

Sister Marie will never forget the words her father spoke to her over fifty years ago when she told him she wanted to become a nun. He looked her square in the eye and said, "You'll never make it."

Well, Marie was a tomboy. She loved sports. Boys, girls, it didn't matter who she played with, just so there was some action. Who could have guessed her future? Professional gambler, maybe, but nun?

Sister grew up in Shawnee. (Are members of Sister's family here? Would you please stand?) Marie attended one year of high school at St. Aloysius Academy. (Is anyone else here an alumnus of St. Aloysius in northeast Kansas City?) Marie attended school there just for her freshman year, but one teacher permanently impressed her, Sister Mary Anne Michelle Shay. (Does anyone here remember Sr. Mary Anne Michelle? She died last year.) Whether or not we knew her, we all owe a debt of gratitude to that nun for influencing Sr. Marie toward two vocations: sister and teacher. Without Sr. Mary Anne Michelle, Marie might never have joined the convent, never have taught a class, and our lives would not be as colorful as they are today.

Sister Marie entered the novitiate in 1946. She worked at St. Vincent's in Petaluma, California. Did some of you follow the Polly Klaas murder case last year? Well, Sr. Marie worked at that school. In 1954 she made perpetual vows with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the "BVM's" from Dubuque. She taught 5th grade in Omaha. Two of her students there are serving the church as priests today. She also worked in Lincoln. (Do we have anyone here knew Sister in Nebraska?)

In 1957 she did what only the best BVM's do; she moved to Kansas City and taught fifteen years at St. Catherine's School. (How many people remember Sister from St. Catherine's?) I know one of her students very well; my little sister Mary. It was during those years when Sister got her BA and her masters in administration. She could only work on the degrees in summer, because she taught every year. It took her twenty summers to get those degrees.

Twenty-four years ago Sister became the principal of the greatest school on earth, St. John Francis Regis. Sister took one year off to take care of her ailing sister Helen, and to visit the homes of the unchurched in our neighborhood here. She visited 250 families--people who were not going to church. Then she returned to the classroom, where she has taught fourth grade ever since. (If you've known Sister Marie here at St. Regis, would you please stand?) (Let me specialize this a little bit more: If you ever had Sr. Marie as a teacher over the past fifty years, would you please stand?)

In 50 years times have changed. Classrooms are smaller. We used to have 65 kids in one classroom. 65 well-behaved kids. If you told them to sit down, they'd sit down. Today, Sister says, if you tell them to sit down they're liable to ask you why.

The BVM community has changed too. 50 years ago if you joined them you became a teacher. But today their apostolate has diversified. Sisters are working in prisons, for the homeless, in hospitals, and administration. (I'd like all the BVM's who are here today to please stand.) Sisters, you know I have a special love for your community because you taught me in grade school. But I want you to hear from our church how much we value the work you do. The commitment you give to Catholic education, to the work of the church in the world, to community life, to celibacy, to the Holy Spirit diversifying your mission--This commitment is a witness we desperately need. It inspires us on our journey when we feel weak, and it makes us proud when we feel joy. Religious life is one of the great treasures in the Catholic Church. Thank you, Sisters; thank you for saying yes to your vocations.

Remembering what Mr. Neff said about Marie 50 years ago, it's tempting to think he didn't know his daughter very well. I suspect he just didn't know nuns very well. Sisters today are knowledgeable and playful women who are making a difference in the church. If any single woman here feels that God may be calling you to religious life, don't miss it; consider this community of women, so that the work they have so grandly begun may continue in our church.

Sister Marie, for nearly a quarter of a century you have served St. Regis Parish. For half a century you have served God and the church. You have brought to us excellence in administration, competence in teaching, and joy in discipleship. Thank you, Sister Marie Neff, BVM, and congratulations on fifty years!