

## ***“Meeting” Mary Mulheron, CSJ***

***Presentation Given at the Association of Pastoral Ministers Annual Banquet, May 28, 2019***

*~ Mary Kaye Medinger*

### **1. Introduction**

What a delight it is to share some stories about Mary Mulheron CSJ as I reminisce about this woman who was my dear friend, my colleague, my mentor. On a very personal level, in how she lived and in how she died, she was the person who taught me how to laugh and taught me how to cry and enriched my life immensely. And so I am happy to be with you tonight for the presentation of the annual Mary Mulheron Awards!

My preparation for tonight led me into the recesses of my own memories from forty years ago as well as into the archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and my own journals from the months preceding and following Mary’s death in 1986.

### **2. Background**

Evelyn Mary Mulheron was born on July 24, 1917, in Spring Valley, Wisconsin, the twin of Everett Mulheron. She entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul in 1939 at the age of 22. Her application materials included a letter of recommendation from her pastor stating that she was “healthy, strong and a willing worker”!

She exhibited those qualities throughout her ministerial life which included assignments at a Catholic Girls Orphanage as well as assignments at 10 different parishes, for many years as an elementary teacher and later as a “Parish Visitor”/ pastoral minister. Along the way, she earned a B.A. from St. Catherine’s in sociology and elementary education, attended continuing education opportunities in theology and CPE and helped found APM! In 1971, Nativity school principal Mary Margaret Deeney wrote about Sister Mary Emeline (who, once the Sisters were able to return to their own names, chose to be known simply as Sister Mary Mulheron): “Her lessons are always well prepared, attitude positive, enthusiasm high. Unusually great ability to carry a workload, always matched with a generous spirit. Special talent in relating with others and on good terms with everyone. Dependable and supportive. Courteous and respectful of all.” Sounds like a fine description of good qualities for a **pastoral minister** as well, and for a Sister of St. Joseph who commits her life to “moving always toward profound love of God and of the dear neighbor without distinction”! AND she was such a **FUN** person with a remarkable sense of humor, a love for her Irish heritage, often a twinkle in her eye. She also had a love of ritual and the liturgical year and willingness to speak the truth as she understood it, especially with regard to the role of women in the church!

3. **God, Give us each our own death,  
the dying that proceeds  
from each of our lives:  
the way we lived,  
the meanings we made,  
our need.**

*Rainer Maria Rilke, III 6 from The Book of Poverty and Death*

Shortly after her retirement following her ministry at St. Luke's (where we had served together), Mary was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer in March of 1983. Shortly thereafter, she made the decision to move from a small house to Holy Spirit convent in St. Paul for the last three years of her life. Life there brought her the gift of community. Her housemates included her spiritual director, Sister Mary Virginia Micka, and other Sisters who accompanied her during her time of active waiting.

On August 8 of 1984, Mary presided over a "Celebration of Life" in the parish hall at Holy Spirit. The theme was "Friends are Life Givers" and it was a way for Mary to express gratitude to family and friends who had made her life so full and rich, even as she moved toward its end. In the sharing of prayer and song, bread and wine, feasting and storytelling, there was a surprise for Mary!

At the initiative of friends and parishioners at St. John's in Excelsior (where Mary had served from 1968-1972), it was announced that an endowment was being created to fund the **annual Mary Mulheron Award!** It was described as follows in the SCAN (St. Catherine Alumnae News) Fall 1985 article:

"The first annual Sister Mary Mulheron Awards of \$250 each were given to Patricia Connolly Durkin '55 and to Eleanor Gets at the annual banquet of the archdiocesan Association of Pastoral Ministers in St. Paul in May. The awards were established by friends of Sister Mary to honor her career as a pastoral minister and to give public recognition to the importance of pastoral ministry in the church today.

"Sister Mary Mulheron graduated from the College of St. Catherine in 1964 as Evelyn Mulheron. As a Sister of St. Joseph she earned the love and respect of many in her years as a religious educator at St. John's school in Excelsior and as a pastoral minister at St. Luke's parish in St. Paul. Two years ago, shortly after retiring, she learned that she had been stricken with lung cancer. 'For many people,' stated the award announcement, 'Sister Mary's warmth and wisdom, acceptance and love had helped them recognize the ministry in which all baptized Christians share. Her sacramental presence and conviction of herself as Church had helped them experience themselves as People of God.'

"One of the Sister Mary Mulheron Awards is to go to a graduating student in the Pastoral Ministry Program at St. Catherine's and the other to a pastoral minister already active in the

field. For Pat Durkin, pastoral minister at St. Jerome parish in Maplewood, it was a great honor to be the first recipient of an award named for a sister alumna, and for Eleanor Getz, the recipient of the graduating student award, it was an encouraging and inspiring experience with which to begin her career.”

Mary’s last trip to her beloved Cobblestone Cabins on the North Shore of Lake Superior, with her friend Sister Rita Steinhagen, was in the fall of 1985. In her favorite picture of herself from that trip, she is seated on a rock she called her “throne” right at the edge of the water. She is wearing a red sweatshirt and tan slacks and holding a cup of coffee. Her post-chemo grey hair has turned curly and she has a slight smile. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the photo is the way the horizon disappears and all becomes one – sky and sea, life and death...ALL IS ONE.

She loved listening to the loons at the North Shore. She once said to Sister Mary Virginia, “Listen to the loon calling to its mate.” And Virg said to her, “The loon is the Lord for you, isn’t it?” and Mary nodded. Her memorial card included a drawing of a loon under a passage from the Song of Songs that read, “The song of the dove is heard in our land. Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come.” Mary’s final years were a time of active waiting on the shore, a time of gratitude.

Her favorite prayer book during those last years was *Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers and Reflections* by Macrina Wiederkehr. She especially loved a reflection called “Gratitude” – “Moments of gratitude for the strangers who have walked with me fill my life constantly. There is always a return gift waiting in my heart. It is for those who took off their shoes to be reverent with my coming, for those who stood on tiptoe beside me when my hope was small. It is for those who were present when I needed my feet washed. It is for those who raced with me to the tomb on the day I was certain it held nothing but death. It is for those who celebrated my emptiness with me and for those who broke with me the kind of bread that fed my death new life.”

Mary died on the evening of June 8, 1986, at Bethany Convent in St. Paul where she had moved a few months earlier. She had commented early that morning that today would be the day and asked to have her family and dear friends informed and invited to be with her. She was fully conscious until just a few minutes before her death. Her final words were “Amen, amen, amen, alleluia” to which Sister Mary Virginia responded, “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, amen.”

Mary Virginia, Mary’s spiritual director and an English professor, wrote her obituary. She wrote:

“Most stories have their beginning, their middle and their end. Not so with Mary. With her everything was rooted in and returned to a center – the life and love that is God. It was as simple as that; and steadily, generously, lovingly she grew into the grace of her being, discovering something new and sacred in each stage.

“It was this involvement in life, wherever and whatever its forms, that kept her younger than her days. New ways of thinking, new ways of worship, new ways of turning up the collar on your blouse, new healings, new reconciliations, new friendships – she welcomed all these into her life and created with them a kind of sacrament of the loving presence of God. She was close to the natural life around her and celebrated its seasonal departures and returns – now it was time to go to Timberlee , now to the North Shore, now to ‘the cabin’, then to Spring Valley again, for the birds or the spring flowers or the autumn leaves...

“Life’s’ occasions, so clearly a mixture of sorrow and joy, took shape under her lightening fingers as blessing times for those (and how many they were!) she gathered into communion. With a basket of bread, a lamp, a gesture, she made sharing possible, and prayer, and thanksgiving, serenely confident that her touch was as important to other people as theirs was to her...

“Her life was an integrated flow, from the God of life to the God of love. Nothing, no one, was compartmentalized; and nothing, not even memory, remained static with her. She did not look long at what needed to be done. Her last days were a vital, active waiting, listening at the shore for the call of the loon. For us who bless, as we have been blessed by, her journey, even our memory is full of her life. May she rest untiring in peace.”

A few months after her death, I myself went to the North Shore on retreat and wrote this reflection about Mary:

### *The Weaving*

*It has been a summer of birthing and dying, and, like the poet T. S. Eliot in his poem “The Magi”, I am not sure where one ends and the other begins. “Was it birth we came all this way for, or death?” It began with the coming of May, Mary’s month. Will it end on the August feast of the Assumption or at the cabin in the woods on Labor Day or when?*

*So like birthing her dying was. A rounded mound that grew week by week, month by month. Breathing became difficult, not knowing what to expect, a remarkable spurt of energy near the end, knowing when the time was right, when all was readiness, and then giving into it, letting go, letting it have its way with her. As another poet said, “...bearing down steadily, she gives birth to her spirit which has come full term”. And matter becomes energy and something beautiful is born – because she said her final YES and let go in every way.*

*And at her burial, she entered eternity carrying a small basket of bread in her hands, resting on the very same spot where that rounded mound had been. She gave birth to bread, to Eucharist, to the Body of Christ - she became the body of Christ, and in all of her bread-breaking and blessing, we too became that body. And so, in her hands, she carried something of us into eternity.*

*At the very end, it was “a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)” (Eliot again). Objectively, simplicity seems so simple – and yet she said, “Letting go is the hardest*

*thing I have ever done.” To let go totally, of everything and (much more difficult) of everyone – and she DID it – consciously, willingly, totally, finally. She came to a new beauty those last weeks, when all that was left were blue eyes, gray wavy hair, a wonderful smile and a body that became (as she said) a box of bones – except for that rounded mound...*

*Birth and death and birth again – all woven together, woven in and out of each other – her final gift to us...*

For twenty five years, on the June 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death, a small group of her dearest friends gathered at her grave to share a picnic supper and share stories to celebrate her life and remember her death. We trusted and trust still that she was and is with us in spirit, continuing to enrich us as, one by one, we join her in eternity. May her story continue to be told by those of you who carry on her beloved ministry of pastoral care!

*Revised and edited July 24, 2019, the 102<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Mary Mulheron’s birth.*

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