

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 21, 2013 at 6:05am

Church World Service humanitarian fought hunger, poverty at home and abroad

by Chris Herlinger

Appreciation

I am filled with respect and admiration for the women of my mother's generation: those born before or during World War II who are now in their 70s. They were (and are) a "transition generation" that, in the 1960s and 1970s, witnessed and experienced great change and upheavals, living lives many of them never could have foreseen as girls.

I am including in this group, of course, the generation of Catholic sisters who came of age during and after the Second Vatican Council. The story of what happened to that generation is well known to *NCR* readers: Some remained in their religious orders and have been leaders for change and social justice, both within and outside the church. Many others, of course, left for other vocations -- to teach, to marry, to serve elsewhere in new and different ways. Their stories are perhaps not as well-known because many entered the pulse of mainstream life.

One of their numbers was a colleague of mine, Marie Varley, a former Caldwell Dominican sister who for years served as the New Jersey and New York metro regional director for Church World Service (CWS), a predominately Protestant humanitarian agency.

Marie died Sept. 2 after a long battle with cancer. She was 75.

Marie was one of those rare people who didn't look puzzled when I explained that I work as a writer for CWS but also write for Catholic media, including *NCR*, Catholic News Service and *America* magazine. As she once told me, "I am glad the Catholics found you to write for *NCR*, which represents another segment of this vast church."

That reflected her wide, warm and thoroughly ecumenical vision of what the church should be, and it's not surprising for someone whose faith journey didn't follow expected patterns. But then, that was true of many of Marie's generation: They took that ecumenical vision of the 1960s to heart.

Marie was born June 10, 1938, into an Irish Catholic family in Jersey City, N.J., that included two brothers and two sisters. (One brother became a priest but left the priesthood.) Marie attended Catholic schools before entering the Caldwell Dominican community in 1956.

She later attended Caldwell College. Along the way came other degrees, including a doctorate in education. She also earned a master's in government and international relations from the University of Notre Dame.

Marie became a teacher and eventually a school principal in Union City, N.J., and later taught at Caldwell College. Marie's last formal educational post was at Seton Hall University. But Marie never gave up being a teacher in some capacity. In explaining her decision to leave her order in the late 1970s -- and she was very matter-of-fact about that -- Marie told me she felt a call to serve God in a different way, down a different path. In her case, that meant eventually working for a Protestant group, educating and organizing around the cause of fighting hunger and poverty.

Still, Marie never lost connection with her former religious order. She helped fundraise for the Caldwell Dominican sisters, and her last days were spent at the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell-St. Catherine of Siena Health Care Center.

"They took her back," said her sister, Sheila Alfano. "Marie left [the order], but she never really left."

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Marie didn't limit herself to church-related causes. Lesley Crosson, a CWS colleague who served with Marie on the board of the New York-based C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, said Marie "brought her skills as a fundraiser and as a purposeful member of society to an organization that helps people find healing and meaning in their lives and relationships and helps them live in response to a discovered sense of purpose."

Another CWS colleague, Kathleen Kusterbeck, said she doubts "there is one person anywhere on earth who knows all that Marie gave to others."

For example, "Marie paid for countless children in Newark to attend Catholic school rather than the poorly staffed Newark school in the neighborhood," Kusterbeck said. "She never said no."

Whatever Marie did, she did with tireless persistence and love.

At her Sept. 7 funeral service, held at St. Joseph's Church in gritty East Orange, N.J., Marie was eulogized in particular for the 33 years she helped organize CWS's CROP Hunger Walks, communitywide events that raise money and awareness for fighting hunger, both globally and in the United States.

Marie was known as "The CROP Lady" in New Jersey, a passionate advocate for the poor everywhere who loved to speak to community members about the work of CWS, which she saw firsthand on trips to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

One locale that touched Marie in particular was Pakistan, which she visited in 2007. In looking over emails I exchanged with Marie several years ago during a time of ongoing problems for Pakistan (for example, years of floods that followed a horrific 2005 earthquake), I am struck by her steadfast concern for the Pakistanis she met and her determination to keep fundraising for the humanitarian work performed in Pakistan -- not a popular thing to do in post-9/11 America.

After flooding hit the country in 2011, Marie wrote: "This is such a tragedy. It is difficult to imagine all of this happening after last year's floods. I pray that CWS can somehow engage the Pakistani community here in the U.S. to respond. I will keep praying for donors."

That wasn't all. Marie included this tagline in her emails for more than a year: "Please support the CWS Pakistan Appeal to assist over 2 million displaced people. In 2007, I visited the northwest area of Pakistan and was so impressed with all they had rebuilt ..."

This dedication to service was keenly and affectionately on display during Marie's Irish-themed funeral, which attracted both the wealthy and the poor, both those speaking English and those speaking Spanish.

"Her world was this," I heard someone behind me at the service say.

Marie's other sister, Eileen Betz, told me at the funeral that it is hard to convey in a published obituary, or even in a funeral service, someone's joyful and playful sense of humor. But Marie had one in abundance. Once at an office "Mad Men" theme party ("Dress as you were in the '60s"), Marie wore her old habit. Years later, we, her colleagues, are still talking about that one.

Marie could be as critical as any *NCR* reader about the church and its many problems and challenges. Yet she loved the church, attending Mass several times a week, and Sheila said Marie was heartened by Pope Francis and optimistic about his papacy.

Regardless of who was pope, Marie loved serving God in her warm, quietly ebullient and cheerfully persistent way.

I once sent Marie an online version of a story I wrote for *NCR* that prominently mentioned the role of women. It was proof, I said, "that the best folks in the Catholic Church are THE WOMEN!"

She instantly shot me back an email: "You are RIGHT."

[Chris Herlinger is a frequent contributor to *NCR*. He is a New York-based freelance journalist and a writer with the humanitarian agency Church World Service.]

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