



Sisters of  
St. Francis  
of Assisi

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Since 1849

3221 S. Lake Dr., St. Francis, WI 53235-3799  
414-744-1160  
[www.lakeosfs.org](http://www.lakeosfs.org)

Dear Friend,

Sister Ruth Mary Costello will tell you that her ‘infancy narrative’ began before she was born. Her older sisters wanted to even out the number of boys and girls in the family. At that point, the count stood at five boys and four girls. One more girl could make it perfect. To accomplish this, they talked with their mother, who was 48 at the time, and then prayed a *Novena* for nine days.

The tenth child, a girl, was born on July 17 of 1939, baptized Kathleen, and truly fulfilled the wishes and answered the *Novena* prayer of her sisters. The three children next in age to Kathleen were boys, so the older sisters were excited to spoil Kathleen in every way possible. However, Kathleen had some ideas of her own. As a toddler they tried to dress her in pink dresses with ruffles; Kathleen was more interested in a holster set. To this day, fuss and frills have never been part of her ‘dress for comfort’ style.

Given that there were enough older siblings to help with the chores on the farm, Kathleen was encouraged to stay out of the way, so she spent her time playing with the cats and engaging in other activities on her own. At the age of 6, she started first grade at St. Joseph School in Fond du lac and, after finishing ninth grade in 1954, went to St. Mary’s Springs Academy, graduating in 1957.

She said she endured grade school, but loved high school and the friends she had. Dances and pajama parties made for fun times and lifelong friends. Extra-curricular activities included chorus and Spanish Club as well as having a part in the senior play, “I Remember Mama.” Initially, her part only had 10 words, but after negotiating with the director to add saying “Thank you,” the word count jumped up to 12.

English was her favorite subject, which has led to a lifelong engagement with books, particularly autobiographies and biographies. Reading about the lives of others and how each person dealt with the good and the sorrowful in their lives adds to her own unique perspective on life. Reading has also filled in learning gaps along the way.

After high school graduation, it was time to look to the future. Kathleen took a position at an office in Fond du lac that did record keeping for Nielsen ratings. In those days before computers, every piece of data was



Sr. Ruth Mary’s first  
profession photo in 1961,  
and Kathleen as a toddler  
in Fond du Lac.

hand tabulated. With a salary of \$35 a week, this job was an introduction to 'real life.' It was also a time to search out seriously where she was being called by God.

Even though the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du lac had been her teachers for 12 years, Kathleen



had a leaning toward a Franciscan way of life. A friend of hers was acquainted with two Franciscan communities of sisters in Milwaukee, so they made plans to visit these two convents. Their first stop was St. Francis Convent, the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. Not wanting to "dither" over a decision, Kathleen decided this was it and a visit to the second community never happened.

Kathleen entered the community on September 8, 1958, along with 39 other young women. The convent felt like home for her. There was a sense of belonging to something larger than herself. It was another opportunity for friendships, growth in spirituality and a sense of purpose. She was received as a novice on August 11, 1959, and given the name Sister Ruth Mary to honor her mother. On August 12, 1961, she made first profession of vows and began her active ministry in food service in the Motherhouse kitchen.



After three years, Sister Ruth Mary's hope of working with orphans was realized, partially when she was assigned to teach fifth grade. It felt like she had moved out of the frying pan into the fire because she had no preparation for classroom teaching, but she gradually reached a point where she had a comfort level.

Changes in religious life at that time allowed for expanding the parent-teacher relationship into the civic community. Convents and Catholic schools were integrated as part of the neighborhood. Her teaching assignments took her to the inner city, a rural area, a changing urban area and a Polish parish which allowed for meeting diverse populations. Sister Ruth Mary said that getting to know parents and other parishioners in a variety of formal and informal settings was very meaningful and gave her insights about the students she was working with.

(Above) Family picture with Kathleen sitting on her mother's lap.

(Below) Sister Ruth Mary (l) regularly enjoys a morning exchange with Sister Cor Marie Lowrie. It always includes a good laugh.

There were many times when 'the listening ear of teaching' extended to the parents during the course of discussions about issues they were facing, or relationships they were trying to mend or foster with their own children, but also with their wider circle of family and friends. Finally,

everyone benefitted from the camaraderie and good times spent together.

As the youngest in the family of 10 children, she was challenged with experiencing the death of both her father and her mother just four months apart when she was only 30 years old. This was during the same year Sister Ruth Mary was assigned to attend college full time in order to finish her bachelor's degree. The loss of her parents wreaked havoc with the physical time and emotional energy she could devote to her studies.

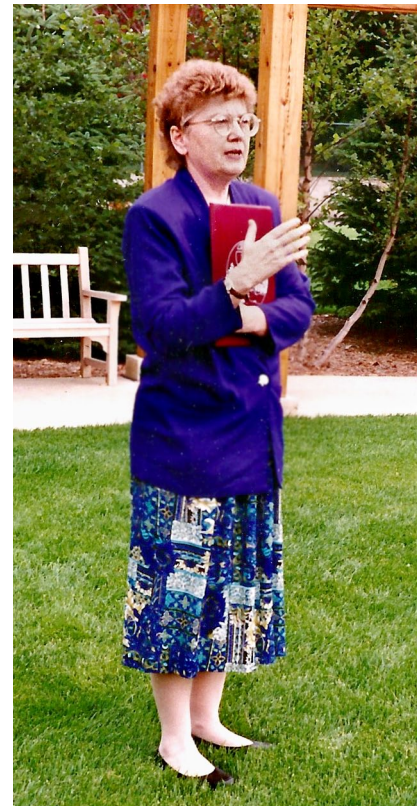
The stress of spending so much time at death beds led her to have a heart-to-heart talk with the sister who was teaching a course she was failing. Sister Ruth Mary told her the circumstances of her reality and said, if she didn't pass, she would have to go to summer school and it would set her back in ministry. The sister listened to her plight, and granted her a 'D' in the course, and Sister Ruth Mary graduated. It was an act of mercy given to her and one never to be forgotten.

When Sister Ruth Mary transitioned out of classroom teaching, she began preparing for hospital chaplaincy with three units of clinical pastoral education at St. Luke's Hospital in Milwaukee. This was followed by studies for a Master of Arts degree in pastoral counseling at Boston College in Boston, Mass. The field work connected with these studies brought her into contact with veterans that had been maimed in combat. She heard their stories of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at a time before PTSD was defined and recognized as such.

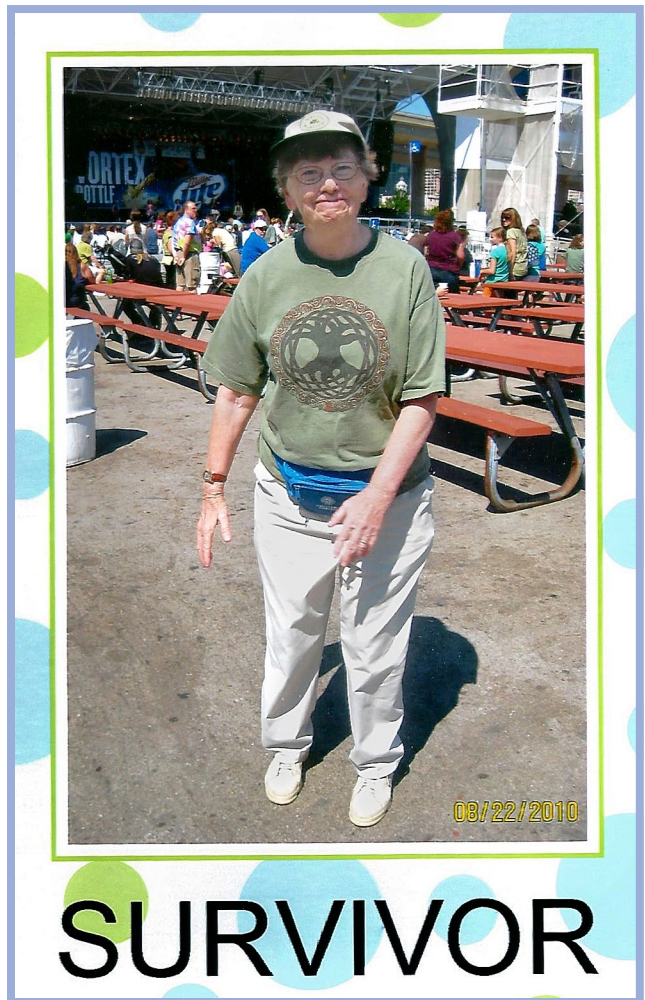
Returning to Milwaukee after graduation, Sister Ruth Mary sent out 100 resumes to facilities in the Midwest who were hiring chaplains. St. Marys Hospital in Rochester, Minn., part of the Mayo Clinic, interviewed her, and after she requested a second interview, was hired. She worked with 35 chaplains in a wide range of religions. Catholics, Protestants, a Muslim imam and a Jewish rabbi helped to widen her world view. She spent most of her 20 years at St. Marys working in the trauma intensive care unit, caring for both the patients and their families and friends.

At age 70, Sister Ruth Mary found herself on the other side of chaplaincy. She was the patient, diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer. She told her family, "You made a *Novena* to get me here,

At right:  
Sister's CPE  
graduation  
speech at  
St. Marys  
Hospital,  
Rochester, Minn.,  
in August 1994.



Below:  
Sister Ruth Mary  
framed a photo  
of herself  
dancing at  
Irish Fest  
in 2010, after  
surviving cancer.



now make a *Novena* to keep me here.” They did. Accompanied by prayer, the surgery, chemo and radiation worked together to bring her into remission. Being the patient was not easy but it provided the opportunity to personally experience the dimensions of healing and to face life from a different standpoint.

At every family reunion she tells the group, “Every time we gather, there seems to be one



Sister Ruth Mary's Mayo Clinic photo, circa 2008

**Grace seeps in among the rocks,  
the gravel, the rigid stones.  
Hard things that would never change.  
It isn't their nature.**

**Grace seeps in anyway.  
She doesn't seem to know the rules,  
doesn't seem to care that  
this rock has held its place for years,  
maybe centuries.**

**Inch by inch, drop by drop  
grace comes, sometimes slow as a glacier,  
sometimes sudden as a thunderbolt,  
sometimes just steady in contrast.  
Always there,  
always seeking the least opening  
to soften the hardness of heart.**

***Ruth Mary Costello, OSF***

less, sometimes two, and sometimes three elders are not here. It used to be fun being the youngest of a big family. I do, however, take comfort and consolation in the legacy left behind by my brothers and sisters who have died – good and decent men and women of their generation.”

Sister Ruth Mary's Irish humor is warm and infectious. Now in retirement, she is a full time volunteer coordinator for our elder sisters and has plenty of opportunities to bring a light-hearted presence into her interactions with them. They also know she can be very ‘matter of fact.’ Sister Ruth Mary's designation as an essential worker during the pandemic didn't change what she does daily; it just gave her the recognition that she and the other coordinators deserve.

She describes her life as “pressed down and overflowing,” as we read in Luke 6:30. She said it “doesn't get any better than this.” To illustrate her point, she described kneeling behind a young father at his son's First Holy Communion. She had prepared the father for his First Holy Communion and was watching history repeat itself in the next generation.

Seeing the search for God lived out in family life and in the lives of many others whom Sister Ruth Mary encounters, she believes that spiritual interest and its pursuit are wide spread today. If we believe in religious life, God will shape that life in creative and responsive ways.

Sister Ruth Mary knows our retired sisters very well. She knows that financial help with their needs is taken care of through the generosity of persons like you. Seeing the sisters enjoying life in a secure and safe environment to the degree to which their health permits them is a blessing. If you are able to contribute to help defray the cost of care for our sisters, your donation will be a blessing for you also, because God rewards those who reach out to others. Thank you so much.

Gratefully,

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF



As Franciscan women with a commitment to caring for all of creation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi use environmentally friendly or post-consumer paper and soy ink whenever possible.

