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Appreciation



Sister of Charity Marie de Paul Combo washes the feet of Christian Br. Louis Rodemann, longtime leader at Kansas City's Holy Family Catholic Worker House, during a Holy Thursday Seder service. Combo died April 1 at age 99. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)



by Thomas C. Fox

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Sister of Charity Marie de Paul Combo, known for her warmth, passion for social justice and independence of mind, made it clear to her community members that she desired "no fuss" on her approaching 100th birthday on April 8, 2024. Despite the toll age had taken, leaving her almost without sight or hearing, she resided peacefully amidst the serene beauty of Ross Hall's abstract art on the grounds of the Sisters of Charity motherhouse in Leavenworth, Kansas.

In one final act of seeming playful autonomy, she took her last breath early on April 1.

"Well, she assured there wouldn't be a fuss," remarked community member Sr. Annie Loendorf. "She left us on April Fool's Day." Indeed, anyone even vaguely familiar with Marie de Paul knew she embodied the spirit St. Paul described as being a "fool for Christ" (1 Corinthians 4:10).

Friends mourning her passing described Marie de Paul with many adjectives, including unabashed, expansive, inspirational, prophetic, persistent, caring and humorous. Despite her self-effacing nature, she possessed a robust and dry wit. Her frail appearance belied her fierce advocacy for peace and justice causes, both local and global. She took her commitment to the Gospels seriously, but never approached her faith with excessive piety. Instead, she embraced a counter-persona and became known as "the fun nun."

Marie de Paul relished steering my wife, Hoa, to the edge of our small group setting, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper as she'd ask, "Why did you ever marry that man?"



Sister of Charity Marie de Paul Combo died April 1 at age 99. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)

Her warmth and charm attracted many. At times, she became a lifeline in our children's faith. A priest once told one of my daughters, Christine, that she could not share a wedding Eucharist with her non-Catholic spouse, so she turned to Marie de Paul to bless their marriage. Marie de Paul flew halfway across the country to be part of the event in a New Hampshire park. She went on to baptize their children.

One of Marie de Paul's passions was preparing meals and serving guests at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City, Missouri. She often mingled with the guests and took a genuine interest in their lives. Many guests frequently sought her

out to share their meals with her.

For decades, I was blessed to be part of a prayer community, an offshoot of that worker community. Marie de Paul was another regular. Community members read and discussed the Sunday readings, broke bread and often shared a meal. We listened closely to what Marie de Paul would say, always practical and always insightful. Not infrequently, we'd end up together on curbside or in a park, protesting some injustice or war. Over time, we delightfully designated Marie de Paul as our bishop, and, in time, we gave her a red cap. I have no doubt she deserved to wear white — and suspect she flatly turned down the opportunity in her new abode.

One annual highlight was our Holy Thursday Seder service. Marie de Paul presided at the center table for years as our rabba. How precious it was to gather for Holy Thursday Seder liturgies, the warm glow of candlelight illuminating Marie de Paul at the center table. Her effortless leadership, a natural extension of her unpretentious spirituality, permeated the room.

She was one of a kind. "I thought of what word most summarized her personality. It came to me during the night that that word is 'unabashed,' " Loendorf said of her mentor. "She was never ashamed, never embarrassed, always willing to speak her mind. That was Marie de Paul."

Christian Brother Louis Rodemann, who ran the Holy Family Catholic Worker House for decades, wrote the following when I asked him to remember Marie.

"Marie loved apple pie, which I often made for our potluck meals, but she always asked, 'Where is the cheese? Apple pie without cheese is like a hug without a squeeze.' "

Said another Sister of Charity, Sheila Karpan: "Doing the work of justice can be a solitary endeavor. Marie was wise in her networking, recognizing that only our combined efforts would make a difference. She also recognized that having circles of support with like-minded companions was essential. She was instrumental in inviting a group of six of us to journey together for shared support and spiritual moorings."

This group, who later unceremoniously referred to itself as "the clump," shared life at a deeper level for nearly 50 years.



Sister of Charity Marie de Paul Combo watches Thomas C. Fox's daughter, Christine, and new husband, Chris kiss during their wedding in a New Hampshire park. Combo flew halfway across the country to bless the marriage. She later baptized the couple's children. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)

Marie de Paul's reach was expansive, working with national and international nonprofits. However, she will perhaps be remembered most for the personal care she offered others. Several friends noted her remarkable memory of past conversations, especially painful ones. Years later, she'd check in, gently asking how they were faring, a testament to her understanding that healing can be a lifelong journey.

Early life

Marie de Paul was the daughter of a mining engineer and union leader, and a devout Catholic mother. "I am the product of 12 years of good Catholic education in a

rugged, mountain-surrounded Montana mining town which somehow instilled in its children an openness to all of life," Marie de Paul said in a 2019 interview in the Montana Standard. "This I value highly."

"Dad had a strong concern for people who were 'up against it,' " she said in 2019, adding that she recalled a miners' strike from early May through late September 1934 and its bitter aftermath. "The mines had a big fence around them, and people would ask, 'Are you inside or outside the fence?' " she remembered.

She entered the Sister of Charity in 1948, taking the names of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and de Paul in honor of St. Vincent. Both names figured strongly in the evolution of her theology and the quest for justice, according to a 2019 profile in the Voices of Charity, a community publication. As an elementary school teacher and administrator in the 1960s, Marie de Paul became involved with school integration and fair housing issues.

Marie de Paul was influenced by a statement from "Justice in the World" issued by the World Synod of Catholic Bishops in 1971. That document emphasized advocating for the poor and oppressed, criticized the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, urged wealthier nations to share resources, and called upon the Church itself to be just, encouraging an examination of its practices and lifestyles.

In 1977, she wrote to the Sisters of Charity leadership, expressing concern about the "alarming depletion" of natural resources, according to the Montana Standard profile. The issue required "us to expand and deepen our traditional practice of poverty," she told the publication.

She also started publicly opposing nuclear weapons in 1977.

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When Catholic activists and missionaries were killed in El Salvador in 1980, Marie de Paul was already deeply concerned about social conditions in Central America.

In 1984, she joined a group of Kansans who delivered to Washington hundreds of signatures opposing U.S. military aid in the region and military intervention in El Salvador. Two years later, she joined a Witness for Peace delegation spending a month in Nicaragua.

The Sisters of Charity in 1987 appointed Marie de Paul as the community's first social justice coordinator. She served several years as the Sisters of Charity liaison to the Charity Federation, a nongovernmental organization at the United Nations. She was a charter member of Network, the Catholic social justice lobby, which once gave her its Women of Justice Award "for women who have exhibited great strength and courage in their commitment to justice." She was also a Bread for the World member and became active with Peru Peace Network/USA.

In 2018, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth formally opened an Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation to support the community's growing social justice advocacy. At the time, it singled out Marie de Paul as one of its fiercest social justice advocates.

Marie de Paul reminded us on more than one occasion that God calls us to work for justice and serve those in need. She added that people of faith are responsible for speaking out for those who can't and for empowering the voiceless to speak for themselves. Her life lives on among those who heed her words.

Funeral and Burial Arrangements:
Vigil: April 29, 7:00 pm. Sisters of Charity Mother House

Funeral Mass: April 30, 10:30 am. Sisters of Charity Mother House.
If you plan to stay for a meal, please call 913-682-7500 by 4-17, to reserve a seat.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 26-May 9, 2024** print issue under the headline: Sr. Marie de Paul Combo: 'Fun nun' and 'fool for Christ' dies at 99.