

Sister Mary Brooks, CSC

(Sister William Mary)

June 29, 1933–August 30, 2022

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Maureen Grady, CSC, who read them at Sister Mary's funeral on September 9, 2022.

There were several occasions over the years when I asked Mary about what she wanted me to say on this, her funeral day. Without fail, I received the same answer: "Oh, I don't know. You know what to say." I responded to her each time: "Mary, please, help me out here; how should I speak?" And always came her same words: "You'll know what to say." Only once did she expand on this standard reply when she added: "I trust you, God knows I shouldn't, but be kind about what you remember."

It is a privileged but heart-rending task to recall the memories and tell the story, but it is eased by all who cared for Mary and who pray with her and honor her today: family, sisters, friends and colleagues; and especially those whom we do not see, the ones who have stood in the shadows for a while: her mom, Kathryn; her dad, William; her brother, Bill.

She claimed that I would know what to say. Well, this is what I know: Her death is just one instant in 89 years of a vibrant, authentic, resolute, extraordinary life.

I remember Mary: her intelligent mind, her compassionate heart, her faithful soul ...

Intelligent, no doubt: She could be the smartest person in the room, but she was never self-important.

Compassionate, indeed: All the attention required of her in the corporate business world in which she lived and worked inevitably gave way to her priority of profound kindness.

Faithful, oh yes: She knew who she was before God. That unshakeable belief sustained her, and a contemplative spirit moved her to action.

I remember Mary: deeply devoted to Holy Cross ...

She embraced her vocation as a sacred calling. Her inner freedom enabled her to let go of her life plan and allow God to lead as she offered her gifts at the service of others. Imbued with the charism and spirit of the Congregation, she was life-giving to Holy Cross and its ministries, particularly those that touched the poor and underserved.

I remember Mary: remarkably gifted and accomplished ...

Her vibrant energy and passionate dedication inspired her ministry: as bedside nurse, director of nursing services, chief operating officer of hospitals, president of Holy Cross Health System, spiritual guide and mentor, leader of spiritual development for the diocese, and director of mission services at Saint Mary's.

Curious and inquisitive, a lifelong learner, she relished every opportunity to increase her knowledge and understanding. Mary used her experience to shape her leadership style, which was not limited to ideas and trends but distinguished by wisdom and creativity.

Gracious and welcoming, Mary maintained lifelong friendships and relationships as a treasured companion and loyal friend. She loved people and they loved her back. Staff admired her, and physicians respected her. Patients, most of whom did not know her personally, understood that under Mary's watch their hospital could be trusted to see them through their health care needs with compassion and competence.

Mary was tenacious in standing up for what was right in her profession. When she witnessed inequity and discrimination in health care, regardless of the source, she fought for truth and justice. Mary sued the federal government and won.

She could make do and make the best of circumstances, especially when they were beyond her control. This aspect of her character became apparent early on as a novice in her religious formation.

She was selected by the mistress of novices to play the organ as accompaniment for the singing at the holy hour. In those days, the holy hour was arranged in this way: There would be a song sung by the entire community followed by 15 minutes of quiet individual reflection. Then the pattern was repeated until, after four songs and four reflection periods, the holy hour ended.

Although Mary explained to Mother that she only knew how to play one song adequately, Mary was directed to lead the music for the entire holy hour. She played the first song, and it went pretty well. After 15 minutes she played the second song. The way Mary explained it was that she played one song and the congregation sang another.

When it came time for the third song, Mary got up and was on her way to play once again. However, she had to pass in front of Mother's pew to reach the organ. As she went by, she heard a voice saying: "Sit down, Sister."

We haven't seen Mary for a while in the fullness of her gifts, but we have known her in the waiting. She came to an advanced age and faced the question: How do I live a meaningful life when I can't be who I was before or do what I once did? At the end of life, what turns out to really matter? Perhaps this question is appropriate to ponder at any age.

In Mary's case her life had its setbacks in later years, but she was never overcome by them. Once again, she made do, and she made the best of circumstances which were beyond her ability to manage. Mary made a life of what she had, not what was taken away. It was her sense of humor, her intellectual curiosity, and her deep spiritual grounding that defined her.

In recent months Mary had periodic stretches of time when she was not able to engage in meaningful conversation. Then she would bounce back and say: "I left for a few days. I was gone away. I don't know where I went, but I'm back."

It is common to think of persons like Mary in such a circumstance as lost. We hear that a lot. It's said: "She's lost" or "We lost her." I struggled when I visited Mary and experienced our inability to relate. But what I learned was Mary wasn't lost. I just couldn't find her. She had begun her final journey of this life and had stepped onto the path of glory.

The last time we connected, a few days before she died, it was difficult for her to speak. So, I leaned over close to her and asked: "Mary, are you on your way?" She looked up at me and said, "Yep." Mary has left again, but she knows where she is. Mary Brooks is in the hand of God.

Mary told me that heaven would be very, very special in that she would be with persons she had not seen for a long time and whom she loved very much: her grandmothers, her mother and father, Bill, her Holy Cross sisters whose names she could no longer recite but whose faces stayed in her memory. Then, she offered me some advice. She said: "Pray for a happy death. It's an option, to die happy and with the mercy of God go to heaven." Who could improve on that? Who wouldn't be happy with her today?

I once asked Mary how she pictured God. She had a one-word response: "Laughter." She went on to tell me what it would be like when she saw Jesus. Mary imagined that he would be pleased to see her, and she added that there were probably some things he would like to say to her. She also said that she had some things to say, although she thought it best to just listen.

Listen, listen, dear Mary, and laugh all the way home!