

Sister Clare Fitzgerald, SSND - 75 Year Jubilee!



Joy, laughter and a heart full of gratitude.

Sister Clare Fitzgerald was in the convent community room at Notre Dame of Maryland University, where she has taught one winter and two summer courses for 20 years, finishing grading papers for the Winter Interim class on Law and the Constitution. The other part of the year, she is in Boston where she lives and gives presentations across the country. She has had a busy schedule, including a recent visit to Plains, Georgia for President Jimmy Carter's 95th birthday, but carved out time to reflect on her seven and a half decades of ministry as a vowed member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Infusing the conversation with a deep joy, Sister Clare reflected on religious life and reminisced about her childhood connection with the School Sisters of Notre Dame. "I loved religious life from the moment I started. Even along the way, with other temptations, the thought of ever leaving never occurred to me. I grew up with the SSNDs in school in Cambridge. That's how I met the community. That's where I met the sisters. That's where my vocation was really fostered and nourished. The sisters were lovely. The joy of religious life and the nuns and dear friends I've met, I'm so grateful."

She continued, "We were a small group when I professed first vows, but we were very close. We were of the war years in 1945 - there were only 20 of us. The classes after us were 40 - 50 in size. It was very hard, very hard. I had friends in the military. We prayed for the boys. My brother was in the Marines and my sister followed, eventually serving as air traffic controller guiding pilots and planes in over the Pacific."

Sister Clare has taught at all levels of education and served for nine years as chair of the American Studies Department at Fairfield University in Connecticut, and for twelve years as the founding director of the Catholic Leadership Program, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, at Boston College.

"Religious life can be a very broadening experience. Mine has been full of surprises. God provided me with so many unexpected occurrences, places and people. My life has been filled with movement. Religious life has that unexpected hand of God. You think you're going to be a fifth-grade teacher for 50 years, and all of a sudden it all changes. I thought the door would close when I became a nun. I said yes and God gave me everything. I gave God a little and have been rewarded a hundred fold."

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Her distinguished service earned *Sister Clare* the *National Catholic Educational Association's* (NCEA) highest commendation for service to *Catholic education* and the Church three different times. "Education has been my love. I've been given many awards, but the most important award I received was given by the NCEA. This award means a lot to me, it's the Mother Seton Award, the outstanding Catholic educator in the U.S. It's a big award for SSND."

In 1980, when Sister Clare was serving as the provincial leader for the Wilton Province and representing women religious across the country as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, she spoke at the memorial service for the three nuns and one religious laywoman killed in El Salvador. "Their deaths pricked the social conscious of America." She promised at the memorial that women religious would object to the resumption of U.S. military aid to El Salvador saying, "Our mission, as theirs, is a mission of peace and justice."

Internationally, Sister Clare has lectured and presented workshops on Catholic education and the future of religious life throughout the United States, Canada, Guam, Puerto Rico, England and Scotland. She has spoken passionately about the role of Catholic education and the sacrifices families and students make in order to receive a Catholic education. About her winter interim class she said, "I worry about the students. They pay tuition. I will never walk into that classroom unprepared. We can so glibly talk about social justice. It's always been a big issue for me to make teachers conscious of that."

She writes individual notes to each of the students on their term papers. "The papers were marvelous! They got what I was trying to get at. It is a wonderful gift. I give two questions. I teach how the government went from isolationist to global - but everything at this moment comes down to, 'You had your chance, America, the 20th century belonged to you but not the 21st.' It startles even me - all of the foreign affairs - end of the American century. The U.S. only became a super power in 1989. It's over already? Who is going to put order in the world in the 21st century? Not the U.S. It used to be BRIC: Brazil, Russia, India and China, but Brazil had an economic setback, so did India. We've lost democracy in Poland, Turkey, Italy and Hungary.

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I don't go Republican or Democrat - the big issue, politically, is the dying of democracy around the world. The trouble is within. Democracy is dying. I'm passionate. I wish I could go back to my class to talk more about the future of the Constitution!"

On her life and God's love, Sister Clare said, "It's the journey, the people I met, and the opportunities God gave me to be a better person. The realization that God loves me came later - that overwhelming joy of God loving me and always being with me. I've always loved God. It took me a long time to realize how much God loves me. 'I am with you always.' That has been the navigating force in my life. I wouldn't say I always had it. We grew up in the atmosphere of punishment and judgement, so that realization of God's love, that God loves me, I'm so grateful for. I'm grateful for the journey, for the people and the opportunities given. I'm grateful and joyful."

Sister Clare nourishes her fidelity with prayer, poetry and relationships. "I like poetry. I read poetry. People, they nourish you. God leads us all. I've had hard times. I'm not looking at that - I'm looking at the joys. I had to learn a lot. I've had to learn humility."

"The journey has been very interesting - very unexpected and full of surprises," Sister Clare added. "I've met marvelous people along the way. On the eve of my 75th Jubilee, I find my life culminating into a marvelous gift from God. I've had my ups and downs, and you stumble along the way, but God was always there for me."

Sister Clare has a bright plaque on her door, "JOY." As she shares her life experience, it is evident that bringing joy to others is a big part of what she does. When she was a girl, her father asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. Her response was, "I want to perform on Broadway or be a nun." It seems she has been able to weave together those two seemingly disparate passions. Known for her occasional grand entrance at various speaking engagements, Sister Clare, when she was the keynote speaker at the Superintendent's Conference Day in New York, took the stage to a rousing rendition of "New York, New York."



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"I try to give joy to others." She recalled the time when three of her classmates were preparing to go off to their ministries, and said of Sister Clare, 'We'll always remember you in sounds of laughter.'

"I've had a fantastic journey. That's the way it unfolded. Give God a little and he comes back and he gives you everything. Just the openness and the love God has given me. It's been an uninterrupted journey of surprises...I never expected all of this in religious life. I can't tell you how grateful I am... The unexpected journey and the people and places God has led me - the joy of religious life."

Sister Clare summed up her sentiments about her seventy-five years of ministry, "Thanksgiving and joy to a God who was so good to me. Isn't God good?"

Sister Clare Fitzgerald is a native Bostonian and the third eldest of an Irish family of six children. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the Notre Dame of Maryland University, earned her Master's degree at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and was awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy by St. Louis University. In addition, she has received honorary doctorates from University of Notre Dame, Manchester New Hampshire, and Notre Dame of Maryland University.

