

# BALTIMORE CARMEL News



SPRING 2021

**Sister Veronica**  
of the Holy Face, OCD  
Susan Lavon Emmick



born September 26, 1929  
entered Baltimore Carmel November 14, 1947  
professed vows June 12, 1949  
returned to God October 11, 2020

Let the heavens rejoice,  
let the earth be glad;  
let the sea resound,  
and all that is in it.  
Let the fields be jubilant,  
and everything in them;  
let all the trees of the forest  
sing for joy.

Psalm 96



## *Reflections for Sister Veronica, October 17, 2020*



What does one possibly say to encompass with any kind of adequacy the mystery and the wonder, the ecstasy and the agony, the ordinariness and the specialness, the evolutions and transformations of a whole, almost century long life? It is as if a stage is set up and Veronica is the main character and her life plays out before us, scene after scene. Some of us witnessed the opening acts, some entered during the third act, others joined the play after the intermission, and some arrived only for the final acts. We all feel we know and love a Veronica.

Susan Lavon Emmick was born and grew up on a large, prosperous family farm in Hancock County, Kentucky with one older dearly loved sister, Betty, and two younger brothers, John and Stephen. "Sue" never forgot the very local cultural world that surrounded her childhood. The Burkes and the Emmicks, her father's wild turkeys, pigs, quail, pecan trees, big breakfasts, friend chicken, bacon. (How she loved bacon!) She attended a one room schoolhouse, Beech Grove, for grades 1-3, Lewisport Consolidated School for grades 5-8 and the Ursuline Sisters' Mount Saint Joseph Academy in Maple Mount, Kentucky as a boarder for high school. She could not wait to return "home" to Kentucky to visit when the changes ushered in by Vatican II opened the way. Family sorrows, family sickness and deaths were the one thing that made her openly tremble with tears. The deaths of her younger brothers broke her tender heart and her dearly beloved father's inability to accept her vocation to Carmel was a deep wound she carried for many years.

Sue entered Baltimore Carmel November 14, 1947. When asked why and how she chose Baltimore Carmel, she said she consulted a list of monasteries and Baltimore was first on the list. So she wrote there and was accepted, sight unseen. There was no live-in in those days to sample the life, no hedging your bets, no comparing of communities. Try to imagine the courage, conviction, and determination it took for her at eighteen in 1947 to board a train alone for Baltimore to enter the Carmelite Monastery on Caroline and Biddle Streets. The large high-walled, stark monastery built in 1873 stood right on the street corner on less than an acre of land, not unlike the monasteries of St. Teresa in Spain, but a far cry from the green farm fields of Kentucky and the beauty of the Ohio River they overlooked. She made her Solemn Profession as Sister Veronica of the Holy Face on June 12, 1952. Those were the pre-Vatican II days that rooted us deeply in the rich tradition of Carmel, but it was also a time of outdated customs that took their toll on Veronica's health and spirit.

When the community moved to the spacious property on Dulaney Valley Road in Towson in 1961, Veronica was reborn. She found a new freedom in caring for the beautiful monastery grounds. Long before we were stressing how trees, as they grow, help stop climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the air, storing carbon in the trees and soil, and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere, Veronica was nurturing trees. Over the years she planted the "meadow" with specimen trees that remain now as monuments to her love of nature and the extravagant variety of its beauty. How fitting she should die in autumn when the leaves are falling from those very trees. The words of the poet, May Sarton, sound like Veronica:

All the way ... I have been in a state of great praise for trees - wondering ... how I could ever live without them, thinking of their comfort, how they nourish and sustain us with their beauty and coolness, their steadfastness, the fact that they outlive those who plant them. And I understood why old people plant trees. (From *May Sarton's Well*, 68)

I think of the trees and how simply they let go, let fall the riches of a season, how without grief (it seems) they can let go and go deep into their roots for renewal and sleep. (66)





Veronica was happiest when driving the John Deere tractor around the property, cutting the grass with both carefree abandon and careful precision. No one touched her tractor without careful training. Once

when she let one of the youthful Jesuits drive it, she was horrified as he recklessly tore around the grounds like a teenager. Her generosity never extended so far again, even for the Jesuits. When she celebrated her Golden Jubilee, she asked for a six month sabbatical during which she would be completely free to tend the grounds, nothing else. She was a meticulous groundskeeper skilled in the art of conservation and eager to pass on her ecological wisdom to the younger sisters who care for the property today.

Even though her passion was the fostering of outdoor beauty, she contributed to the everyday life of the community in many ways. She was an avid, sensate cleaner and suffered immensely when other sisters could not keep up to her standards. One term as prioress was enough to convince her that kind of leadership was not for her. She served a stint as bookkeeper, and in her elder years related with compassion and tenderness to the people who came to the monastery door or called on the phone seeking the



encouragement of the nuns' prayer or joining us in the chapel for Sunday liturgy. So many who have contacted us since her death remember her gracious, sweet, wistful smile and gentle welcome; her genuine interest in their lives. "She was such a sweetheart," one said. "A great nun," another.



Veronica was a hermit by nature. I think she attended two meetings outside the monastery in her entire life. Little moved her from her structured life or planned schedule. The deepest supports of her spirituality and her contemplative life were her books and her music. She read voraciously and delighted in and was comforted by the beauty of opera and classical music. The great gifts to her elder years were her iPad and Kindle! There was something "secular" about Veronica, and her reading extended far beyond theological and spiritual writings. Some people keep a record of their life in journals; she kept a list of every book she ever read. Privileged was the person invited into her world of books. (They were few and far between.) A threefold passion suffused Veronica's contemplative life: her reading, her opera, her trees, and through these, in these, she experienced God. This atmosphere of beauty and tranquility is what she poured into the energy fields that surround us.



### *Reflection by Sr. Judy Long*

Once upon a time someone asked Veronica, "If you had not been a nun, what would you have been?" She replied, "an Opera Prompter." Now an opera prompter is an extremely important part of the performance. Their seat is a little box close to the stage where no one sees them except the singers. MET Opera Archives Director Peter Clark describes it this way, "The prompter has to be a highly trained musician. She can hear if they make a wrong entrance, she'll motion to them and ask them to hold up a second, wait a minute, you have two more measures before you come in now. That's why the singers love the prompter because they put them back on track." Eric Owens, an operatic bass states, "It's great to get a set of ears that you trust and then to have that person be there on stage with you, it's like she's lifting me up."

When I read of the scope of the work and how intricate the prompter is to the performance, I immediately knew Veronica would have been an exceptional one.

But it occurred to me that in a different way she fulfilled that dream. She was a "life prompter." She shared with us her wisdom, her common sense, her love of nature, and her love of the Carmelite life.

When I first entered, I worked outside with her on the trail that surrounds our property. I certainly was not as used to working outside as she was, and I would come in drenched and she would be without a drop of perspiration. One day we were working outside and having difficulty with a task. She knew we needed another way to approach it. She said, "If you have the right tool, you can do anything." That is not only true concerning yard work, but in life. If one way does not work, look for another. Determined determination, as St. Teresa says.

I came to the table one day and declared I have nothing to say, Veronica replied, "Then say nothing." She did not speak just to hear herself talk. She knew the value of silence. When she spoke, her words were carefully considered and not just a cacophony of sounds.

And yet, Veronica was a great lover of words. As we all know, she was an avid reader and kept a list of all the books she had read throughout her life in Carmel. Literature, History and so much more fed her inquisitive mind.

Once we were driving to an appointment and I was upset about something. I shared it with her, to which she replied, "Don't take someone else's anxieties on yourself." I am still working on that one.

For me she was all that and more. I cannot begin to tell you how much Veronica meant to me and how much I depended on her. I had the privilege to care for her long before she moved to the infirmary and then while she was

there. I so loved her, our talks, our time together, and just being with her. She was as strong as the trees she loved. She bent with the wind but did not break. She knew the change of seasons and understood the value of each one.

So you see, Veronica achieved her dream of being a prompter, except she did it on the stage of life. My dear Veronica, that role you embodied so exceptionally has come to an end but your lessons of gentleness, generosity, graciousness, wisdom, and common sense live on. You will continue to lift me up every day. I miss you, I love you and will always be grateful for the lessons you taught me. If I need a little prompting as my journey of life goes on, I will be looking for your cue.

