

*Sister Mary Ellen  
Johnston, CSA*

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*Light in Her Life*



*As told by Sister Angela Behen, CSA*



It was on a clear sunny morning on the west coast of Ireland that Bridie Johnston first saw the light of day. The next day she was carried to the parish church and baptized Bridget, receiving God's own life and light as a child of God.

Bridie grew up in a happy home nestled in a valley surrounded by a mountain and a hill.



Knocknashee Hill

She had six sisters and eight brothers. Life was simple, and though sometimes hard, filled with faith, joy and beauty. There was not even a bicycle in the family so everyone walked everywhere, including Mr. Johnston who had to walk to the nearest village to get the doctor every time a new baby was born. New clothes were a once-a-year event when the family went back to school in September.



Both parents were interested in the children's education and saw that every one attended school when the weather permitted.



Sister Mary Ellen's father and mother

Every one in the family had a chore to do. On Saturdays, Bridie polished the saucepans until they shone like the sun.

In spring the Johnston children needed to pick stones from the fields. No one liked that job and they were glad when it was completed. Also in the spring, the children helped Dad collect peat for fuel and set it out to dry. On sunny summer days long hours were spent "saving" hay. Winter was a quiet time on the farm. Mr. Johnston made a wicker basket and was proud of the finished product.

On Saturdays everyone had fun playing school and having their oldest brother Eddie pretend to take them off to "jail."

At night the entire family, after homework was finished, gathered around a blazing peat fire and said the rosary or listened while their grandmother and mother told stories of long ago.

Every night Mr. Johnston visited an old man who lived down the lane. Since the old man could not read, Mr. Johnston enjoyed reading the daily newspaper to him and then discussing the news. When Dennis Gormally died, the father's reading for other people ended because the rest of the neighbors could read. Dennis was missed very much.

Bridie's First Holy Communion was a glorious day. After that, when she would receive Jesus, she often went outside to sit by a rambling, singing brook in buttercup-filled fields.

At the age of ten, Bridie was confirmed and received the Holy Spirit, Light of Lights, in a special way. At that time she was given her confirmation name, Josephine.

When Bridie was thirteen, she read about a holy woman who founded a group of sisters dedicated to the Sacred Heart. It was at this time that Bridie began to think that perhaps God was calling her to do something special.





When Bridie was seventeen, her aunt came from Chicago to visit the Johnstons. She invited Bridie to come and live with her and her husband so she could go to



L to R Sister Mary Ellen's Aunt Marie, Aunt Maggie, Sister Mary Ellen and her mother

school and get a job in the USA. Since there were no suitable jobs in Ireland and Bridie was the oldest child living at home, she gratefully accepted the invitation.

Thus, Bridie's eighteenth birthday found her three thousand miles from home. She was lonely for the first ten years that she was away from her loving family but the faith that she brought from

Ireland helped her. She lived with a kind aunt and uncle in Chicago and became a secretary after a year of Business College. It was a proud moment when Bridie became an

American citizen after five years of residency and a great deal of intense study.

During this time Bridie began to think more seriously about



Bridie Johnston when she was made a U.S. citizen

entering a convent to become a sister. She was interested in two groups - one in New York and one, the Sisters of St. Agnes, in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

Then one day, Bridie got the sad news that one of her favorite sisters, named Sister Marie Eugene, had died at a convent in France. When Bridie heard that, she knew that God had a job for her to do to continue Sister Marie Eugene's work to love souls and be a source of light and inspiration.

But where would she go to do this?

One day she discovered an interesting booklet "Under the King's Banner." It turned out that it was about the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac. The Holy Spirit was lighting her way to join these women.

Early in the spring of that year, Bridie wrote to the sisters asking to become a Sister of St. Agnes. They were happy to accept her. She went back to Ireland for a visit because she thought this might be the last time she could go to see her family. When she returned to Chicago in the fall, she was too homesick to go to the convent in Fond du Lac so she decided to wait a year.



Sister Marie Eugene  
Johnston, O.S.M.



The following September she did join the Sisters of St. Agnes. It took three years of preparation and her name was changed to Sister Mary Ellen.



Sister Mary Ellen on Profession Day

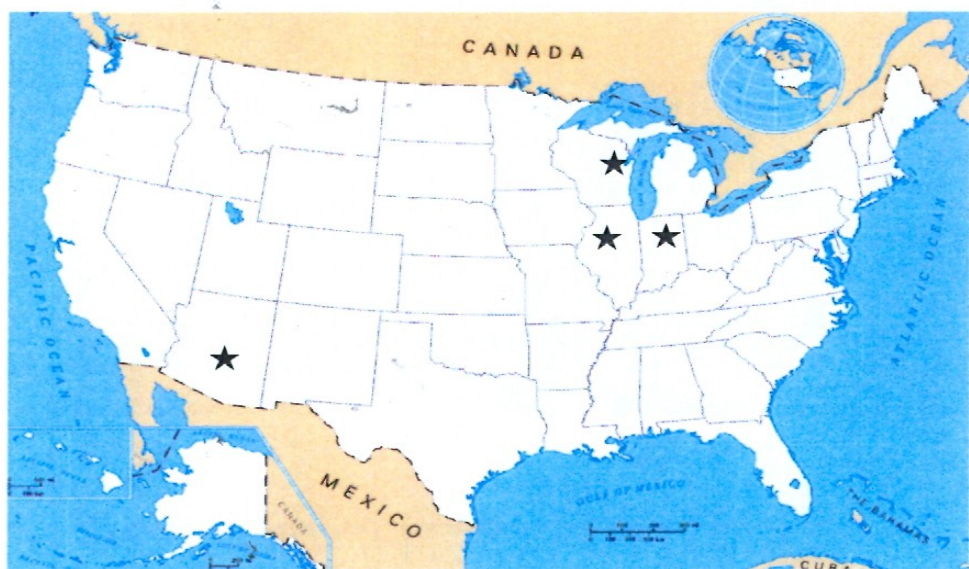
After Sister Mary Ellen became a sister, she went to teach in Hudson, Wisconsin, a long way from Fond du Lac. The winters were very cold in Hudson and she caught several bad colds. At the end of the second year, she left for Crown Point, Indiana. She prepared the second and third graders for two sacraments – Reconciliation and Eucharist.



Sister Mary Ellen and her Kewaskum family

She spent six happy years in Crown Point bringing her students closer to God and living with thirteen other sisters.

Sister Mary Ellen taught in the following places in Wisconsin: Kewaskum (twice); Sheboygan; North Fond du Lac; New Munster; Fond du Lac (three times); Marytown and Milwaukee as well as Fort Wayne and Crown Point, Indiana; Evanston, Illinois; and Tucson, Arizona.



Sister Mary Ellen usually taught the middle grades. She didn't let a day go by without telling a story about when she attended school in far-off Ireland. Her former pupils in Kewaskum love to tell about how she would dance the Irish jig for them on St. Patrick's Day.



Living in Tucson was different from the other places. It was very hot with the temperature reading 100+ degrees in the summer. Snakes are plentiful there, too. One day Sister Mary Ellen almost stepped on one; both she and the snake were very surprised. The sunsets are very beautiful. Hopefully, everyone will get a chance to visit the picturesque state of Arizona.



Sister Mary Ellen in the convent back yard in Tucson

Sister also spent many happy days in Evanston, Illinois. The city was very near the sparkling waters of Lake Michigan. She and another sister would walk to the lake and enjoy looking at the interesting stores along the way. Then, on the return trip, they would stop off and have coffee and a sweet roll.

Sister Mary Ellen also has been a school principal, secretary and tutor. She is a good cook specializing in

Irish soda bread. She has traveled many places to serve God in various ways.



L to R Sisters Mary Ellen, Susan Kolb and Mary Agreda Touchett at the Grand Canyon

Fortunately, she was able to return to Ireland several times but it was very difficult for her parents to watch all of their children leave home. Seven went to England; four left for America; one went to France; and three stayed in Ireland. Eight have died and seven are living.



L to R Bob Imrie, Kathleen Johnston Imrie, Sister Mary Ellen, Owen Johnston and Joan Johnston Casey



When her brother, John, died in Ireland a few years ago things changed for the Johnston family.



John Johnston on the family farm

John was the last of the family to live and work on the family farm. Now their home and farm have been sold.

During retirement Sister Mary Ellen gave more than 1500 hours of service to the Congregation of St. Agnes' Office of Justice, Peace and Ecology.



L to R Susan Ledesma, Sister Mary Ellen and Sister Stella Storch, O.P. in the office of Justice, Peace and Ecology



For the last few years, Sister Mary Ellen has been retired and living at Nazareth Court in Fond du Lac. She continues to spread her light in a thousand different ways – helping the elderly, visiting the sick, and doing other things other people aren't able to do. Yet she still finds time for extra prayer and reading.

Sister thanks God daily for having called her to be a Sister of St. Agnes, to be light to all those around her.



