

Margaret Mary (Mavie) Coakley

April 11, 1920 – July 2, 2011

“Who does not weep for such a loss to all of us, even to those who never knew her! I think Mavie was the most charismatic leader we’ve had. With vision and insight she fearlessly forged our way into the future.” These words sprang from the heart of a dear friend, Jean Bautz, on hearing of Mavie’s death.

Margaret Mary Coakley was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on April 11, 1920. The sixth of ten children, she was part of a lively household! Even though her siblings went their separate ways, many raising large families of their own, Mavie held a special place in their lives as one generation followed another. Like many American families, the Coakleys were touched tragically by World War II. Mavie’s dear brother Hank, an Army Air Corps pilot, was killed in 1944, leaving a young wife expecting their child.

Mavie attended St. Ann’s elementary school in Cleveland, and then she followed her older sisters Agnes and Ann to the Society’s boarding school at Noroton, Connecticut. She was the first of the family to go to Manhattanville College, graduating in 1942 with a major in Mathematics and minor in Music.

Mavie entered the Society at Kenwood in 1942, where Mother Agnes Barry was her mistress of novices. Following first vows in 1945, she spent her aspirantship years (1945-50) in Sacred Heart schools at Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and Elmhurst in Providence.

She made her final vows in Rome on July 30, 1950, prepared by Reverend Mother Zurstrassen. On her return to the U.S., Mavie taught at Grosse Pointe briefly before returning to Noroton, first as mistress general from 1951 to 1955, then as superior until 1959.

In 1959, Mavie was named mistress of novices at Kenwood, a position she held until 1967. She was faced with responsibility for more than ninety novices, including the Cuban and Puerto Rican novices who arrived in December 1961 in the wake of the Castro revolution.

During these years profound changes were beginning to occur in the Church. Vatican Council II had been convened by Pope John XXIII in 1959. As the first documents appeared, it was clear that Reverend Mother de Valon, the superior general, who was a Council observer, took the call to renewal very seriously. However, the pace and nature of change called for in the Society’s 1964 Chapter documents could not begin to match the speed with which change was already occurring in many parts of the Society.

The changes of the ‘60’s, of course, went far beyond the world of the Church. This was the time of student revolutions and social upheavals, and the winds of change began to blow through the Kenwood noviceship. Mavie listened – one of the things she did best – and a novice of that time speaks of “early, middle, and late Mavie,” that is, the evolution of the formation program during those eight years. Toward the end, she met very deliberately with novices of the early years to apologize for some of her actions, and to tell them to “forget” what she had taught them that no longer applied. Marcia O’Dea wrote: “I will always remember her because to me she called up joy and a kind of humble ebullience about life. She used her very keen intelligence so much on behalf of good humor, teasing others from fear into fun!” The changes she made in the noviceship program came at a cost, for if their necessity was clear to her, it was not always so to those in authority.

In 1967 Mavie was elected one of the delegates from the New York Vicariate to the Society’s Special Chapter, the chapter that enacted the profound changes, *ad experimentum*, that marked the life of the Society from then on. Mavie left Kenwood that same year for Greenwich, where she was superior until her appointment as provincial of the New York Province in 1968. During her six years as provincial, change took place – planned and unplanned. Steering a course through those years drew on all her gifts: deep prayer, courage, an almost unerring instinct about each one’s potential. The criticism she had suffered as mistress of novices paled in comparison to

what she faced as provincial. Two rounds of school closings (including her beloved Noroton) drew the wrath of many, especially alumnae; there was a serious lack of communication across the lines of the five provinces, even as more and more RSCJ crossed province lines in their ministries. About these years Theresa Chu wrote of Mavie's uncompromising attitude, her cheerfulness in adversity and her trust in the future – all qualities that saw her and the province through the difficult times.

Her term as provincial ended, Mavie headed west to Berkeley, California, in June 1974 to study at the Jesuit School of Theology on that lively campus. Someone described her as the “den mother” to her younger classmates! Berkeley launched her into a serious study of Liberation Theology, which had had a strong influence at the 1970 General Chapter. The role of the U.S. government in suppressing democratic change in Latin America sparked a new kind of church activism to which Mavie committed herself in the years that followed.

When she returned east in 1976, she joined the 49th Street Community in New York City's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. The cause of justice in Central America was still her passion; she worked closely with the Reverend Sergio Torres at Theology in the Americas. During this time she also formed a close friendship with Sister Marjorie Tuite, O.P., a brilliant theologian, feminist and interfaith activist. From 1983 to 1985 Mavie was her right hand in the Women's Coalition to Stop Intervention in Central America, accompanying her on many trips to Nicaragua.

The new U.S. Province was launched in 1982, following years of planning in which Mavie had taken part as provincial. In 1985 she was asked to go to Washington, D.C., to work with Kit Collins in founding the Center for Educational Design and Communication (CEDC). She was key in helping shape its mission “to serve the Society of the Sacred Heart as well as other faith-based groups that are in the forefront of social justice.” The connection with New York remained strong, and when Marjorie – only sixty-four – was dying there of cancer in 1986, her dear friend Mavie was at her bedside. Two years later, she was one of the small delegation that carried Marjorie's ashes to Nicaragua to be buried beside the country's “heroes and martyrs.”

A born networker, Mavie was an active participant in the marches and protests that were frequent events in Washington. Kathleen Cox, living there at the time, recalls Mavie saying that she was going to a demonstration, but that she would not take part in the civil disobedience at the end. A few hours later came a call from the D.C. jail, asking for a few overnight necessities and a sweater, because she had given hers to her cellmate, a prostitute who was cold!

From 1985-93 she lived at Sursum Corda, a housing project in inner-city Washington. Every day, with her trusty backpack, she boarded the bus out to CEDC in Brookland – usually the only white person on the bus. Even after her return to New York, Washington always seemed close. A short trip down took her to a birthday party for Fe Garcia, when Mavie was the “surprise gift” hidden in a big box in the basement for the birthday girl to unwrap!

In 1994 Mavie returned to 49th Street in New York City, where she became the director of the Shop & Escort Program at Encore Community Services, “Broadway's Longest Running Act of Loving Care.” With her at the helm, the program became much more than its official description. If her homebound elderly were hospitalized or moved to a nursing home, she tracked them down to see that they were not alone, or – most unthinkable – forgotten. One of her community remembers vividly the “invitation” to join in Christmas Day gift deliveries!

Mavie nourished her mind and her soul seriously throughout her life, and certain writers were very important to her. Elizabeth Johnson's *Truly Our Sister* was a book to which she returned over the years, and she made a point of going to hear Elizabeth speak if she was lecturing nearby. Another marked-up favorite was *An Act of Hope: Province Priorities for Strategic Planning*, published in 1992, which she valued not just for the priorities themselves but also for the process that had led to them.

Her Golden Jubilee in 2000 had two parts: First, the public celebration was a grand party at Encore for her elderly friends. The RSCJ admission price was to bring a home-bound person to

the event. Many of Mavie's family came, and her nephew John Treacy Egan brought a group of Broadway musicians for splendid entertainment. Second, she told her community that they would have their celebration at Sea Girt and that she would prepare it! Kit Collins and Betsy Hartson came up from Washington for an amazing weekend. She produced a long prose-poem with these memorable lines: "I am not my own. I am not on my own." Framed, this hung on her wall at home, and it followed her to the room in the nursing home where she died in 2011.

On August 28, 2006, Mavie was hit by a car as she crossed the street. Although no bones were broken, she suffered traumatic head injuries. During months of hospitalization and rehab, she set herself earnestly to re-learning everything she had ever known. At the Isabella Nursing Home, where she was a patient from October 2006 to February 2007, a visitor found her praying quietly. When questioned, she said simply, "I've forgiven him" – the driver. This was what faith called her to do, and it was the challenge she set for those who loved her.

On her return home to Hell's Kitchen, where she lived until March 2011, the strength of her bonds with Encore, with neighborhood friends and with family became ever more evident. "I am not my own. I am not on my own." She remained very much an active member of the community; she cared for those who cared for her. If she was sometimes sharp with her family and close friends, she always made up in some way, letting the other know how much their friendship meant to her. She understood what was going on, her preferences were clear, and she was a game participant in any activity that was planned – an outing to Washington, vacations in Halifax, a trip to Sprout Creek Farm, visits to family in Cleveland, an excursion to Battery Park to take in the splendors of the harbor. A highlight of 2008 was a trip up the block to vote for Barack Obama; the head poll worker, an old friend, cleared a path to the head of the line, and she stayed up past midnight to celebrate his victory with her community.

These deep bonds endured through her last months at the Mary Manning Walsh Home. July 2011 was her month: on July 1, the Feast of the Sacred Heart, she renewed her vows for the last time; God took her home peacefully on July 2, the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; her funeral took place at Mary Manning Walsh on July 8 with more than fifty relatives present; she was buried at Kenwood on July 12, and her sixty-first anniversary of Profession would have taken place on July 31.

If a single thing can be said about this exceptional life, it was Mavie's *fidelity to relationships*, or more simply put, *the gift of her friendship*. The strength of these bonds was a constant theme at the reception at 91st Street following the funeral, attended by relatives, friends, and RSCJ, at the "sharing of memories" at Teresian House, and at Abba House after her burial. Elmhurst alumnae, former RSCJ, and members of many RSCJ communities told of what she had meant in their lives. It might be the right word at a decisive moment, or a challenge – "Where is your faith?" – or an invitation to follow where the Spirit called. A Noroton student wrote, "In my now senior lifetime, no person brought me closer to the Lord than Mavie. I am eternally grateful for this great gift above all others."