



Sr. Mary Paul of Jesus and of the Holy Cross, OCD 1933-2020

Years ago our community learned an old hymn called *Soul of My Savior*. In the last verse there is a phrase: "in death's drear moment..." Sr. Mary Paul would sing: "in death's dear moment..." When the choir directress told her: "The word is drear," she would reply with a little smile: "Not for me, it isn't!" That dear moment came for her at 10:36 p.m. on March 12, 2020.

Maryann Cutri was the eldest of two daughters of James (Vincenzo) Cutri and Maina (Philomena) Ferraro. Philomena was James' second wife. His first, Mary the eldest sister of Maina, died of tuberculosis after a short marriage. James, a native of Regio Calabria, Italy, then proposed to Maina and, after they were married, moved into a house on Cherry Street in Erie, PA, Maina's home town. Maryann was born on July 28, 1933. A few years later, her little sister Geraldine was born.

Maryann's mother was a woman of great energy who believed that anything could be accomplished by drive, hard work and prayer. Everyone was her neighbor and the recipient of her generosity. This was a trait Maryann inherited and emulated. Her father, on the other hand, was a mellow Italian grocer in a small store he co-owned with Maina's brother, Joe. Both parents were faithful Catholics, and the fact that Maryann was baptized Maria Annunziata (her given name "amended" by the elderly Italian pastor) on the feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord was a source of joy to her.

As she grew into a lean, wiry child, she found her pleasure in the outdoor activities the children of her neighborhood enjoyed. She loved sports: softball, basketball, tennis and swimming, especially in Lake Erie. These childhood pastimes endured into young adulthood when she was pitcher on the Erie City championship softball team and played forward for the Mercyhurst College women's basketball team. She also took tap and



toe dancing instructions, which she enjoyed very much. Sometimes her high energy got her into trouble, as happened when she was ten: she jumped from a six foot fence and broke her leg, causing her mother to have to pull her on a sled three blocks through the snow to Columbus Grade School each day to support the heavy cast. Another time, she carried a drinking glass outdoors against her mother's wishes, then fell and cut the tendon in one of her fingers. The finger healed, but could no longer bend. She said it was a reminder, for the rest of her life, of the importance of obedience.

In her pre-teens, she was stricken with chorea, an infection of the nervous system. At that time, the cure included plenty of rest in a quiet, darkened room. This enforced solitude and silence dragged for the young child, but taught her many lessons that would make her appreciate these gifts in Carmel.

One of her favorite jobs as a young teen was working in her father's grocery store, and her very favorite job there was restocking the candy case. This was accompanied with surreptitious and generous sampling of the goods. If her father and uncle knew, as she suspected they did, they never said anything. Her love of chocolate continued throughout her life and sometimes was a cause for merriment. She once complimented the sister-cook on her delicious chocolate cake, only to be told that she had just eaten a dark, moist gingerbread.

After grade school she attended Strong Vincent High School and matriculated at Mercyhurst College in Erie where she majored in Biology and minored in English and Chemistry, graduating cum laude. She then obtained certification as a Medical Technologist from St. Vincent Hospital.

Once she had a salary she would indulge her love for children by setting aside some of it to treat two orphans from the local orphanage, chosen at random each time, to a day of shopping, fun and treats. Often her sister Gerry would join her and it was hard to discern who was having more fun, the girls or the children. During high school she was employed in Murphy's Department Store where she met a young man she admired, dated and then fell in love. There was a general understanding that, once they finished their education, they would marry. When she attended college she was befriended by several Sisters of Mercy and the thought of religious life entered her heart, where it waged mighty war with her first aspirations.

Once employed at St. Vincent Hospital, she met two orderlies there who had been Trappist monks. These men introduced her to the writings of OHM St. Teresa of Avila, which increased her desire for religious life. She then put herself under the direction of Fr. James Peterson, a saintly priest who was director of Vocations for the diocese of Erie. He suggested that she visit the Carmel of Loretto, PA. One day as she was doing some spiritual reading at the dining room table at her family home, the vocation crisis came to a head. Maryann realized she could no longer resist the Divine Bridegroom who had taken over her heart, and putting her head on the table, she burst into tears and surrendered to her vocation.

Her mother, however, was not to be so easily persuaded and dismissed the idea of vocation for her eldest child. She discussed this weighty matter with a priest who told her she was resisting the Will of God in Maryann's life. Her mother reluctantly agreed and on October 16, 1955 an uncle and aunt drove her, her parents and her sister to the Carmel in Loretto where she would enter as a postulant. The trip was a damp one, as her mother held her hand and wept for the entire four hours. In fact, her mother only embraced her daughter's vocation when the new foundation in Latrobe was initiated. Maina was one of the mothers asked to come for a week to cook for the community while they worked at moving in. When she saw how happy the community was, their loving relationship with each other and their fidelity to prayer, she not only found joy in her daughter's life but adopted the whole community as her extended family. The feeling was entirely mutual.

Maryann received the Carmelite habit on May 2, 1956 and the name Sister Mary Paul of Jesus. She had great love for St. Paul and found much nourishment in his epistles, so the name was a joy to her. Sister's demeanor was serious and studious, and she labored with the same determination and energy she learned from her mother. She would often fail to see the humor in



a story, and while the rest of the community enjoyed a hearty laugh, she would smile gently or look perplexed. When she did see the humor then she joined us, but it didn't bother her not to "get it."



By 1960 the Carmel in Loretto was nearly full, with more applicants hoping to enter, so in response to Bishop Connare's invitation, a new foundation was planned to the neighboring young diocese of Greensburg, PA. Sr. Mary Paul had been finally professed on May 3, 1960 and was one of the sisters chosen to make the foundation. In particular, she was to establish an altar bread baking and distribution department for the support of the monastery. Sister also had a fine voice, which she joined with

the other seven founding sisters as they spent time learning the Gregorian chant propers for the major feasts of the Church.

Sr. Catherine Marie, the sub-prioress of the new foundation, and Sr. Mary Paul were sent a week early to establish the altar bread work and to direct the final cleaning of the monastery. They had been told, by Mother Bernadette, to stay together as much as possible, so when the doorbell rang, both would go to answer. The house was overrun with Benedictine Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters, who were eager to help clean the monastery for their new neighbors. One memorable hour found the assigned Benedictine chaplain cleaning the bathtub, the Prioress of the Benedictines cleaning the sinks, and our two Carmelites –together- in the shower, cleaning it.

Since there was no money to pay a handyman, the Prioress organized the sisters to spend afternoons clearing brush and mowing grass. Sr. Mary Paul soon found out by sad experience that she was highly allergic to poison ivy, which grew prolifically everywhere on our property. Though she experienced severe edema and ugly blisters from the ivy, she never asked to be excused, but put extra large gloves on over her swollen hands and big boots on her swollen legs and feet and would go with the rest to do battle with the leafy enemy. A doctor who lived nearby us would come to give her daily shots to rid her of the edema and decrease the intense itching.



After a term as the sub-prioress of her predecessor, Sr. Mary Paul was elected the third Prioress of the community and continued to lead us through the changes that resulted from Vatican II. When the idea of a federation or association for Carmelite Nuns was proposed, Sister was very supportive and interested. She was elected to the interim committee of the Association of Carmelite Nuns (the forerunner of CCA). When CCA was first formed, she was elected chairperson for 1970-1972. She served in many ways over the years. One of those times was when she participated in the first formation program CCA held for its sisters in initial formation. She gave the classes on OHF John of the Cross. It was a great joy to her as he was very dear to her and her spiritual guide throughout her life. The many friendships she made through CCA were a great treasure to her. As the years passed and she felt she was no longer able to attend meetings, her interest never diminished.

She enjoyed carpentry and put it to good use to relieve the sisters of some knee problems. The mansion that became our monastery had settled quite a bit after mining was done underneath it, and all the floors had a great propensity to lean from one corner to the other because of the settling. This was very hard on the knees of the sisters who knelt on the bare slanting floor for long periods during the day. Finally, Sr. Mary Paul ordered two-by-fours and plywood, and using our trusty level, built a level false floor in the choir to the comfort and better health of the community.

With an increasing number of applicants, it became evident that more cells would be soon needed. Our altar bread department had outgrown itself too, so with the encouragement and support of our Bishop, Sr. Mary Paul engaged the contractors who had remodeled the mansion and soon we were praying to the music of earth movers, saws and hammers. A modest wing was built onto the mansion with an altar bread department, a recreation room and new cells.

Sr. Mary Paul, who experienced within herself a compelling call to solitude, was foremost in making sure all the useable wood, nails, plasterboard and cinder blocks were scavenged and saved each night after the men quit work. All the larger pieces of discarded wood were



saved and the dream of having a hermitage for retreat days and our individual retreats was realized when we used it to frame our own little building. Once the hermitage was built, she asked to spend an extended period in solitude at the time of her Silver Jubilee. This was the first of several times she was granted an extended hermitical experience over the years.

Sister was always in reasonably good health. However, during a heavy wind storm our large enclosure gate blew back on her and the latch struck her spine. That caused a debilitating injury and required spinal surgery. She was left with a slight, but permanent, limp in her right leg. She never let her disability impede her and continued to be very physically active and execute many more building projects.

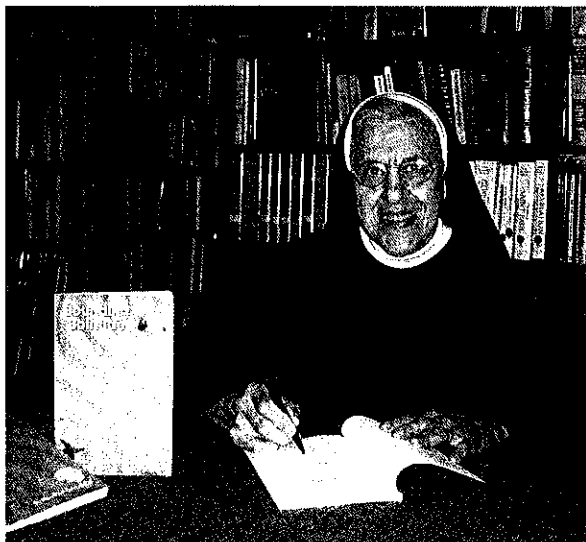
In the early 1980's our old mansion had finished its serviceability as our home, and we began the large building project of a real monastery. Sr. Mary Paul served on our building committee, giving the fruit of her experience to planning a modest but convenient home that served the charism and our daily needs. She was again interested in saving all the building scraps so that we could build a second hermitage, joined to the first, with a shared kitchenette and bathrooms. This made it possible for us to spend the night when we were on retreat, and be completely in solitude.

Over the years, Sister spent her talents in many offices serving the community, including councilor, novice mistress, infirmarian, treasurer, maintenance and outdoor work. She gloried in the hot days of summer and would be working in the yards or mowing grass when the rest of the community sought the cool areas of the house. During her retreat, one would see her sitting contemplatively on one of the benches in full sun, wearing a little white beanie she had made to protect her head.

Sister was also gifted musically. Various sisters began to compose melodies for the antiphons to enhance our celebration of the office for Solemnities, and she wrote the antiphons for several of them, as well as antiphons and psalm tones for the Holy Week Triduum that we sing each year.

As the years passed, she continued to do her outdoor work, into her 80's, planting trees and bushes, mowing grass, trimming trees and brush and tending her tomato patch outside the kitchen. It was a source of joy for her to pick the tomatoes, slice them for the meal and present a wonderful full platter of fresh tomatoes for our enjoyment. They never lasted long! The day of her funeral, the flowering quince she planted and tended outside the back door was in leaf and showing its orange-red blossoms.

In her 80's she also accepted the challenge of taking charge of our library and managed to get the several thousand books catalogued and entered into the computer and fill the card catalogues. She never had a comfortable relationship with a computer (it was a real penance for her!) but she did her best and would ask for help when needed.



In her later years she also turned her energy to fulfilling a desire she had to share her experience and love of solitude with others through writing. She had written articles over the years for the magazine "spiritual life", but she was ready to write a small book. "Sounding Solitude" was published by ICS in 2010. After its publication she received many notes from people, mainly OCDS members, who told her how much it had helped them in their vocation. It sold far more copies than she had dreamed, and often thanked God that He had used her to help others taste the life she loved.

It was fitting that her book helped so many Secular Carmelites because they were very dear to her heart. After the foundation

in Latrobe, efforts were made to found a Carmelite Third Order chapter in the early 60's. Several members went through formation and made their promises, but it gradually dispersed. Some years later, several of the finally-committed members approached the Bishop asking that the Third Order be re-established. Sr. Mary Paul was asked to see what she could do to help them. From 1981-1989 she guided and formed all those who aspired to live according to the Secular Carmelite charism and became very dear to the group, who revered her as a mentor and councilor.

As she aged, she slowed down and weakened, but rarely showed signs of ill health. When she was asked to move into the one of the infirmary rooms she resisted this symbol of her aging, but then relented so someone who had difficulty getting to the second floor could move down to her room. Her new room was very warm all winter, which she appreciated and needed.

The beginning of 2020 brought St. Joseph as Sr. Mary Paul's patron for the year. She thought maybe he would be coming to take her home. He did that in a very striking way since her funeral ended up being on March 18th.

In the last year of her life, Sr. Mary Paul began to experience shortness of breath, especially in the long walk from the infirmary and Chapel area to the common rooms. She was put under the care of a heart specialist and given medication for heart problems and stroke prevention. She seemed to be doing well for awhile, but asked for an early night on occasion. On February 22, she had trouble getting her food on her plate and at the end of the meal, dropped her dessert plate. Our Sister infirmarian feared she was having a stroke and called the ambulance. Sr. Mary Paul didn't want to go to the hospital, but realized we needed to know what was causing her distress.

After two days in the hospital it was concluded she had not had a stroke and she was scheduled to come home. When we went for her, she was unable to even get herself dressed. She was re-evaluated and re-admitted. After a new test, they found signs of stroke and she was transferred to St. Anne Home in Greensburg for physical therapy. She did well with her PT, but was not eating much and was extremely tired. She was scheduled to come home, but Wednesday morning at 2:45 a.m. they called us from St. Anne to say that they were sending her back to the hospital as she was unresponsive. When she arrived at the hospital she was alert and coherent but having trouble breathing. One lung appeared congested and she was admitted for treatment for possible pneumonia. She ended up back in the room she had occupied when she was first admitted a week earlier. She stabilized after a few days, but it was discovered the fluid was around her lungs rather than in them. So, plans were made to drain it over the week-end. She was scheduled to return home on Monday, but once again our hopes were dashed. Cancer cells were found in the drained fluid and it was decided she should remain. We were not given much hope. When our Benedictine brothers heard she was in the hospital, she was visited by many of them and anointed daily, besides being given the Apostolic Blessing more than once. That was all very consoling to her and to us.

Though she was medically fragile she was physically strong. A couple of days before her death she was in a delirious state, and when her medication wore thin, she would sometimes resist the helps given with great gusto. Praying with her or singing hymns in her ear would give her some peace and help her fall asleep. She had a major seizure two days before she died and we all gathered together thinking she was leaving us at that time. But, it wasn't God's time yet.

When the final lab results came back (only the morning of the day she died) that she had stage 4 lung cancer, the decision was made to move her from the cardiac unit into the hospice section of the hospital. The doctors didn't think she had much time left and a trip home would be difficult. We had wanted to bring her home so much, but our plans and hopes were thwarted each time. In the end, she was in a large, bright room which had space for all the community. Hospital volunteers make beautiful quilts for the patients in hospice. Sister received a lovely one with a patchwork cross in the middle. The nurses thought it was perfect for her, and we did too.

We planned to stay the night at the hospital, since we knew Sr. Mary Paul was near the end of her journey. Yet, she still seemed stable after the move and so we expected her to last into the next day. When Sr. Shirley called us late that evening of March 12th to tell us that she had passed into the arms of her Bridegroom, it was a surprise that she slipped away so easily. Srs. Mary and Marie Elizabeth went to pray at her bedside and found her looking peaceful and at rest.

Because of the lockdown being implemented two days later, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not sure if we would be able to have a funeral. Gratefully, we were able to hold her wake on March 17, which was greatly amended by the shutdown of the Churches and the order not to congregate in groups of more than ten. Friends came in in ones and twos and stayed for a short time so others could participate. Many sent their condolences by mail or email. The funeral was sparsely attended, due to the circumstances. Her spiritual director of many years was the main celebrant with two of our other chaplains attending. We had made an inspired choice to have the funeral on Wednesday and it turned out to be the best weather of the week. It was mild and sunny for mid-March.

Sister had planned her funeral several times over the years. We had enough suggestions for several funeral Masses, so we trust we did what she had in mind. In the subsequent days we received enough mail regarding her passing to constitute a small novena correspondence. She had touched the lives of so many people over the years. It was so beautiful to read of their love and appreciation for her.

We thank God that we were able to be with her throughout her last illness and also to celebrate her funeral before all those privileges were taken away. God was so merciful in His timing. It will take us some time to adjust since her passing took us by surprise. We expect her quiet presence at our community acts and have to remind ourselves that she is now present to us in a different way, but not beyond our love and the hope that she will pray for us and still be caring for us especially in these unprecedented times.

Carmel of the Assumption
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