



Remembering

Sister Thomas Bernard MacConnell, CSJ

April 23, 1926 - June 11, 2019

Sister Thomas Bernard, Patricia Mary MacConnell, was born in Oakland, California on April 23, 1926, the third child of Herbert Woodruff MacConnell and Ida Catherine Myers. Sister's father, Herbert, was born in Cranford, New Jersey, and her mother, Ida, in Ferdinand, Indiana where they met. Patricia's sister, Yvonne, was five years older and brother, Charles (Bud) just three years her senior. They were a very close family and Sister remained close to each of them until their deaths. It was through them that she was blessed with a wonderful relationship with Yvonne's husband, Howard, 4 nieces (Debbie, Janiene, Judy and Rebecca), 2 nephews (Ron and Tom), as well as grand-nephew (Christopher).

Growing up in the thirties and early forties, Thomas Bernard or TB, as she was fondly called, cited as her strongest memories of that time period, the struggles of the great depression and the impact of World War II. She notes, "We were poor, but somehow or other, my parents

managed to keep us together. We grew up in a neighborhood where there many children, our family being the only Catholic family. We often commented on how much fun we had with relatively few resources."

It was within family and St. Jarlath's parish that Sr. Thomas Bernard met a lifelong friend, Erwin Cain, whom she referred to as her brother "Erv." Erwin lived with the MacConnell family in Oakland before his entrance into the seminary. He was ordained in 1950 and was renowned for his ministerial leadership roles in San Francisco and later in the Stockton diocese.

Patricia attended St. Jarlath's Elementary school where the impact made by her teachers, the Sisters of St. Joseph, eventually became a decisive factor in her discernment of vocation. Pat attended Fremont High School in Oakland, where she became deeply involved in Speech and Drama classes and plays. This love of drama remained with her throughout her

life.

Pat financed herself through college at Holy Names in Oakland by working and receiving some scholarship aid. It comes as no surprise that she majored in Speech and Drama with minors in Philosophy and English. At the end of her college years, she knew God was calling her to religious life. She was very attracted to the Sisters of the Holy Names, but her discernment led her to the Sisters of St. Joseph. In her own words, "In the end, it was my observation of the Sisters over many years; they seemed to have so much fun among themselves. That was very appealing!"

Before entering the congregation, Pat devised a creative way to earn her dowry. During the war effort, she enlisted to drive trucks for the Army. Her experience is recorded in the first of the essays of a book published in 1953, Why I Entered the Convent.

Patricia began religious life as a Postulant at St. Mary's Academy on Slauson and Crenshaw on September 15, 1947. She received the habit and the name Sr. Thomas Bernard on March 20, 1948; professed first vows on March 19, 1950 and made Final vows on August 15, 1953. The group (Reception) in which she entered was atypical of those times. Of the 18, six were older, having some significant life experiences and twelve were just out of high school. TB described the group in this way, "The receptions before and after us were truly extraordinary; we were extraordinary because we were so ordinary." Sister's leadership and talents soon became apparent. She was in her element as she wrote and directed the traditional St. Stanislaus play, the Wizard of Oz puppet performance, and the Postulants' Christmas play which eventually was

performed on the first Sunday of Lent. Sister's ministry career started out as ordinary, yet truly became quite extraordinary. In fact, it might be called "checkered" due to her giftedness and willingness to serve wherever her talents were needed. After teaching three years at St. John Chrysostom elementary school, she was missioned to Bishop Conaty High School where she taught Latin and Driver's Education which had just become a requirement for graduation. During this time, she earned her Master's degree in English from Loyola University, her thesis being a study of Chaucer and the Middle English Mary-Lyric.

After teaching English and Speech at St. Bernard's in Westchester, she was invited to join the English Department at Mount St. Mary's College where among other classes, she taught Epic and Drama, always with a flair for Homer's Iliad which remained one of her lifelong favorites. After only three years at the Mount, Sister's talents for administration were tapped when she was appointed Principal at St. Mary's Academy. She was the last Principal at the Slauson-Crenshaw site and the first on the new campus in Inglewood.

TB describes her next call to ministry as follows: "During the Watts riots of 1965, the National Guard was camped on the lawn of St. Mary's Academy. It was through a Guard checkpoint that I was sent to my next ministry—to be Superior in our Juniorate." Thomas did so in her own unassuming way—just being herself and providing wise counseling for the Junior Sisters. After several years in this position, community called again, this time, to return to Mount St. Mary's College as Superior of

the local community and part-time instructor.

Sr. Thomas Bernard served only a short time in this position because in 1972 she was elected by the Los Angeles Province Chapter to serve as General Councilor in St. Louis. She served for six years during the first term of Sr. Mary Kevin Ford from 1972 until 1978. Her special area of ministry was the Congregational Archives.

When her term as General Councilor was completed, Sr. Thomas Bernard was asked to be Local Superior of Our Lady of Grace Convent in Inglewood, the residence for our Sisters who served at Daniel Freeman Hospital. TB commented that this was her first experience with hospital Sisters. It was fulfilling, but, once again her term was cut short. In 1983 she was called to be the first Superior of the newly-established Holy Family Community at Carondelet Center.

Sister described her last and most memorable ministry assignment as follows: "The next adventure, after six years with our Senior Sisters, years for which I am ever grateful, I was asked to set up and open the Spirituality Center for the Archdiocese. Cardinal Manning said, 'Let it begin modestly,' and indeed it did. It has been a wonderful position and a place where so much of my life became integrated; came full circle. It has been a rich and full life."

Amid the many activities she carried out as Director of the Spirituality Center from 1985 until her retirement, Sr. Thomas Bernard, also served as Provincial Councilor from 1998-2004; was active in the Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue for the Archdiocese; led several Pilgrimages to the Holy

Land and was looking for her next challenge as she participated in the pilgrimage: "In the Footsteps of St. Paul", travel-study through western Turkey and Greece, including exploration of the sites of the seven Churches of the Book of Revelation.

Sr. Thomas Bernard began her account written for the Archives, with these words: "My years in the congregation have been quite a bag!" After listening to this abbreviated account of her life, who could argue with that?

Sister's life was undeniably full. It was replete with scholarly accomplishments such as those of her beloved patron St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet the scholar and the servant leader balanced her pursuit of "the more" with the spiritual depth characteristic of her other cherished patron, St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

Sr. Thomas Bernard—simple, ordinary and approachable; yet always searching, intuitive, and quietly contemplative. Your spirit is now at rest. You have found the God of your questing and you will not release your hold on that mystery of Beauty and of Truth beyond words.

~ Sister Eileen Mitchell, CSJ
(Reception Member and loving friend through 70 years)

