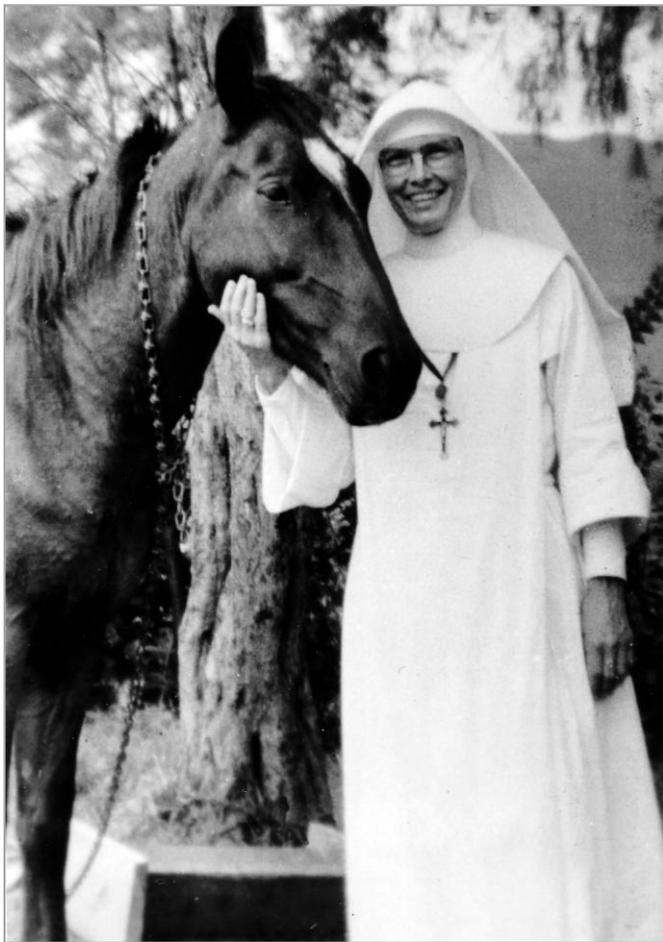


# Sr Margaret's Stories



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Cover's picture: Sr Margaret and Dimbi

# INTRODUCTION

## by Sharon Riley

*I have been graced with many blessings in my life. Treasured friendships have enriched my life immeasurably. Friendship cannot only brighten one's path with joyful companionship, but can also light the way with wisdom and by example. I have shared such a rich friendship with a nun by the name of Sister Margaret Simon.*

*I like to think about the way I came to know her. The trail of little events and moments shows me how the Holy Spirit sometimes works, in marvelous and mysterious ways. There seems to be no limit to its amazing abundance.*

*The story of my friendship with Sister Margaret begins in the middle part of my life. For many years, I was a member of the "Sharing Committee" at my parish, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. We meet monthly with a mission of trying to reach out in friendship and in service to our brothers and sisters at our four "sharing parishes". They are located in areas of Chicago far less materially affluent than our own suburban village of Glenview.*

*One of our members, Irene Kim, whom I did not know well at the time, handed out Bible bookmarks at one of our Sharing Committee meetings, explaining that they were gifts to us by a nun at the Convent of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, located right here in Glenview. I had never heard of that Order, and had never noticed the small sign on a main thoroughfare in town identifying the Convent. This special place was tucked back off one of our busiest streets, next to hidden woods.*

*After our Sharing Meeting that night, I casually mentioned to Irene that it might be nice if I thanked the nun who gave us these bookmarks. Without missing a beat, Irene agreed that yes it would be nice, and she promptly provided a name and address for Sister Carissima Zelenek, a retired missionary sister at the Convent. Since that time, Irene has come to be a good friend, who has often gently guided me along with her wisdom and faith.*

*I made a note on my "to do" list to write to Sister Carissima, but somehow I didn't get around to doing so for about three months. Finally, tired of seeing this note being transferred from one list to the*

*next, I wrote a short thank you to Sister. By return mail, I received a long response in the spidery hand of a very old woman.*

*The letter told a unique story of a girl who had left her home and her country of Slovakia at age 13 to become a nun, with dreams of becoming a missionary in China. Instead, after three years of training and of instruction in English at the Convent in Hungary, the Order sent the young nun to be a teacher in Milwaukee where her proficiency in both English and the Slovak languages would be helpful to the large community of Hungarian immigrants. From there she led a life of service and leadership at various schools around the country, including teaching in a segregated black school in the South, during the years of civil rights upheaval.*

*The letter was fascinating, and I had to respond. But as I recall, I waited several weeks until writing again. Again I got a response in the return mail. I became her pen-pal, even though I lived very close by. For many months, though, I did not visit her. My husband Jim's wonderful Grandmother was 99 years old and was receiving care from hospice for nine months during that time. I felt that I needed to be assisting Jim's family, who was lovingly dedicated to helping Grandmother Anne. But one day, Irene Kim told me that on a recent visit to see Sister Carissima, she found her looking at a picture of my three boys that I had sent her at Christmas time. Shortly after that Sister became ill and had to go to the hospital. The time had come for a visit.*

*I remember that visit well. Sister Carissima was pale and white, her long hair tucked into a white knit cap, and her fragile skin thin and drawn. I had brought her a small yellow mum plant. She started to cry because in her illness she was quite emotional. She said thank you, and said that she loved flowers. But please, next time, she continued, would I take the money and send it to care for the orphans living in one of the harshest of places on earth, in Siberia! Later I was to learn that her Father had spent 7 years there as a prisoner of war in WWI, and that she had developed a deep concern for the poor people there, especially the children.*

*Further, when I expressed sympathy for the pain she had in her illness, she told me that it was nothing compared to the suffering of Jesus for all of us. She said that she was thankful for it, because it reminded her of His sacrifice. The things she expressed while severely ill in that hospital bed were powerful thoughts that made me know that I had much to learn, and a long way to go in my own personal*

*spiritual growth. I was drawn to this intense lady, and I would come to know her well, as I visited with her over several years after she recovered and returned to the Convent.*

*It was during one of those visits that I met Sister Margaret Simon. She was working at the time. I believe that she was about 87 years old. Apparently, not too many years ago, she had retired from her "later in life" job as a driver of sisters to and from appointments and on various errands. But her eyesight in recent years was seriously failing. Her work now consisted of doing various crafts "by touch" and with only the blurriest of vision to guide her, and visiting with the less able sisters in the Convent. It was her ministry to provide comfort, cheer and a listening ear. She has always been a deeply gifted listener.*

*Sister Margaret was visiting Sister Carissima one day when I arrived for my regular weekly visit with my friend. Once again, a chance encounter would lead me to a treasured friend. Sister Margaret had given Sister Carissima a small gift - a special card that she had made for her. I was intrigued; the card was exquisite. Sister Margaret had pressed and dried some delicate blossoms, whose names I would soon learn were buttercups and verbena. They were displayed in a graceful arrangement, on a background of delicate pastels. I asked Sister Margaret if she felt it was possible to learn this beautiful craft. She assured me that I could learn, and she offered to teach me some day.*

*I remember well that lesson in note-card making. At the time, Sister Margaret was living in a house on the Convent grounds with a few other sisters, and she clearly found it to be a glorious place. Outside her door, she had a bed of various flowers to use in her craft, and a few feet away were the Buttercups she loved, thriving on the edge of the lovely woods. When I arrived Sister had already set up all her materials and was ready to be my teacher. For three hours, she patiently and pain-stakingly instructed me on her efficient methods to create a variety of cards, and she watched while I made my first cards. After some 25 years of card-making, her techniques were tried and true. She told me the story of her first card, which she made for her mother, to show her the Dogwood that bloomed outside her home when she was serving as a sister in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.*

*Now I had a new friend in Sister Margaret, but for several years after our "workshop," I continued to focus my visits on Sister Carissima, whose health was steadily declining. Unlike Sister*

*Margaret, Sister Carissima resided in the infirmary in the main building of the Convent, for she was no longer able to walk, and required assistance in all the tasks of daily living. While I was at the Convent, I would sometimes stop by to say hello to Sister Margaret too, but generally she was busy with her own visits, and she wanted me to concentrate on Sister Carissima, who was much less well.*

*On January 30, 2003, Sister Carissima Zelenek died. I was very sad to say goodbye. I loved her, and had learned a great deal from her zealous faith and sharp intellect. From then on, I continued my visits to the Convent, which I had come to deeply enjoy. Now, I visited with Sister Margaret every few weeks.*

*My purpose here is not to compare my experiences visiting with these two extraordinary women. They were very different people, yet both intensely spiritual and holy. Suffice it to say that visiting the two was like taking a trip to the majestic mountains, versus the glorious sea. Both experiences may provide breath-taking beauty and boundless joy. Always, after leaving the Convent for these visits, I felt more peaceful than when I came. Some days I felt inspired and energized as well. But the sense of peace, and my joyful heart at time well spent, were constant.*

*We have talked about many things over the years. I have found Sister Margaret to be a wonderful conversationalist, the consummate listener, with never a trace of judgment of the speaker. On most of our visits we would just talk, about a variety of issues. I would talk about my own life's events, including my volunteer work, and my life as a mom. We would talk about my boys, politics, current events, and church teachings regarding the role of women, birth control and gay rights. Always, Sister Margaret's deep spirituality and her unwavering faith formed the basis for her opinions and her advice. I never recorded any of these topics we discussed, which so enriched my life and expanded my thinking.*

*I was also enriched by another special gift Sister Margaret shared with me. That was her gift as a story-teller. Always matter-of-fact, always in vivid detail, she would respond to my questions about her past. Sometimes I would find myself simply in the mood for one of her stories. She would tell them and I would take notes, in the hope of preserving them for her family's continued enlightenment and enjoyment over the years. Her experiences were not only entertaining, but also quite unique. They gave me a precious glimpse into a way of life gone by. Sister Margaret grew up poor on a rural Wisconsin farm,*

*and lived a life of small adventures as a missionary nun. What follows here are some of the stories she told, in response to my specific questions, about her past. At the end are a few short reflections on the spiritual gifts she has given to me over the course of our friendship. I could never do justice, however, to the depth of what I have learned by her example and her life.*

***Sharon Riley***



Sister Margaret's  
Stories,  
in Her Words

## GROWING UP YEARS

I was born at home on the farm on County Line Road in Wisconsin, on December 27, 1914. I had a sister four years older than I and a brother two years older. My older sister was always a lady and was very proper, while I was a tomboy. While my sister was sitting and stitching, I was outside and playing. At age 8, each child got an assignment of his or her first cow to milk, two times a day. We had to get up at 5-6 A.M. every day for this chore. I really didn't mind. I preferred to feed the chickens or do anything in the barn rather than dust the parlor and wash dishes. Mother said I was hopeless. I developed strong hands forever. Our family had so little money, but we thought in looking at the city kids that their lives must be awfully dull.

Life was hard but as a child I thought it was great. When I was a young girl of 7, I remember thinking how OLD Mother was. At the time, she was only 28. We had no electricity and no running water, but our wash was white; Mother boiled it in a big pot on the wood-burning stove. Mother sewed all our clothes too, and she always had stockings to darn.

Mother would read the Bible and mission stories, with all of us children gathered around her on the floor. I remember that when I was 7 or 8, Mother showed us a picture of a Sister in a mission in Africa, playing on the playground with the little black children. I remember thinking at the time that that was what I wanted to do - to become a missionary sister.

Mother read us stories from a Bible that was unique. It was about 12 inches by 10 inches, and seemed very thick. Interestingly, it used pictures to depict many of the nouns, such as picturing the "snake," "bird", or "child" instead of using the words. Mother was very loving in her stories about God; she taught us that God will watch and see everything. She said that He loves us and wants us to do good. She never talked about a "fire and brimstone" type of God, but rather a loving God.

My mother's father was a Mormon, and mother was too before she married. My father was Catholic and he said he couldn't marry

my mother, because she wasn't Catholic. Mother told father, however, that she could change for him. Fortunately, when my Mother discussed converting with her own father, he said that it was fine to do, but just to be true to the faith that she chooses.

My mother was very efficient and hard-working. She doctored all of her children. Once, my barefoot brother, who was about 12 years old at the time, was running through the meadow and stepped on a board with a rusty nail sticking up through it. It almost went completely through the thickest part of his foot. Mother pulled it out and soaked his foot in Lysol and hot water, then poured iodine over it and wrapped it. He never did get an infection. Doctor visits in those days were house calls, and at \$5 a visit, were very expensive. Mother's home remedies were much cheaper; a bottle of Lysol went a long way.

Once, though, my other brother, who was about 16 years old, was very ill with pneumonia. The Doctor came several times a day, sometimes at six in the morning. At one point, the Doctor told Father to get a priest to anoint the sick. Right after the priest came, he turned the corner and got well. That brother lived to the age of 85 and had 8 children. The Doctor was very kind and easy-going about payment. He gave us plenty of time to pay, and sometimes took his payment in honey from Father's beehives.

All the children in the family had work to do. We had two acres of green and yellow beans. The children were in charge of weeding and picking which were daily chores in growing season. My father contracted with a local factory for the beans. Father would buy a gallon of ice cream for the family after he sold \$100 worth of beans. That was a LOT of beans in those days. I remember him bringing home the ice cream home from town in a metal pail. This was a HUGE treat after all that hard work. As I reflect on this great reward, a gallon was not much for all of us. I believe that there were 10 of us at the time. But we were grateful. We did not get ice cream very often. Of course, we only had ice boxes that kept things cool. We didn't have freezers to keep it frozen anyway.

During the depression, my father owed about \$200 in back taxes on the farm. At that time, he had 11 kids and one on the way. During the depression, father lost the farm to JP Morgan. So then he rented a small one acre farm nearby. At age 15, I wanted to go to high school in the worst way, but I had to work to help the family. In my

first job, I worked in a hospital. Next, I worked full-time babysitting a family for \$3 a week, plus room and board.

Around this time, I remember how strong my commitment was to wanting to be a nun. It seemed like I had never had any doubts since I was about 8 years old. I remember one young man who simply could not understand and refused to accept my calling. His name was Hank. He was not what you would call a handsome guy, but even if he had been, he was not for me.

I was about 17 and my sister was 4 years older when Hank was introduced to me by my future brother-in-law. Hank lived near where I was working as a nanny and a housekeeper for a family with two young children, living on Eagle Lake, a summer resort. This family had a beautiful home. In those days, babysitting meant keeping house too.

This family had an interesting neighbor, whose name was Al Capone. He lived in one of the small cottages by the Lake - incognito. He did not want to have a phone in his cottage, so he would come to the family's home to use theirs. I was not allowed to tell anyone who he was, and that the family allowed him this favor. Al Capone was notorious at the time, but he was anonymous there at Eagle Lake. He would shoot a person as easily as he could shoot a rabbit. I knew that he was not the family's enemy, so I felt safe. He was a big guy, though.

Back to Hank. Hank wanted to date me, but I didn't want to date. So he said, "Let me take you to Mass, so you don't have to walk there." I said OK, but I told him in no uncertain terms that I did NOT want to be his girlfriend; I want to be a nun. He didn't believe me and kept trying to win me over.

When I turned 18, I got a "serious" babysitting job full time for one family. I was also very sick around that time. I contracted a severe ear infection and was in the hospital for two weeks. I got better, but I lost my hearing in my left ear. Later, I moved to New York City with my employer family as a babysitter and housekeeper. I told Hank NOT to write. He still wrote, though, and sent me gifts, such as a pink bathrobe and a vanity set. I never said thank you because I told him I was not interested in him, because I was going to be a nun.

I earned \$6 a week at that job, and sent every bit home, except one time, when I bought an ice cream cone for a nickel. I felt a little bit guilty, but not too much, for keeping that nickel for myself.

In New York I was terribly homesick for mother and father, and for my young sisters ages ten, eight, five and three, and for my one and one-half year old brother. But I survived, and the experience showed me that I could manage and live without all of them. After ten months in New York City, I returned home to my family's one-acre farm. My sister and my new brother-in-law picked me up at the train station. To my amazement and disgust, there was Hank in the back seat! I remember that day in July of 1934, keeping Hank off me was like pushing away ants - he was all over me, trying to put his arm around me, etc. He kept coming around, although I never gave him any hope.

Mother and father knew that I wanted to be a nun since I was a little girl, but that summer I told Father that I was truly serious. I wanted to go to the convent. Father said that he had nothing against it, but he asked if I could please wait until he had a job. So I got a job in Racine as a housekeeper again, for \$6 a week; I felt rich.

On October 3, 1934, my father got a job in the iron works in Racine. He stopped in to see me on his way to work that day, and told me that I was free to go. Oh, I was so happy, not just for me, but also for father. That night, I used a pencil, because I did not have a pen, and wrote a letter to the Mother Superior in Techny, Illinois. I told her that I wanted to become a missionary nun and to join her order. I did not have an address; I simply addressed it to her as "The Rev. Mother General, at St. Mary's Mission House, in Techny, Illinois." She wrote back to me within a week, telling me what I needed to do. We corresponded back and forth after that. My time had finally come.

I had promised my sister that I would help her with her first baby, due to come on December 1<sup>st</sup>. I prayed that the baby would be on time and it was. (That baby is a Great Grandpa now. I never forget his birthday because it was four weeks before I entered the Convent.) My family had a going away party for me with family and friends on Christmas night in 1934. Hank was there, but FINALLY, he realized that it was hopeless. I was never going to be his girlfriend.

I remember there being so much smoke at that party that I got very hoarse. Those days many people smoked. I also vividly remember a huge ice storm that night. Everything was coated with an inch of solid ice, every tree branch, every phone pole, and every fence post. I was supposed to leave for Techny the next day, but with all the ice, we couldn't go. We left on the following day instead, which was December 27, 1934, my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I remember being very excited. It was what God wanted for me, and what I wanted too, with all my heart. My parents came along with me. Driving was difficult because they did not clear the roads back then.

I remember clearly what happened when I got to Techny. I hugged and kissed my mother and my father. My father was skeptical about my choice, and I believe that it was hard for them to leave me there that day. But when I went into the door of the Convent, and the door shut behind me, I knew that this was where I belonged. There was a long flight of stairs ahead of me, with a Sister at the top. She welcomed me warmly, and I was home. After six weeks, my family was allowed to visit me, and my Father could see that I was happy. After that, he knew that I had made the right choice, and he and my mother were proud of me.

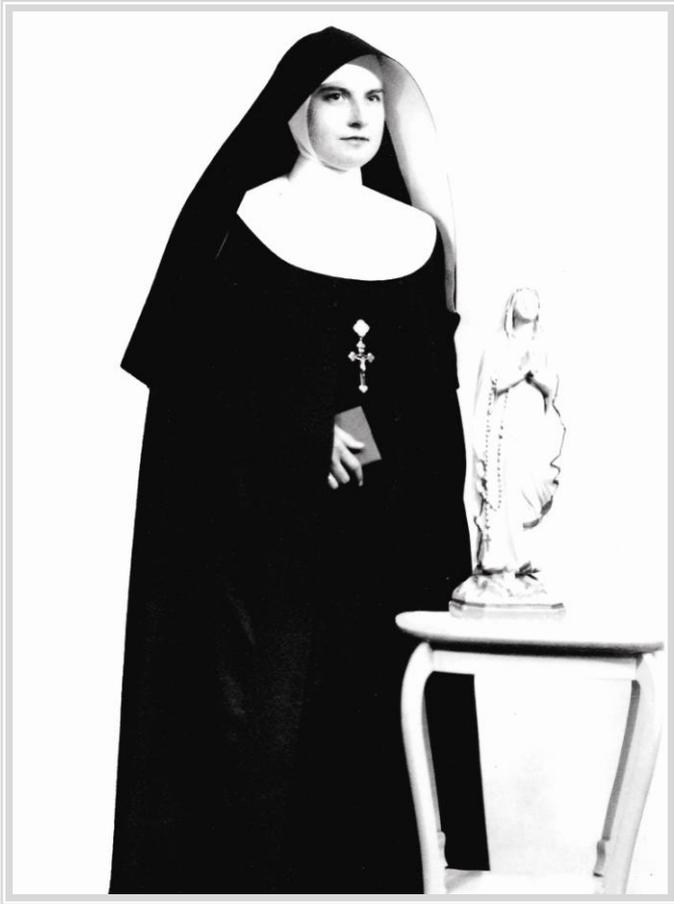
I really had no idea of what Convent life would be like. Money was scarce at that time, and our lives reflected the times. Our food was very simple and I remember eating a lot of oatmeal. Later, though, the sisters did start getting sick, and they had to start serving fruit, and sugar for energy. I wore a black dress and a black habit. My new life felt like such an adventure, even though we were extremely poor at the time. My new life was fine with me.

Mother Superior had a silver anniversary when I arrived. She was very nice. We all had a lot of silent time for prayer. Also, we prayed aloud together every day. But generally we lived our lives in silence, unless it was recreation time, when we were allowed to talk among ourselves. Sometimes, we were allowed to read at the dinner table. On special occasions, we spoke. I had six months of training, and then I was allowed to enter the Novitiate.

In the Novitiate, I had two years of training. The training was extremely enriching and focused intensely on spiritual training, education about the Constitution of the Order, and other aspects of religious life. The training, however, was directed more toward a cloistered, contemplative life than outreach and missionary work. This type of training changed, however, with Vatican II. Then, training became much more focused on connecting with others and dealing with the outside world.

My second year of training at Techny included training for three months at St. Anne's Nursing Home a mile down the street. I helped to take care of the patients and even was allowed to give

medications. I took temporary vows every year for three years, and then I made a vow that would apply for the next three years. Finally, after those 6 years had passed, I made my perpetual vows.



## **NEW GUINEA**

Since the late 1800's, Catholic missionaries were in New Guinea. During WWII, however, the Japanese occupied the island and killed about 80 of the Catholic brothers, fathers and sisters there. The rest escaped to Australia. In 1944, Eisenhower sent word to the Society of the Divine Word authorities that he wanted 20 young priests in Australia to return to New Guinea to replace those that had been lost in the war, as soon as the Japanese moved on.

In 1945, I was assigned a new ministry. I was to become a missionary nun in New Guinea. First, however, I was to go to Australia, because there was no housing available yet in New Guinea. It had all been destroyed during the war. I remember arriving in the harbor in Australia that Fall. Our Fall is their Spring, and I knew that. But still I felt amazed arriving in the harbor of this new land, seeing a huge tree covered with gorgeous lavender blossoms. In Australia, while I was waiting for my more permanent assignment, I taught several different subjects, especially religion, to Australian children.

In the fall of 1946, I was sent, along with 17 other sisters who had been there before, to serve the people of New Guinea. I remember that long and very choppy boat trip from Australia to New Guinea. I was so sea sick I was desperate. I told the sisters I just had to do something. A nurse traveling on the boat had the cure. It was a HUGE stein of ice cold beer, more than a pint. She instructed me to drink it FAST! I listened and I drank it. Remarkably, I was fine with no other ill effects. Before that I could not stand the taste of beer, but now, I can tolerate it.

I spent a couple of years on the coast in New Guinea and then was transferred to a mountain area. The climate on the coast was a tropical one.

## STORY OF THE SHEEP

One of the priests that we worked with in the mountains decided to purchase sheep from Australia for the farmers to raise to provide food. One time a year, they would teach the farmers how to shear all the sheep. The first year, they produced five huge bags of wool. Living on a farm, I had learned to be a resourceful person, and our Pastor noticed this I guess. Sometimes he acted like I could do anything. Anyway, he gave those five large bags of wool to me. He wanted me to teach the girls how to spin the wool and how to knit. His mother apparently knew how to do this, so he assumed that every woman knew. But I had no idea how to spin or to knit - no clue.

I took a deep breath. I looked at those sacks and thought, "Here I go." First I washed some of the contents. I found out quickly that I could not spin the clean wool; it was too dry. Then I tried to work with it with all the oil and dirt. I found that the "dirty, oily version" was much easier to spin.

Next, I trimmed the branches off a bamboo stick and attached a fruit to the bottom of the sharp stick. I took the wool and pulled out some fibers to spin by turning the stick like a top. This way, we produced a short piece of yarn which we wound around the top of the stick. We repeated the process until we had a large ball of the fibers transformed into yarn that still was quite dirty and oily. It was painstaking work, but the farmers were patient. Everything that they did took time, from planting their seeds, to harvesting their crops, to washing their clothes and cooking their food. This activity was fun and interesting to them because it was new and different.

Back to the yarn. Next, we turned a chair upside down to serve as a frame for our skeins. After wrapping the long grimy threads around the legs of the chair, we tied short pieces of yarn in four places on the skein to prevent tangling when we washed it. Finally, when we were all done, each of the girls had a wonderful, clean, cream-colored ball of yarn. They had a lot of pride in that yarn.



I had learned how to knit from another sister, and so I taught the girls to knit themselves sleeveless vests.



They never knew that I felt like I didn't know anything and that so much of what I did was experimenting and improvising. At first the sweaters were solid colors, but then we used dyes to make stripes and they thought that was fun. Some of the only photographs that I have kept over the years are of those beautiful girls making their first homemade sleeveless sweaters. I must admit that I have always liked a challenge. Later, when the children grew up, they used commercial yarn to make beautiful things.

# THE STORY OF THE HORSES

I smile when I think of my life in New Guinea. My thoughts drift back to a time vivid in my memory and joyful in my heart. Every day was a day filled with great purpose, and more than a little adventure for a farm girl from rural Wisconsin. My purpose was to lovingly teach the boys and girls, who longed for education in all subjects. The work was immensely rewarding. The boys and girls seemed to long for religious education most of all.

My ministry in this humble and good country was always clear to me. I was so grateful that I could serve the Lord in this place. I am 90 years old as I tell this story, and I must say that I have been blessed with a very joy-filled life. I think a life of service to the Lord tends to be that way. But these years I spent as a missionary sister in New Guinea stand out as particularly happy.

As I have mentioned, this little country had been largely ruined in WWII. It was very primitive in many respects, but fortunately, I have always loved a challenge, and meeting the little, and sometimes big challenges of everyday life made life fun and always interesting.

One of the biggest challenges that we faced in the mountains of New Guinea was how to educate the people who were longing to be taught. Before the War, the pre-war missionaries and the New Guineans had together established schools. The War, sadly, had ravaged both their land and their schools. In the aftermath of all the destruction the people deeply desired to establish schools once again. Accordingly, we missionaries, the people and the New Guinea government devised a system to restore education to this mountainous region.

I remember a moment, early in our planning for the new school system. Father asked me if I could ride a horse. I said sure. I had ridden our work horse on the farm, without a saddle of course. But I believed that if you love a horse, you can ride it. I did love horses. A brand new system of schools was about to be born, and the horse would be a key part of it.

First, in the way of background, I will describe briefly our organization in those days. Our station in the mountains was staffed by several priests and three sisters. One of the sisters was a cook, in charge of performing domestic chores and teaching these skills to the girls. The other sister was a teacher at our station's local school. I was to be in charge of outreach.

We devised a system for bringing school to the people who lived some distance away. We had a total of eleven outlying "stations" that we wanted to serve. In each area, we recruited dedicated persons who wanted to teach. These people had very little formal education themselves; most had not completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade because as I said, the War had ruined the schools. Consequently, we needed to teach the teachers.

Every week I prepared a syllabus for each of the courses, reading, math, writing and religion. In addition, I would also prepare all the work sheets and written materials. God had blessed me; I had found an old typewriter in an army surplus store when I was working on the coast. It was in sad shape. The tropical coastal climate had not been kind to its machinery; the keys were all very stiff and took forever to bounce back after you pressed them. It was a dirty and greasy machine. But I cleaned it up, and the mountain climate was kinder. I had it working quite well except for the stubborn "e" that would always stick and try my patience.

In addition, I copied everything using a primitive mimeograph machine that worked with a stencil and some dark ink. It was a messy piece of equipment, but it worked fairly well. I guess in the 50's no one anywhere had much better.

The program was very simple. The teachers came to see me at the main station every Saturday, and I would give them their materials and discuss with them the lessons for the coming week. I taught them as a teacher would, with a slate and chalk up in front of the classroom. Then during the following weeks, I would ride my horse to each outpost to help them in any way I could. In this way, I would visit each of the stations at least one time per month. A boy would accompany me on my journey by walking along with me. I would always welcome his company on the long rides. Some of the outposts were as far away as about fourteen miles.

In addition to my travels to the outpost stations, once a month I would travel to a government run teacher training school. Importantly,

in New Guinea the leaders focused their training on religion; they wanted their children to have it as a basis for their lives. In that way, their philosophy was very different from that of our government here.

When I began my new ministry, the priest gave me an old stallion with a big belly that my legs had to stretch to hold on to. I was eager to start my travels with my new companion. I did have one problem, though. The law at that time required that I wear a gray blue habit down to my ankles, along with a long white veil. The skirt posed a problem as I rode my horse. I solved this little problem with a needle and thread and some snaps. First, I cut the skirt most of the way up the front panel. Then I stitched the snaps on both sides of the slit. When I was off my horse, the skirt was snapped securely closed in the front. I always had slacks on under my skirt whenever I was going to ride.

When I got on my horse, I simply unsnapped the skirt, and rode comfortably in my slacks. When I got off my horse, I just snapped up my skirt and I was all ready to go.

I always wore my veil, but I decided that on very hot days, I also needed a proper hat to wear over my veil. The only hat I owned had about a four to five inch brim. I found a long straw braid somewhere, and I decided to put it to good use. I stitched it around and around to the brim of my hat, until I had a brim that was two and one-half to three feet from end to end. When I wore that hat, it was like being in the shade.

So I began my work on this big old horse and my new riding clothes. After I returned from a visit, I would tie the horse to a tree, and one of the men would return the old fellow to the pasture. The horse would rest there until the man retrieved him for my next ride. The pasture was surrounded by a picket fence made of tree branches, and the pickets had sharp points at the top.

One day, after I had been riding him for about a year, I noticed that there were some mares grazing in the neighboring field. That day, my good old horse decided to jump the fence. He pierced his belly on one of the fence posts and had to be put down. I was very sad. He had been my friend and my companion. But that was reality and I had to face it.

Next, a horse named Maxi came into my life and brought with him a bit too much excitement. Perhaps his tragic young life had scarred him in some way. His mother had died when he was only

eight days old. He was raised by humans, who coaxed him to lap milk from a bucket. The method was tried and true and I knew it well from my years on the farm. A person would immerse his hand in a bucket of milk, and extend his finger slightly out of the liquid. When the colt began to suck on that finger, he would discover that he could also accomplish his objective by lapping up milk from the bucket.

In any event, young Maxi's life had been spared. Without the comfort of his mama, however, I think he developed his highly anxious and nervous tendencies. One of the priests broke him in, but that priest was used to horses and he had a very strong way with them.

One day one of the teachers from an outpost missed attending his Saturday group teachers' lesson. He, therefore, had not picked up his syllabus, lesson materials, and, importantly, his newspaper. That newspaper was of particular interest to my friends, not for the news, but for its utility. The people would use the newspaper to roll their cigarettes, which they enjoyed greatly. In those days smoking was a pleasure for many people, not known to be fraught with such severe hazards to peoples' health.

I packed up all these items for him in my knapsack, and off I went on my journey. When I arrived, I was eager to make my deliveries. While still mounted on Maxi, I opened my knapsack and with a great crinkling noise, pulled out that newspaper to hand over. That crinkling noise absolutely panicked my horse! To the horror of my friend, and the boy who had accompanied me on my trip, my big strong horse began bucking back and forth, trying to remove from his back whatever had produced such a terrifying sound. I think I was too busy responding to the emergency to feel the terror of my plight. I just remember thinking that somehow, I had to get off. I took my feet out of the stirrups and let go. I flew forward, over the horse's head, and landed on the back of my neck. Horses will not step on a human if they can help it, so he charged off in the opposite direction. Fortunately a jeep came along down the road. Maxi was also deathly afraid of motors so he turned around and came back. The boy was able to catch him.

Miraculously, I suffered only big bruises and a very sore shoulder. I was able to get right back on Maxi and ride home. I made the people promise never to tell anyone about the accident, and they kept their word. I did not want anything to interfere with me doing my work. Years later, I did tell Sister Superior about the accident.

I had learned a valuable lesson that served me well in my horseback riding years to come. The horse was just scared. I would have been okay if I had just gotten off the horse and handed the local teacher his newspaper in front of Maxi. The lesson was to never make strange noises on top of a horse.

Nevertheless, Maxi kept on reacting very nervously to many things on our journeys that were outside of my control. If he saw something move unexpectedly, he would stop, or jump. Another day I was coming home after a long day's trip, with about another five or ten minutes to go. I was tired and hungry, and was riding Maxi in a relaxed way. All of a sudden, Maxi jumped about six feet over to the other side of the road. I believe that he saw something move inside of a bush along the road. In any event, there I was, hanging by one foot in the stirrup, off to one side, but still hanging on for a very lopsided ride.

Then the real disaster struck. My long white veil was flapping in his face. My poor high-strung and jittery stallion was petrified of the ghost waving in his eyes. He began to buck, and once again, I knew that I had to get off this creature. I let go, and pulled in my legs beneath me as best I could so as not to be trampled by my wild steed. Unfortunately, I did not succeed, and he stepped on me quite hard. I had a hoof print on my ankle and calf.

Maxi had taken off down the road. Then all of a sudden, he stopped galloping abruptly. He looked back at me as if to say, "What are you doing back there?" The frightening ghost had disappeared and he wanted me back on his back. I walked up to him, climbed back on, and we were on our way home.

This time I had to confess. I had been hurt. My injured flesh was like ground sausage. I was so very sore. I did not receive any antibiotic shot or any attention by a doctor. I just did not ride again for a week.

Then I said to Father that if he wanted me to visit those schools, I needed a different horse. After that, he gave me a lovely horse from a priest who was leaving our station. My new horse was, thankfully, very obedient. He would go like the wind if you wanted him to, but if not, he would walk.



If I had had him all along, it would have been a picnic. That lovely horse's name was "Dimbi." He was a beauty, and never hurt me. If he saw something he would just stop, not jump or have fits. I had Dimbi as long as I needed a horse, then the lay missionary got him. I felt sad to say goodbye to him because he had become a good friend. We had traveled together for many miles over the years. Once I had Dimbi, I loved this work, traveling to the outposts and teaching the teachers.



## STORY OF THE BEES

When I was a child, my father kept bees. He boxed and waxed honey in jars. We were never allowed to play in the pear orchard because that is where they were. I learned all about them from watching Father.

In 1950, I was transferred to the mountainous area of New Guinea. I had never seen a bee in New Guinea before, but there they were in this rugged area, on the mountain flowers, wherever they could find nectar. Bees were even coming in and out of the eaves of the trade store. In fact, they had taken up residence there in a big way. They had somehow been allowed to become well-established. Their nest was the size of a 44 gallon oil drum. Interestingly, it was one huge colony only, with one queen and thousands and thousands of worker bees. Our priest supervised that store that was run by the local people and carried all sorts of imported supplies for them.

Now this priest seemed to like to put me in charge of impossible tasks. He asked me to get rid of those bees. I asked a teacher to help with the project. One day when thousands of the bees were out during the day gathering honey, we went to work. We put containers on the floor, climbed up on ladders, and chopped away at that nest with bush knives, catching honey, larva and residue, as they broke off from the rafters. We put the container pans in the oven and the honey sank. We were able to preserve 44 pounds of honey from our efforts that day. The wax rose to the top of the pans after we cooled them, and we skimmed it off and taught the teachers how to make candles too.

But that is not the end of the story. When the bees returned at the end of the day, they could not all fit into what little remained of their nest. Consequently, the bees had to produce another queen. The worker bees and the new queen moved out and settled on another tree. We sprinkled them with water and they formed a “shingle-like” structure, comprised of thousands of the swarming insects on the branch of a tree. I said to Father, “let’s try to preserve them for their honey.”

I asked a carpenter to make a special wooden box, like the one I remembered from my days on the farm. At dusk, I shook the branch that was covered with bees into this box. As long as the queen landed in the box, the rest of the workers would follow. I had only cheesecloth on to protect myself. We didn't have anything like mosquito nets, although we certainly could have used them. They simply were not available. I did have a big brimmed hat though, and while I had no proper clothing, I covered up more or less. I did get a few stings but that was ok; the stings give you a sharp pain at first, and then they sting quite a bit, but then, **you've got bees!** Sometimes you have to pay the cost of something to benefit from it.

We covered the box and moved it into a dark place. We put a small opening in the box, so the bees could come and go but not the mice. In a short time we had three hives and later on we had seven. Soon after that, I created a "super". This tool was a hand-made wooden box with slats, not like the wax type my father used to use that was perfect for the job. The super goes on the top of the hive and is used to "harvest" the honey. The bees fly through the slats and then deposit their honey in the area above. You cannot use the super to take all the honey, however; what's left in the hive provides all the bees' food to survive in the winter.

When I left New Guinea, they had seven hives. Another Sister came along who took over after me. I heard many years later that at one point they had 17 hives.

After nine years in the mountains, I was sent to Lae, on the coast, where we had a school. When I was in Lae, I was run down and contracted malaria. The doctor sent me to the mountains to rest for a few weeks.

The sisters where I would be recovering had heard about my work with bees. They said, "We're so glad you're coming. The bees are here!" Their house was built with moist wood, and when that wood had dried, it created cracks which were perfect for bees.

So when I arrived at their home in the mountains, I took the boards off and saw that the outer walls were full of bees. I had to spray them in between the walls from the outside, with poison, and that was the end of the bees. I hated to do it, but then I could not come there on vacation and tear down their house, which I would have had to do to get rid of the bees without the help of the chemicals. I replaced the walls I had removed and then the sisters had peace from the bees. That was the end of my experiences with bees.

## **THE NORTH WAGHI RIVER**

The last place where I was sent in New Guinea was on the North Waghi River, where there was a large teacher training area. Each class had a thatched structure. John Wald was the Society of the Divine Word priest in charge. Three sisters taught young high school age boys; girls weren't going so far yet. Father had a class, and each of the three sisters there had a class to teach. The students were future teachers and they were very interested in learning geography, English and other basic subjects. Up until third grade, the children used "Pigeon English" in school. While we of course encouraged proper English, we allowed the children to speak the dialect they had grown up with in their lessons. I quickly caught on to this English variation myself, and it was useful for communicating with the young ones.

But in third grade and thereafter, the children were expected to use proper English in school if possible. I taught about 30 boys in my class all the subjects, including religion. One day the government officials came to observe me teach. I remember that I was teaching about root systems and crops. I was not worried; I knew what I was teaching, but still I would have rather that the government did not come. They observed me for a day and that was that.

I taught in that environment for two years. The students lived there in thatched houses like dormitories. We all had one day a week free to garden because they had to grow much of their own food. Their main food was sweet potatoes. If they didn't have a sweet potato, they felt they didn't have a meal.

My house there was waterproof, but not bug-proof. When you went in and turned on the light cockroaches scattered, and they were BIG, about one and one-half inch long or so. We didn't have poison to use, none of that fancy stuff, and there was no keeping them out of the thatch. So I came up with an innovation; I took an empty wine bottle and then coated the inside of the neck with butter. I put it out at night, and it would be full of cockroaches which could not get out by the morning. I had to empty it right away into a campfire or put boiling water in it before they ate all the butter and escaped.

Once I found a tiny egg sac that looked like a white capsule. It had stickiness and it made me curious. I stuck it on a lid then put it in a small glass container with a net on the top. Two weeks later the container was swarming with bugs. I emptied them into a porcelain bowl and counted 24 little creatures. That's how they multiply with such abundance. I was never that smart, but I still have my good mind at 89.

I remember what it was like to cross the Waghi River when I first arrived in this part of the country. There were two ropes made from the bush suspended over the River, with planks attached to the ropes, and other ropes for handles. It was very scary to cross the river with the torrential force of a mountain stream raging below. The current was too strong to swim in, too. One of my best catechists decided to swim across one day, when it didn't look too bad, but he was never seen again. That was a very sad day for all of us. It was a river to be respected. Crossing it was just a small part of life as a missionary. Later on, a bigger bridge was installed that a horse or a motorcycle could cross.

## **THE STORY OF THE CHURCH IN THE MOUNTAINS**

Part of the mountainous section of New Guinea was called the Eastern Highlands. The old church there was built of thatch, and was in the process of being replaced by a new church made of locally hewn and dried timber. It was a wonderful new building that was meant to hold 2000. By Christmas of 1950, the new church was ready.

The Pastor asked me to find the nativity scene, which was missing. Finally, after much searching I found it in the corner of the organ loft of the new church, where someone had moved it. I had located the crib and several foot-tall statues, in various stages of disrepair. The Blessed Mother was beautifully intact, but St. Joseph's head was missing. The shepherd did not have any head either, but at least his was in the box. I knew what I had to do. I filed down St. Joseph and used plaster of paris to fasten the shepherd's head on St. Joseph. Luckily, I had oil paints with me. I patched and painted and no one knew the difference. That was one gift that God gave me. It comes slow, but it comes, the ability to solve a problem. Father wanted a very showy display for the Christmas services in our new church, so we used paper mache and paint to make a colorful background for the Blessed Family on the altar.

We never used to wear white. It just was not practical to do so living among our friends. The men used to wear long strips of fibers and roots dangling in front of them, held up by a woven belt. In the back, they wore a branch. The women and school children wore a long piece of material wrapped around them called a "lap-lap." In addition, the people used pig grease mixed with powdered paint of every color, along with soot on their skin to keep warm, to keep their skin soft, and for "decoration." "Bilas" was the term for this brilliant display. Clearly, it made no sense for us to be wearing white.

That Christmas day was special, however, and we decided to wear white. The church was built for 2000, as I said, but that day we had about 5000 attend our service. It was a big celebration, and not only the Catholics, but the non Christians were there, too. We had six priests giving out Holy Communion for 25 minutes. The people had

colored their skin in brilliant shades, as described above. They crowded around the sisters for communion that day, and when we left the church, all of us were brightly colored. There wasn't a bit of white left. It was a beautiful, joyful celebration, and I will never forget that Christmas in the mountains of New Guinea.

Our new church had dirt floors. Planks served as pews and kneelers. Sometimes a chicken or a pig would wander in. The church was primitive, but beautiful in its own way.

The people helped us to tear down the old thatch church, and planted roses where it once stood. The young children provided the fertilizer. They never wore pants, and they used that spot to fertilize the newly planted bushes. Those roses were huge, with blossoms like cabbages, colorful and glorious. They were products of the perfect climate, hot at mid-day and cooler the rest of the time, and of the perfect nourishment provided by the children.

Father had ordered new statues for the new church one Christmas that was a step up from St. Joseph who had a shepherd's head. A local artist made the cross and the corpus for the crucifix came from Germany. One day, the priest came to the convent with tears in his eyes. The corpus had broken right above the hook to hang it. Father got me some plaster of paris and I went to work.

That was a tricky job partly because the statue was so big. I had a man who was a catechist to help me. We had to install a spike into a 2x4 to mount and hold up the statue. We immersed each section in water and put the lower part on the nail to hang by the hook. Then we put plaster on the broken surface and quickly had to put the top part on to mend. It would not stick, so we had to clean it all off quickly and try again. The second time it worked. I mixed up colors of paint from the artist's paints I had brought with me years ago, and finished the repairs. Father was so happy.



## A ROMANTIC STORY

My brother Robert was two years older than I, and he was a very shy man. He did not seem like the type to have a romantic story, but he did.

Robert's first wife suffered from depression and died a tragic death at a young age in a mental hospital, when the couple's daughter Yvonne was only 5 years old. After that, Robert helped our parents move from Wisconsin to Arizona, where we thought the warm dry climate would improve their health. After he helped them to get settled, he moved with Yvonne to Oregon, where he put her in a Catholic boarding school. He took her home with him on weekends.

One weekend, Yvonne told her father that she wanted to go to a social event at her school. Robert really did not want to go because he was shy; he would have been happier staying home. He reluctantly told his persistent daughter that if she cleaned up the house, did the dishes and a few other chores, then he would go. She did it all and he had made a promise to her, so he went.

When they got there they sat at a table with another family, a young woman, Freda, and her parents. Freda was very weary of men, but still, she had enough faith to have prayed to St. Anne that very morning to send a good man her way.

The conversation at the table was a bit awkward, and Robert was relieved when a hostess invited him into the kitchen to help slice the ham. While he was gone, the conversation picked up. Freda's parents asked about Robert, because they were concerned that he may be a divorced man, which to them, was not a good sign. Yvonne told them their story, and how her father was a widow. Then she asked Freda, "How old are you, because I am wondering if you're old enough to be my Mom?" Freda was understandably taken aback at the question. However, when Robert returned to the table, the ice had been broken. Freda had warmed up, and talked a lot. Robert was very quiet, so that was fine.

After a while, she said that it was time for her to go; she had to play with her bowling league and couldn't let them down. Robert said

that he would like to take her, but he had to take Yvonne home. Freda said that it was no problem; her parents could take Yvonne home, and then he could pick her up after bowling. When Robert came to pick her up, Yvonne was sleeping soundly, so Freda's parents suggested he return for her the next morning, which is what he did. The next morning's meeting gave Robert and Freda another chance to get acquainted. After three months of dating, Freda and Robert went to a priest and said that they wanted to get married. The priest said that three months is not a long enough time to get to know each other. They responded that they were ready, and that they wanted to start a family.

They were married soon thereafter. He was 37 and she was 31. Soon after that, they had two children, and then accepted a foster child of about 13 years old from Catholic Charities, whose parents had divorced and didn't want her. Eventually, they had five girls and two boys, plus Yvonne.

And the moral of that story is "persevere in prayer."

## **ANCESTORS**

My ancestors on my Mother's side came from Denmark about 200 years ago. They first settled on a farm in Pennsylvania. Later, they moved to Northern Wisconsin. There, the family had two little girls who were very beautiful. One day when one of the girls, Mary, was a teenager, Mohawk Americans kidnapped the two girls and took them to Canada. Mary's parents and some other local people went after them to rescue them. After much searching, they found Mary who was by then pregnant by one of her Mohawk captors. She returned home, married, and gave birth to a half Mohawk child, named Mary Ann. We do not know whether she married one of her rescuers, an old friend from back home, or just who it might have been.

After Mary Ann grew up and married, she gave birth to a daughter, also named Mary, who was then  $\frac{1}{4}$  Mohawk. This Mary had a baby girl she named Bertha, who was my Mother. Bertha married my Father, Jacob, and together they had twelve children. That is how my brothers and sisters and I came to be  $\frac{1}{16}^{\text{th}}$  Mohawk.



# Reflections

by Sharon Riley

## **Thy Will Be Done**

*One of the most challenging teachings of our faith in my opinion, is to surrender your will to God, and to trust him to guide you in all you do. I remember for many years, being close to praying, "Use me Lord," but resisting, for fear of how the Lord may choose to answer my prayer.*

*Sister Margaret's entire life is a testament to the courage of surrendering to God's will in faith and in trust. I cannot imagine what it must have been like, leaving the country farm which she loved, and a loving family she adored, at the young age of 20, and losing personal control over her destiny. She had no idea what hardships life as a missionary sister would entail. Similarly, 12 years later, she could not imagine living in primitive New Guinea after years of violence and destruction there, yet she went forth with courage and hope.*

*Years later, I would witness her strong faith and trust in God again and again. I watched her response when the Convent's Mother Superior directed her transfer from the cottage that she loved, with her flower-bed, and beloved wooded wildflower patch just steps away. The time had come for her to reside in the "main building" in a lovely second floor room, where she would not be subject to the hazards of a walk, with her failing eyesight, to the main building for her meals. She accepted the directive with grace, and without complaint or grief for the loss of a way of life she clearly enjoyed and treasured. She kept making her brisk daily walks outside, and it seemed to me she had a strong case for remaining in her home, but she trusted the Lord deeply, and her life of obedience to the wisdom of the Order, in implementing His will, compelled her to make the move without a whimper or trace of regret. Instead, her response was her most frequent phrase, "Praise God." She has witnessed His goodness in every turn her life has taken.*

*Even as one by one, she has had to surrender her most treasured activities, she has kept her faith. Indeed, if it is possible, I believe her faith has grown. First, in the past six months, she put away her crochet needles. She has crocheted blankets for children as long as I have known her, transforming skeins of soft colorful donated yarns to brilliant and comforting blankets of love for needy children*

*residing in Chicago's Mercy Home for Children. She was prolific, producing as many as one blanket a month. This occupation was a source of great joy and satisfaction. She loves to be busy and this activity fulfilled her as she devoted her evenings to the peaceful craft.*

*Yet one day, she was simply done. Similarly, she just recently retired from her job of making cards. Sister had, since I've known her, made about 10 cards a night. Her card-making activities filled her spare time with joyful productivity and gifts that hundreds of people benefited from over the years. From the Sisters who always had a source for a special greeting or card, to the visitors to the Convent such as myself, who received these practical and useful selections, her cards had a purpose. In addition, the recipients had a special treasure as well. At one time, Sister "sold" them for the price of a donation to Sister Paulanne's Needy Family Fund, and her craft helped the poor. But when her failing eyesight made it too difficult for her to continue, she simply was done. She showed no trace of anguish for this loss.*

*And in an ultimate display of surrender, she recognizes her creeping blindness and profound loss of sight, yet still she proclaims, "Praise God." She points to the Sisters less fortunate than she with different crosses to bear, such as the loss of their cognitive abilities. And with a special grace that is a gift from God, she repeats, "Praise God."*

## **Consider the Lilies**

*"Consider the lilies of the field, for neither do they toil, nor do they reap. Yet Solomon in all his glories was not arrayed like one of them." Sister Margaret has lived a joy-filled life. She is a witness to the irrelevance of material possessions to a happy life. As her stories illustrate, she has felt good about her work in creating simple solutions to the problems of everyday life. She has loved her life of service to countless children and adults with whom she has shared lessons of academics, as well as of religion. In her later years, she has found joy in her chauffeuring the less able, visiting the sick, nurturing flowers, gathering blossoms, creating cards, stitching blankets, praising God, and enjoying the friendships of her fellow Sisters and others. Her life is one richly lived, although the material possessions she has "amassed" fit easily into one file-box. She has always "traveled light" in that way.*

## ***Eternal Life***

*When one hits 90, thoughts of the future inescapably lead one to thoughts of the end of life on this earth. Sister Margaret states in her matter- of- fact way that she is ready for the next life, while at the same time she is in no rush. She recognizes this earthly life for the amazing gift that it is, and relishes it. At the same time, she tells me that when her time comes, it will be wonderful, because then she will see Jesus, clearly, face to face.*

*Sister also knows, she says, that in God we live and move and breathe and have our being. She has known this truth for a long time, of course; it is fundamental to our faith. Yet recently she was spending a peaceful moment looking through the haze of her vision at some fish swimming in a simple aquarium in the Convent, when she experienced a deep sense of absolute certainty and peace, knowing that we humans are divine. God is in each of us; we are each “of God.” The divine spirit is not “out there” somewhere. Rather, He is us, and therefore, we are precious, each one of us.*

*I can only conclude through my life journey thus far, that the Holy Spirit, while mysterious in its workings, is the source of great abundance. It is the only way I can explain the gifts that poured forth from a thank you note for a book mark, and a chance encounter with the maker of a greeting card. I am grateful for the blessings that I have received by virtue of my friendships with two missionary sisters from the Convent of the Holy Spirit. Praise God.*





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