

Sister Catherine Marie of the Eucharist, O.C.D.
(Catherine Anne Dowd)
1919-2005
Year of the Eucharist

"I was made for the honor and glory of God" were words Sister Catherine Marie spoke several times in the remaining weeks after her 86th birthday on June 10th until her death on June 29, 2005. She had lived her baptismal commitment as a child of God in a spirit of gratitude which remained true to the end in self-giving and praise of God's goodness. "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being bless His Holy Name!" These words, Sister Catherine Marie loved to sing and she chose these words of praise for her obituary card.

Baptized Catherine Anne Dowd, she was the second child and only girl of John Joseph and Bridget (Moran) Dowd, Irish immigrants who lived approximately one mile from each other in Galway, Ireland but had not met each other until they were both in the United States. Catherine told us, with a smile, that when she was born her father said, "You needed a haircut". After their marriage John and Bridget made their home in Jersey City, New Jersey, where four more sons were born to them, Martin, Kevin, Michael and Francis Benedict – John, the first-born, had preceded Catherine by two years.



This close and loving family would soon experience great sorrow when Bridget, their mother, died of tuberculosis at the age of 37, having delivered her last child, Frances Benedict, only eleven weeks previously. Sr. Catherine Marie was nine years old at the time and would experience, even close to her death, how "terribly I had missed my mother".

Little Francis Benedict had been parted from his mother because of her illness. On the day of his mother's death, he stopped eating and on the day of Bridget's funeral, Francis Benedict died and was placed in the arms of his mother before the casket was closed, a memory which touched Catherine very deeply. Bridget had prayed to God, "If you are taking me, Lord, may I please have my little baby?" How mercifully God had heard her prayer! Close to Sister Catherine Marie's own death she anticipated, with joy, seeing again her mother and little brother, Francis Benedict.

After approximately two years during which relatives attempted to help in the care of the five remaining children, it was necessary to place them in an orphanage maintained by the Sisters of Charity of Covent Station while their father, John, worked to provide for their well-being. He visited them faithfully every weekend. When Catherine was fourteen years old she expressed strongly to her father that "she could do it", meaning she wanted to return with her brothers to their home and care for the household. Her father wisely refused, until Catherine had finished her high school education and was more able, at seventeen, to undertake the task. Thus in 1936, after six years of separation, the family was reunited in Jersey City, their sister, Catherine, caring for their needs.

Sr. Catherine Marie was educated by the Sisters of Charity of Covent Station to whom she remained gratefully indebted for their guidance and support of her vocation, they, expecting one day that she might join their community. Sister was able to continue her education in addition to caring for the household and completed one year at Seton Hall College and also obtained a graduate certificate from Drake Secretarial College. She taught second grade for six years at St. Joseph's School in Jersey City. All four Dowd brothers entered the Navy during World War II and returned unharmed, a gift Sister Catherine Marie prayed for earnestly. Many years later Catherine would see all of her brothers, except Martin, precede her in death. She had truly cared for them

with such love that their lives, as responsible Catholic gentlemen, reflected the beauty and goodness which love, support and bonding can reveal.

It was in 1942 when Catherine began to consider again a religious vocation, although she said she had been attracted to religious life from the beginning of her school years. "I thought it must be very nice to love God that much; I desired that love but did not feel any call – until the night of March 19, 1934 when the Lord gave me the



first light about Carmel. For three days I was on cloud nine, then back to normal." One day (she recalled it as October 20, 1942), Sr. Inez Eucharist, a Sister of Charity, asked Catherine if she was drawn to religious life and it was on this occasion when Catherine spoke of her religious vocation for the first time, a call to the Carmelite contemplative life.

Although Catherine had been in contact with several Carmels, seeking admission, for various reasons there were no openings until she visited the Carmel of Loretto in October of 1948. She related to us that after her interview, the Chapter convened to vote for her acceptance while she and her father went for a walk. Looking back at the monastery from the road she says, "all of a sudden I had one of the greatest temptations – if not the greatest - of my life! It was upsetting. I decided that if it lasted until the following day I'd truthfully tell the Prioress. However, the Prioress saw the change in me but said nothing of it to me, only that I had been accepted. Peace returned after she told me and I did accept God's call." Catherine had been told she could enter Carmel on the feast of All Saints of the Carmelite Order, November 14th, but the Novice Mistress confused the dates and told her to come on the 15th, the day commemorating all departed souls of the Carmelite Order. Thus, she was nicknamed "the poor soul" for many years. Those who knew her in the latter years of her life could attest that Sr. Catherine Marie was one of the truly "poor in spirit", one of the anawim of God, whose life witnessed to total dependence upon God and faithful trust in God's mercy.

While Catherine was changing her garb after she passed through the doors of the Loretto Carmel, the Prioress, Mother Mary of Jesus, was conversing with Mr. Dowd and asked him, "Well, Mr. Dowd, how do you feel about your daughter entering Carmel?" He replied earnestly, "You are taking half of my life".

Catherine was given the name, Sr. Marie of the Eucharist when she received the habit. Later, in Latrobe, she prefaced her name with Catherine and was known as Sr. Catherine Marie of the Eucharist. She once said when asked of her particular devotion, "The Eucharist is more than a devotion; this is all that really matters to me". On May 15, 1950 Sister pronounced her first Vows and three years later, her Solemn Profession took place.

In Loretto, Sister Catherine Marie was seamstress of the Nuns' habits, accomplishing this task with the minute carefulness she applied to everything she did. A lover of

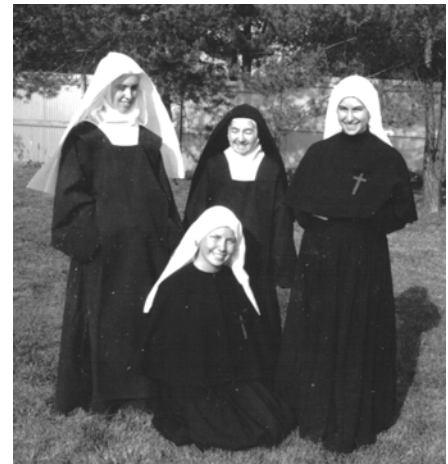


music, she had been told by friends that she was gifted with a beautiful voice and she relished with joy the opportunity to sing. Soon she became a strong voice in choral recitation and Gregorian chant. Clear and distinct, her soprano voice was the gift she made to God in praise. We delighted also in the duets she and Sr. Caroline would engage in to entertain the community on festive recreation days. Coupled

with Irish humor, their songs and skits held us laughing to tears many times. Some years later Sr. Catherine Marie became the Mistress of Novices, a task she fulfilled with loving generosity.

When the Loretto community's fourth foundation was underway at the request of Bishop William Connare, Sr. Catherine Marie was asked to be a founding member in establishing a new Carmel in the Diocese of Greensburg, PA. She and Sister Mary Paul were the first to arrive by car (her brother, John drove them) in Latrobe on May 26, 1961 to start the process for our Altar Bread business which would be our means of support. A week later the other six founding Sisters arrived. John Dowd continued his generosity to the Latrobe community when, yearly, he would come to Latrobe on his vacation and work on electrical and other repairs that needed to be done and also contributed financial support to the community. Sister Catherine Marie's faithful older brother who had stood by her side when she began caring for the household was true to her all his life and so generous to us.

In the early years of the Latrobe foundation, Sister Catherine Marie served as Sub-Prioress, Mistress of Novices and Prioress and, later, many times on the Council. She became the community treasurer and maintained this job for approximately twenty years with her careful, accurate skills in book keeping which she learned by trial and error. Those persons with whom she communicated when she became Sacristan and who knew her through correspondence found a trustworthy friend and confidante, a kindly listener and a gentle woman of prayer whose counsel and wisdom helped many people through difficult times.



Again her musical talents added a beautiful descant to the Christmas caroling the Nuns did at midnight Mass which she was able to participate in joyfully until 2004, the last year of her life when she was no longer able to sustain the singing because of shortness of breath. She was then experiencing congestive heart failure. In the early months of 2005 she contracted bronchitis and then a lung infection which left her weakened because of the excessive coughing. In February of 2005, Sister was hospitalized twice, for a

few days, to balance her potassium level and to give needed hydration, while the lung infection was being treated. Gradually she began to eat less and experienced back pain from osteoporosis. By March, she was unable to do the little jobs she had and this was a trying experience for her to let go. She would say, "I never thought it would come to this." Always hopeful, she anticipated the day when she would be stronger again in order to serve the community. A scheduled cataract surgery in May needed to be postponed first to June and then again to the end of August because Sister Catherine Marie was unable to recover sufficiently from a series of colds; her immune system was weakening more and more. The surgery was never done.

With joyful anticipation she looked to the day of her 86th birthday, June 10, which celebration was held in our recreation room, where she was wheeled in, robed in her bedclothes and accompanied by her oxygen tank, now a "constant companion" to aid her breathing. Within two weeks she had declined from being able to bathe herself, give her own medications and walk alone to needing assistance in all these areas. She would ask Sr. Mary Paul who was her care-giver, "Am I going to die soon?" to which the reply was given, "Sister, you are winding down. You are closer to heaven now." Within a week she would be asking, "When am I going to die?" Sister Mary Paul said she did not know when God would come for her but that she was in God's hands. "You only want what God wants, true?" "Yes", Sister Catherine Marie responded, "I want His will to be done." Then Sister Catherine Marie looked at a picture of the Holy Face of Jesus on the wall of her room and said, "He's a great Guy!" Sister was ready to surrender and did this from day to day; now it was her turn after she had advised many persons to peacefully "surrender to God".

Whenever the Sisters asked each day how she was feeling Sister Catherine Marie, with an infectious smile and convincing gesture of the hand, would reply strongly, "great". We heard this each day until "great" became her password and we knew how she would respond to our inquiry. We would say, "yes, we know: great!", only to receive a gracious smile from her. She tried virtuously to maintain a positive and grateful attitude, often saying she did not want to be a burden to anyone.

Ten days before her death, she received the Sacrament of Reconciliation and was anointed by her spiritual director who afterwards told two other Sisters, in the presence of Sister Catherine Marie: "I have been ordained twenty-five years and you, Sr. Catherine Marie, were present when I celebrated my first Mass here at Carmel. In all my years of priestly ministry, I have never seen anyone more ready for heaven than you are." What a tremendous consolation this was to her as she silently bowed her head. That evening she wanted to come to recreation for a while (usually she needed to retire early). She had something to say. She had previously asked Sister Barbara for permission to die. That night she asked pardon of the Sisters for any offense she may have given; she expressed her deep gratitude to us for all we had done for her; she told us of her love for us. It was a tender moment for all of us and now she was ready to die.

The next Saturday, Sister Catherine Marie was unable to be with us for Night Prayer and the singing of Solemn Salve which was always so special to her. She expressed her concern that she may have missed her last time to sing the Salve. When we told her

that we would sing the Solemn Salve again on Monday evening when she was feeling somewhat better, she was delighted. We wheeled her into the Chapel and she, with candle in hand, sang with as much voice as she could give, her last tribute to Our Blessed Mother. Her face beamed with a gentle smile.



Sr. Marie Elizabeth who covered the night hours in Sr. Catherine Marie's room would tell us that Catherine coughed most of the night. Neither one of them was getting much sleep. We decided to contact hospice. Sr. Catherine Marie was very weak now and eating minimal amounts of food, mostly chicken or vegetable broth. She knew the end was near. On Tuesday morning she received the Eucharist and was anointed by Benedictine Fr. Fred Byrne, who had a personal connection to Sister since she attended his ordination at St. Vincent Archabbey, her first experience of an ordination to the priesthood. That afternoon the hospice nurse requested morphine which we were to give her that night to aid her sleeping and relieve the discomfort. Knowing that she might not be so alert once the morphine was given, we gathered around Sister's bed after Evening Prayer to recite the prayers for the dying, each of the nuns taking a part to pray. Catherine Marie knew we were present. Although, at the time, we expected that she might linger a few more days, this was to be the last time we as a community gathered at her bedside before she died. That evening we gave her a small dose of morphine at approximately 7:00 p.m. and another dose later. She was able to sleep throughout the night. When Sr. Mary Paul entered the room at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday morning, she asked Sr. Marie Elizabeth how Catherine had been through the night. "She has slept all night" was the reply. "I think we should turn her over because she has been in that position all night." So they turned her position and when they had finished, Sr. Marie Elizabeth said: she has stopped breathing. The other Sisters were called and we prayed around her bedside, surrounding our dear one on her journey home into the arms of God and her beloved heavenly and earthly mothers. It was the feast of Ss. Peter and Paul.

Family members, many friends and our Carmelite Friars, Brs. Bryan Paquette and Michael Stoegbauer from Washington joined us for the funeral Mass with several of the Benedictine monks concelebrating. Sr. Robin from the Baltimore Carmel, who was one of Sr. Catherine Marie's novices in Loretto, attended also. Many of those who participated in the funeral Mass related to us how Sr. Catherine Marie had assisted them over the years and how important she was in their lives. As we walked to the cemetery site on our grounds where three of our Sisters are buried, we remembered that we had just left this site ten weeks ago when our Sr. Monica was laid to rest. Each of us placed a rose upon the coffin after the prayers and we departed. Another Life, of fullness of joy and glory, is now theirs where we hope one day to join them.

Many memories which we recall are a source of joy to us amidst our grieving. In her humble, faithful little ways, she is truly, and continues to be to us, Sister Catherine Marie, the "great".