



A Woman of Providence...

...sifts experience looking for hints of Holy Mystery's plan in all circumstances.

One Sister's story, in her own words, from her own heart

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Margaret McCleary, SP

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Sisters of Saint Joseph educated me. In the 1940s and 50s as a student in Catholic schools, discussing and praying for vocations seemed to be part of the religious curriculum. In those days, not like today, Sisters invited youngsters, and that's what we were, to consider a religious vocation. The discussions, the prayer and my contact with Sisters influenced me in my youth.

My family was not overly religious, by the standards of that time, but they were church-going people. They were the same as my school chums' families. In those days the families came together for Mass—the children's Mass was at 8 a.m. on Sunday at Sacred Heart Church in Springfield.

Describing atmosphere

There was confession every week, First Friday Devotions, the Saint Francis Xavier Novena in the spring, and daily Mass during Lent, visiting all the churches on Holy Thursday. Attending the triduum at the Cathedral was the highlight of Holy Week. In those day, too, the Diocese of Springfield broadcasted the Rosary nightly at 7 p.m., and parishioners from different parishes were invited to say it. In my home on Mayfair Avenue, the rosary was on every night. I didn't have to say it, but it was understood that during that time quiet in the house was expected. My grandmother who lived with us, once told me, "Peggy, I say the rosary for you every day." As a child, I'm sure that didn't mean much to me. However, on some level it did because I never forgot what she said. Through these experiences seeds were planted in my heart.

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In the 1950s, kids could work at 14. I, along with lots of my friends, was employed by the Sisters of Providence at Mercy Hospital for \$.65 an hour. From 1953 until January 1957, I worked with one of the best, brightest and holiest Sisters of Providence that ever crossed the threshold of this wonderful Community: Sister Mary Evangelist McNamara.

At the time, Sister Evangelist was in her 50s. By profession she was a registered nurse and a therapeutic dietitian.

When I worked in the diet kitchen, as it was called in those days, there were a dozen or so teenagers working under Sister Mary Evangelist. She had a gift for working with kids; kids who thought they knew it all. She was very strict with us and, at the same time, cared about us and we knew it.

Recalling special spirit

What I remember most about Sister Evangelist was the Providential spirit of compassion, reverence and concern for the homeless of the city. This Sister of Providence, every day of the year, fed the men of the street who came from the North End of Springfield down the back ramp at the old Mercy Hospital to receive a nourishing meal at tables set for them. These were the days before soup kitchens.

Sister Mary Evangelist called these homeless men “Saint Josephs.” At age 14, I was introduced to a side of life I didn’t know existed. People hungry and dirty, with tattered clothing, some having had a bit too much to drink, others not aware of reality. They had no place

to call home, except the streets of the city. These men were received as guests at Sister Mary Evangelist’s table. This touched my heart and influenced me profoundly.

Very often one of my jobs all through high school was to help Sister set the table, and to help her serve the men the only meal of their day. In the beginning I always stood close to her and followed her moves. I remember as a teenager, thinking and feeling, “Wow, she

cares about these guys as much as she cares about us kids.” Sister Evangelist revealed to me, by her unconditional love and reverence for these men, God’s love for us. This experience is the one that started

to nurture the seeds that had been planted in my heart years before, and I started not just to think about a religious vocation, but I asked God to give me one, and to the Sisters of Providence of Holyoke. The prayer was answered, the rest is history.

Noting unique opportunity

It is interesting that 23 years later, in 1980, the Sisters of Providence allowed me to open Kate’s Kitchen to provide daily meals to a new generation of poor, many of the men, women and children of Holyoke.

Sister Mary Evangelist died at the honorable age of 99. It was a privilege for me to offer the reflection at her funeral.

Thank you, Sister Mary Evangelist, for living so fully the spirit of the Sisters of Providence of Holyoke. It made a difference in my life.

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—Sister Margaret