

Katherine McDonnell RSCJ

1915 – 2004

Katherine McDonnell, the third of four girls in her family, was born in New York City on March 16, 1915. However, proud as she was of her Irish heritage, she claimed March 17th as her birthday! Kate was always very close to her youngest sister, Charlotte. Life in their home was very happy and full of fun and laughter. They grew up together with many relatives. Kate often spoke of having some 40 cousins. Kate attended Eden Hall and after graduating in 1933, studied interior design for two years at Parsons School of Design in New York.

During her last year at Parsons, an event occurred which she loved to recount, an event that changed the course of her life forever. It was New Year's Eve and she and her friends had celebrated by partying all night. In the wee hours of the morning, they decided to stop in a church for 2:00 AM Mass. During that Mass, something happened to Kate. She left the church knowing that she was called by God. Without hesitation and to the astonishment of all, Kate decided to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart. Imagine the chagrin of the boyfriend who, on returning home from a trip to California, discovered that Kate had entered the Convent at Kenwood on September 8, 1935. For all who knew this lively, energetic, fun-loving Kate, life in the Convent was out of the question. She would not last long.

But last long Kate did, contrary to all expectations. She made her first vows on March 15, 1938 and her final profession February 11, 1944, both at Kenwood. During those years, she obtained a BA from Manhattanville and an MA from Villanova University. Sr. McDonnell spent twenty-nine years in teaching and school administration, mostly as principal, in schools of the Sacred Heart in Rochester, New York, Philadelphia, PA Miami, FL and Newton, MA. She was an inspiration to her students whom she challenged academically, spirituality and in generosity of service to the most needy. From her experience of the migrant camps in Florida and the inner city in Roxbury, MA she discovered that "politics is the determining factor in the oppression of migrant farm workers and inner-city African Americans." From this insight, grew the dynamic passion for justice for the poor that drove and characterized Kate from that time on.

In 1969, with the encouragement of her cousin and greatly revered minister to the poor, Father Horace McKenna, S.J., Kate was among the RSCJ who moved into *Sursum Corda* on North Capital Street in Washington, D.C. They were among the first residents who set the goals for their successors. Of that time, Kate writes, "Reflection became a daily reality around the issues of housing, health, wages, job skills, family stability and education for our new community. Our ministries grew out of the insights we gleaned here, living among families at risk. Our commitment to our neighbors brought is in touch with most issues of their lives."

With a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Kate soon established the Housing Counseling Services, which, according to an article on Kate in the Washington Post, "became one of the city's most influential housing agencies, negotiating with landlords and creditors, helping poor renters convert rental buildings to cooperatives and condominiums, and assisting new home owners."

In 1972 NETWORK, the Catholic Social Justice Lobby, was inaugurated at 1124 McKenna Walk, home of the RSCJ *Sursum Corda* Community. On April 9, 1987, a gala celebration took place on Capitol Hill marking the 15th anniversary of NETWORK. The Society of the Sacred Heart was honored. Network bestowed the Clare Dunn, CSJ Award on Sr. Kate McDonnell, recognizing her 16 years of housing advocacy and direct service to countless families in need. Inscribed on the plaque which Kate received are these words:

To Kate McDonnell, RSCJ, who continues to live out Clare Dunn's belief that politics is a way to "witness to God's care for the least of our brothers and sisters, God's concern for the marginal and powerless."

No account of Sr. Kate McDonnell would be complete without some mention of her strong belief that God's call for justice includes equality for women in the Church, and she never hesitated to promote this cause. She had a deep conviction of her own call to the priesthood and spoke boldly of this to the hierarchy on at least one occasion.

Kate McDonnell was unique. To do her life justice would be impossible. One of her sisters said of her:

Kate was a special person, on fire to help the poor get their rights and some decent housing. . . . She was a little powerhouse who was not afraid to take on power where little folks were feeling oppression.

Another writes:

What an extraordinary woman! She was surely inimitable in many ways. Her commitment, her faith-filled passion for all that is right and just, her great humor . . . not to mention her feisty way of standing so strongly for her beliefs in Miami, in Boston, in Philadelphia, in Washington, and in reality across the globe. She is to this day held with a smile and great affection in the *Sursum Corda* community.

In May, 1998, Kate realized that it was time to leave Washington and to move to the Pax Christi Community. During these last years, she entered fully into the life of the community. Her love of music and dance and her sense of fun enlivened community celebrations. When Kate decided that she no longer had the energy to travel, her sister, Charlotte, came often to Kenwood. Kate looked forward to her sister's visits. Together, they thoroughly enjoyed the time with each other and with the community. Kate's diminishment became more and more evident as she grew frailer. Although the time came when her communication was minimal, those Irish eyes never lost their sparkle and expressed the fire of love that burned within her soul. Finally, on the evening of June 29, 2004, simply and peacefully, Kate went to God. At the Mass of Christian Burial, Kate's spirit was very present to us as we heard the words of the song that we knew she was singing with us for it expressed the deepest desire of her heart and her life:

Let justice roll like the river, and wash all oppression away;
Come, O God and take us, move and shake us,
Come now and make us anew, that we might live justly like you.