

Sister Kathy Clementz

In a recent homily, Pope Francis said, “This is Christian life: a continuous ‘Here I am’ of doing the Lord’s will.” Sister Kathy Clementz surely exemplifies such a Christian life. With sometimes offbeat humor and an indomitable spirit, she continues to respond, “Here I am, send me” in answer to God’s call to bring healing, comfort and hope to His people.

Sister Kathy was born in California during the last days of World War II. Her father was Catholic and her mother was Protestant. When the war ended, the family moved to Michigan to be near Kathy’s grandparents. As the family grew to include two younger brothers and a puppy, Sister Kathy’s early years were characterized by the frequent moves required by her father’s job. Sister Kathy says, “School was hard because I didn’t like changing schools all the time.”



Although Sister Kathy attended public schools and had relatively little contact with nuns, she now sees that God was planting the seeds of a religious vocation. The one and only nun she knew personally was her father’s sister, a Franciscan Sister who lived in Ohio. Sister Kathy wrote to her aunt in the fifth grade and told her that she also wanted to be a nun. Almost immediately afterward she regretted her action. “I wanted to crawl in the mailbox and take the letter right back. I was scared to see my aunt for a while after that!”

When Sister Kathy was a junior in high school, her family moved to Oakland, NJ. Her grandmother, who by then was living with the family, became very ill around the time of the move. Sister Kathy remembers, “A doctor came to the house and said that Grandma needed to be taken a hospital, but she wouldn’t go. She died in my arms.” The experience affected Sister Kathy profoundly. “I think that’s how I ended up in nursing.”

A year after graduating from Ramapo Regional High School, Sister Kathy enrolled in St. Joseph Hospital School of Nursing. She earned her RN as she gained broad practical training and experience. She says, “I fell in love with nursing.” She had a gift of relating to people of all ages, making patients smile and laugh and offering comfort to patients and their families when they needed it the most.

When Sister Kathy was 23, she knew it was time to accept the call to religious life that had persisted ever since the fifth grade. It had become very obvious. “I became a Sister because I wanted to serve God and His people.” She laughs, “I never went to Catholic School but God got me anyway!” She was one of the older women in her entering band. It was just after Vatican II and a time of rapid change for the Sisters of Charity and for the entire Church.

Sister Kathy was sent to All Souls Hospital as a postulant. After making her promises as a Sister of Charity, she was pleased to be sent back to minister at St. Joseph Hospital. She credits Sister Eileen Clifford, her sponsor and her head nurse, for teaching her “everything there was to learn about nursing.” She continued her formal education at William Paterson College, where she earned a B.S. in Nursing.

In 1975, Sister Kathy moved from hospital nursing into community nursing, a ministry that she continues today. She loved visiting people in their homes, taking the time to really get to know patients and their families. From the earliest days as a home health care nurse, Sister Kathy’s supervisors knew to assign Sister Kathy the more challenging cases. “They’d say things like, we’ve got a baby with a brain tumor. These young girls can’t handle that. Can you handle that?”

One aspect of Sister Kathy’s many years of ministry as a home care nurse has been providing palliative care to patients who are nearing the ends of their lives. With compassion and sensitivity, she recognizes when patients are ready to address the reality of their imminent death. She helps address their fears and provides support to entire families who are often scared and overwrought.

Sister Kathy's experience with a patient named Frank illustrates how God has used her to help people who are scared and vulnerable. Frank had bone cancer and he was the primary caregiver for his wife, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Frank's great fear was that he would die and his wife would never understand that he was gone. Sister Kathy promised Frank that she would somehow help his wife when the time comes. When Frank died, she led Frank's wife in to say a final goodbye before his body was taken to the funeral home. By the grace of God, Frank's wife had a moment of clarity and was able to say good-bye to her beloved husband. The adult children in the family were forever grateful for the gift of knowing that their mother experienced this closure on earth as she awaited reunion with Frank in heaven.

God used Sister Kathy in a similar way when she ministered to pediatric AIDS patients. She will always remember her final visit to an eleven year old girl who knew that she had not long to live and was scared to die. "I took her hand and said that Grandma and Jesus and everybody is there waiting for you. All you have to do when you're ready is close your eyes and jump. Jesus will catch you." Sister Kathy related to the girl with great love and understanding. "I told her, 'You know what? You've got to do something for me. Just because I'm a Sister and I love God and I love Jesus, when my time comes, I'm probably going to be as scared as you are.' And I said, 'I'm awful big. So Jesus is going to need help. So you've got to be there and help him catch me. Can you do that for me?'"

Sister Kathy's encounters with Frank and with the little girl who had AIDS are just two examples of the many times when Sister Kathy has felt God has shown her people's needs and led her to help them. "God leads me to these things for a reason. I feel God's presence through Jesus. I know that God is allowing me to do what I do and that he wants me to be doing it."

Now in her 51st year as a nurse and her 50th year as a Sister of Charity, Sister Kathy currently splits her time between seeing patients in their homes through Barnabas Home Health Care and providing nursing services to the sisters who live in the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse. Each day brings new opportunities and challenges, as she draws on her years of experience as a nurse and the deep wellspring of faith through her years as a Sister of Charity.

Sister Kathy sums up her story by saying, "I love what I do. I always have. It's like God is right here next to me, and He is with me wherever I go. Recently there was a Sunday mass when all the readings and the songs were about 'Here I am, Lord. Send me.' I had tears in my eyes as I went up for Communion, for that's what God does."

"He sends me."