



Sister Mary Canavan, SC

Entered eternal life on September 1, 2025

It is an honor to be able to reflect on the life of Sister Mary Canavan. I first met Mary in 1979, when I was a novice and she was the Assistant General Superior. She made a great impression on me; once she spoke with novices and posed the question, “What are you not just willing to die for; rather, what are you willing to live for?” Mary was blessed with a long life and extraordinarily good health – physical, mental and spiritual – so we know what she was willing to live for.

One of my fellow novices once said that Mary “set true and clear standards for us as Sisters of Charity.” Earlier this morning we heard Saint Paul describe to the church in Corinth the attributes of love and I’m sure many of us were nodding our heads, recognizing those qualities that Mary manifested in her life.

Mary brought a loving kindness, a steadfast loyalty and a calm attention to the needs of the people she met. She was able to reach the hearts of many because she understood our humanity, accepting it and sharing it.

Another attribute of Mary’s was her reverence for others, their experiences and their decisions. Last week I had dinner with a former Sister of Charity and told her that Mary was dying. This woman recalled that Mary was General Superior as she was grappling with the decision to leave the community. Some years later my friend thanked Mary for her kindness at the time and Mary’s response was, “Why wouldn’t I be kind?”

Mary took the responsibility of a quarter-century in elected leadership seriously, but her sense of humor enabled her to wear the mantle lightly. She liked to tell the story about the time she had gone to a parish to speak about our Congregation, its works, and its needs before a collection was taken for us. The pastor wasn’t there on Saturday evening, but he was present at the Sunday Masses. After the last Mass, Mary went up to him to thank him for his generosity and hospitality. He replied, “Thank you, Sister, for coming. But when you go home, tell your Mother Superior next time to send a sister wearing a veil.” Her reply? “Father, I am the Mother Superior.”

Sister Mary loved the Sisters of Charity and our mission. She completed her second term as General Superior a few weeks after her 66th birthday and it would not be unreasonable to think that she might have retired. But, no, Sister Anne Virginie offered her the position of Vice President of Mission Services at the Hospital of Saint Raphael in New Haven, Connecticut and she accepted, serving ten years as Vice President and as a volunteer in the Children’s Psychiatric Crisis Service.

Then it looked as if she just might retire when she went to live with Sister Marilyn Thie in Hamilton, New York, where Marilyn was a Professor of Philosophy and Religion and Women’s Studies at Colgate University. One might call it an active retirement, as Mary found ways to serve the People of God in upstate New York. Among her activities she volunteered at Heritage Farm, which served developmentally disabled adults, and the Georgetown Correctional Facility where she helped incarcerated people with their reading, writing and arithmetic skills.

When Marilyn was elected Assistant General Superior in 2011, she and Mary returned to life in New Jersey. Perhaps now she’d retire? No, she agreed to serve as the Vice Postulator of the Cause of Sister Miriam Teresa and three years later our sister was beatified and now is known as Blessed Miriam Teresa. You can see some of the fruits of Mary’s efforts – to my right are the beautiful shrine and the room where visitors can learn about Blessed Miriam Teresa’s life and spirituality. Earlier I mentioned Mary’s reverence for others. It was she who reached out to Bishop Burnette, the Eparch of Passaic in the Ruthenian Greek Catholic Church, in recognition of Blessed Miriam Teresa’s spiritual roots.

I've just scratched the surface of all that Mary did in her 78 years as a Sister of Charity. Know that she deeply loved all her family and those of us who were blessed to be her friends. I won't mention names because I'm sure that I'd omit some.

In an interview some years ago Mary said that, upon completing the novitiate, she requested that she receive Sister Assumpta Mary as her religious name because there was a family tie to an earlier Sister Assumpta Mary. The legendary Mother Benita agreed saying, "Now may our Lady of the Assumption come down and take you to heaven." Mary claimed that every year around the 15th of August, she prepared herself to meet her Maker. Well, the Blessed Mother was a few weeks late this year, but we know, Mary, that you were ready to go home to meet the God whom you loved and served so well. May your soul be at God's right hand!

Sister Noreen Neary, SC