

Eulogy for Sister Maria Fitzgerald

September 2007

Sixteen years ago, Sister Maria Fitzgerald visited Loaves & Fishes. After her tour, we met in my office where she told me: “I’ve been a nun for 30 years, and I am looking for an opportunity to work with the poor.”

Let’s stop for a second and reflect on what she told me: “I have been a nun for 30 years, and I am looking for an opportunity to work with the poor.”

Imagine that! In one sentence, Sister Maria had summed up the corporate mindset of the American Catholic Church dating back to at least 1950. Without meaning to do so, she highlighted the disconnect that exists between the Catholic Church as a corporate institution and the teachings of Jesus that characterize and define a Christian.

“Come blessed of my Father:

For I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

I was a stranger and you made me welcome,

Lacking clothes and you clothed me,

Sick and you visited me,

In prison and you came to see me.”

On that day, during her visit to Loaves & Fishes, Sister Maria had made up her mind to devote her life’s work to the poor – if I would allow her to do so.

I don’t think Maria’s decision should come as much of a surprise, after all, she was the religious daughter of Nano Nagel who in 1775 made the decision to devote her life to the oppressed of Ireland by founding a women’s religious order who would live among the poor and seek to improve their lives through education and by working for

social justice. Sad to report, not long after Nano died, the church authorities who rule on such matters – along with the acquiescence of the order’s leadership, I have to admit – relegated the nuns back to the convent cloister to say their prayers and take their solemn vows. By coming to Loaves & Fishes to work with the poor, Sister Maria was simply picking up the torch lit by Nano Nagel two centuries earlier.

The mission of Loaves & Fishes is two-fold – first and foremost, it provides survival help in the form of food and shelter for the hungry and homeless of our community, but second, and very important, it provides the call, the opportunity, and the structure for people of faith and people of good will to practice the gospel teachings of Jesus.

Sister Maria Fitzgerald came to Loaves & Fishes to put the teachings of Jesus into practice. In truth, this is the same reason why many of you have come to Loaves. It is also the very same reason why many of our volunteers have come, and it is the reason why our donors generously support this work.

I knew Sister Maria well and I can say from personal experience she was a woman with many facets.

A feminist – men, but especially men in authority, although tolerable, needed to be dealt with;

An accomplished professional – her jail visitation department and volunteer meetings, her United Way speaking engagements, her fundraising outreach – all was organized, right down to the coffee and tea cups, the napkins, the pens and notepads on the table, the agenda and informational handout at the ready, and the desired outcome of the meeting well thought out in advance, nothing was left to chance;

A woman always impeccably groomed and stylish but dressed in the classical fashion of understatement, I would say;

A master – or should I say mistress – of conversation – large or small, short or long, witty or sad – all decorated with the lilt of her native accent honed in her beloved County Cork. She was a charmer with words;

And did I mention taskmaster? Yes, it’s true, there is no denying it. And woe to those of us who ever complained, even under our breath, about being overworked and

underpaid. Nonsense, she would say, and proceeded to point out our time-wasting shortcomings and our lack of planning skills. On occasion she would come to me to complain that in her view a particular program director was not earning his/her keep, and she was concerned that as the director, I was not providing enough oversight and therefore – without meaning too, of course – I might be condoning this laxness. She could be tough, let me tell you.

Long before Friendship Park existed, Sister Maria began her Loaves & Fishes ministry in Brother Martin's Courtyard. She came to know each guest by name – especially those who never responded to her greeting. Sister Maria chatted with the guests singly, and in small groups, to help wile away the waiting hours before the noon meal. Sister Judy used to refer to this conversational activity with our guests as “loitering with intent.”

Not long after, she founded the Jail Visitation Program and recruited dozens of volunteers to help her. It was she who finally convinced the Sacramento County Sheriff to facilitate jail access for her staff and volunteers to visit our incarcerated guests. Believe me, this was no small accomplishment, even though it is something we take for granted today.

Her last assignment at Loaves was that of fundraising. She founded the Development Department, and began an organized outreach, especially into the church communities, to drum up support for Loaves & Fishes. Again, her remarkable gift of speech and her heartfelt concern for our guests gave her entrée and sparked much favorable response. On behalf of the poor, she was a brilliant speaker.

In addition to these fulltime assignments, she served for many years on our board of directors.

Sister Maria left her imprint on Loaves & Fishes in many ways but none greater, I believe, than her outspoken commitment to the principle of non-judgmental acceptance. Truthfully, she served as the board's conscience in this regard, and time and again, she spoke up at meetings to remind board members that for all our preaching and talking about being non-judgmental, our present discussion and proposed action fell woefully short.

In 2002, Sister Maria retired from Loaves & Fishes and returned to her beloved Ireland – a kind of repatriation, I think.

In March of 2005 she sent an email asking if I would provide an employment reference to one Sister Mary Malone.

I wrote back: “GREETINGS TO SISTER MARY MALONE, It is not possible in a few sentences to adequately explain Sister Maria’s positive impact on the lives of homeless people in Sacramento. Suffice it to say she is revered by the homeless poor, the volunteers, the staff and the supporters of Loaves & Fishes – and her accomplishments are legendary. For many years Sister Maria served on our board of directors and always represented the needs of the poor even when some of us became too judgmental.

I am confident in saying that if your program includes anyone in need, or anyone who is suffering, or anyone who is distraught, or anyone who is difficult to deal with, then you have recruited the right woman.”

Sister Maria Fitzgerald was the right woman for Loaves & Fishes.

In her memory, my prayer today is simply this: may our Loaves & Fishes leadership remain true to its commitment of non-judgmental acceptance, not only in word, but in deed.

And may those who seek to work with the poor find their way to Loaves & Fishes, and be given the opportunity to follow their calling.

Maria, we miss you.