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A reflection on motherhood: one life well-lived

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Anne-Marie Gallagher quietly makes rosaries at home.

Every four years the presidential campaigns roll out their version of motherhood and apple pie. This year is no different. While the recent public discussion on motherhood was ramping up, the life of one mother, Anne-Marie Gallagher, was coming to an end. After suffering a serious stroke earlier this year, Anne-Marie went home to God peacefully surrounded by her family in upstate New York on April 14.

Anne-Marie, a distant relative of mine, lived a quiet, but extraordinary life, a life that offers much to ponder.

She had 13 children, 48 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, with one son a priest and one daughter a nun. Three other children are members of Opus Dei, whose mission is to turn work and daily activities into occasions for growing closer to God, serving others and improving society.

Anne-Marie and her twin brother, George, were born Feb. 25, 1929, in Strakonice, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), to Rudolf and Milada Menkes. She also had an older brother, John (now deceased), and older sister, Eva. They were a prominent Jewish family in this small town about 60 miles from Prague. The family celebrated the major Jewish holidays, but also had a Christmas tree and the kids received Christmas gifts.

Her father, a pessimist by nature, could see that Hitler and the German army would eventually take over Czechoslovakia. In 1931, Anne-Marie?s parents changed their name to the nondescript Menkart from the Jewish Menkes.

At the age of 9, Anne-Marie and her family began an odyssey of escape that took them to Elbeuf, France, and then when the Nazis invaded France, on to Bordeaux via a 400-mile taxi ride.

The Menkarts then undertook a feverish, four-week effort to secure visas to another country, including Portugal, Argentina, Venezuela and China. They sent telegrams to relatives and friends in the U.S., Latin America and England seeking advice and assistance.

As the Germans began to conquer Belgium and Holland, Anne-Marie?s sister, Eva, on behalf of her family, purchased Veronal, a powerful sedative, from various pharmacies. If the Germans arrived in Bordeaux, the

family was prepared to end it all.

Visas were finally secured on the last day before the French government moved from Paris to Bordeaux. The Menkarts left on a ship headed for the Dominican Republic three days before the Germans entered Bordeaux.

After arriving in the Dominican Republic in 1940, the Menkarts eventually secured visas and other documentation necessary to travel to the U.S. They arrived in 1941 and settled in New York City.

Once in the U.S. the children entered school. Anne-Marie?s twin brother, George, recalled, ?None of the faculty and none of the students spoke any of the languages that we knew. For a couple of weeks, until we learned enough English to interact with the indigenous people, we could only talk to each other.?

After high school, Anne-Marie attended prestigious Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Mass., graduating in 1950.

It was at Radcliffe that Anne-Marie converted to Catholicism. Contributing to her conversion was a roommate who would take her to Catholic events such as retreats.

?She took classes on Western civilization and came across St. Augustine and St. Anselm and they made sense to her,? said Oblate of the Virgin Mary Fr. Timothy Gallagher, her son. ?These things were stirring in her when she met Dad, who was Catholic.?

Years later, Father Tim and his mother were speaking about her conversion. Then, as Father Tim was getting into his car to leave, she came running out of the kitchen and wanted to add one more thing: ?I remember listening to Handel?s ?Messiah? and I knew I believed.?

In 1950, she married Wendell Gallagher of Binghamton, N.Y. They settled in Maine, N.Y., and were parishioners at Holy Rosary Parish for the next 58 years. Wendell joined his father in running two gas stations and eventually took over. Wendell died in 2009.

Anne-Marie and Wendell took seriously the role of being the primary educators of their children in the faith. They attended daily Mass and prayed the rosary daily. When rosary time came, the neighborhood kids would have to wait on the porch before they could resume play.

In the early 1970s, Anne-Marie committed to making at least one rosary a day and distributing them to local churches and missions. Her son James studied the notebook where she recorded her completed rosaries and estimated that she created more than 20,000.

Anne-Marie?s influence on her children was by example, a ?quiet strength,? according to Father Tim. ?She knew who she was and what she wanted to do.?

The family grew up without a television and became avid readers. Anne-Marie particularly enjoyed reading St. Francis de Sales, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and Msgr. Ronald Knox, the English priest-convert and theologian. Anne-Marie instructed the children that every third book they read had to be about the lives of the saints.

?Everything came together,? said Father Tim. ?We had a good Catholic school run by sisters, a good parish and a very Catholic home, a very prayerful home.

?My parents were very unobtrusive and never pushed a vocation to the priesthood in the slightest,? he said. ?It was the air they breathed.?

When he was a senior in high school, Father Tim told his mother that he wanted to be a priest. She teared up with happiness for just a moment.

Today Fr. Tim Gallagher gives retreats, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation according to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. He has authored six books and has appeared on EWTN and CatholicTV.

Daughter Mary attributes Anne-Marie?s ?every third book? requirement for triggering her thoughts about a vocation to religious life.

She recounted for the Syracuse, N.Y., diocesan newspaper: ?I was very moved by [the biography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux] and was impressed by the intimate relationship she had with the Lord. I saw how, in the cloister, she filled the silence of her day with a loving dialogue with him. I thought that when I grew up I would like to be just like her.?

Today, Mary is now Sr. Mary Timothy of the International Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary of Fatima. She is based in Milan, Italy.

Anne-Marie was an active volunteer at her parish and in helping neighbors and friends.

Margaret Stark, a longtime neighbor, said Anne-Marie had a major influence on her. ?She taught me how to say the rosary,? and ?without saying a word to me, she got me to attend daily Mass,? she said.

?Anne-Marie lived her religion,? Stark said. ?She would drop everything and help you, if you needed it.?

Another neighbor, Dorothy Ludington, has known the Gallaghers for more than 50 years. She and Anne-Marie would babysit each other?s kids. ?Wendell was my husband?s godfather when he converted,? Ludington said. ?Anne-Marie would fix my rosary whenever it broke.?

Even in her later years, Anne-Marie would drive into nearby Binghamton once a week to take care of a woman in her 90s.

For this cosmopolitan Radcliffe College graduate, who spoke several languages, her family and her faith ?created an enormously fruitful life that gave her fulfillment and peace,? Father Tim said.

The impact of Anne-Marie Gallagher?s life of faith and selflessness will be felt for decades to come.

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