Sister Mary Ellen Plummer, OP
1946-2019

A large white house on Lakewood Avenue on the east side of Detroit, in St. Ambrose Parish, was home to Robert and Mary Jo (Pease) Plummer and their family of seven boisterous children including Mary Ellen, the second oldest. Eighteen years separated the oldest, Bill, and the youngest, Liz. In between, in addition to Mary Ellen, came Cathy, John, Margaret, and Virginia.

Robert and Mary Jo were both Montana natives (Missoula and Butte, respectively) who met as students at the University of Montana. The pair married and moved to Boston, where Robert, who had entered officers’ training with the U.S. Navy, studied sonar technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Eventually, he was in the submarine service in the Pacific during World War II.

After the war, the couple moved to the Detroit area, where Robert went to work for the U.S. Rubber Company, now Uniroyal. When Sister Mary Ellen was born on September 14, 1946, the family lived in a small house in what is now Harper Woods, but when she was four years old they moved to the home on Lakewood.

“It was there that we roller-skated for hours (our driveway was the best in the neighborhood!), played house, raked leaves, grew gardens, made snow people (and had great snowball fights!), and bumbled our way through school and adolescence toward adulthood,” Sister Mary Ellen wrote in her life story.

It was a time of enthusiastic birthday and holiday celebrations, trips to the beach at Lake St. Clair and the Detroit Zoo, travel to Montana every four years to visit family, and always an emphasis on doing well in school that extended to Robert’s peppering the children with questions “Jeopardy!”-style over dinner.

The children attended public-school kindergarten and then spent the rest of their school years at St. Ambrose School, where they were educated by Adrian Dominicans. Sister Mary Ellen participated in Girl Scouts and was academically a good student, interested in languages especially. As a junior, she won a trophy for the school with her Auxilium Latinum award. She also studied French.

Even as a little girl, she found herself drawn to religious life, and in her life story recalled walking home in second grade thinking about what religious name she would choose when she entered.

“Playing school grew into so much more,” she wrote. “It was an attraction to the loving, accepting atmosphere that I saw, yes, but more. Even in grade school I had become aware of a deep sense of being drawn to intimacy with God, to holiness.”

And so it was that on June 1, 1963, at the age of sixteen and having completed her junior year of high school, she wrote to Mother Genevieve Weber seeking admittance to the Congregation. By taking a senior English course that summer at Dominican High School, she had enough credits to be considered a graduate, and when she arrived in Adrian in September she was able to begin her college studies at Siena Heights College (University) with the other postulants.
She was received as a novice on August 4, 1964, and given the religious name Sister Brendan Mary. After completing her canonical novitiate year, she was assigned to St. Mary Star of the Sea School in Chicago, and spent the next three years there followed by two and a half years at Queen of Apostles School in Riverdale, Illinois. At that point, she was called back to Adrian for one final semester at Siena Heights that completed her bachelor's degree in French.

This allowed Sister Mary Ellen to be hired by Aquinas High School in Southgate, Michigan, as its French teacher, which she found to be a real change of pace from grade-school teaching. “The students and I got along well, especially as I reminded them now and then that French was an elective and la porte (the door) was là-bas (over there),” she wrote.

After four years there, however, Sister Mary Ellen decided she was being called to work with adults, and became the religious education director at St. Joseph Parish in Belding, Michigan. During her time there she worked toward a master's in religious studies from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota – although the onset of the back pain from which she would suffer the rest of her life kept her from finishing her degree – and as part of that program spent a semester studying in Jerusalem.

“War materiel, reports of bombs downtown, the sight of strafe marks in the Golan Heights, armed soldiers everywhere – there was no possible way to forget the condition of contemporary Israel while we studied ancient prophets and history,” she wrote.

After spending the 1978-79 school year teaching Scripture part-time at Monroe Catholic Central High School in Monroe, Michigan, Sister Mary Ellen moved to Orlando, Florida, and became director of student volunteers at Bishop Moore High School. During her two years there, she assisted with some diocesan liturgy workshops, and in 1981 became co-director of the diocese's Office of Liturgy.

“I have to say that these nine years were some of the most professionally and personally satisfying of my life,” she wrote, and it laid the groundwork for her next phase. After taking a sabbatical of a year and a half at the Franciscan Center in St. Paul, Minnesota and another half-year at the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, to study Spanish, she moved to Jacksonville, Florida, for a job on the retreat team at the Marywood Retreat Center.

During her second year there, she received a Congregational grant to study in the new Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri.

“I met marvelous people and was opened to ideas and methods of thought new to me and certainly grew in my appreciation of and skill in the art of preaching,” Sister Mary Ellen wrote. “Underlying the learning, of course, was the deepening awareness of how much more there is to learn. The ecumenical experience was priceless; the sense of church we women students developed together worth more than pearls.”

With her D.Min in hand, Sister Mary Ellen became director of liturgy at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Greensboro, North Carolina, but departed for a variety of reasons after just more than a year there. Serious back surgery in 2000 left her with a lengthy recovery time during which she was asked to consider returning to San Antonio to work with seminarians and in liturgy at Assumption Seminary. She loved her ministry there, but after a few months she realized that the back surgery had not worked and it was physically too difficult to do the job, and with great sadness she resigned. She continued to live in San Antonio for another year, until deciding in 2003 to return to Adrian to reside at the Dominican Life Center.

Her years there were filled with preaching, reading, quilting, tutoring at the Adrian Rea Literacy Center, writing regular reflections for the Congregation’s Facebook page, and participating in
community life, from being part of the Crochet Ole group to playing dominoes to competing in the 2012 St. Patrick’s Day whistling contest.

Sister Mary Ellen died on March 25, 2019, at the age of seventy-two and in the fifty-fourth year of her religious profession. She had entered the Congregation at the beginning of the changes wrought by Vatican II and had seen Dominican life, the church, and society in general undergo great transitions in that time.

“She rode the waves, surfed through the many transitions, enjoying the ride for the most part: leading, studying, teaching. There were crashes in the surfing, health crashes difficult to integrate, but she got up on the surf board again!” said Sister Mary Jane Lubinski, Adrian Crossroads Mission Chapter Prioress, at Sister Mary Ellen’s wake two days later.

Her funeral homily the next day was preached by Father Scott O’Brien, OP. The two had first met in Orlando while she was with the Office of Liturgy and he was a chancery clerk and attending college.

“She was so knowledgeable about the things that interested me as well that we quickly formed a friendship that has endured over these many years,” he said. “… I wouldn’t be standing here now as your Dominican brother without her witness, presence and friendship in my life.

“… I admired her sharp mind, her quick wit, her keen sense of humor, but it was her devotion to the crucified and risen Christ that influenced me the most in my own discipleship, in my own Dominican vocation.”

Father O’Brien concluded:

> Because she also sought the One Mary called Rabbouni, Mary Ellen has been shepherded now beyond both her wants and fears.

> We pray in this Eucharist that our beloved sister and friend is now delivered from death to a dwelling place of mercy and kindness, of righteousness and truth, of the fullness of life in the house of her God forevermore.

> We pray this day for ourselves as well; that we might be as wholehearted to that same call to holiness.
From left: Sister Mary Ellen’s seventh-grade photo at St. Ambrose School, Detroit. Reception Day, August 4, 1964

From left: Sister Mary Ellen Plummer is shown in Altamonte Springs, Florida, a suburb of Orlando during the 1980s, when she ministered for the Diocese of Orlando. Sister Bridget Maier, left, with Sister Mary Ellen Plummer
From left: Sister Mary Ellen Plummer, crouching, and Sister Mary Ann Ennis enjoy the outdoors at Kalispell, Montana, during a summer of study in 1974. Sister Mary Ellen, shown with Scott O’Brien, OP, celebrates her Doctor of Ministry graduation from Aquinas Institute of Theology, May 9, 1998.

From left: Sister Mary Ellen poses with a 60th birthday cake that she shared with her friend Margaret at Bill Knapps in Charlotte, Michigan, September 23, 2006. The two had also shared a 30th-birthday cake. Sister Mary Ellen’s family poses for a group photo during her sister Virginia’s wedding in Tucson in the 1980s: standing, from left, Margaret, Elizabeth, Sister Mary Ellen, William, Virginia, Catherine, and John, and seated, their parents, Robert and Mary Jo.
From left: Sister Mary Ellen poses with the first quilt that she made, Fall 2009. Sister Mary Ellen Plummer, left, with Sister Jovanna Stein

Members of the 2014 Golden Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Jacqueline Phillips, Mary Frances Fleischaker, Patricia Millenbach, Attracta Kelly (Prioress), Patricia Walter, Mary Ann Caulfield, and Adrienne Piennette, and front row, from left, Sisters Mary Margaret Pachucki, Judith Friedel, Dianne Koszycki, Myra Jackson, Carmen Rose Alvarez, Rosemary Asaro, and Mary Ellen Plummer.