



Sister Mary Ellen Kowalski, CSJ

October 24, 1930 - August 30, 2021

Mary Ellen was the youngest of five children; Jack, Bob, Tom, Ken and then she came along. These fun loving, often very mischievous children were born to Lawrence Kowalski and Lillian Mullins. Larry was born in Moorehead, Minn., and Lillian in Napa, Calif. Her parents' cultural backgrounds of English and Irish, German and Polish had a great deal to do with a strict yet loving upbringing and strong family ties that were so treasured by Mary Ellen.

All the children were born at St. John's Hospital in Fargo, North Dakota, a hospital that was then staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet from St. Paul, Minnesota. Mary Ellen was not to be re-acquainted again with the C.S.J.s until August, 1949 when the community was invited by Msgr. Robert Falvey, (brother of Sisters Robertine and Laurentine), to staff St. Catherine of Sienna School in Martinez.

The Kowalski family left Fargo and moved to Martinez in 1933. All of Mary Ellen's education was through the public school system. Her religious education was from her devout parents and attendance at catechism classes taught by the Holy Family Sisters. The importance of family and community ties, and support were stressed and were therefore easily transferred to religious community life.

Mary Ellen learned how important good sportsmanship and being a team player were. Her father and brothers were into sports, and her brothers received sports scholarships. Football was the family sport, with the 49ers as their team.

All of Mary Ellen's brothers served in the Navy during World War II and the Korean War. Family prayer became even more important to her parents and to Mary Ellen during those days. Thank God all the boys returned safe.

After Mary Ellen graduated from Alhambra Union High School in Martinez, she had her heart set on becoming a nurse. She had even sent in her application to St. Mary's College of Nursing in San Francisco. God intervened, as well as the Sisters of St. Joseph, when they came to Martinez. At that time the sisters did not drive, and Mary Ellen was called on to drive them. Her father worked for a Ford dealership, and was generous in loaning cars for her to use for the sisters. Thus, in 1949, a relationship of love, care, concern, and a new familial sense of belonging was begun. The original Martinez community was made up of Sisters Mary Anne Bahner, Patricia Margaret Barnard and St. Anne Bromham. Mary Ellen once said, "What a dynamic, energetic, inclusive group. Who wouldn't want to be part of an organization made of women such as these?"

Mary Ellen entered religious life on September 15, 1950 at St. Mary's Academy. There were fifty vocations in the Holy Year 1950. It was this group of young women who initiated Sister Rose Cecilia into her new ministry as Mistress of Postulants. What an energetic group they were. Mary Ellen received the habit on March 18, 1951 and was given the religious name Sister Mary Lorraine. She made her first profession on March 19, 1953. In 1969 she chose to return to her baptismal name Mary Ellen. She celebrated her 60th Jubilee in 2011 and her 70th this year.

Mary Ellen became an excellent first grade teacher. Her students were taught with loving care, and religion class was the highlight of the day. Her classrooms were a joy to be in, and they reflected her creativity, love of beauty and cleanliness, and organization. She generously gave of her time and talents to others. Mary Ellen was in elementary education and administration from 1953 to 1976, a total of 23 years. Then her ministry changed from education to diocesan global education in the Office for the Missions in San Diego, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Holy Childhood Association in the San Diego Diocese. She had the marvelous fortune of visiting Bolivia, Haiti, Venezuela, Peru and Chile. She and Sister Kathleen Corbett's visit to Chile initiated the C.S.J. Community commitment in ministry to the Chilean people through the invitation of the Bishop of Talca, Chile, Don Carlos Gonzalez.

Mary Ellen was in the Mission Office for 17 years, from 1976 - 1993. She then attended Berkley at the School of Applied Theology, was appointed principal at Vacaville, and later, librarian at Christ the King School in Concord for 14 years. It was sometime in her later years in the north that the "Jack Ass" club came about. She said, "If I call you a jack-ass, it is a term of endearment". Images of donkeys adorned her room wherever she lived and all those inaugurated into her club were grateful! Her transition to Carondelet Center and the Holy Family Community on February 28, 2008, was not easy, given her independent nature and her growing limitations. Eventually she became accustomed to her new setting and was a cheerful and generous addition to the many activities and groups she attended. Staff looked to her for support and insights.

Mary Ellen appreciated her long friendship with Sister Suzanne Steffen and Sister Kathleen Corbett. They were able to spend time together as residents of Holy Family Community as they aged.

Mary Ellen's smile and sense of humor were a welcome addition to Holy Family. She found support and meaning in her deepening relationship with God and the dear neighbor. Much was asked of her and she responded with a generosity and cheerfulness that was God given. Even at the end of her life her gracious smile did not abandon her. As one of the first 25 sisters to transition to St. John of God Retirement Center, she continued her ministry of loving presence and hospitality. Before long, the staff were in her room enjoying her wit and kindness.

Mary Ellen asked that Robert Frost poem "Two Road Diverge" be included in remembrances of her. She died peacefully at St. John of God on August 30, surrendering her life into the hands of her loving God who walked that divergent path with her for ninety years.

While many will miss her, now she is free from the limitations she endured for so long, and in God's love rests gently and gratefully.

This necrology was written by Sister Mary Ellen Kowalski, CSJ