



Remembering Sister Mary McClellan

Oct. 14, 1921 - March 22, 2009

Once upon a time ...

A fabulous reading teacher's story must begin like this.

Once upon a time, a baby girl was born in Detroit, Mich. The date was Oct. 14, 1921. Her parents were Elizabeth Bennett McClellan and Ives Paris McClellan. She was named Mary Elizabeth McClellan. Baptism at St. Vincent Church in Detroit "consecrated Mary Elizabeth's life with all its potential of goodness, perfecting what otherwise would remain undeveloped, isolated and frustrated." (Caroll Stuhlmüller, CP)

Mary was preceded in birth by her brother Ives. Vincent was the second son, born later. The McClellan children attended St. Vincent School. The family was a happy one. During school months they lived in Detroit and during the summer they traveled to Vineyard Lake near the Irish Hills where they enjoyed nature to the fullest.

After Mary's graduation from St. Vincent's in 1941 she spent two years at Marygrove College. When she left the college she entered the IHM congregation and as a novice received the name Sister Mary Ives.

Mary was an excellent teacher, beginning her teaching career in Marine City, Mich., in 1944, and teaching thereafter at St. Thomas, Ann Arbor; St. John, Benton Harbor; St. Hugo of the Hills, Bloomfield Hills; and St. Francis de Sales, Detroit. In 1963 she became the principal of St. Columban's in Birmingham. Bloomfield Hills was her next administrative position, and then Sacred Heart in Dearborn.

After leaving Sacred Heart, Mary lived one of her dreams. She wrote to Janet Ryan, her mission counselor, "Teaching piano is my hobby. Studies have shown that an initial dream can be very successful for an individual. Many years ago I dreamed of having my own music studio with a huge grand piano. My first year (away from administration) teaching piano at Queen of Martyrs was a good and productive year for me."

Every day she traveled from Riverview to St. Hugo's to teach reading in the morning and then to Queen of Martyrs in Beverly Hills to teach piano. After a few years of making this long trip, we were happy when she moved back with us to St. Hugo Convent. She taught at St. Hugo's until 2007 when she returned to the Motherhouse to retire. Mary taught school for 32 years and was a principal for 31 years. She was "in school" for a total of 63 years.

"In school" doesn't connote that Mary was concerned about each student, establishing a curriculum to meet the needs of the gifted, the very bright, the average, and students with special needs. She believed that every child can learn; it is up to the teacher to discover how.

"In school" doesn't describe Mary's tireless work to establish a strong academic program to which she added drama, instrumental music, a strong art program and a computer education program.

"In school" doesn't reveal Mary's studying and reading about current trends in education and the incorporation of these trends while wisely still maintaining traditional approaches if such were best for the students.

The words excellent teacher, administrator and friend, must be understood with the described nuances.

As I read the materials I had on Mary, they seemed to group themselves into two categories. Let's listen to how she saw herself:

My Life Journey has been one of finding God, of having a relationship with God that will continue through eternity.

She then tells about herself before Vatican II and then after Vatican II.

My world prior to Vatican II was smaller, surer, contemplative, rule-obeying, spiritual, with a concern for a personal relationship with God. I related to God through my family, friends and religious sisters, through liturgy, Eucharist, and prayer, through meditation, spiritual reading and Scripture.

In the years after Vatican II my world became larger, with greater personal responsibility, a need to arrive at my own convictions, a need to make personal commitments.

Now, I relate to God in music, nature and prayer, in caring, reconciliation and friends, in ritual, liturgy and ministry, in community, recreation and personal responsibility. I am more aware of the world, with special care for the hungry and support of justice. Feminism, ecology and acceptance of all people and their beliefs are also important to me.

She ends her Page of Life by asking, "Who am I?" and by answering: "I am a caring, responsible, positive and gifted person. I am a real friend, a teacher, a leader and a modern religious. I help to make God present in God's world. I am one of God's Marys, true daughter of Elizabeth Bennett McClellan and Ives Paris McClellan, the two people who have most influenced my life."

The second category, "How others see Sister Mary McClellan" can be partially answered by examining a few writings from people close to her. Father John Trese, the pastor at St. Columban's, in writing to Sister Marian Farrell, Mary's provincial in

1969, wrote, "Sister Mary Ives has been completely open to all the activities and the happenings within the parish. She has been a one-person social service agency for any number of families who have come to her for help in matters of financial stress, family upheaval, children problems, mental illness and bereavement. I have seen her go without hesitation or without concern for her own convenience or schedule to family after family who turned to her for calmness, guidance and hope." Father continues, "Sister has been an integral and vital part of our parish council since its beginning. She brings as much concern and thought to matters of liturgy, finances and communication as she does to educational affairs. Her practical wisdom and her Christian optimism have helped make our parish council one of the foremost councils in the archdiocese."

Father concludes: "When Sister Mary Ives participates in activities on a Vicariate level, she has the full confidence and support of the parish leadership. We know that her judgment will always be broad enough to encompass the entire parish and not be limited to a narrow concern of her own areas of responsibility."

Father Anthony Tocco, pastor of St. Hugo of the Hills parish, when Sister Mary was leaving to become principal at Sacred Heart, Dearborn, in 1986 wrote:

Sister Mary is leaving St. Hugo's. An epic in her time, it will be difficult to realize that she is no longer with us. Her first five inspirational years were as teacher, the last 17 as principal--22 years of her life spent in molding the future of the many young lives entrusted to her care. A brilliant educator, her students and St. Hugo's were first on her priorities.

One more clipping from the St. Hugo *Herald*:

"Those of you who know her for the past 22 years know first-hand about her personal talent for teaching, administration and ministering to the Gospel of Jesus in the school environment. I think I speak for the parish when I say that her presence will be felt in the halls, walls and classrooms of this institution for years to come."

Fr. Clement J. Esper wrote of Mary from his apartment at Norman Towers:

"During all the time I have known Sister Mary, I have found her to be a true religious, an excellent educator, administrator and friend."

Once upon a time, after a beautiful life, one of God's Marys returned to God and now lives happily ever after with God.

Sister Margaret Van Velzen
Sister Mary Ellen Keyes
24 March 2009