

In Memory of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher

~Excerpts from the REFLECTION of Sr. June Schlereth at the
Wake Service of Sr. Elizabeth on August 21, 2013 ~

Elizabeth Mary Kelliher was born on November 9, 1923 in Brooklyn, NY to Jeremiah Kelliher and Elizabeth (O'Flaherty). Both parents had immigrated from County Kerry, Ireland – a heritage Elizabeth was always proud to claim. Elizabeth was born premature at seven months and was so very, very tiny that she fit in the palm of her father's hand. Those of us who knew the tall straight person later in life would never have guessed she had weighed so little.

Elizabeth's mother died when she was just ten years old. This left the father with a family of four young children and times were not easy as the Great Depression with its economic collapse had affected so many lives and any savings they had. During the summer Elizabeth's father sent her to the Sisters of the Atonement Camp at Indian Lake near Graymoor. Elizabeth loved her summers there and was an expert swimmer – lessons she had learned from swimming in a dangerous quarry in Kingston. She knew that one day she would join the Sisters and become one of them. Since her sister, Sister Jerome, had been accepted into the Community, Elizabeth was allowed to come to Graymoor at an early age and join the other little Oblates there. She entered the Community as an Oblate on July 9, 1936 and as a Postulant on September 8, 1939; she received the name, *Sister John Marie*. She was Professed on June 5, 1941 and made her final vows on August 24, 1946.

Her first mission assignment was to St. Patrick's Hogansburg in Northern New York in 1941 and she was stationed there sixteen years. She saw so many of the youth grow up around her and she herself was not older than most of them. She was very outgoing, loved people and was energized by them. Her stories at table might take you down many a labyrinth with new entrances and intriguing details till the point was reached, if you didn't get lost on the way.

She had known our Founder, Father Paul and always carried a great love and devotion to him, Mother Foundress and the Community. Her love for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was very profound and no matter what sacrifices were entailed, she made every effort to assist at daily liturgy. She gave beautiful example of her fidelity to Morning Prayer. There she received her inspiration and strength. In Edmonton, the early evening would find her in chapel, her chair pulled up in front of the Blessed Sacrament and deep in prayer.

Elizabeth held the conviction that each person is special and unique and made to the image and likeness of God and is to be respected. A sacred scripture that motivated her life is Micah 6:8: "Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God." When we would complain about some one or something, she would say, "Don't sweat the small stuff."

At St. Patrick's, Hogansburg, Elizabeth was responsible for the choir and played the organ. Our pastor, Msgr. Funcke had been in Rome.... He knew good music and Elizabeth's little volunteer unprofessional choir gave their best. Msgr. Funcke thought the world of Sister and by the time Sister Elizabeth (still known as Sister John Marie) left Hogansburg in 1957, she had made an indelible mark on the parish and its people with her zeal, joy, real love and caring. They were family to her and she was their beloved Sister. Msgr. Funcke hated to see her go. Her transfer was to St. Jerome's in New York City. She worked in the Day Care Center at St. Jerome's in the Bronx and in 1963 at the Cardinal Spellman Center and then at the Day Care in Lower East Side Manhattan. Sister loved her work in child care and worked tirelessly for the well being of the children.

While in New York City, Elizabeth was elected to the School Board. She became an activist for Peace and Justice.... Dorothy Day was a personal friend and someone Elizabeth loved and admired. They gave support and strength to each other. In 1998 at age seventy-five – almost seventy-six, Elizabeth was assigned to the Community's mission in Downtown East Side Vancouver, Cordova Street as Administrator. Her main role became Community Development with outside organizations. She became a voice for the poor and needy, an outspoken advocate for peace, justice and affordable housing. Elizabeth belonged to the Sisters Association of the Archdiocese of Vancouver and was president of it for six years. They addressed such issues as human trafficking, forced prostitution, environmental concerns, etc. ...



Excerpts from the Homily of Fr. Jim Gardiner, SA **from the Funeral Mass of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher**

~ AUGUST 22, 2013 ~

For some reason that still escapes me, I was unaware that Liz was as sick as she was and, when I learned just about two weeks ago that she was not only sick but close to death, part of me just did not want to believe it; *but* another part of me was struggling with a couple of questions for our Lord: “Are you *sure* you want to do this (...call Liz home)? Do you realize just how many people on the fringes of society will be bereft of one of their staunchest advocates? Do realize *what* you’re buying into – what you’re going to have to deal with for the rest of eternity? *and* ...that it’s irreversible!

In many respects, Liz was larger than life and to encounter her was not to forget her easily or very quickly. Everywhere she went, she made an impression, and 99 and 44-one hundredths percent of the time it was a favorable one. I remember a time in 1974 when a car-full of us left Graymoor very early one morning with Liz as navigator to drive to Brasher Falls for the funeral of the late Fr. Bernard Foley. Thanks to Liz’s directions, we got there in plenty of time for the Mass, went to the cemetery, came back to the parish hall for a *big* post-interment breakfast, and then – at Liz’s insistence – went to a farm in sight of Massena, where, within the hour, we were treated to a lunch that was even bigger than the breakfast we just downed. I said it was Liz’s insistence that we *went*, but that’s not exactly true. She had insisted that we accept the invitation of this farm family who were so proud that she was their friend and the catechist for their children that they just *had* to do something for her while she was in the vicinity. The other thing I still remember about that lunch is not only the amount of food consumed by our host, but also the fact that everything on that table – meat, poultry, fish, vegetables, fruit – had come to a more or less violent end at the hands of the man sitting next to me. Liz, however, was completely oblivious to all of the carnage that had only recently taken place as she asked questions about the kids, the neighbors and the town. On the ride back to Graymoor, one of us said: “that was *some* lunch,” and she used one of her favorite words to describe the whole thing: “it was *marvelous!*” She used that word a lot. Maybe we should retire it in her honor.

I had a lovely visit with Liz exactly two weeks before she died. I was warned beforehand that she’d tire after 10 minutes, but our conversation inevitably turned to justice and she was still going strong at the half-hour mark. At one point, she started to laugh and, when I inquired *what* in circumstances such as hers, could possibly be so funny, she said she was not thrilled with the prospects of being bed-ridden, so she got herself out of the bed a couple of days previously but the excursion didn’t last very long. It was the *irony* of her changed circumstances that made her laugh. “Imagine *me*,” she said, “of *all* people, not being able to stand on my own two feet!”

Liz marveled at the fact that should she live to November (*and she was very realistic about this*), she’d be ninety! She was also trying to remember a song or a hymn, and I couldn’t figure out the *why* or *wherefore* of what this was all about. I think she may have been thinking of suggesting it for her funeral Mass. With the clock ticking well past the allotted ten minutes, rather than waste any more of these precious minutes, I said, “Well, I have one you might like to consider.” “What is it?,” she asked. “It’s Billy Joel’s ‘*Only the Good Die Young*’ and she rewarded me with a trademark Kelliher belly laugh!

There’s a new book just out that’s getting a lot of attention especially with the reviewers. It’s called, *Beyond Belief* and it has the off-putting sub-title, *The Secret Lives of Women in Extreme Religions*. NO, Liz is not in it, but there’s a line in one of the essays that I think suits her to a ‘T!’ One of the contributors, describing what she calls, “the impulse that impelled me into the convent...” (p.300), identified that impulse as an, “*irresistible urge to love the whole world*” (ibid) ... doesn’t that sound like Liz?

The flags aren’t flying at half-staff at City Hall in lower Manhattan this morning, although they should be, to honor the memory of an indefatigable woman who spent her life marching, organizing, testifying, demonstrating, occasionally arguing, sheltering – *no one (and probably even Liz herself) could ever tell* who – or even how many – were living in that apartment at 300 East Fifth Street at any given time. We can probably take comfort in knowing that those walls can’t talk!

I remember one aggravated, Lower East Side pastor - actually a mutual friend - shaking his head as Liz and company were leaving some demonstration saying, “All that marching is going to put those girls into an early grave!” Oh, how wrong he was! And, oh, how blessed we and so many others are to have been able to call her ‘our sister!’

Reflections by Sr. Marianne Rohrer, SA

~ A memorial funeral Mass was celebrated in Vancouver, BC, Canada on Friday, August 23, 2013 for the repose of the soul of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher ~

A Memorial Mass celebrating the life of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher was held on August 23 at St. Paul's Church on Cordova Street, Vancouver, B.C.

I heard it said recently that Sr. Elizabeth was one of the only Sisters of the Atonement arrested for speaking out for the poor while she lived in NY City. She was *almost* arrested here in Vancouver during the reconstruction of the Woodward building after she heard that the number of social housing units was decreased. One of our staff members picked her up, just in time. Also Elizabeth might have been the only parishioner of St. Paul's Church whose Memorial Mass violated the Fire Code. The small church of 23 pews was filled to the maximum with people standing in the aisle, more standing out on the sidewalk. Some wheelchairs were able to come into the church; others had to stay outside.



Six priests (two Atonements, 2 representing the local Bishop, Fr. Al, our assistant, and Fr. Garry LaBoucane, our new pastor) celebrated the Mass. There were eight Sisters and many representatives from the organizations that Elizabeth was a part of, former employees, former sandwich makers, guys from "our sandwich line" and friends.

After Communion, I invited those in attendance to come forth and speak of the influence that Elizabeth had in their lives. One woman spoke of the time, while she was deep in drug activity, when she met Elizabeth and her life changed. Elizabeth gave her back the zest to live as God intended her to live. Others spoke of the strength that Elizabeth had. She used the gift of voice to speak out for any of the injustices happening in Vancouver particularly injustices that affected the poor, (e.g. the deplorable living conditions that many have to live in). Before closing, I reminded all in the Church what Elizabeth said and believed: "All are created in the image and likeness of God." Respect yourself, respect those around you and also respect Mother Earth.



Now that Elizabeth has died it is our challenge to speak out in whatever way we can, and continue to be the voice of those who are being abused, violated, and who are unable to speak for themselves.

(Above): Photo of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher taken at the Sisters' picnic at Graymoor on Memorial Day, May 27, 2013.
(Left): Memorial set-up in honor of Sr. Elizabeth Kelliher in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Canada news put out a video-clip of Sr. Elizabeth speaking about social justice and human rights. You can view this video by typing the following link into the Address line of your Internet browser:
<http://vimeo.com/72678202>