

## Immediate Release

Cullman, Alabama  
July 17th, 2022

### Sister Madeline Contorno celebrates 50 years of Benedictine Life

Benedictine Sister Madeline Contorno joyfully celebrated fifty years of monastic profession on July 16 at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama. Abbot Marcus Voss of St. Bernard Abbey presided at the Eucharist, Father Ray Dunmyer was homilist, and Deacon Bob Martin assisted at the altar. Sister Elisabeth Meadows, OSB, Prioress of the monastic community, received Sister Madeline's renewal of her Monastic Profession. The Sisters, Sister Madeline's mother, Virginia Contorno, other close family members, and many guests enjoyed a luncheon buffet afterwards.

Sister Madeline has been steadfast in her love for Benedictine monastic life, making her first monastic Profession on June 9, 1972 and her final monastic Profession on June 19, 1977.

The first child of Paul and Virginia Contorno, Sister Madeline was born in Birmingham, and baptized at the old St. Mark Parish in East Thomas. She attended St. Paul Elementary and John Carroll High School. Madeline was greatly impressed by the joy and dedication of the Benedictine Sisters who taught her. The attraction to seeking God in religious life persisted through her adolescence, and at the end of her senior year at John Carroll, she accepted a scholarship to Sacred Heart Junior College over a full scholarship to Spring Hill College, just to be closer to the Sisters.

A true scholar, Sister Madeline attended the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa where she received a B.A. in history and a certificate in secondary education. She was awarded membership in the Mortar Board Society. She also garnered an M.A. in Liturgical Theology from the University of Notre Dame, an M.S.W. in Social Work from the University of Alabama, numerous social work licensures, and a certificate in spiritual direction from Spring Hill College in Mobile.

Over her lifetime, Sister Madeline has served in a variety of ministries, endearing herself to many people throughout the diocese. Starting out as an elementary school teacher at Sacred Heart School in Cullman, she then taught theology at John Carroll Catholic High School in Birmingham and St. Pius X High School in Atlanta, Georgia. She went on to serve as youth minister at Holy Spirit Parish in Huntsville, Alabama, and as campus minister at St. Francis University Parish in Tuscaloosa.

While she was serving as campus minister in 1984, Sister Madeline joined with other Benedictine women across the country to take part in a Third World Seminar and Dialogue with the Poor in Cuernavaca, Mexico. She was so moved by her experiences there, she came back with a strong desire to serve the poor in her own state. With the advice and assistance of some social work professors at St. Francis, she applied and received a grant to begin the master's program in Social Work at the University of Alabama.

In retrospect, Sister Madeline affirms, "The Lord works in very surprising ways," because her desire to serve the poor as a social worker was to take shape in a direction she had not expected. When she graduated in 1987, she was sought out to be an oncology social worker at the University of Alabama Hospital in Birmingham (UAB), something she had never imagined for herself. There she ministered to

people from all over Alabama who had cancer, but often lacked the material resources they needed. She also became involved in the beginnings of the hospice movement in the Birmingham area. And again, surprisingly, she soon found herself as hospice social worker and chaplain for the newly formed St. Vincent Hospice.

She was to spend ten years doing hospice ministry in homes, trailers, and facilities all over Birmingham with St. Vincent and Medical Center East hospices. Her desire to serve the poor was realized as she ministered to people both in the inner city and in isolated rural areas, praying with patients and family members, and consoling them in their grief. She was well-known by every funeral director in Birmingham.

In 1993 Sister Madeline completed clinical pastoral education (CPE) at Carraway Methodist Hospital, training her professionally as a chaplain, and she was later recognized as a fellow in thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC). With her strong background in grief counseling and chaplaincy, she conducted many grief support groups, memorial services, and grief retreats. In later years, she was to serve as Director of Pastoral Care at St. Vincent's Hospital.

When the Jubilee Year 2000 approached, Sister Madeline became interested in the call to the new evangelization taking place in the Diocese of Birmingham, and applied to be Coordinator for RENEW 2000. Working closely with Bishop Foley and the diocesan staff, Sister Madeline went to parishes throughout the diocese to train facilitators for small faith-sharing groups. A mammoth undertaking, she managed to make it seem manageable, and also succeeded in organizing a large ecumenical event for Pentecost 2000 at the Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center.

For the last twenty years, Sister Madeline has served in pastoral ministry at Holy Spirit Parish in Tuscaloosa, Our Lady of the Valley Parish in Birmingham, and is currently serving at St. Mark the Evangelist Parish. She has offered what she does best: teaching the scriptures and sacraments, ministering to the sick and grieving, building small communities, encouraging outreach to the poor.

While engaging in external ministries, Sister Madeline has also served the Benedictine community in many ways, including infirmary coordinator, vocation director, community secretary, and chapter delegate. The regard and affection in which she is held has been demonstrated by her frequent election to serve on the monastic council and on various committees.

Sister Madeline cherishes the Benedictine practice of hospitality, embodying in her ministry the admonition of St. Benedict that "all be received as Christ." Quoting St. Benedict's directive, "Prefer nothing to the love of Christ," she is also quick to recognize that the love of Christ has been at the core of her monastic life from the very start.

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