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NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF HONOLULU

Obituary: Sister Richard Marie Toal followed 40 years in saint's footsteps

02/15/2013 BY [HAWAII CATHOLIC HERALD](#)



Franciscan Sister Richard Marie Toal

A Franciscan nun who lived out her youthful goal to follow in the footsteps of Mother Marianne Cope by serving as a nurse in Kalaupapa for 40 years died in Honolulu Feb. 3. She was 96.

Sister Richard Marie Toal was remembered at a Feb. 8 funeral Mass at St. Francis Convent chapel in Manoa. More than 100 people attended the service honoring the New Jersey-born nun who was a link in the uninterrupted timeline of Franciscan sisters who have worked in the leprosy settlement since 1888 when Saint Marianne brought sisters to help Hansen's disease patients quarantined in the remote Molokai peninsula.

Sister Richard Marie joined the Sisters of St. Francis in 1937 and came to Hawaii in 1960 after 20 years as a surgery nurse and teacher at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Utica,

N.Y. She worked as a nurse and later nursing supervisor of the state hospital in Kalaupapa, where the patient population was 200 when she arrived. After retirement from the staff, she continued as a volunteer, preparing and changing bandages for patients, until she suffered a stroke and was forced to leave her beloved home in 2002 to live at the Manoa convent.

Memories shared at the celebration of her life last week were of her kindness and professionalism as a nurse, the quick wit that was a trait of her Irish ancestry, and her love of fishing which she shared for years with fellow workers and visitors.

She was a familiar sight, fly-casting from the shoreline, wearing the traditional white habit and sturdy nurse shoes as she waded into the surf. “The fishing nun” image was captured in a 1981 photo spread in National Geographic magazine and in local newspaper stories.

“I remember that most of the patients called her ‘Mother’ and they still do,” said retired practical nurse Frances Padeken. “She was like a mother to them. She was that close and they trusted her.”

Padeken said nurses remember Sister Richard Marie as “strict and very meticulous in her work, one of the old school of nursing.”

Clarence “Boogie” Kahilihiwa, president of the Kalaupapa Patients Council, recalled Sister Richard Marie’s role as an active member of the Kalaupapa Lion’s Club for many years. “She pulled her chores with everyone else” as they did painting, cleaning, recycling projects and prepared socializing fundraisers. “Sister Richard Marie wasn’t a person to sit down and talk story, she was always on the go; she kept busy.”

Kahilihiwa said the nun “won in every fishing contest” and would bring fish to the social gatherings of the club. That was the punch line of her role as a fisherman — she did not eat fish but would share them with other residents of the village and with convent cats.

Retired nurse Joyce Nishimura remembered her initiation soon after arrival to work at the peninsula. “She took me fishing. I had my back to the ocean when a wave swept me down. Sister laughed but I panicked. I didn’t know how to swim and neither did she. I ended up with some scrapes on the soles of my feet” and the memory is one she tells with laughter.

Over the years, the nun met hundreds of clergy, sisters and others on their visits to the place where Saint Marianne and Saint Damien did their historic and heroic missionary work. She would drive them around the peninsula in a battered convent vehicle. Sister Helen Agnes Ignacio learned of the long-reaching web of friends when she volunteered

to help Sister Richard Marie answer her mail after her stroke. "I thought, how much can it be for a nun of her age. Then, there were 89 Christmas cards!"

"The best way for me to honor Sister Richard Marie is to live from her example," said her nephew Sean Toal of Arvada, Colo., in prepared remarks read at the service. At the end of each telephone call "she reminded me that she prayed for my family every day." Toal said his aunt reminded him that they were the last to carry the family name, and she was delighted when his son Channing, 2, was born to carry the name on.

Born Feb. 22, 1916, in Camden, N.J., to parents of Irish ancestry, she was baptized Mary Margaret Teresa. She took her father's name when professing her vows. Sister Richard Marie completed nursing training at St. Elizabeth Hospital and earned a master's degree in nursing at Catholic University.

She is survived by sister-in-law Pat Toal; niece Charlene Templeton; nephew Sean Toal, and grandnephew Channing Toal.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Sisters of St. Francis Retirement Fund, 2715 Pamoia Road, Honolulu, HI 96822.

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