

Eulogy for Sr Kathleen Staunton

Kathleen grew up in a farming community in the West of Ireland. She was the third child in a family of seven, having three brothers and three sisters. No doubt her early days on the farm awakened in her a love for nature, for the outdoors and for gardening. Up to a few months ago she would don her wellies, gardening gloves and hat and with spade and wheelbarrow start her daily war on the weeds. As she tipped her hat to the residents of the home, she communed with nature accompanied by Missy the convent cat.

Kathleen often recalled that her earliest creative play was teaching, her first pupil being her younger brother and nearest sibling, Noel. As a teenager Kathleen decided she wanted to be a teaching sister in a religious order. When her older sister Mary said she could not leave the countryside and the beautiful trees, Kathleen responded: "I could, surely there are beautiful trees in other parts of the world." Inspired by a Sister of Mercy, Sr Margaret Mary Kelly, who regularly visited her family in the village, and our mother's cousin Sr Ita Columba Donnelly, our parents eventually allowed her to join the Sisters of Mercy in Tilbury, England. She later wrote: "I missed each member of my family very much, and I know they missed me. This initial sacrifice has been the basis of the on-going offering of my life to the Lord." Her first visit home, she often recalled, was one of sheer joy with her parents and family.

Kathleen enjoyed her school days at an all age school in Laurencetown. Mr Cogavin, "The Master", was her hero. He read the Irish Independent and Irish Press each day to the senior classes and explained the happenings of World War II. Her secondary education was with the Sisters of Mercy in Gravesend, travelling on the daily ferry with her pal Marie Finnane, who became her "Anam Cara" and is here today, Sr Brendan Mary. Kathleen trained as a teacher in Digby Stewart College, a course she hugely enjoyed. Her first teaching job was in St Mary's Tilbury, then some years in St. Joseph's, Stanford-le Hope, next on to St Edwards Upton Park as headteacher and finally she completed the circle back in St. Mary's Tilbury as headteacher. One highlight in her teaching career was her time in St Edwards, Upton Park, next door to West Ham United's Football Stadium. In fact, when West Ham won the FA cup, she was so excited we thought she had become their manager!

She loved the club and the club loved her, giving her free tickets for every match! In fact, it was St Edward's School and Fr Hopkins, her Chair of Governors, a staunch Roscommon man, God rest him, who gave Kathleen her first ticket to visit brother Noel and his family in Australia. How she treasured that visit and subsequent visits to Noel, Kath and their family! Pride and joy sums up her feelings for nieces and nephews in Australia, England, USA and Ireland and we know they are with us in spirit today.

When the Institute was formed she certainly enjoyed the additional freedom and opportunities offered. She loved style so shopping was always a thrill: her top shops were Boundary Mills and Heart Foundation, especially the former as it had the best labels always in good condition.

On retirement she completed a year of Spirituality in Berkley, San Francisco. With her usual zest for life, travel and spirit of adventure she discovered new horizons like the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas and other major attractions in the USA and Canada. Strong willed and determined, she approached tasks with a will to succeed, focusing largely on the ultimate goal. As she herself said, "the best was yet to come". Her passion in life was to pass on the good news of the Gospel, so imagine her joy when she was accepted to join 12 parish clergy based in London, to

give missions to schools and parishes throughout England. One of her priest colleagues recalls her delight when she was given a small sitting room with an “en-suite” bedroom in Mission House. She had never had such luxurious apartments in all her religious life, and to be invited to this “new den” for a comfortable cup of tea became a special treat. One of her jobs en route to a parish mission was to watch the motorway signs and directions. She had some practice in this. Stopping one day while on holiday in Ireland on the Galway Road she asked: “Is this the road to Kilkerrin?” “Yes,” replied the farmer, “but if I were you I wouldn’t start from here!” As a parting shot he added, “if you have to go, stick to the tar road!”

Since most of her years were spent in education, she felt she needed to broaden her knowledge for her new mission. Her delight in learning spurred her on to acquire two MAs in Pastoral Studies and Contemporary Theology from Heythrop, while working with the CMS in London. She loved music, she practised regularly and delighted in playing the piano or organ in church or chapel.

Kathleen had a thirst for knowledge. Our father was a good tutor in card playing and Kathleen later put this training to good effect. An example of her wry wit, wrote one of her peers, would always emerge in a game of cards. “Innocently, one would be led like a lamb to the slaughter as the poker-faced Kathleen laid down a card that just happened to be the best in the pack, asking “will that do?”. The infectious laugh and hands that covered an embarrassed face would add: “It’s the little victories that count.”

Her attitude to life was “one is never too old to set another goal or to dream another dream”, and therefore on her second retirement she found other outlets for her gifts and skills. One she particularly loved was working with prisoners in Cambridge, Hull and latterly in Worthing. She had a particular sympathy both for the prisoners and for their families. She would wholeheartedly agree with the late Bishop Cassidy of Clonfert and Tuam who said: “We are all on the right road to heaven, but occasionally we are facing the wrong way.” Kathleen believed that God draws us to himself often by means of our weakness and failures. Her passion for sharing the love of God, be it with young or old, peer or prisoner, strengthened her conviction that God blessed and supported her and that a person’s true wealth is the good he or she does in the world and the legacy left behind. God had dealt her a good hand in life as regards health, happiness and work ethic. When He called her from this life she had the winning hand of the best cards in the pack i.e. the five, knave and ace of hearts. In all humility she might ask the good Lord “will this do?”. The answer of our merciful judge in this year of Mercy would surely be not to grant her the little victories she was used to in life but instead grant her the ultimate victory of eternal life.

Today we are deeply saddened by her passing but our grief is neither a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith but rather it is the price of love. Death, we believe, is not the extinguishing of a light but the putting out of a lamp because the dawn has come. We are consoled by the fact that you, Kathleen, accepted your illness with such bravery and fortitude, that in your own words you were ready to meet your maker and that you may now be witnessing the dazzling presence of the transfigured Christ. Thank you, Kathleen, for being such a gift to our hearts, a friend to our spirits and a golden thread to the meaning of our lives. We will miss you so much and until we meet again we will love and pray for each other. May your noble and gentle soul rest in peace.