



Remembering Irish American Women on Martin Luther King Jr. Day

We remember Martin Luther King Jr and the Civil Rights Movement which lead to the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 a landmark legislation outlawing discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Many Irish American women answered his call for justice marching in Selma and the March on Washington. These Irish American Women remembered their own ancestors' struggles against prejudice with the "No Irish Need Apply" signs in newspapers and places of business in the 1900's.

Irish American women religious also stood on the front lines recognizing in the Civil Rights movement a moral challenge they could not ignore. Their voices and courage were rooted in Catholic social teaching. One Religious Sister, Sr. Mary Antona Ebo, whose community had deep Irish roots, marched in Selma and declared, "I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic." The legacy of these women is a testament that the Civil Rights Movement was not only an African American struggle but an American one, strengthened by the conscience and courage of Irish American women who walked beside Martin Luther King Jr.

Thousands of Sisters of Mercy, Charity, St. Joseph and other Religious orders taught in Black schools knowing the importance of education for those facing discrimination. One of those sisters teaching in Black Schools was Sr. Bernadette McNamara SHSp, the first LAOH St. Brigid Humanitarian Award Honoree. Sr Bernadette was Called Home to God on March 28, 2023. She is survived by some of our Sister Hibernians; her sister Mary Celine O'Leary and her nieces Maire Manning and Una Escolas of the Our Lady of the Rosary Division Cleveland. During her life her nieces and their Hibernian Division raised funds to assist Sr. Bernadette in her ministry. I had the honor of knowing Sr. Bernadette. She wrote her own story which was found on the internet. Here is her story:



"I'm a Sister of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate. Our Motherhouse is located in San Antonio, Texas, the cradle of our foundation.

I grew up in a loving and faith filled family on Achill Island, County Mayo, Ireland. I was the third oldest of 12 children. I had a wonderful childhood though because of health issues, aggravated by the dampness on the island, my father had to work in England and we only got to see him, for a week, every few months.

As a young girl, Missionary Sisters often visited our elementary school, many of whom worked in Africa – they told us stories and showed us pictures of their missionary work among African children who were very poor. They asked us to sell tickets and fill “mite boxes” with our pennies to support their work. I began to dream of one day working with those children – my vocation was born.



Sister Bernadette McNamara narrates the annual Holy Family Early Learning Center Passion Play in this 2014 file photo.

I didn't know how my dream would become a reality, but the Holy Spirit has a way of guiding each one of us exactly where God wants us to be. I went to live with my aunt, in County Galway; she lived close to the convent and high school where the Sisters of the

Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate lived and taught. I was 12 years old at that time. When I was 15, I told my parents that I had decided to join the sisters. On January 6, 1950, I bid farewell to my beloved family and with two others, I entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate. A few months later, on July 4, we left on the Mauretania – a passenger ship bound for New York. We made the trip to San Antonio by train. There I received my formation as a Sister of the Holy Spirit, and continued my education, first at St. Mary's University and later at the University of Incarnate Word.

I pronounced my first vows as a religious sister in 1952. During the next 64 years I lived a full and rich life, which had its challenges but also an abundance of joys and blessings. In the earlier years I taught in schools in Texas, and in New Orleans, Louisiana, where I taught for a year and then became the school principal.

I had the privilege of ministering with and for the people of Mississippi for 21 great years – 12 as principal of St. Peter the Apostle Elementary School in Pascagoula and nine at Holy Family in Natchez. St. Peter the Apostle School in Pascagoula was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and the pastor decided it was not feasible to rebuild. And so ended my ministry there.

I volunteered to go to Natchez to teach. Two years after I arrived, the elementary school closed because of financial challenges. In the fall of 2007 an Early Childhood Learning Center opened at Holy Family and I was asked to serve as the Catholic identity and financial director of the Program. Talk about life after death. The following eight years were a mixture of so many joys and blessings, but also some serious challenges.

In March 2015 I had a serious fall. I broke my second cervical vertebra. After time in the hospital and physical therapy I was able to travel. I moved to our Motherhouse in San Antonio where I now reside. Although I had to leave Natchez, I left my heart there with the beautiful people who were such a blessing in my life. I continue to support the program from a distance, through my daily prayers and in any other way I can offer my support."



Sr. Bernadette is one of the remarkable Irish American Women that has made an impact on the past 250 years of America. On this day let us remember all the Irish American Women that had the courage to stand with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. By saying the following prayer.

Prayer for Justice and Courage

God of mercy and freedom,

You placed in the hearts of Your children

a longing for dignity, justice, and peace.

We thank You for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

and for the Irish American women

who walked beside him in faith and courage.

May their witness remind us

that silence in the face of injustice

is not the way of the Gospel.

Give us brave hearts and

compassion like the Religious Sisters

and a spirit of charity that sees Christ in every neighbor.

Teach us to build the beloved community

where every life is honored

and every voice is heard.

Guide our steps in the work of reconciliation

today and always.

Amen.

