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Obituary



Sr. Patricia Crowley of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago, a social justice advocate, and a leader in the church and community, died Oct. 14. (Courtesy of Benedictine Sisters of Chicago)



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October 16, 2023
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Benedictine Sr. Patricia Crowley came from a famous Catholic family — she even shared a first name with her parents, Pat and Patty Crowley, who served on Pope Paul VI's birth control commission. But "Patsy," as she was known, went on to make her own mark as a Benedictine sister, social justice advocate, and leader in the church and community.

Crowley died Oct. 14 from complications from a stroke and cancer. She was 84.

In Chicago, where she was born and lived much of her life, Crowley was first known for her work with communities of people experiencing homelessness. She served as executive director of the Howard Area Community Center and of Deborah's Place, a program for homeless women. Later, she helped found a ministry to young women seeking asylum, called Bethany House of Hospitality.

"Patsy really lived her faith through action on behalf of others, especially marginalized women," said Sr. Mary Susan Remsgar, current prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago. She noted that Crowley was "widely known and respected throughout the city of Chicago and beyond."

"She also was someone who was able to attract others to join with her to assist others in practical and effective ways," Remsgar said. "She really made a difference in the lives of those whom she served."

It was a lesson she learned from her parents, who were active in lay movements of the 20th century, including the Christian Family Movement. The eldest daughter of six children (not including countless foster children cared for by her family), Crowley grew up in a family committed to social justice and their Catholic faith.

"I think Patsy followed in her parents' footsteps in that respect," Remsgar said.



Pictured with Benedictine Sr. Patricia Crowley (right) at a demonstration are Benedictine Srs. Benita Coffey (left) and Patricia Cielinski. (Courtesy of Benedictine Sisters of Chicago)

Mary Ann Kono of Santa Cruz, California, said her sister "epitomized the Crowley family legacy of striving to live out the Gospel teaching to feed the hungry, shelter those who are homeless, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, offer clothes to those in need, look after the sick and visit those in prison."

Kono remembers that "we never had fewer than 10 people at the dinner table" where deep conversations about faith and current events were held. The family said the rosary together in the evenings, and when Patsy was older, she accompanied her mother on visits to women at the state detention center on Saturdays.

"As a small child, I loved 'playing priest' at a little table with some bread on a plate in the middle of the basement of our house," Crowley wrote in a reflection about her vocation on her community's website. "My mother read us the lives of the saints in

the car on our long trips to visit Christian Family Movement (CFM) groups throughout the country each summer. I was particularly taken with Thérèse of Lisieux. My parents also taught us Gospel responsibilities to our society and encouraged reflection on the Sunday Gospel after Mass each Sunday."

Young Patricia dreamed of having a large family, but was also inspired by the sisters of St. Scholastica High School in Chicago, whom she saw as "very human and very holy." She continued to consider religious life while attending Trinity College in Washington, D.C., and entered the community in 1958.

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Judith Borchers, a former Benedictine sister who entered with Crowley, said Patsy was one of the first in the community to move out of sisters' traditional ministries. "She was always doing something new and innovative," Borchers said during an August celebration of Crowley's life held in Chicago.

Crowley went on to become a leader in communities of religious women. She served as prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago, president of the Conference of Benedictine Prioresses and a board member of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR. She also was coordinator of the Together program for the religious formation conference.

At the celebration of life, planned before a stroke prevented Crowley from attending in person (she attended virtually), speakers praised her administrative gifts, spirit of collaboration, love of learning and ability to empower people. She also was described as a companion to those on the spiritual journey.

Patsy was "a dreamer with her feet planted firmly on the ground but with arms reaching out to the hurting world with love," Franciscan Sr. Dolores Zemont, board president of Bethany House, said at the celebration.

Later in life, Crowley taught spiritual direction in Namibia and coordinated a monthly *lectio divina* prayer group online, having earned a master's degree in catechetical theology from Manhattan College in New York and certification in spiritual direction from the Siena Center in Racine, Wisconsin. She was a team member with the Ignatian Spirituality Project and served on the boards of many nonprofit organizations.

During Crowley's tenure as prioress, the community made the difficult decision to close St. Scholastica High School, a move Remsgar called "courageous."

"It wasn't easy or pleasant, but it was needed and it was necessary," the current prioress said. "She didn't flinch from it. She did what had to be done."



Sr. Patricia Crowley is pictured blessing Benedictine Oblates in Colorado. (Courtesy of Benedictine Sisters of Chicago)

Throughout her life, Crowley's faith and spirituality were foundational to her work and life, say people who knew her. Many remember her as a daily Massgoer who rarely missed morning and evening prayer with the community of sisters. In September, she was wheeled from the infirmary to the chapel for daily prayer.

"She listened to God very intently and really paid attention to where she believed God was leading her and directing her to serve," Remsgar said. "She had a determination about her but also a gentleness and grace that attracts people."

In her own emails to family and friends during her cancer treatment, Crowley wrote about the spiritual challenges of her illness. "After 5 chemotherapy infusions, I am trying to just live in the present moment as I face the unknown and experience the mystery of letting go and of being open to new possibilities," she wrote in a January email.

Fr. Robert Oldershaw, a Chicago priest who knew Crowley's family and was friends with Patsy, called her "indefatigable" and a model "evangelizer" who went to the peripheries, in the language of Pope Francis.

Like her parents, Patsy hoped for reform in the church, especially expanded roles for women, which she herself modeled, Oldershaw said. "She was a witness to the beauty and the power and the wisdom of women," he said.

The two shared a love of poetry, especially Jesuit Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins. At the celebration of her life in August, Oldershaw shared a "Hopkinsinian" blessing written in the style of the poet's "Pied Beauty," which concluded:

> You are kingfisher catching fire,
> dragon fly drawing flame,
> You are Patsy Crowley, OSB
> With but one work to do
> Let all God's glory through.
> You are the just woman justicing,
> keeping grace,
> Acting in God's eye who in God's eye you are —
> Christ!
> For Christ plays in 10,000 places.
> Lovely in eyes, lovely in limbs not his,
> Through the features of your face, Patsy!

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A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 27-Nov 9, 2023** print issue under the headline: Sr. Patricia Crowley, who made a mark on the Chicago church, dies.