



Sister Ellen Mary Desmond

Entered eternal life on June 15, 2017

It is fitting that we gather here in Holy Family Chapel tonight to celebrate the life and legacy of Sister Ellen Mary Desmond—this is after all, the place where she prayed daily throughout her senior year in college that she would not have a vocation to the religious life. But as we know, Ellen entered the Sisters of Charity after her graduation in 1950—one of the things that her grandnieces brought up at the offertory procession is the candle that we use at Sister of Charity celebrations.

Sister Ellen, Aunt Ellen, Dr. Desmond was a “people person”. She was a student of demography—starting with her doctoral dissertation entitled “Mortality Analysis of the Brandywine Population of Southern Maryland” which was also brought up at the offertory.

Ellen focused her research on the behavior of various groups of people. These are some of the courses she taught in the Sociology Department: Research Methods (most often focusing on data from the US Census), Race and Ethnicity, Marriage and the Family, Criminology, Urbanization, and Gerontology. They all focus on an in-depth understanding of many of the critical issues facing America today. She believed that without knowledge of human relationships and human behavior, people can be fooled into looking for quick and easy answers for societal problems. Her commitment to teaching at the College of Saint Elizabeth for over 55 years is represented by the rarely awarded Sister Regina Clare McGlory Medal which also was brought up at the offertory.

In the 1980’s, Sister Ellen was a pioneer in the state of New Jersey for instituting the academic study of Gerontology. Ellen’s influence went beyond the classroom. She was a valued member of Paterson Diocesan Social Action Institute, the Urban Action Taskforce, the Campaign for Human Development, and the Commission for Ecumenism. She served on the board of Family Services of Morris County and worked with the Morris County Department on Aging. She advocated for the needs of seniors at the White House Conference on Aging in 1980 and at the Governor’s Conference on Aging in 1981.

She took her show on the road by participating in the National Catholic Conference Traveling Workshop on Race and Poverty—traveling by station wagon with four other women religious giving presentations in cities across the United States.

So, tonight as we remember Sister Ellen’s life, I believe she would like to challenge each of us to influence and advocate for changes in the fractures that we see in our country and in the world around us today. Given this task I think she would also leave us with these words from the Talmud:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obliged to complete the work. But neither are you free to abandon it.”

Sister Elena Colicelli