

Remembering Mary Fran (Kathleen Thomas) Gilleran, IHM
April 23, 1944-July 9, 2011



Welcome.

We are gathered here tonight from many points of the earth. We are gathered by Mary Fran – whom some knew as Mary, others as Mary Fran, others as Sister, or Aunt Mary. We are gathered by her, as was her gift.

We, like she, had hoped it would be different, that her cancer would remain in remission. We had hoped it would be simpler. Yet, when the cancer returned, she chose with freedom and surrender, to go forth, to enter the next phase of her life, another life-changing adventure into the unknown, and with JOY. We witnessed her living with one foot in the

everyday and one foot in the afterlife. She came and went from that Center with God on a daily basis for these past months. As late as July Fourth, in the middle of the night, she said, “I’m having wonderful dreams...wonderful images of God. God is a garden.”

Mary related to us all, and led the IHM community from within, from her center where she knew she was ONE with all.

She lived each moment very consciously and over and over again said, “It is so beautiful. Marge, it is just so beautiful.” When I asked her what, what was so beautiful, she said, “the joy, the generosity, the love. The love that surrounds us. God is so present.” Mary Fran’s legacy is amazing love and how to live joyfully in the Mystery of God’s love.

Mary chose the songs and readings for the services for these two days. They will tell a significant part of her story.

Opening Song: So Great A Love

Reading: Emmaus Story Luke 24: 13 -24

Remembering

Reflection of Mary Fran: The People Gathered

Community Prayer: Prayer for the New Story

Concluding Song: God Beyond All Names

REMEMBERING

Two of Mary Fran's many gifts were to gather people together for significant sharing, as she does tonight, and her gift as a storyteller. There are thousands of Mary Fran stories to be told: funny stories and transforming stories of how she was/is a part of our life stories. We will take time now to share a few of those stories from me, Mary Kay Butler, her niece, and Tom Brennan, a long-time friend.

And then, after our time in Chapel, you are invited downstairs to the Community Room where, if you wish, we can continue to share Mary Fran stories and support each other.

Not only was Mary Fran a great storyteller, her family are great storytellers. Mary Fran and I lived together these past five-plus years. Often when Mary Fran was on the phone with her family or friends, I would hear her laughing, or crying, over some story they were telling one other. I loved listening to her stories, even one side of them and even if they were embellished. She listened for the story in each conversation and she spoke and taught in stories. I encouraged her to write some of these stories down. But alas, Mary Fran was not a writer.

However, much of the following story she told about herself.

Mary Frances Gilleran was born the sixth of seven children to Kathleen Frances Brunett and George Thomas Gilleran. She chose Sister Kathleen Thomas as her religious name.

The age span in the family meant she was an aunt very young and so nieces and nephews were ones she babysat and then became friends with, as they all grew up together.

Mary Fran attended St. Matthew School in Detroit, Dominican High in Detroit, and briefly St. Mary's Notre Dame. Later she received degrees from Marygrove College, University of Detroit and Antioch College.

It was while she attended college at St Mary's Notre Dame that the Second Vatican Council opened and the Vietnam War was raging. Her younger brother, Tom, left for Vietnam when she entered the IHM community in 1963. The excitement of the church was opening up with fresh vitality and energy, and the pain and confusion of the war greatly influenced her desire to be with people who shared common values.

Mary's call and commitment to service of others began in her family. She said of them, they were and are a community of faithful and thoughtful critical believers.

Mary Fran said of herself, “I am so deeply an IHM. I was born with blue blood.” Her father and mother both had sisters in the IHM community and a great aunt as well as IHM cousins. In addition, Fr. John Nolan is an IHM associate. She also had priest uncles and a cousin who is an Adrian Dominican sister, as well as one cousin who is a retired bishop. They were always peers within the family who provided good conversations and support.

Sister Ann Thomas Gilleran, IHM, her father’s sister; Sister Helen McEwen, IHM, a great aunt on the Gilleran side; Sister Francis Joseph Plunkett, IHM, a cousin on the Gilleran side; Sister Clare Estelle Gilleran, IHM, a cousin on her father’s side; Sister Regina Mercedes Brunett, IHM, her mother’s sister; Sister Rita Brunett, OP, Adrian, a cousin on her Mother’s side; Father Alex Brunett, an uncle on her mother’s side; as well as recently retired Bishop Alex Brunett, a cousin living in Washington State.

Catholic faith and critical thinking were part of her home life. Her parents were faithful people who also held their own opinions and view points on how to be faithful. They respected their own judgment and integrity on all matters. Mary cherished this about them and learned to do the same.

Because the Catholic schools in the Detroit Archdiocese were in financial strain, she was involved in two school closings in her first four years of teaching: St. Frederick, Pontiac, (where we first became good friends) and St. Columban in Birmingham. It was the end of the 1960s. In Detroit, the racial, economic and church upheavals were enormous.

When the school closed at St. Columban’s, the sisters stayed and developed a religious education program which involved educating the parents on the Vatican II theology, which the children had been learning. That led Mary Fran to an interest in adult work and into pastoral ministry at St. Columban.

It was while she was at St Columban’s that her father died and Father Jack Trese became a life-long part of the Gilleran clan. He was friend, teacher and counselor to all the generations in her family. With his gifts and humor they often felt like they had created a vibrant, honest, and inclusive communal church. They learned to be serious together, to tell the truth about hard things, to be free to be different and to articulate a God who was inclusive and who cared. They often prayed and celebrated significant family events that they created together for different occasions. That deepened the family ties across the generations as they welcomed new members and families to join. The Gilleran clan grew with weddings and births and extended families united. Their traditional Catholic family changed over the years and the intention to welcome and expand was a commitment that they embraced wholeheartedly.

After St. Columban's, Mary completed two clinical pastoral education units in different settings and then found a year-long CPE program in Windsor, Canada, at the Glenwood United Church.

She was invited to speak to many other church groups while there. It was during this time that she learned to speak about her faith in terms that united Christians instead of divided them. She was welcomed by the United Church to consider joining it. And though she didn't formally join it, she later was named co-pastor and ministered there for six years. This call was supported both by IHM leadership and the local Catholic bishop in Canada. That interfaith and intercultural experience was transforming for her. She stated that while there, she had to decide over and over again if she wanted to remain a Catholic and how to be the kind of Catholic who would be welcoming and inclusive.

She chose from that very attractive place at Glenwood not to be ordained, to remain a Catholic and to remain an IHM. She made her final vows as an IHM Sister while she was still a part of the Glenwood community.

After her ministry in Glenwood, she ministered at the IHM Visitation House of Prayer. She began adult ministry forming Women Sources and Resources with other kindred spirits and ministered at Madonna Village. She facilitated the IHM Third Age Ministry. She became provincial for the IHM Northeast Province for six years.

Following provincial leadership, she earned a master's degree in conflict resolution. She co-facilitated many nonprofit and for-profit groups, committees, pastoral teams and religious congregations across the United States for the next 12 years. During that time she also co-facilitated the IHM Master Long Range Planning research and discernment group of IHMs regarding our own land, properties and spirituality, which resulted in the renovation of the Motherhouse to be more sustainable and to reflect our spirituality and our commitment to the Earth.

In 2006, she became president of the IHM congregation here in Monroe. She acknowledged at the IHM Chapter of Elections that the images, language and framework of some of her own faith tradition no longer nurtured or supported what she was experiencing in life and in God. She challenged us to see our personal life story, the life story of the IHM community, the Jesus story and the Catholic church story within the larger inclusive framework of the Universe story. She recognized there is a larger context for the spiritual questions of all people by placing them in the 14 billion-year story of the unfolding Universe in the mystery of God. Mary Fran, your witness to us was loving, trusting, generous, expansive and joyful. You made each choice in life from a place of inner call and with courage.

Throughout her 67 years, Mary's faith journey involved a great deal of change and pain in articulating what she believed. Though she needed fewer and fewer words for her inner

journey, she said, “I have always believed. How could I not?” Her life was filled throughout with faith, generosity, joy, honesty and integrity in love. She lived in gratitude for the many advantages, opportunities, affirmations, fun and for the breath of her life. Mary Fran was highly intuitive, always one step ahead seeing what was right and needed.

Mary lived her Catholic faith journey within the Mystery of God. God was the ground of her being, and so she was not afraid to live into the deeper questions, the soul questions. She told me that “living from within, in the mystery of God’s love, is the whole point of our life. Nothing else will sustain us. It is the whole message of my life.”

Mary Fran, we are proud to call you our president, our sister, sister-in-law, aunt, cousin, mentor, colleague, patient and friend. Death ends your life with us here, though not our relationship with you. We are forever connected with you and with all the people who gather here these days because of you.

July 10, 2011
Marge Polys, IHM