Columns
Ministry
Religious Life



(Courtesy of Margaret Cessna)



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My family moved from Ohio to Pennsylvania six weeks after I started second grade. New school. New teacher. No friends.

Sister Mary Mark (not her real name) was a stern one, and I was scared of her. Although she didn't use a ruler, her sharp tongue and ridicule hurt more than any slap on the hand.

I had made my First Communion in first grade but was afraid to tell her, so I went through all the prep and practices with the rest of the class. I always went to the children's Mass, but I never went to Communion. Since my mother went to a later Mass she never knew. Finally, I told her because the stress was weighing me down. So, the next Sunday, at my mother's urging, I went to Communion even though my classmates tried to keep me in the pew. On Monday my mother wrote a note informing Sister of the truth. I was out of favor with her for the rest of the year.

But this teacher gave me a great gift I did not recognize until many, many years later. At the time it was very difficult to accept that my artwork was never displayed on the classroom bulletin boards. She couldn't understand — and did not approve — that I consistently colored outside the lines.

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From that early age on, I found myself often thinking and behaving outside the box. It hasn't always been comfortable but it has become a badge of honor even though my work has often missed being posted on the walls of my world.

Sr. Mary Mark has become a symbol for me. I never got over being afraid of her in second grade. I tried to put into practice my mother's lesson to face fear to be rid of it. It took me a lot longer to do this once I left the place of my mother's protection. But I learned. Later than I wished. But I learned.

At age 7, there were two women in my life: one stern and mean, and one loving and kind. I learned from both. Gratefully, I learned which was a model worth imitating.

Enough of the image of nuns with a ruler in hand ready to strike at any moment. Though I did have one mean one, I am so tired of seeing social media posts and comments suggesting all sisters are "mean."

After my 16 years of Catholic education, I celebrate instead all the sisters who taught me with hearts the size of Wyoming and minds as clear and as sharp as the points they made.

These are among the first women executives, at hospitals, schools, colleges, social agencies. Others were energetic workers who taught millions, comforted the dying, embraced the homeless and the lonely. The list goes on.

Thinking about Sr. Mary, I smiled broadly at this quote: "If you can’t keep your colors inside the lines, draw new lines."

American sisters are women who turned on a dime after Vatican II and took on the world. They drew new lines. They changed the face of religious life. Not for being mean but for being smart, kind, generous, energetic, determined.

They shed the clothes of exclusion and opened their convent doors. They put on their tennis shoes as they carried banners and marched for women, for peace, for human rights, for racial equality. They played dead at the United Nations to plead for the end of war. They died in El Salvador. With heads held high they were arrested and jailed at the School of the Americas. They rode the Nuns on the Bus from top to bottom and from side to side of the United States to speak for social justice.

They became respected theologians, well-read authors and national speakers.

And then they created new agencies and organizations to speak for those who are unable to speak for themselves. Theirs is a new voice that cannot be ignored in the United States, in the world, in the church.

They are strong, these women. This is our reality. This is who we are. And that spirit is still alive as we continue to work to make the message of Jesus as alive and meaningful today as it was so long ago

Though we're aging and fewer in number, our work goes on with hope and vigor. As Tennyson wrote, "Though much is taken, much abides."

I have marched, protested and worked with new agencies. And though I never went to jail, I am honored to be among these American sisters.

As Tennyson put it, "That which we are, we still are." Heroic hearts. Strong in will. Never yielding.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality** feature series. View the full series.