



**Eulogy of Sister Sara (Philip Mary) McAlpin, BVM**  
**Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Oct. 25, 2024**

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Sara McAlpin.

Sara Ann McAlpin was born July 2, 1934, in Charles City, Iowa, to Philip and Mary Alice (Elsen) McAlpin. Her father worked as a representative for a publishing company. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1984 and died in 1999 at the age of 91. Her mother was a loving and dedicated caregiver for her husband. She had a sharp memory and continued to be the matriarch for her large family of siblings, nieces, and nephews until her death in 2004 at the age of 95. Sara's younger brother James completed the family. He was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Sioux City in 1964 and died in 2017. Both Sara and Jim felt fortunate to have their parents be part of their lives for so many years.

Sara attended Corpus Christi schools in Fort Dodge, Iowa, and was crowned the 1952 Queen of Mardi Gras in her senior year. She enrolled at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, where she completed a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in history in 1956. Sara entered the BVM congregation on Sept. 8, 1956, and received the name Philip Mary on March 19, 1957. She professed first vows on Feb. 3, 1959, and lived 68 years as a BVM.

Immediately after profession, Sara was sent to St. Gertrude in Chicago. "I was at St. Gert's for only a semester during which, as I always say, I *refereed* 47 third graders. . . I taught almost nothing, but I never learned so much in my life! I'll always be grateful for that brief experience." At her next mission, St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines, Iowa, she attempted to teach general science - everything from astronomy to zoology - and did a better job of teaching English.

In 1961, Sara was missioned to teach American Literature and writing at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa. She remained there for the rest of her professional career, a total of 53 years. "Sometimes I think I must have subconsciously taken a vow of stability along with the traditional three. In many ways, I've had three lives at Clarke - as a student, as a teacher, and in the archives office. I chose my life here as a student because I knew BVM sisters . . . and because of Clarke's excellent reputation in education. . . As a BVM sister, I was 'assigned' to teach at Clarke, a ministry that I wasn't very excited about at the time, but which I grew to treasure profoundly." Sara completed an M.A. in English from Marquette University in Milwaukee in 1964 and a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of Pennsylvania - Philadelphia in 1971. She served 13 years as chair of the Clarke English department.

Unfortunately, in the devastating 1984 fire that destroyed three of Clarke's historic buildings, Sara lost everything - both personal and professional. Remembering that day 20 years later, she penned, "We received lots of hugs and understanding tears from friends and strangers, along with offers of housing, clothing, shoes . . . Even today, I can name each person who gave me the above items, along with a cap and gown to wear in the graduation procession. . . The fact that one rarely faces adversity alone became more clear as the weeks and months passed; each day bringing reminders of what used to be and what was newly emerging, and of the countless people who helped to create a fresh future for Clarke and for everyone connected with it."

In 1987, Sara received the Meneve Dunham Award for Excellence in Teaching, a tremendous honor recommended by Clarke faculty and students and selected by the administration. In 1999, Sara gave the lecture "Words, Arts, Leaders" as part of the Clarke Mackin-Mailander Lecture Series. In 2003, she was named Professor Emerita. She wrote, "Actually, that's a fancy way of saying, 'You're old and need to quit!' So, after 42 years teaching at Clarke, I retired. . . I really missed the classroom and the unique dynamic with students; however, I didn't miss reading countless papers!"

Retired, Sara now began her third life volunteering in the Clarke Archives. She commented, "In the BVM dictionary, as most of us know, 'retiring' and 'half-time' are defined as 'illusions.' I spent more than half of my time in the archives. That was fine with me. . . I loved digging around the treasure of the past. . . I had the opportunity to help preserve some of the history and heritage of an old BVM institution." Sara also served on the BVM Archives Advisory Committee and was a frequent contributor to the BVM *Salt* magazine.

Sara had great concern for the poor. She was vigilant about not wasting or consuming more than she needed. Retirement provided time and flexibility to become more aware and more involved. She attended a Call to Action (CTA) meeting in Milwaukee and a vigil and protest at the School of Americas (SOA) at Fort Benning in Georgia. She shared, "Both experiences were rather mind-blowing for me and raised my consciousness about several realities that until then I had only been able to read and hear about from others. CTA gave me a solid base of genuine hope for the church. The people who spoke at and attended the meeting all demonstrated so vibrantly that the church is truly the people of God. At SOA, I felt overwhelmed at the vivid eyewitness accounts of how our country has trained personnel to commit countless atrocities against human beings in other countries."

Sara's involvement in civic and archdiocesan organizations increased. She protested "stand your ground" laws and worked to raise awareness about gun violence prevention. She volunteered with the Dubuque Restorative Justice Program, part of the Archdiocesan Jail and Prison Ministry Program, offering acceptance and genuine concern to those imprisoned. In 2015, Sara received the Governor Volunteer Award for this ministry. Most recently, she served on the board for People in Need and was active with Dubuque Area Congregations United. She was a member of the Dubuque branch NAACP and the Nathaniel Morgan Memorial Committee. After attending a meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations, Sara reflected, "What women (and all marginalized people) want is to have their voices heard . . . Change is possible. . . There is hope!"

The Set of 1956, in anticipation of their Golden Jubilee in 2006, launched a year of celebration for the sisters and former members of the set with a trip to Door County, Wisconsin. Sara remarked, "It was a perfect opportunity to renew connections that are deep and lasting, with people who will always be special in my life." Sara had two realizations at the time of her Golden Jubilee. "One is gratitude for God, family, friends, teachers, natural beauty, lasting relationships, education, mentors, ministry, flowers, books, ice cream, sunrises and sunsets, heroines, travel, health, chocolate, plants, stars, smiles, long walks, lakes and countless other things! The other is knowing that life is a process of losing and gaining (and not just weight!), laughing and crying, growing and diminishing, loving and being loved."

The death of her brother Father Jim was a huge loss. So was the death of Sister Barbara Kutchera who taught side by side with Sara in the Clarke English department for 28 years. "I count it an enormous grace to have had Barbara's friendship for so many years. She was a consistently lifegiving presence in my life and taught me so much about living, but also about dying."

"You have been told, O my people, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you. Only this: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8). This is how Sara lived her life – simply, gently, and with great love. Let us celebrate Sara's joy as she reunites with her parents, Jim, Barbara, Mary Frances Clarke and all deceased BVM sisters, relatives, and friends in the presence of our loving God.