

## **COLLINS, Sister Sheila, DMJ**

August 1, 1933 - September 7, 2023

Rather than a short biography of our Sister Sheila, I want to share snippets of the woman I learned to admire as a living saint. This is not because she was perfect, but rather because of her deep, abiding faith while fully immersed in her weaknesses and human frailty. An ordinary human being, fragile and simple, who became an instrument of compassion in God's hand.

In Christopher Walkers version of Psalm 23, he chose the words for the refrain: Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life. It is this trust beyond wants and fears that was most striking in Sheila. She heard the voice through her prayer, through scriptures that kept her moving even while afraid, disappointed, in pain, lost, and grieving

Sheila Collins was born in Glin, Co. Limerick, overlooking the banks of the beautiful Shannon River, where she grew up with her parents, brothers and sisters. The year was 1933 in the midst of tumultuous times in Ireland and Europe. While in high school she became interested in religious life and went to England for part of her education. Her sister had entered with the Daughters of Mary and Joseph. Sheila was younger, and too lively and social to enter, they thought. Her family was afraid she would not last.

She entered The Daughters of Mary and Joseph for initial formation August 25, 1950, at Castlecor, Co. Longford. The final part of her formation was spent in Uccle, Belgium for the novitiate. A harsh formative experience in a strange country on the heels of World War II, often immersed in French.

After her first profession she was hoping to go to Africa. She made her first vows in Belgium, April 21, 1953, returned to Ireland to spend a little time with her family and prepare for her assignments in a Mission. Her health was an issue. She was sent instead to California. She might never see her family again.

Sheila's first assignment was at Saint Sebastian School, in West Los Angeles. Thus began discovery of the gifts children had... Every child was very precious to her. But it wasn't easy. Classrooms had 60 kids or more, and she didn't have much preparation as a teacher.

In the sixties and early seventies many of the sisters who had entered religious life were discerning to leave the convent. Some of her own friends were leaving, she felt pressured to leave too ... yet her calling and commitment was much stronger

After many years of teaching, she took a new path: that of Parish Ministry. She was support to the priests and parish staff. She visited families at home, and those in the hospital. She was available when anyone was in need of assistance or a prayer. Sheila's compassion and constant availability to others was a gift

that was most appreciated by all. It wasn't easy though. Sheila discovered she took on other people's pain. This was not merely in compassion, but in a very real way, taking on other people's physical suffering. It was so real that at times she would have a natural reaction to recoil fearing the pain she would feel. In spite of this she would step up and sit at someone's bedside in the hospital, or while homebound. She trusted that she would make it...beyond her wants, beyond her fears.

She loved people. She loved socials even when her body and energy would tell her to slow down. However, Sheila was actually very timid and felt uneasy, and even panicky, when it came to being in the limelight.

In 1993 she was called to fulfill a position in a parish in San Diego, St. Mark's. Leaving the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and her DMJ community was difficult. In trepidation she was deep in prayer, opened her Bible and read: Jeremiah 1:8 "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and I will rescue you,".

Her ministry expanded to numerous aspects of parish life: RCIA, Legion of Mary, and bereavement ministry. She led countless rosaries at mortuaries, organized funerals and prayed at gravesites. She would walk through crying and contorted faces with grief, and offer a soft handshake, a gentle hug, a peaceful presence, as she herself prayed for strength and courage to be there.

And when she was becoming settled and comfortable she stepped up into leadership for the province. She walked in a spirit of courage and service, even while trembling within, knowing she would have a very difficult time... be not afraid. She faced many challenges in times of diminishment and transition in our community.

Rather than stability, she lived "instability". She had lost her family and home in Ireland, she had left homes, schools, communities, and friends in different places. She left them in trust, beyond her wants, beyond her fears.

She lost her sight . . . She lost recognition of familiar faces, Sisters, friends, relatives, their voices, their words...

But she trusted the Shepherd who led her. She trusted Our Lady who walked with her.

As Father Willie King who knew her for 50 years said of her upon her passing: using a Gaelic expression which translated means: when God created her He broke the mold. Sheila, Ni fheicimid a leitheid aris ann.

Shepherd Sheila, O God, beyond her wants, beyond her fears, from death into life.