the scenic route' through the hallway filled with plants, since Rita loved them so much. Rita would usually chastise me for not finishing everything on my plate and would tell me how her father would never allow her to do such a thing. Yet she would still enjoy the milkshake I'd make us all for dessert. We would water and inspect the plants together after lunch, going around to each floor. I would often offer to help, and she would scoff and say, 'And how do

you think I do it when you're not here! I'm fine!' When I would leave, I would always give her a kiss and tell her I loved her. And every time she would make a face, scoff and say, 'You do?' Queeney was stubborn like that. She was funny like that—by far one of the funniest people I have had the pleasure of knowing.

“I think it is important to note that in our seven years of friendship, Rita never knew my name. She would often be quizzed, 'Who is that?' or 'Do you know who that is?' and every time she'd look at me, chuckle sheepishly, and say, 'I don't know, but she's my friend.' I never needed her to know my name. It was never necessary. We would play games, go to Mass, go on walks, take care of the plants, share stories and so many jokes. She trusted me with family memories, tales of working in the schools and hospital, and even the day she knew she wanted to become a nun. In the most amazing way, we were close friends.

“She blessed my life for seven years, and I could not be more grateful. She taught me so much about faith, love and life in general. I will remember her as wise, bold, independent, sweet and altogether incredible. I will never be able to look at a plant and not think of her. I know God will give her the most incredible gardens to enjoy, and she and Sister Dorothy Marie will be playing games every day in paradise. I look forward to seeing her again someday.”