

Marycrest, December 16, 2000

Sister Mary Paul, Barbara Jean Nevins, died at St. Anthony Hospital North, Westminster, Colorado, on December 16, 2000. She was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on November 27, 1932, the elder daughter of Frederick Klund Nevins and Margaret Elizabeth Ellis. Her first profession was made at Marycrest on August 15, 1960, in Denver, Colorado.

The Wake was held at Marycrest on Tuesday evening December 19, 2000. The Mass of the Resurrection was celebrated at Regis University Chapel on Wednesday, December 20, 2000. Her body was sent to Peace of Mind Crematory, Denver, Colorado, and her remains were buried at Mount Olivet Cemetery, Denver, Colorado on December 27, 2000, in the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity Plot.

When Barbara was 5 years old her mother died of Pneumonia and the family moved to Rehoboth, Delaware, where the Dupont Company had transferred her father. Barbara had vivid memories of a very southern, segregated Delaware town, where childhood friendships in a mixed racial town became taboo in pre-adolescence and where overworked maids with swollen ankles waiting at the bus stops were a common site.

A diagnosis of diabetes at age 12 did not prevent the young Barbara from an interest in sports, dramatics and school publications, nor from a variety of part-time jobs. Nor did it interfere with her studies. In 1954 she graduated from the University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, receiving an M.S. with a major in Medical Technology, like the woman who had become her step mother when Barbara was 10 years old.

She made two important decisions as she approached graduation: one was to become a Catholic; the other was to come to Denver. On February 2, 1955 she was baptized in Holy Ghost church, Denver, Colorado. Work as a Technologist in Denver and in La Junta, Colorado hospitals brought her into contact with Benedictine Sisters of the nearby Santa Fe hospital there. She was drawn to religious life.

Believing that diabetes would make her ineligible for community life, she offered her service to St. Francis Mission, St. Francis, South Dakota. A week after her arrival in March, 1957, Sister Borromea Befit asked her "point-blank" if she'd ever thought of a vocation. Counseled by Sister Cecilia Linenbrink and Sister Elma Vifquain she entered the Marycrest Franciscan community the following September, and celebrated her first profession of vows on the Feast of the Assumption, 1960.

Looking back, Barbara, now Sister Mary Paul, remembered feeling misfit with teen-age candidates well-grounded in their faith and from rural communities. Indeed, it is a tribute to the congregation as well as to the independently spirited new convert, that she could grow in religious life when look alike, think alike, and act alike behavior had not yet been transformed by the renewal of Vatican II.

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After a brief stint as Latin and biology teacher at Marycrest High school, Denver, she served as Laboratory technician at Saint Mary's Hospital, Scottsbluff, Nebraska. Following perpetual profession, she began graduate studies, receiving her doctorate degree in microbiology from Colorado State University, Fort Collins in 1970. Honors were given her as a student: a President's Fellowship by the American Society of Microbiologist; a pre-doctoral fellowship by Public Health service of the National Institute of Health; membership in the honorary scholastic fraternity, Phi Kappa Phi; and membership in Sigma Xi, honorary scientific research fraternity.

Now, with her doctorate, she had two goals: one to do microbiology research with the government; the other to teach in a Black college. She did both.

For seven years Sister Mary Paul was professor of biology at Miles college, Birmingham, Alabama, Making positive reparation for the broken friendships and for the women who suffered swollen ankles, by getting three or four of her students into medical school. She left Alabama in 1977 after experiencing devastation at the brutal murder of a chemistry professor friend.

Returning to Denver, Sister Mary Paul directed the testing of investigational anti-cancer compounds on experimental mice at the AMC Cancer Research Center. Then for five years (1977-1984) she was the science teacher at Marycrest High School.

Her medical retirement in 1984 was not an end to her ministry. With CAP program she became an AIDS buddy, keeping contact by phone and welcoming visitors who were victims of the dreaded disease that at that time caused so much fear among the general populace. From her own relative confinement she made daily telephone contact with ill and shut-in friends. Sister Mary Paul never had clients, but only friends and associates who journeyed with her along the broken road to the Father. The point was to keep the road interesting, and this she did with incessant but well-chosen reading, salted by her own sagacity and wit.

In 1998, experiencing diminishing health, she became one of the first residents of Serenity, the assisted living residence for seniors built on the site of the former Marycrest High School. Her continually deteriorating condition led to more frequent doctor and hospital visits, that did not interfere with her love for Serenity: the staff, food, amenities, library and post office bus, and the trips. She knew the residents by name and each one's personal story. She became part of a Bible discussion group, took part in liturgy when possible, received guests and phone calls, weaving her friends into a community of mutual prayer support. It was difficult to leave Serenity for a nursing home this fall when strength for ordinary self-care could not be recalled.

The day before her fatal heart attack, Sister Mary Paul was enjoying the Christmas spirituals of a concert singer at the nursing home. She congratulated the singer, then rolled her chair to the nursing home entrance, the pain in her eyes disappearing only when she greeted patients and their visitors. "I'm falling apart," she confided. "Keep coming, I love the visits and the Sisters who bring me Communion." Experiencing a heart attack the following day, she answered a firm "No" to the doctor's suggestions of a bypass or pacemaker. The call to go beyond the struggle for survival had come. It was as if she was to step forever out of her wheelchair and run to the Heart of God, so quickly did she go. I imagine she knows almost everyone in heaven by now,

especially those who were on the margins here on earth, and that her wit has added to their joy. We believe she is looking on the face of God.

Once she wrote: "I have a strong sense that all things are working out. I feel very comfortable with God; he/she is the very air I breathe. I love my life and my community and all created things. I live one day at a time because this is all I have. I am grateful for every moment." And Mary Paul, we are so grateful that you shared our humble, broken Franciscan journey.

All the Sisters at Marycrest