

*Sister Mary Kelliher, BVM (Maurita)*  
*Wake Stories/Reflections*  
*Marian Hall Chapel, April 20, 2017*

**Jose Luis Gonzalez, Kankakee, Ill.—Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM (Lucian)**

Sister Mary, the gentle, happy saint! In all the years I knew Sister Mary, I never saw her upset in any way; she was always smiling and happy. I met Sister Mary in my early days of learning English as a second language. Although I was never in one of her classes, she would always correct me whenever I made a mistake, and that was quite often. What I most remember from her is the way she would treat you. There was no individual distinction; she would look at everyone the same way. It did not matter if you were young or old, educated or uneducated, or from a different race. In her eyes, we were all the same, without judgment. Sister Mary was a living guardian angel. She was never in charge, but was always there to lend you a hand and guide you in the right path.

**Fr. Tony Taschetta, Former Pastor, St. Teresa, Kankakee, Ill.—Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM (Lucian)**

My first reaction to hearing the news of Mary's passing was not to feel sad but to smile. You can't think of Mary without smiling; she just brought that out in you. She was this incredible combination of outward simplicity and raw unadulterated guts. She was afraid of nothing; there was nothing she was afraid to try. Whatever it was, she just plowed right into it and heedlessly brought the joy of Jesus to all she encountered.

With her pigeon Spanish (like I have room to talk) she communicated to our young Mexican community in a language that was totally understood by all whose lives she touched. It was the language of compassion, understanding, acceptance and love. When she left us, I think she went to Guatemala for a while to teach novices. At her age and with her language skills, don't tell me that's not gutsy! She had to have left a lot of smiling novices in her wake. And she's not done. I'm sure that on the other side she will be busy making grumpy holy people smile. Go get 'em Sister Mary! I'm still smiling!

**Sister Sandra Rodemyer, BVM (St. Philip)**

I'm sorry I have to correct, but Mary would want me to do this. We lived at St. Frances Xavier, but taught at St. Albert the Great Central Catholic High School. That's where I met Mary. It was my first mission and it was a hard one. Mary was the bridge over the troubled waters. I've been playing that song a lot lately. I know Jesus is a bridge, but Mary was too. She just turned 40 when she came and I was 26. We were the closest in age; that ought to tell you something.

I was listening to "Bridge over Troubled Waters" as I was coming here; so much of it reminds me of her. The superintendent of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Des Moines, Sister Elizabeth Claire, had given that album to the sisters at the convent. One of the cuts on the album was "The Boxer." Only those of us of a certain generation are going to be familiar with Simon and Garfunkel in the first place, and nobody else in that convent was. However, I still have

memories of Mary listening to "The Boxer." As the song played, she would do mock boxing. I can never hear that song without seeing that image.

Mary talked about her parents a lot. In the last week, I've had time to reflect and thought, *Yes, she does reflect both of them*. She talked about her mother, who was so unsentimental and her father who was the dreamer, as she called him. Mary was a bit of both depending on the occasion. She told me how, when she would get upset, she'd run away to the foothills of Casper, Wyo. I never quite pictured exactly how far she got, but I could tell there was that feistiness in her already. She wasn't always smiling, especially if she thought about the British and what they were doing to her ancestors and the people in Ireland. She was very unhappy with them.

We had so many trips together: an Elderhostel in Duluth, Minn., focusing on Native Americans; my trip to Green River, which she made sure I was going to see and enjoy. For those who don't know, Green River is on the western side of Wyoming. We went into Utah and she took me to the Flaming Gorge. She took me wherever she thought I needed to go and to see. She arranged someone, a volunteer, to take me up to St. Stephen Indian Mission so that I could visit my friend, a Jesuit priest. Later Mary and I took trips to Wyoming together. That's where I first met her niece Ann Rochelle and Ann's mother Rita, Mary's sister. We stayed with her sister Pat Tripeny and then I would go out to the Indian reservation for some times of prayer. The only Kelliher sister I did not get to meet was Rosa Webster. What a treat it was! Even talking with Pat last Friday, hearing her voice was like hearing Mary; they sound so much alike.

Coming back from our last trip to Casper, we spent the night in Grand Island, Neb. We had breakfast at Perkins and were heading east for Des Moines when Mary suddenly realized that she didn't have her purse. We were a good half-hour away from Grand Island. Well, we get off the interstate and find a place where she could call Perkins. Yes, they had found her purse. Of course, I had a timeframe in my mind that was out the window because we were driving back to Perkins. This was tripling the amount of time on the road.

Then the little sneak wanted to stop and visit a nephew in Council Bluffs. This had not been prearranged; it was a surprise to me. We stopped and had a lovely lunch, but he wasn't home, so then she wanted to visit him and asked if I wanted to come along. I said, "No, I'll just stay here and take a nap," which I did. After she got back into the car, we stopped at a Dairy Queen along the way for a huge Blizzard. That took care of my supper. The sun never set on any problems we ever had. While I tell you my name is Sandra or Sandy, she frequently just called me San. The other day I felt the need for Dairy Queen for old times' sake. I pulled in and said, "I'll take a medium chocolate cone." Whoever had been ahead of me had literally emptied the machine. So all there was was the cone with just a little heap of ice cream. The poor lady was so embarrassed and said, "Can I top it with a mix or something?" I said, "No, no, it's fine. Just tell me what I owe you." "Oh, it's free." I said, "Thank you" and, as I drove out, "Here's to you, Mary!"

**Judy Christensen, Niece**

One of my fondest memories of Aunt Mary was in the 1960s. I was in college and as a typical University of Wyoming co-ed, I pledged the sorority. Aunt Mary was rather appalled at that decision. I was 17, but that's no excuse. She said, "I want to ask you something." She was not supportive at all; she always had been supportive of most things. She said, "Does your sorority accept black people and Jews?" It really never came to the forefront. At the University of Wyoming in the 1960s there were no black people, except for the footballs players, but they were men and couldn't be in the sorority. I was unaware of any Jewish people, so I said, "I don't know, but I will look into that."

How right she was! I investigated it and we did not pledge blacks and Jews; it was a Christian sorority based in the South. Our Southern sisters "would not be accepting." That raised my consciousness so much. I've often reflected back on her ability to make me see the error of that. I so appreciated it. In so many ways through the years, she has always been instrumental in keeping that consciousness there. Thank you for being so hospitable to us. It's a beautiful home. Thank you for being Mary's sisters.

### **Sister Dolores Kramer, BVM**

I knew Mary Kelliher even before postulancy here at Mount Carmel. There were four of us who entered from Clarke University in 1948: Sue Rink, Mary Kelliher, myself, and Marjorie Carey, one from each class. During our senior year as novices, Mary was asked to teach Latin. Mary was very, very bright and she also had a quick wit and a comic sense of humor. When Mary tried earnestly to be serious as when she was teaching, she sometimes came off as a little comical. We seniors were giving her a bit of a hard time about that. When our novice mistress, S.M. Leo Hogan, BVM heard about it, she quickly put a stop to it. Mary knew her Latin and we loved Mary, so all ended well and we learned a lot of Latin.

### **Lori Ritz, Associate and Former BVM**

I first met Sister Mary in high school at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines. It was around 1967. She did not teach me, but I knew where her classroom was and who she was. Now fast forward about 40 years. I was living in Phoenix and my former father-in-law, Zack Panagos, passed away. I loved my father-in-law dearly. It was the first time I'd ever sent out a prayer request to the BVMs and associates. I received several emails in support, including one from Sister Mary. She wrote, "I most certainly will remember Zach in my prayers. I went to high school with Zach and his younger brother Tony in Casper, Wyo." Small world. Every time I visited Mount Carmel after that, Sister Mary would tell me a story about what she, Zach and Tony did during their high school days. I want to thank Mary for remembering someone who was so dear to me. Tell him "Hi" for me as you reminisce with him now.

### **Sister Anita Montavon, BVM (Felicity)**

I can only tell you that Mary was part of a whole bunch of blessings. I met her when I was age 40. I didn't know a thing about Gillette, Wyo. For eight years, it was really a whole picture—the state, her family, her beautiful nieces and nephews, the unreal hospitality. All I can say is that for me there were blessings galore.

**Sister Vivian C. Wilson, BVM (Lauren)**

I've known Mary for a big part of my life. Mary loved the moon. When we lived in Deerfield in the Motherhouse, we all learned to love the moon, especially when it was full. She also liked to wander outdoors at night. When I was in Deerfield, I would go with her. Finally, I said, "Mary, I am not sure of my footing. I'm not going to do it anymore." Fast forward to now. She said to me not too long ago, "You know I went out last night." I said, "You went out! You're getting too old for that." She said, "No, I went out after the security guards left." "Mary, what are you doing out there?" She said, "Everything is so beautiful with the moon." She made many a trip out gathering her leaves and wandering around in the yard at night and then coming to tell me about it. No matter what I said, I could never talk her into stopping it.

**Sister Jeroma Day, BVM**

I first met Mary when I was in Casper and she was in Gillette, Wyo. I got to know some of her family while I was there. Her niece and nephew were in the high school religious education program. When I moved to Douglas, Wyo., I stayed with Mary in Gillette. It was my first experience of someone living in a very poor basement apartment. It didn't seem to really matter to Mary. When she moved to Green River, Wyo., I went to visit her there also.

Just a couple of months ago, we sent out an email inviting sisters who either had a third world grant, a mission experience, or were in some way involved in a third world country, to share their experiences at the BVM Heritage meeting this fall. The immediate response was overwhelming. However, just about two weeks ago, Mary came up to me in the dining room and said, "I really would like to share my experiences in Guatemala." I was excited because I knew her experiences there were unique.

When she died on Good Friday, I was very sad, not only to lose her, but also to know that she would not be a part of our sharing. I immediately said to her, "Mary, this project is in your hands. It's up to you to see that it works. As we go through our corridors, especially in Caritas Center and Marian Hall, we see the signs that say "go on steady and quiet." That's how I see Mary.

**Sister Eileen Powell, BVM (Robertrese)—Read by Sister Marjorie Heidkamp, BVM (Herberdette)**

I lived with Mary in Kankakee, Ill. In her ministry, Mary didn't meet a need that she didn't believe she could conquer. She approached every challenge with great determination. She was a mix of kindness, wit, a dash of eccentricity, deep faith, and love for others. When I would visit at Mount Carmel, at the end of our time together, Mary would say, "Thanks for the visit. Now go because you have many other sisters you want to see." She was selfless, never wanting to impose herself on others. Mary was an example of how to live life with trust, love and ease. Thank you, Mary, for our years together. It is a comfort to know that you are resting in the peace of God's presence.

**Joann Crowley Beers, BVM Associate**

I'm recognizing Mary in the wonderful stories that people are telling. It's almost like she is here with us. Mary Maurita, or as her older sisters used to call her, I'm sure affectionately, Mary Terry Trixie Tomboy Tress Iodine Pain-in-the-Neck. I love those names because what they do is give us a sense of the breadth of her personality because she was all of that. She was a lot of fun, a little curmudgeonly sometimes, but always loving, generous and gracious.

I met Mary when I first left Mount Carmel in 1956. It was pre-Scholasticate, so we went right out to the missions. It was such a gift to have Mary Kelliher there to guide my steps. She was an "older" sister who had just made her final vows. Somebody mentioned her never getting upset or angry. I have to remember that, because of one of the things that happened in that mission at St. John. Mary had come back from making final vows, which gave her a new status. There were other young nuns like myself in the house, so she felt like she had moved on. When the first recollection Sunday came around and the superior said, "Now, Mary, you come with the young sisters for our little instruction." She was really furious about that. Her sense of justice was offended.

There were hard times in the 1950s. There are a few of you here who can remember that they were even hard financially. We were trying to make ends meet. I didn't know it at the time, but I do now, that we got \$25 a month for teaching in the school. Mary had the job of buying groceries. I went along with her as her companion, but it was her responsibility. She knew how to be frugal. She was given a \$10 bill for the grocery store and very carefully make her selections. Almost inevitably, when we got to the checkout counter, it was a little over. Mary would have to go back and see what we could leave behind. She did that with great patience. That's just what you had to do.

She was one of the most accepting people I've ever known. Another time while at St. John, we were invited over to St. Anne. The Butte flats had two BVM convents. We didn't get together very often, but they had invited the young sisters over for a gathering. We didn't have a car, so the monsignor said he would take us over because he could visit the pastor. Well, the monsignor was not on our timeline. In those days, if you stayed out after dark you had to write to the provincial to tell her you had been out after dark. The monsignor didn't care if it was dark or not, so we got home late. The superior was very unhappy with us and said, "You'll probably have to write a letter." Mary wasn't fazed by that. We did the best we could and got back as soon as we could so there was no reason to be excited about it. What ever happened, she could always take it in stride.

Eventually, Mary and I went our separate ways. In about 1969, during another big time in the community when TOPA (Total Open Application) was beginning, Mary had been trained to do religious education and I got a job in Denver. I was the only BVM there, so it was an opportunity for Mary to use her new knowledge, to get closer to Casper, which she loved, and to live with me. We found a Loretto sister and a tiny little house to live in together. The elderly man who owned the house moved into the basement so we could live in the rest of it. One of my strongest memories from that place was Mary with the children on Halloween handing out candy. She was having more fun than they were. She just loved that experience of being

generous to them. She was generous to me too. In that house, there were two bedrooms upstairs so Mary and Eileen each had one and I slept in the pantry, which was just the size of the bed. When Mary came downstairs in the morning, she would make the coffee and hand me my first cup in bed. It was pretty luxurious for me. She always liked doing things like that.

When we moved into a different house with more Loretto sisters, we got serious about being responsible. Times were changing and we wanted to move with the times. We all read Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, and then decided to be vegetarians. Mary really became very adept at serving vegetarian meals, maybe it was her experience buying groceries in Butte. Another thing that happened was that we were robbed. We lost some guitars, a radio and a TV. We put on the wall a big piece of newsprint just to write notes to each other. One of the Loretto sisters wrote, "Dear Robbers, take whatever you want. We don't need things." Mary was the first one to say, "Yes, we will get by with what we have. We don't need things."

I do have to mention Guatemala. When I was leaving Guatemala, Mary was working with Hispanic people and her Spanish was better than mine. I didn't want to leave them without someone to replace me, so I talked her into going to Guatemala. It was a challenge for her; it was a challenge for everyone. She lived on a very steep mountain. It was cheap land. That's why they could build the convent for the young Mayan women who wanted to be Catholic sisters. They also wanted to keep their Mayan traditions, dress and languages.

Mary was teaching young women who grew up with four different languages and Spanish, which they were just learning. It was a complicated situation. If you wanted to drink water, you had to boil it. When you washed clothes, you did it in tubs outside and had to carry the water to do that. There was no refrigeration. It was a primitive way to live. However, the joy and happiness that was there more than made up for it.

I am feeling in this room two things that I always felt from Mary: gratitude and love. She was always grateful for whatever came her way and she always loved the person she was with. I think that Mary's gratitude and love is with us now and we are returning that gratitude and love to her. BVMs have given me tremendous things over many decades, but one of the best of them was friendship with Mary.

### **Ann Rochelle, Niece**

Mary was Mary Terry Trixie Tomboy Tress Iodine Pain-in-the-Neck. The iodine came because she spilled iodine all over something white. She definitely was a tomboy. She could be a pain-in-the-neck. To her two sisters who are still alive, Rita, my mother (96), and Pat, her younger sister (83), and her deceased sister, Rosaleen, she was a spiritual advisor. I, too, lost my spiritual advisor.

Twenty-one years ago, I adopted my first daughter from China. Nineteen years ago, I adopted my second daughter from China. Judy adopted her little Sammy from Korea. Two-and-a-half years ago, I did an intervention and put my oldest daughter into substance abuse treatment. I remember going to church and sitting in the back. The Gospel was Christ walking on the water.

The point of the sermon, the priest said, was that we should all be able to say, "Amen, I believe," and when we say that, we are saying everything will be all right. I remember sitting there thinking, *I can say "Amen."* I believed that everything would be all right. It was through my years of counsel with Mary and my counsel immediately at that time that my faith came through for me.

Today, my daughter is two-and-a half years substance free. She worked her program and then went to New York City and graduated from culinary school. She's worked with addicts in New York City. She has her sense of God and sense of faith. It was my Aunt Mary who was there all the way, helping me to believe, "Amen, it will be all right." Her leaving us is her way of saying you, her sisters, will be all right and our biological family will be all right. I am grateful for Mary and for her spiritual counsel. Her sisters in Casper and up in heaven send you her love. Amen.