



Sister Mary Paul McKenna, MM

Born: September 21, 1888

Entered: July 10, 1917

Died: January 11, 1984

We come together this morning to celebrate with gratitude the long life and faithfulness to mission of our Sister Mary Paul McKenna, who died peacefully in our Maryknoll Nursing Home on January 11, 1984.

Grace Anselma McKenna was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on September 21, 1888, one of 5 children in the family of John and Bridget Hasson McKenna. She was educated in the parochial and public schools of Reading, Pennsylvania, and completed her studies for a Teacher's certificate from Reading Normal School in 1910. She taught in the public schools for 5 years and at the same time began at the University of Pennsylvania what was to become a lifelong pursuit of on-going education. In 1917 she came to join the newly-formed group of Teresians at Maryknoll.

Sister Mary Paul's leadership abilities were quickly recognized and she pioneered many of Maryknoll's "firsts". She was among the first group to take vows as Maryknoll Sisters on February 15, 1921. In September of that same year, she led the first group of Maryknoll Sisters assigned to mission in South China. In 1923 she accompanied Mother Mary Joseph on her first mission visitation and, in the same year, was given the responsibility of traveling to the Philippines to evaluate the possibilities for mission there.

Mother Mary Joseph and Sister Mary Paul made their final vows together in Shingishu, Korea on February 11, 1924.

Sister Mary Paul was to serve the Congregation in a variety of leadership positions for most of her life. She was instrumental in planning for the foundation of many of our Asian missions. As a delegate to the 1946 General Chapter, she was elected Councillor and was re-elected in 1952. After completing her term on the General Council in 1958, she was assigned Superior in Chicago. At the age of 76, she was once again assigned to mission in Hong Kong.

In the late 70s, Sister Mary Paul returned to the United States in order to arrange for the care of her younger sister and brother who were in failing health.

Throughout her life, Sister Mary Paul maintained good health by a faithful commitment to daily exercise. In 1980 an injury necessitated a short stay in the Maryknoll Nursing Home, after which she was able to lead a fairly independent life in The Center Community, at which time she again took courses at the Maryknoll School of Theology. In April 1982 another injury required her to be re-admitted to the Nursing Home.

Sister M. Paul suffered health problems late last summer from which she made a remarkable recovery, although her health remained very fragile.

Despite gradual physical diminishment, Sister Mary Paul maintained her keen interest in Maryknoll and world events.

Any attempt to comprehend what is deep in the heart of another is a delicate and precarious task. There is no doubt in anyone's experience of Sister Mary Paul that she was controversial. Indeed, each of us is controversial in some way and what is in our heart is never fully revealed. Because she was called to the service of leadership and authority during most of her life, as well as during most of the Maryknoll Sisters' 72 year history, Sister Mary Paul has become a vital, public person in our Congregational history. The controversy about her style, convictions and decisions are then more public and long-lasting than is usual.

Administrator, organizer, mover of projects, efficient, woman of discipline, of action and a woman of her times, would surely describe many of her talents and skills.

In the early days of our presence in China, there was much discussion about the ministry and life-style of the Maryknoll Sisters. Sister Mary Paul listened to and weighed all aspects of Bishop Francis X. Ford's new ideas of Sisters living in twos among the people in the villages. As Superior, once her decision was made, she didn't consider the risk of being controversial and wholeheartedly supported the new venture.

In a letter from Hong Kong to Mother Mary Joseph in 1936, after admitting her impatience, she mentions something which gives us an insight about one who has the above-mentioned talents. Writing of the spirit of charity, she says: "Without it, our work is worth nothing.

Here we are faced with that so strongly because we are made constantly conscious of our obligation to influence souls – that all else is only a means to that end and no matter how cleverly we may work, without the fruition for

souls, we have not fulfilled our vocation and we are ‘unprofitable.’ That reality is one of the blessings of the mission field.”

In an interview 41 years later, Sister Mary Paul said: “What’s most important? Most important is a deep personal spirituality which enables one to keep our goals clear and firm and to have an interest and empathy with other people and cultures.”

One can imagine the deep struggle of the efficient administrator who held charity, empathy and patience as the deepest desires of her heart. For a woman who was straightforward, clear and firm about her own goals, she was so dedicated to mission through Maryknoll that she was able to recognize and affirm styles of leadership and authority which were quite different from her own.

In June 1981, after attending our ceremony of First Commitment and Mission Sending, she wrote to me: “As you know, I have attended many such ceremonies at Maryknoll on both sides of the road – but this one gave me a sense of deeper appreciation of our missionary vocation.

There was no glossing over the reality of the Cross — We are maturing.” She concludes her note with: “Be assured of my prayers that God may continue to bless and inspire your leadership. Gratefully, Sister Mary Paul.”

Sister Mary Paul saw clearly that we will continue to grow and mature in our understanding of mission. She was convinced that Maryknoll is blessed and inspired by God.

When asked what do you enjoy? She responded: “Maryknoll. I enjoy Maryknoll and its vision and its efforts thrill me.”

As we now celebrate the Eucharist in memory of Jesus, we also remember Sister Mary Paul McKenna, friend, leader and apostle. May we, here today, enjoy Maryknoll and may its vision and its effort thrill us!

Father John Cioppa, Missioner from Hong Kong and member of the General Council of the Maryknoll Society, will lead us in our Eucharistic celebration.