

Eulogy for Sister Rose Mary Dougherty

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March 18, 2019

I first met dear Sister Rose Mary when she enrolled in the Shalem Institute's first class of the Spiritual Guidance Program way back in 1978, a program for the enrichment of spiritual directors. Her existing experience as a director then, along with the ways she showed such mature understanding of that ministry during the two years of that program, and such wonderful personal spiritual maturity, led me to ask her to join the program staff after the first class ended. I was so happy she agreed to do that. Eventually she became the director of that program, and over her decades of leadership, it became one of the most respected director's programs in the country.

I came to know Rose Mary more intimately during the three weeks we lived together in South Africa, just months before Nelson Mandela became president there. We had been invited to lead a program for the development of 90 current and aspiring spiritual directors from around that country, from different racial groups and denominations. The two of us lived together in a small apartment in the girl's private high school where the program was held, outside of Cape Town.

I'll never forget her calm, centered, flawless leadership of the seminars she led there, given spontaneously with almost no notes. In the evenings before giving them, instead of reviewing what she would say in her seminars, as I needed to do, she instead spent the evenings reading a novel! All the time I've known Rose Mary, she seemed to find the full richness of life best exposed in good novels more than in any other kinds of books. All her seminars given in South Africa were taped, and when I heard the tapes when we returned to the United States, I was astounded at their coherence and lucidity. It sounded like she was reading from a carefully written script, but in fact it was a spontaneous flow of her mind, I daresay a flow of the Spirit collaborating with her mind, saying just what was needed to help people understand the subject. The uniquely valuable books and articles she later wrote and talks she gave related to the ministries of individual and group spiritual direction and other topics reflect that same gifted capacity to clearly and concretely convey what's essential and needed for understanding the subject.

Rose Mary loved humor, being the wonderful ego-deflator and equalizer it can be. I'll share with you a humorous story that she used to tell people when talking about spiritual direction, the story of her experience with a directee with whom she once met at the Bon Secours Retreat Center, where so many of Shalem's programs are held. A variety of versions of the story float around; this is one version. She was very tired when she met with the directee, and she asked if they could sit down on a bench, side by side, outside the building in front of the fish pond. At some early point in the hour she fell asleep, and she didn't wake up until just before the directee was coming to closure. She worried that he might have been aware of her falling asleep, but instead he exclaimed that his spiritual experience during the hour was the most powerful he had ever had; he gave her a check in appreciation.

She used that story to express the importance of realizing that it's the Spirit who is the true director; the human director mainly just holds the space for the Spirit to be recognized, and that space can be held even by a sleeping director.

Over her decades on the Shalem staff, Rose Mary's gifts showed themselves well beyond spiritual direction. Among other things she created a new long-term program, the Personal Spiritual Deepening Program, for people who wanted to focus on deepening their spiritual life and understanding, grounded in contemplative practices and awareness. Many people to this day tell me how much that program was foundational for their deeper spiritual life. Bill Dietrich will be telling you about the pioneering expansion of her forms of ministry later in life.

As a member of the core Shalem staff for nearly 40 years, I found her work and very centered, insightful presence indispensable. Without her, Shalem's staff and ministry would have been seriously diminished. Overall, I would dare to call Rose Mary an outstanding and distinctive example of the pioneering, reformist spirit of a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Sister. She had an independence and integrity that allowed her to think and feel outside the box. She interpreted spiritual reality and community in fresh, down-to-earth ways that were rooted in her own experience, as well as in scripture, contemplative tradition and the human condition with all its potential and limitations. She helped people come to see the unique, authentic, loved human images of God that they were, even with all their imperfections.

Rose Mary also had a strong sense of the injustice shown women both within and without the church. I can remember her barely-suppressed anger as she encountered or heard about incidents of that injustice over the years. She was painfully realistic though about what she could and couldn't do to help bring about the changes she felt were needed.

I will be forever grateful to God to have had Rose Mary as a cherished friend and co-minister in my life, and as a mentor who taught me so much by just being who she was: a person without contrivance, calculation, pretense or false piety, but with a profound faith, honest humility, and spontaneous compassion and wisdom. She was dedicated to the living God of truth and love, a challenger of the unjust and false, as she cared for the world day by day in the many ways she was called.

The last time my wife Mary and I visited Rose Mary here at Villa Assumpta was in the afternoon of this past New Year's Day. We brought her some Reese's peanut butter chocolate bars, which were always her favorite. Despite her obvious suffering from her Parkinson's disease, Rose Mary hospitably treated us as she always had, as welcome guests with whom she shared a close friendship that transcended her suffering. Her still-sharp mind showed itself in our few hours of animated conversation together. As always, at the end she took us into Sister Mary Ellen's room next door to hers for a brief visit; Mary Ellen is her blood sister as well as her SSND sister, who suffers from a debilitating physical ailment. After that visit Rose Mary accompanied us in her wheel chair to the elevator. After we embraced her we could see her tearing up a bit, as though this might be the last time we would meet. We left with the same sad sense of that possibility, yet so grateful for the time we had together, so grateful for all the times she blessed our lives.

May whatever transformed life is Rose Mary's now beyond this life be pain-free and close to the heart of the great holy Beloved who shaped her into being and lived through her for the benefit and joy of so many others.