Sister Maureen Fenlon, OP
1943-2019

With a father who was a judge and a mother who passed her own love of nature on to her children, Maureen Fenlon learned early on the importance of both social justice and caring for the Earth. These qualities shaped most of her life in ministry as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Sister Maureen was born on May 29, 1943, in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, to James and Noel (Finlan) Fenlon. Her entrance into the world was not at all certain; Noel spent three days in labor and neither mother nor baby was expected to survive the ordeal. But survive they did, and Maureen became the fourth of five children born to the couple in less than five years: Brian in August 1940, Paul in May 1941, Dennis in April 1942, Maureen, and finally Shauna in June 1945. “We were close not only in age but as lively playmates,” she wrote.

James Fenlon and his brother were both attorneys who became judges, and Maureen said in her life story that listening to their conversations shaped in her a sense of fairness, justice, and compassion. Both men believed in leniency for the people they sentenced, she said, despite criticism from law enforcement, and “I learned a lot about social justice and it made me proud of them for their compassionate ways.”

Noel was a brilliant and creative woman who worked for a lawyer until she married. According to Sister Maureen, she was “very tuned into nature and its beauty” and would wake the children up on particularly beautiful nights to go outside and look up at the stars and moon. “We developed an appreciation for nature in all kinds of ways,” Sister Maureen said.

After public-school kindergarten, Sister Maureen attended first grade at St. Mary’s School, which was staffed by the Ladies of Loretto, and then finished her grade school years at the newly built St. Joseph’s School, where she was educated by “a very young, lively, joyful community of women”: the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

Sister Maureen was so drawn to them that she wanted to enter the Congregation after eighth grade, but was told by Mother Gerald that she needed to wait at least a year, and so she began high school at Loretto Catholic Central. In December of her freshman year, and with the blessing of her parents, she wrote to Mother Gerald again, seeking admittance to the Adrian Dominicans. Mother Gerald gave her permission, and Sister Maureen arrived in Adrian on June 28, 1958, just a month after her fifteenth birthday.

She remembered her time in formation as “a very exciting, challenging, stretching time,” especially given her age, and “I grew up in this congregation in more ways than most people had.” She received the habit and her religious name, Sister Shaun Paul, in December 1958, and after her canonical novitiate year spent eight months studying at Siena Heights College (University) to begin her bachelor’s degree work.

Her first mission, from 1960 to 1963, was at St. Rita’s School in Chicago – a definite change from her years growing up in a small town in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, and the start of what would be ten years spent as an elementary-school teacher, all in the greater Chicago area. This was followed by two years (1963-1965) at Santa Maria del Popolo School in Mundelein, two years (1965-1967) at St.
Joseph's School in Homewood, and three years (1967-1970) at Queen of Apostles School in Riverdale. She completed her bachelor's degree in sociology from Siena Heights in 1969.

Those last few years of teaching coincided with the Congregation’s Chapter of Renewal, and her interest in social justice concerns led her to be asked if she wanted to earn a Master of Social Work degree. She decided to attend Florida State University because it had an MSW program with an emphasis on criminology, a passion she attributed to her early experience with her father and uncle.

During her time at FSU, an Episcopal prison chaplain asked her to assist him in working with prisoners’ families, and in 1971 she began Terrell House, a hospitality home for these families that she named after a Florida Supreme Court justice. The home, which she managed until 1975, was based on the Catholic Worker model, and at one point during her years there, none other than Dorothy Day herself came to visit. It was “almost like meeting your patron saint,” she said in her life story.

While Sister Maureen was running Terrell House, she read a story in the National Catholic Reporter about a similar house near San Quentin Prison that stated the facility was the only one of its kind in the country. She wrote to Catholic Social Services of Marin County, California, the entity operating the home, to tell them about her ministry, and they asked her if she would come to California and establish houses throughout the state. The result was an organization she named Centerforce.

After leaving that ministry in 1980, Sister Maureen's life went in many, and quite varied, directions. She spent two years in the mid-80s as a farmworker in California because of her interest in organic farming, several years as a community organizer in North Carolina and California, and a year (2003-2004) as the interim national coordinator of NETWORK, among other ministries. She also created LYDIA, a women's co-op program, and was involved in socially conscious investment work. During her time as a social investment specialist for Transfair USA in Oakland, California (2001-2003), which was an unpaid position, she worked in the wine tasting rooms of two local wineries.

"I never did tell them who I was; that was part of the fun," she said in her life story. “That was the way of earning some money and it’s fun.”

She also worked for California congresswoman Lynn Woolsey for four years (1993-1997), first on her campaign and then as her field representative in her district, and for Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, of Dead Man Walking fame, as the national coordinator of the Dead Man Walking Theater project from 2004-2009.

In that role, Sister Maureen traveled to schools to present the Dead Man Walking play and lead talkbacks with the audience on the topic of capital punishment. “I learned a lot over those years,” she said. “It is one thing to study social work but it is another thing to engage in it directly.”

She and Sister Helen were based in New Orleans, which in 2005 was devastated by Hurricane Katrina; the pair evacuated to Helen’s sister’s home in Baton Rouge for several months and continued their work from there.

Sister Maureen’s final role in active ministry came in the last half of 2009, when she served as the interim co-director, with Sister Esther Kennedy, at Spirit Mountain Retreat House in Idyllwild, California. In that capacity, she handled the house’s various hospitality duties.

From there, she spent five months living at Santuario Sisterfarm, which was co-directed by Sisters Elise García and Carol Coston, in Texas, before returning to Adrian. She lived near the Motherhouse campus for more than four years and then moved on-campus in 2014.
Sister Maureen died at the Dominican Life Center on March 27, 2019, at the age of seventy-five. She had battled increasing memory loss for almost ten years.

Her funeral homily was preached by Sister Elise, who connected the Gospel reading for the Mass, Mark 2:18-22 – the parable of the wineskins – to Maureen’s life of service.

In this parable Jesus speaks of the radical newness he was bringing to life – a newness that could not be contained by old ways of thinking and being. Jesus tells this parable after scandalizing the Pharisees by eating with tax collectors and sinners. His life force and new boundary-breaking ways of being in the world could not be contained by old beliefs and brittle doctrine.

Maureen Fenlon lived this Way of Jesus – bringing her own life force, boundary-breaking and generous expansiveness to every one of the many creative endeavors she engaged in during her life as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

“Life is a gift,” she often said, “so live it as a gift.”

… Through the process of Renewal, our congregation, as so many others, shed its old wineskin for a new one. This new wineskin provided the elasticity for the Spirit alive in each member to expand and find new expression in response to the signs of the time, which called us back to the basics: to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God and God’s people.

Maureen was made for this time and she took to it with exuberant energy, an extraordinary depth of purpose, and a global, universalizing perspective.

… A few weeks ago, Maureen began to say, “My work here is finished. It’s time for me to go home.”

Maureen, your work here IS finished – but your beautiful life force lives on in each of us. Over the decades, as one among us, you stretched the wineskin of our Adrian Dominican community and of all you met, calling us evermore, as Jesus did, to a radical newness, expanding our hearts and minds and souls – with bold joy – for the common good of all creation.
From left: Sister Maureen with her father. From left, Sisters Elise García, Marilyn Winter, Maureen Fenlon, Kathleen Schanz, Carol Coston, Esther Kennedy, and Rosemary Ferguson, 1998
From left: Sister Maureen, left, with Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of Dead Man Walking. Sister Mary Elizabeth Beres, left, with Sister Maureen.

From left: Sister Maureen, in Bali, examines a carving, The Thinking Woman. Sister Maureen Fenlon, front, second from the right, joins her family to celebrate her Uncle Ned’s 100th birthday.
Left: Sister Maureen adjusts the sound at the 2006 Dominican High Schools Preaching Conference, held at Siena Heights University.

Right: From left, Sister Maureen Fenlon, Berta Boegel, and Mary Keelty

Members of the 2008 Golden Jubilee, December Reception Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Mary Anne Yanz, Rita Eileen Dean, Margaret Augustine Exworthy, Charlotte Anne Swift, Carol Bollin, Barbara Matteson, Elizabeth Ann Demirgian, and Maureen Fenlon, and front row, from left, Sisters Sharon Beckmann, Patricia Stellmah, Phyllis Duffie, Joan Hinz, Mary Miday, Patricia Ann Dulka, Veronica Kelley, Lorraine Mordenski, and Judith Ann Nelson.