

Mother Margaret Mary Palumbo, C.S.JB.

April 17, 1907 - October 2, 2003

Whether we knew her as fellow Sister, Superior, principal, teacher, novice mistress or friend, we all knew Mother Margaret Mary as a "sister in the Lord". Come with me in your heart's imagination as we leave this chapel for a few moments and enter the courtyard of the heavenly kingdom. "My dear ..." begins a soft voice that commands your full attention. It is a voice instantly recognizable - and loved. From every direction come streams of people to welcome Mother Margaret Mary into her heavenly home.

Her parents Mary and Vincent eagerly await her, as do her sister and other family members. Vincenzina, as she was baptized 96 years ago in St. Rita's Parish in the Bronx, is greeted by fellow Bronx classmates from the Ursuline School, Washington Irving HS and Fordham University. Both her father and her uncle were professors. Vincenzina, a gifted and serious student, determined to follow in their footsteps and dedicate her life to helping God's little ones as a teacher.

"Jenny" as she is still affectionately remembered by her cousin Louis was responsible for taking her then 7 yr. old cousin each day to Our Lady of Loreto School in Manhattan. Louis recalls a quiet, shy but determined young woman. It was as a lay teacher at Our Lady of Loreto that "Jenny" first met the Baptistine Sisters. Impressed by their loving dedication to the children and by their prayerful commitment to God, her heart was receptive when God planted the seed of a vocation. Through her own prayer and reflection, Vincenzina would nurture this gift from God - a gift she would treasure, like the pearl of great price - for her lifetime.

The older of only two children Vincenzina's plans for religious life were not well received by her family. Her entrance story is memorable. Determined to answer God's call she literally ran away to the Convent - wearing a double set of clothes. On March 23, 1930 - the anniversary of the Founder's birthday - Vincenzina received the habit of the Sisters of St. John the Baptist and a new name. Known now as Sr. Margaret Mary and following in her namesake's path, she began a lifetime devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For 73 years Sr Margaret Mary allowed God to transform her so that all who met her knew that she too was "gentle and humble of heart".

Like the Founder, Bl Alfonso Fusco, Mother Margaret Mary had a lifelong predilection for God's little ones. As we stand in the heavenly courtyard we see line after line of children racing forward to greet Mother. They are led by the children from St James School in Manhattan where Mother served as teacher, principal and local Superior. In the 1940's, long before cars were common and Sisters drove, Mother Margaret Mary faithfully lead her Sisters in their daily bus commute from convent to school and back again. How many more lives were touched as Mother cordially greeted her fellow riders and accepted their requests for prayers. As we look we see that the throng of youngsters includes students from St. John Villa Academy, Staten Island. In the late 30's Mother taught in the Villa's elementary school and returned in the 60's to serve as principal of the high school and superior of the local community.

In 1946 Mother accepted an assignment that would define her life and leave an indelible mark upon the Baptistine Community here in the United States. As we watch, we see the first of those novices who have already gone home to God embrace their Mother Mistress. For 10 years Mother lovingly welcomed young women into the novitiate of the Baptistine Community. By instruction, but mainly by example, Mother gently guided these young souls entrusted to her care, molding them into spouses of Christ and women of the Church. Her famous "little black book", secure deep in her tunic pocket, kept record of her pious thoughts and astute observations. Her sayings became engraved on the hearts of her novices as guideposts for life: e.g "Gratitude is the mark of a refined soul".

Truly, Mother looked upon these young women as her "little sisters". Their families were always warmly welcomed and graciously received. On occasion family members were looked after in the absence of their daughters. Whether they remained in religious life or followed God's call to another path the postulants and novices touched by Mother Margaret Mary's loving guidance know that they owe her a debt of gratitude that extends into eternity.

It was with great reluctance, but in humble response to the greater need, that in 1957 Mother agreed to leave her beloved postulants and novices in order to assume leadership responsibility for the American community. In the years of her tenure the Church, American society, and the Baptistine Community were challenged by profound changes. Through her

deep commitment to the Founder's vision, her gentle leadership style, and her steadfast faith in Divine Providence, Mother Margaret Mary led the recently designated American Region through a time of unprecedented expansion and to a clearer understanding of itself as a more autonomous entity in the Baptistine family. Beginning with Father Founder all those Baptistines who have gone before her receive Mother, a true and faithful daughter of Alfonso Fusco.

Now in the heavenly courtyard we see an older group of women approaching Mother. At age 64 when the world begins to consider retirement, Mother Margaret Mary began a new chapter in her life.

Named Superior of the Sisters' vacation house in the Catskills, for the next 20 years Mother devoted herself to Alphonsus Manor, in Cairo, NY with the same resolve that she had brought to earlier tasks. In due time Alphonsus Manor became a haven for women being discharged from the care of the State of New York. Mother accepted them, providing them with a home that was loving and secure. At the same time, she sought out, once again, God's "little ones" and coordinated the CCD program in the local parish. Every moment that she was bringing another girl or boy to Jesus through Mary was a joy for her.

In 1990 Mother returned for her 3rd and final residence at Mt. St. John, Purchase. Now in her 90's Mother's childlike simplicity endeared her to the Sisters and staff who attended her as well as to the children of the on-site Day Care facility. She still loved bringing God's "little ones" close to her so that she could lead them to Jesus. Her final years were an opportunity for deepened prayer and for renewed contacts with many of her novices, students and friends. At times her wit and humor seemed to bubble up now more than ever. On one occasion as Mother resisted getting out of her bed, the local Superior reminded Mother of the saying that she had used with her novices: "At the sound of the bell you should rise as if your bed is on fire." Mother's instant and unexpected response brought a chuckle: "Well, that was silly, wasn't it?" On another occasion one of her novices was trying to get her to eat the veggie soup instead of the sweets that she preferred. Sister kept encouraging: "Mother, eat it, it's good for you." Mother's determined response: "Because it's good for you doesn't mean it's good for me!"

The crowd is parting and we see Mother fading from our sight. It is time for us to add our own final words: "Mother Margaret Mary, your Sisters still here on earth thank you for your daily example of a God-

centered life of unstinting service, compassionate leadership, and sisterly love. May you enjoy for all eternity the fruits and fullness of God's abiding love."

As we prepare to leave the heavenly courtyard we hear a final, loving voice, beckoning: "Veni, Sponsa Christi. Come, Vincenzina, Jenny, Margaret Mary, receive the crown the Lord has prepared for you from all eternity".