

Holy Cross History Conference 2014

Sister Maura Brannick, CSC, Pioneer and Builder

I want to express my gratitude to Jerry Ziliak, and the members of the Planning Committee for the kind invitation to participate in the Holy Cross History Conference. It is gratifying to be among you who have such a vibrant interest in and thoughtful care of our Holy Cross history. I am especially pleased to be part of a conference that honors Sr. Maura.

Many of us know her. She is with us today. For those who are meeting her for the first time, some background will be of interest. Louise Brannick was born in 1923 on a farm in Minooka, Illinois, the only daughter of Nell and Charlie Brannick. She was educated in local public elementary school during the 1930's, and then met the Sisters of the Holy Cross when she attended Saint Angela Secondary School in Morris, Illinois from which she was graduated in 1942. The next year of 1943, Louise followed her call to religious life when she entered the Novitiate of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Following a period of religious formation at the Motherhouse, now Sister Maura was missioned to Saint Mary's Hospital, Cairo, Illinois from where she earned her nursing diploma and initiated her clinical practice. Maura professed her final vows in 1948 and subsequently began a health service career that took her to various hospitals and facilities in the Congregation where she ministered in nursing service, nursing administration and community based health care for the next sixty plus years. I use the word plus because she isn't finished. She is presently in the ninety-first year of her life and the sixty-fourth year of her ministry. But who's counting? Welcome, Sister Maura.

I begin my remarks with an expression from a very interesting historical figure of Holy Cross; a woman whose colorful and engaging writings I have long appreciated: Mother Vincentia. Her reflective words composed for the 1941 forward to the book Pioneers and Builders include the following prayer:

“Praise be to God Who inspired the heart of Abbe Moreau with holy enthusiasm for His glory and loving compassion for souls! Praise be to God Who gave Father Sorin the grace and courage to light this fire in a new world! Praise be to God for those holy women---Angela, Augusta, and their worthy co-laborers and successors, who, through prayer, labor, and suffering, brought forth so fruitful a harvest in the vineyard of Holy Cross!” Inspiration, grace and courage, holy women: read carefully, the prayer of Mother Vincentia is three-fold in its praise of God.

First, praise to the God who inspires:

Mother Vincentia’s understanding of giving glory to God and extending compassion to one’s neighbor come about through the gift of inspiration to Holy Cross; inspiration given uniquely to the Congregation for its response to God’s plan of salvation for the world. Inspiration rooted in the women and men of Holy Cross whose creative ideas and imaginative thoughts have been and continue to be realized in the ministry of wholeness and healing.

Is it possible to see inspiration at work? Sister Maura’s inspiration shows through the persons to whom she has dedicated her life’s ministry. She is inspired by those in need: the downtrodden, the underserved, the most vulnerable. Those who know violence, suffer prejudice and feel indifference are the ones who inform and transform her life.

Even during those early years of her ministry, as Maura served in more traditional roles within the hospital setting, her experience led her to an awareness of those who were seriously ill but who would not or could not go to the hospital due to financial restriction or personal circumstance.

She was convinced that something more could and should be done to provide health care for all who were deprived and in need. Consequently, by the mid-sixties Maura’s vision led her to move beyond the walls of the institution. She began volunteering at local churches and social agencies to help provide food, clothing and basic medical care to needy individuals and families in South Bend neighborhoods.

By the 1970's Maura had developed her healing efforts by visiting and caring for elderly patients in their homes. It was through these out-reach ministries that her inspiration had clearly struck a hidden, significant need within the civic community: the provision of health care services to the indigent, the poor and the marginalized, most of whom had never visited a doctor during their adult years.

By 1986, with the help of generous benefactors, Sister Maura, along with dedicated health care volunteers, took over a four hundred square foot, one hundred year old garage, a converted carriage house located in one of the most deprived and dangerous neighborhoods in the city. They transformed it into a small health clinic.

This effort began with two nurses, two doctors and a few patients from the immediate neighborhood. There is so much history and so many stories that could describe the evolution of the clinic. Suffice it to say that during the ensuing years of its existence, the clinic has undergone dramatic change and extensive development.

Through hard work, perseverance and the generosity of many volunteers and benefactors, what stands today is a 10,000 square foot community center that provides general health assessment and examination, dental and mental health facilities, all prescription medications, needed imaging and lab services, and if appropriate, referral to local specialized physicians. Included as well are community meeting facilities, a food pantry, a prayer room and exercise space. The center provides health care exclusively for patients who have no form of health insurance whatsoever.

In twenty-eight years of service, the center has provided for over 200,000 patient visits. Currently, some seventy volunteers of all backgrounds and talents serve the center monthly. Fifty physicians donate their time and expertise each month. The center functions with just eight paid staff.

For the past ten years regional educational and health care facilities have funded a full time internship position for a pre-medical student with the aim of offering a learning experience for the care of an indigent population. In 2006 the "Clinic" was renamed The Sister Maura Brannick Health Center in her honor.

Inspiration:

I wonder if that's what Maura meant when she said, in reference to the initiation of the clinic: "I saw poverty and people with no health care. Consequently they had no hope, so this inspired in me the need for a health center. I didn't have any money...just an idea."

Second, praise to the God of grace and courage

Mother Vincentia viewed the Congregation as favored by the grace of God. She also understood that for Holy Cross to be a wellspring of divine activity in the people and history of this country, it would demand a courageous and whole hearted response from those called to carry forth its mission.

Grace: the gift of God's presence in the world. Grace: the experience of God's activity of transforming the world. Grace: the transparent presence of God reflected in all creation but especially in human living history. Grace: the Holy Spirit living within us and among us.

Is it possible to describe the presence of grace? Have you ever felt its closeness? I think about what I know of Sister Maura's response to grace; the qualities that express it in her. They include deep faith, profound kindness, endless energy, resolute determination, undaunted courage and humble leadership.

Above all, it is the ease with which she deeply connects with those who come into her life. This is what people see and know in her. This is what touches the deepest part of them. This is what they desire to emulate in their own lives. This is what she has devotedly given during her sixty years plus of ministry: whether to the thousands whom she has served directly in health care, or the hundreds whom she has mentored; including co-workers, sisters in community, family, friends, volunteers, medical staff, students, novices, or the guy sitting next to her on the bus.

I have seen grace in action with Sister Maura. I once observed her in a restaurant as she was enjoying a meal with a group of friends. The conversation was light and engaging, but then I noticed that Maura had stopped conversing as she happened to look out the restaurant window into the street. She saw a thin, frail, unkempt homeless man shuffling by. As her eyes followed him down the street, I heard her mutter to herself: “I wonder where he is going.” And I knew that in a short while she would be out looking for this man. And I was certain that she would do anything within her capability to assist him at his point of need.

As for courage, there is no lack of that quality in Sister Maura. Courage: an experience of letting ourselves be loved by God. Courage: the discovery of our gifts and the giving of them in service. Courage: the daring, audacious embrace of new possibilities through creative imagination to move forward in history or to change its direction.

Grace and courage signify the presence of God in the world and in human beings. Saint Matthew tells us that when God is present, the hungry are fed, the stranger is welcomed, the naked are clothed, the suffering are comforted, the imprisoned are consoled.

There was a young man named Dick who had come a long way from home in the fifties to attend Notre Dame. He had no money and no work experience. The need for a job led him to the hospital where Sister Maura took him on as an orderly, the lowest possible post in the place. It was hard, lonely work for a full time student, but Dick performed his duties with kindness and great care. Maura watched Dick come to work each evening after having attended classes and studied all day at the university. She knew he wasn't eating supper. He would leave work around midnight, and the dining halls on campus were already closed.

Grace and Courage:

I wonder if that is what Maura thought of when she said about Dick: “I always tried to sneak a hot meal to him at the hospital. I knew I could get in trouble for it, but I didn't care. He was a good young man and a hard worker. I couldn't bear to see him go hungry.”

There was a homeless man by the name of Willie. Everyone in the neighborhood knew him because each day Willie rode his bike to the soup kitchen for meals. One day, Holy Cross Brother Jim contacted Maura and asked her help for Willie who was sick, and did not make the appointment scheduled for him at the doctor's office. Willie had not been seen for several days. Something was surely wrong, and Sister Maura and Brother Jim knew they had to find him. Eventually, they tracked Willie down to a crumbling old building with no electricity or facilities. It seemed impossible that a human being could be living in that place. There he was in the basement. Willie was curled up into a tight ball. He was jaundiced. He was in great pain. He was dying. If Brother Jim and Sister Maura had anything to say about it, Willie was not going to die in that dreadful place. And, he was not going to die alone. They gathered him up and arranged for hospice help. That's where their friend Willie lived for three more days. When he died, he died the way anyone should: with dignity, with other caring people around him, and, as Sister Maura said, between clean sheets.

Grace and Courage:

I wonder if that's what Maura was thinking as she spoke of Willie in saying: "It breaks your heart to see people live like this. They don't deserve to die like this either. No one does."

Third, praise to the God of Holy women worthy successors

Mother Vincentia knew her history in regard to those whom she called the holy, Holy Cross Sister fore bearers of the Congregation. She lived their legacy with the sisters of her own generation and trusted that those who were to come after would live their lives in faithful commitment to God and devoted service to God's people through the mission of Holy Cross.

How does one know if she is a worthy co-laborer and successor to those holy women, Augusta, Angela and so many others who have preceded her? What is the measure of her prayer and labor and suffering? How is it possible to assess a fruitful a harvest in the vineyard of Holy Cross?

Perhaps a measure of one's legacy may be noted by the manner in which colleagues, friends and recipients acknowledge one's accomplishments.

There is a long list of awards and honors that have followed Sister Maura's ministry. At the Health Center you can find a room full of tributes. I know Sister Maura would be embarrassed and bored if I expound very much upon:

The Point of Light Award presented to her personally by the President of the United States, or the Honorary Degrees conferred upon her from the University of Notre Dame and Holy Cross College, or the Key to the City of South Bend given by the Mayor; or her distinction as bearer of the Olympic Torch, or the most recently bestowed Catholic Hospital Association Lifetime Achievement Award, and so many more citations and decorations.

However, I will speak about one gift that Sister Maura cherishes. When asked about all of the tributes bestowed upon her, Sister Maura tells a story. It is about the occasion when she was presented with the Sagamore of the Wabash Award. This commendation is the highest that the State of Indiana can bestow to a private citizen and can only be authorized by the Governor.

The night of the ceremony, among the many dignitaries and officials present, there was a woman in the crowd who had listened to all of the speeches and witnessed the Governor's presentation. Sister Maura was still sitting in the place of honor on the podium when this same woman approached her, leaned over and whispered in her ear: "Thank you Sister. Thank you for helping my son. He had an addiction until he came to your clinic. Because you helped him, he's no longer addicted and he's back in school. You saved my son's life and I will never forget it." Of all the recognition received by Sister Maura, this is the one that stays in her memory. And this, of course, surprises no one who knows her.

The insightful words of Mother Vincentia have led us to a most worthy co-laborer and successor of those early and notable Holy Cross women. A view of Sister Maura's history has shown her to be a pioneer and builder in her own right and in her own special way.

We have seen her as a master of inspiration.
We have witnessed the grace of the Spirit at work in her.
We know her to be standing with Angela and Augusta.

Holy Women-Worthy Successors:

Perhaps Maura said it best: “I joined the Sisters of the Holy Cross a long time ago, and I’ve been a nurse ever since. And I’ve loved every minute of it.”

Just as Saint Matthew gave us the account of the Last Judgment in regard to the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and imprisoned, he also tells us what Jesus has to say about the ones who have a radical, lifelong, passionate commitment to healing: “You have my Father’s blessing!” (Matthew 25:34)

Indeed, bless this inspired woman of God
Bless this graced, courageous daughter of the Church.
Bless this worthy co-laborer of Holy Cross who brings forth so fruitful a harvest in its vineyard.

It seems only fitting to end, as we began, with the word and wisdom of Mother Vincentia who, by the way, was Superior General when Maura entered Holy Cross, and thus it was she who accepted Maura into the Congregation. Vincentia, a woman who, it seems, had an eye for worthy successors and co-laborers. She knew a good thing when she saw it.

Seventy four years ago, in the last remarks of her final letter to the sisters, Mother Vincentia, as she was wont to do, offered a blessing that also served as a directive and a challenge to the Congregation. Her comments are surely as appropriate for us today as they were in her time; and so she leaves us and we close with her words:

“Now, remembering that we are all poor prodigals ‘limping along a stony road to our Father’s house,’ let us carry on to the end unitedly for Christ and Holy Cross. Praying God to bless each one of you as only our God can bless, I am Devotedly yours in the Holy Cross, MOTHER M. VINCENTIA, Superior General

The Generalate, Feast of the Presentation, February 2, 1943

Circular letters of Mother Vincentia, CSC From July 31, 1931 to July 31 1943
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