

Sister Mary Elizabeth Bonia, smsm  
31 August 2019  
Reflection by Betty Rae Lee, pbvm



Father Steve, Members of the St. Mary's South Historical Society, the Holy Name Society, the Ladies Auxiliary, Distinguished Guests, Family and Friends,

I have been asked to pay tribute to Sister Mary Elizabeth Bonia, a Marist Missionary Sister, and since she would not like being centre stage, I decided to use her own words to give you a glimpse into the woman we call Aunt Liz. She is now 97 years of age and, while in poor health, can be quite alert at times.

A wise woman once wrote: *"There are only two lasting gifts that we can give our children, roots and wings."*

Roots:

In her vocation story she writes *"I grew up in a small town - all white, all Catholic. My mother was a British citizen, my father, an American citizen, and my teachers were all Irish nuns. So that will satisfy your curiosity about my strange accent."*

Community Values:

In Aunt Liz's words: *"As you approach St. Mary's you will see this greeting, "Welcome to the Community of St. Mary's." This is where I learned the first lessons of living community life." I remembered when a neighbour's house burnt down, the whole community came together and built them a new home."* This commitment to community influenced her life greatly.

Wings:

Then she spread her wings. Her entry into the Marist Missionary Sisters took her to Massachusetts where she served for many years in leadership positions, including being Congregational Treasurer and Provincial Leader of the Marist Sisters which included Sisters in the United States, Jamaica, Peru and Columbia.

Another move to the West Indies: In her words, *“My dream in life was fulfilled when I was assigned to a leprosarium in Jamaica- not white, not Catholic, not stable like the days of my youth but multicultural - deep poverty alongside great riches, mansions and shacks, slavery and independence. My safe, white Catholic world was no more and I was enjoying every minute of it.”*

She also worked in a very poor district in Memphis, Tennessee which was 98% black with extreme poverty, drugs and prostitution – the whole gamut. She writes: *“We were amazed at how many gentlemen rang our doorbell each night until we realized we were right in the middle of a red light district and our bright red sanctuary lamp was inviting people to visit.”* Imagine that!

Empowering Others:

The whole point of her mission was to train others to lead so that she could then move to another place of unmet need. To each new place she brought along her motto:

*“Give me a fish and I eat for a day.  
Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.”*

She also had a practical side and over the course of her life, to meet the needs of her ministry, she became certified as a mechanic, carpenter, home inspector, real estate agent, community developer, health care administrator and God knows what else.

Looking back on her life, she says: *“I’ve done a lot in life and it’s been a good life.”*

Roots and wings: She followed that ideal of community she learned as a child in St. Mary’s and lived her whole life building community everywhere she went.

My cousin, Mark Purcell, made a speech about Aunt Liz when he was in high school and I’ll end with his words: *“I am very proud of this nun, not only because of all her good work but also because she is my aunt.”*