

# In Memory of Sr. Mary Ellen LaFave

~Wake Service Reflection by Sr. Margaret Sikora ~

Wake Service of January 4, 2015



Good evening. As we gather to celebrate the life of Sr. Mary Ellen LaFave, I find myself at a loss. We know she was born Alice Margaret LaFave on December 12, 1916 to Agnes (O'Connor) and Jasper LaFave in Watertown, NY. Sister is predeceased by her brother, Francis LaFave, and her sister, Sr. Marcia LaFave, who was also a Franciscan Sister of the Atonement. Sister is survived by numerous loving and caring nieces and nephews who visited her often at Graymoor.

On September 7, 1933, Mary Ellen came to Graymoor, professing her first vows in 1935, and her final vows in August, 1941. As an Atonement missionary, Sister served in catechetical and pastoral ministries in Ticonderoga, Schenectady, Hogansburg, Ogdensburg, Mechanicville, Corinth, Crown Point and St. Cecilia's in New York, in Williamstown and Camden, New Jersey, and in North Conway, New Hampshire, before returning to Graymoor in 1999.



Everyone knew Sister Marcia, her sister and looked up to this renowned catechist in Ogdensburg Diocese; later, she was the beloved choir director at Graymoor, always on the cutting edge of whatever she was involved with, be it liturgy or religious education. But Mary Ellen? Quiet, reserved - an ordinary Sister, but truly a treasure to live with.

The first words that came to mind as I contemplated Mary Ellen were the words of the hymn she loved - *Gentle Woman, Quiet Light*. That best epitomizes this woman we were privileged to call our Sister. She was always gentle, always bright-eyed with a warm smile and she could lighten the room by her presence.



I got to really know Mary Ellen when we lived together in Camden, NJ. She, the gentle, sensitive, caring woman, who seemed to be dropped into a hardscrabble city, the poorest in the United States. A city of blaring fire trucks, police sirens, gun shots, murder, prostitution, drugs and misery. (We lived next to a drug dealer, and on the other side, a house of prostitution. She, like all of us, regularly awakened at night with the knocking of a "John" who had the wrong house!)

Mary Ellen came to this city having ministered most of her religious life in rural areas where life was more stable and predictable; where people were respectful of each other and their neighbor's property, to one where muggings and break-ins were a fact of life. She came to a place where she would no longer be instructing first communion classes, but to help in a large day care center, where she served as receptionist/secretary to a population of single parents trying to gain an education or eke out an existence for themselves and their child or children on low income wages of \$2.25 an hour. The Center she came to served 99 black Baptist children; one Caucasian. To say it was a shock is to put it mildly. At first, she seemed sad, as she wondered what she had done wrong to have drawn such a ministry. However, this sadness was not for long.



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Above: Sr. Mary Ellen on her 98th birthday December 12, 2014 ... with friends, who are also Associates, Arnold & Jan Patrignani, along with Sr. Mary Kathleen & Sr. Paul Marie.



Above: Sr. Mary Ellen & Sr. Eileen



But did I say Mary Ellen was a lady? A kind lady. The epitome of good manners. A proud lady. She was always impeccably dressed, her hair fixed just so - never one hair out of place. (I could imagine her telling the funeral director, "That's not the way I like my hair fixed.")\* Even to her last days, she was always happiest when her hair had been 'set' and she was looking her best in what she wore. She set an example of 'class' whether in habit or suit. Her gentleness rubbed off on the often 'rough-edged' parents. She was an exemplar to parents, grandparents and children. It was here a hug, there a hug, or a kind word or bit of advice on child rearing. And this gentleness and 'class' rubbed off, too, on those of us who were privileged to be her co-workers, even the men among us.

One incident stands out among others for me. It was my mother's birthday, and I had boxed the night gown I had purchased for her, and put it in a brown paper bag. Mary Ellen saw me, and said, "You're not going to give it to your Mother like that! Give it to me." She wrapped the box in beautiful paper, and decorated it with a ribbon. It truly was a work of art. When I gave it to my mother, who was used to my hastily boxed gifts, said, "Who wrapped this?" I replied, "Sr. Mary Ellen." My mother said, "Then don't ever let her leave Camden." That day, I learned a very important lesson: the value of a beautiful presentation of a small gift to an aging person that one aging Religious taught me. I had never before realized how thoughtless, unloving and unappreciative I had been by just putting my mother's gift box in a brown paper bag!

As Mary Ellen continued to age here at Graymoor, a short visit or a few brief words in passing became more important to her. If I passed by her door without pausing, there was always the flashing smile, the blown kiss. When I stopped to visit, often the visit consisted in just sitting together in silence, or the invitation to join in a decade of the rosary, or to just hold her outstretched hand. A communication deeper than words can say.

As I bid farewell to my friend, Mary Ellen, there are only thoughts of gratitude for this gentle woman who taught me so much; whose presence was a quiet light for all of us. Now, Mary Ellen, with Mother Lurana, you can echo these words you recited at your Profession of Vows: "Behold, that which I longed for, I now see, that which I desired, I now hold. I am united in heaven with Him, whom I have loved with my whole heart while on earth." Rest in peace, Gentle Woman, Mary Ellen.

~ Reflection by Sr. Margaret Sikora, SA