

Sister Mary Gen Smyth

June 30, 1929 - September 18, 2013

What about Mary Gen? She was a person who in certain milieu might easily have been missed. She could be quiet, unobtrusive, and easily slip into the background to let others shine. Yet, in her own way, she was powerful and influential-- it was her loving outreach to others that touched hearts and moved people to respond. Some of the comments by her Soboba extended community included:

- “Sister Mary Gen had a great interest in the people of Soboba ...”
- “Our memories of Sister Mary Gen are of a faithful and hardworking servant of God and her community ... she was so diligent in caring for the needs of the Sacristy and the church itself ...”
- “...a kind and loving person ...”
- “She was like a shining Star in our church.”
- “... generous, helpful, and persistent to get things accomplished.”
- “...always had a warm and ready smile and a positive attitude...”
- “...a very strong and faithful woman of God ...”
- “Thank you for showing us the love of God throughout Indian country!”
- “...liked the full moon and new moons ... enjoyed the sunsets especially and also the sun coming up ...”
- “How she loved her sweets!” as well as her favorite exclamation: “OH, GOLLY!”

As far as the things that filled her life, and the accomplishments she achieved, these are many. They range from her early life in family, to her work as a librarian before entering, to her teaching careers at Forest Ridge in Seattle, with the boys at Stuart Hall in San Francisco, to teaching at Menlo and various houses where she assisted the treasurer and did bookkeeping. Then there were her many trips: the Holy Land, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Mt. Sinai, Ireland, Germany, as well as across North America; to her many years setting up and helping guide Abba House, and to her years at Soboba since then. If we were to make a laundry list of all the various tasks and works of this life of hers, it would be very, very long indeed! I’ll spare you that! Better to look at her life and the person who lived it.

From Mary Gen’s own account of her life we read: “Born in June 30, 1929 in St. Louis of Dr. Joseph Henry Smith” -- here she adds deliberately “(who was also an Anglican Priest)” – perhaps the only fact she ever boasted about – and then goes on: “and Lillian Adelaide West who was a teacher.” After his internship at St. Louis University her father was sent by U.S. Indian Service to Laguna, New Mexico and then Chinle, Arizona to minister to the Indians. That was shortly after her birth. Mary Gen recalls these years, the first eight of her own life; and several years ago went back to visit Chinle with her sister Margaret. It is noteworthy that she remembered the place where she lived—a tribute to her remarkable memory for details, which would serve her well during her long life.

Her Father's dream of being a missionary was played out not only at Chinle; when Mary Gen was 14 he was sent to the Bahamas and later to Liberia to work as a priest and with the Anglican Church there. In the meantime, back in the States the family lived first in Stockton and later in Seattle and after high school Mary Gen worked as a librarian in both places.

Seattle was the place of great transitions for the family. As there was no Anglican Church there, Mrs. Smyth and her three children, Mary Gen, Margaret, and Joseph began attending St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, directed by the Jesuits, and Margaret attended a Catholic school. It was predictable: they all entered the Church on May 7, 1949. Dr. Smyth, coming home on furlough and finding they had become Roman Catholics, asked pointedly: "What made you cross the Tiber?" He decided to return to the monastery of the Order of the Holy Cross in New York State, which he had left to get married. We can only imagine the suffering precipitated by these decisions.

It was shortly after that, with the encouragement of one of the Jesuits, that she met our Sisters at Forest Ridge Convent and decided to enter the Society. She had some understandable trepidation about sharing this news with her father. She wrote: "I had permission to enter the Convent, so ... I packed my trunk at Forest Ridge, in case my father was around. I wrote him a good-bye letter. I ... received a very affirming letter from him saying religious life was the best life and he was very happy about that." After her entrance at Kenwood on May 31, 1951, she said that "My father visited me wherever I was, even at the Mother House in Rome. We had become good friends and when he retired, I visited him in Santa Barbara where he was living at that time."

It was in the Society that her love for prayer grew and blossomed. Testimonials to this abound in the copious journals she kept, replete with quotations, inspirational conferences, her own spiritual notes-- often linked with photos of the outdoors she loved so much. It was her love for Scripture and for engaging in Bible Study that prompted her extensive travel to the Holy Land and surrounding areas. But more than that was her unusual request to live for several months with the Trappistine Nuns at the Redwoods Monastery in northern California. Perhaps in this we see a reflection of her own monk-father?

It was also her love of prayer and her desire to share that love with others that gave her the energy to make the foundation of Abba House, along with Sr. Libby Hoye. For some thirty-plus years the two of them continued and expanded this ministry, which has done so much good in the Albany diocese and beyond. This was, looking back, a rather monumental task and Mary Gen felt keenly the need for support, especially from her sisters in the Society—a support rather long in coming. A House of Prayer was a leap of faith, a prophetic gesture not yet understood by so many of us who were focused on formal education. Now, with her passing, and with the passing of time, the true value of centers of prayer is becoming better known and appreciated. I have had the privilege of viewing (briefly) the draft of a book about Abba House which Anne Samson is authoring. It is, simply, a wonderful history of a beautiful ministry. We hope it soon will be

published, and it would be well worth getting for all of us who love Abba House and want to know more about it and about the two foundresses.

I often marvel at how strange it is that we think we know a person until that person dies, and then we discover so many hidden corners in that individual personality. We may have vaguely suspected them, but they come to light in what that person has left behind and in what others have to say. Certainly I was not fully aware of how many lives she touched -- often by her simple smile and welcome. When she met someone the first thing she asked was their name-- no matter whether it was one of her Bible students or the young man who delivered fresh water to our house. And the next time she saw that person she called him or her by name--a talent I could only envy! Another thing I knew, but didn't fully realize, is how very well organized Mary Gen was. If I should have her experience: one day walking around, efficient, helpful, active and the next completely incapacitated with a crippling stroke -- what would I leave for the next person to clean up? Everything was in good order, and most of it was in perfect order -- organized, well kept and easy to locate. Amazing! But most of all, there was the depth of her spirituality-- so well hidden under a simple, helpful and welcoming attitude towards everyone and everything. This is amply described (if indeed it can be described at all) by the extensive notes she has left.

When Sister Libby Hoye became ill and then disabled it was impossible for Mary Gen to continue with Abba House. This was a real sacrifice for her, but she had already reached the age of 73 and surely one can retire at such an age! But no! Her love for the Indian people, born in her during her first years in Cinle and continuing over the decades, prompted her to move to a small Indian Reservation in southern California where she could join in the work of St. Joseph Mission. She dates her coming to the Soboba Indian Reservation as July 23, 2002. This was at the end of a long trip across country by car with her sister Margaret AND her beloved cat Cali! She has tales of how she was able to take a cat along in a car, while doing a lot of side trips to visit various places of interest on the way -- how she had to call ahead to make sure motels accepted animals, how she and Margaret had to eat take-out food because the cat was not permitted in the restaurant, and just plain how to manage until they finally arrived at their destination. This is a tribute not only to her love for her beautiful little kitty but for her sister Margaret. She always remained close to Margaret, going periodically to Portland to help her sister in various ways.

I think the deepest insight I was given into the beautiful relationship which Mary Gen had with the Lord was when I visited her last spring. I saw the culmination of all those eighty-four years of love, suffering, joy, kindness and smiles in one short incident which probably will remain forever engraved on my memory. I was standing by her bedside, where for several months she had been immobilized by paralysis and in great physical pain. Because of the severity of her suffering she would cry out at times for help, and then in a calm voice explain to me, "I just have to do that." But it was not only the physical suffering; *that* I had expected, but the spiritual anguish that she was experiencing and which she also shared with me. It was a profoundly sacred moment: "Jesus, where ARE you?" "Where IS He?" she cried out, "I can't *find* Him!" and she

repeated this. I could only think of “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” I embraced and held her, and tried to comfort her with: “He is right here, and you couldn’t be closer to Him. You are on the cross with Him when he cried out to the Father.” Again, very calmly and firmly: “Yes, I know He is here!”

We miss her and will miss her a whole lot, but now she is *there*. And *we* are *here* -- but only for a while, and then all of us will be *there*... “and everything will be all right!” Oh Golly!

We can only say about Mary Gen what she wrote of her mother at her mother’s passing:

“We pray - that nothing of this woman’s life will be lost,
but that it will be of benefit to the world;
that all that she held sacred may be respected
by those who follow her
and that everything in which she was great
may continue to mean much to us
now that she is dead.”

Reflection by Marianna Torrano, RSCJ

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