News



Carmel McEnroy at her 1984 Ph.D. convocation ceremony at the University of Toronto. McEnroy received a master's degree and a doctorate from the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology. (Brian Smith)



by Sarah Mac Donald

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 3, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Mercy Sr. Carmel McEnroy, author of a groundbreaking work on the role of women in the Second Vatican Council, has died at age 83 in Galway City, Ireland, after a long illness.

Responding to the news, Sr. Doreen Whitney of the Sisters of Mercy in the U.S. said McEnroy, who passed away Dec. 3, would be greatly missed by family, sisters, former colleagues, associates and many others throughout the world.

Following a diagnosis of terminal cancer earlier this year, McEnroy had been receiving care from the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, though she spent most of her working life in the U.S.

When a comprehensive history of women and the Catholic Church in the 20th century is written, the name of Sr. Carmel McEnroy will loom large. She penned the most insightful account to date of the 23 women auditors who participated in Vatican II. *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* was published in 1996 and the following year (1997) won the Catholic Book Award for History/Biography.

In an article published on the Mercy Sisters' website in January 2013, McEnroy related how within 20 years of the closing of Vatican II, the fact that there were women at the council was already becoming a forgotten memory. She wrote: "This exclusion motivated me to recover the dangerous memory of the female auditors before it was irretrievably lost."

In his foreword to her book, German theologian, Redemptorist Fr. Bernard Häring, who was a theological advisor and consultant to the council, wrote, "I consider McEnroy's book both important and necessary. As far as I can see, up to now very little is said by historians of the council about the absence and presence of women in Vatican Council II. I dare to foretell that the present book will find great interest for a long time."

Though McEnroy will be best remembered for her book on Vatican II, she will also be remembered for the treatment she received from St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, in St. Meinrad, Indiana. A distinguished theologian, she taught systematic theology there for 14 years and was tenured in 1992.

However, St. Meinrad fired McEnroy from her position as a professor in 1995 after she signed an open letter to Pope John Paul II and the U.S. bishops, along with about 2,000 others, asking that the discussion of women's ordination be allowed to continue. The letter, which was written in response to John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of May 1994, which sought to close the debate on women priests definitively, was published in the Nov. 4, 1994, issue of the National Catholic Reporter.

The treatment of McEnroy by St. Meinrad raised uncomfortable questions about the academic freedom of Catholic theologians and the denial of academic due process. In her autobiographical notes in the postscript of her book on women and Vatican II, she recalled how she was fired from her teaching position "with less than two weeks' notice, no due process, and the insulting offer of half a year's already meagre salary. All of this was in clear violation of the terms of my contract, the procedures spelled out in the Faculty Handbook, and the school's endorsement of the American Association of University Professor's Statement on Academic Freedom."

The charge brought against McEnroy was public dissent from magisterial teaching in regard to women's ordination. The open letter she signed had been organized by the Women's Ordination Conference. McEnroy contended that she was acting as a private citizen and that she signed it, "in accordance with my rights as a citizen and private person (guaranteed by my contract)." She did not indicate her professional affiliation with St. Meinrad School of Theology, nor did she use the initials of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy.

Putting her name to the letter, even in a private capacity, was construed by St. Meinrad as dissent. On April 26, 1995, McEnroy received a letter from Archabbot Fr. Timothy Sweeney stating that he was asking the president-rector of St. Meinrad, Fr. Eugene Hensell, to terminate her contract because signing the open letter had made her "seriously deficient" in her duty. This was despite consistent commendation of her work in previous years. May 9, 1995, was her last teaching day at the college.

St. Meinrad was undergoing a visitation by a team on behalf of the U.S. bishops' conference. The first rumor McEnroy had heard about her possible dismissal was on March 6, 1995, when the chair of the visitation team, Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha, according to McEnroy, "made it known publicly to students that he was there to carry out Archbishop Daniel Buechlein's wishes with regard to feminism, including firing me, and homosexuality." McEnroy said the "precipitous unilateral

action" against her evidenced her accusers' "ignorance of the nuanced understanding of 'dissent,' which clearly distinguishes honest differences from those that are hostile and obstinate."

St. Meinrad's administrators, she explained, "totally ignored" letters from the Leadership Team of the Mercy congregation at the central, provincial, local and individual level, as well as from other religious congregations and groups at academic institutions, who tried to initiate discussion before her position was terminated.

On May 10, 1995, Sr. Bridget Clare McKeever, a Sister of St. Louis and a tenured professor at St. Meinrad, submitted her letter of resignation, stating that the termination of Sister Carmel's tenured contract without due process was "a breach of faith not only with Dr. McEnroy, but also with the entire faculty. Regardless of how these actions are rationalized, they are unjustified and unjust."

Then the largest professional society of theologians in the world, the Catholic Theological Society of America, overwhelmingly endorsed a statement and two resolutions in McEnroy's favor at its 1995 meeting, calling for her reinstatement and questioning the charge of dissent. McEnroy took a civil action against St. Meinrad. But in June 1999 the Court of Appeals of Indiana ruled in favor of the seminary's argument that resolution of the action would "excessively entangle the court in religious matters in violation of the First Amendment." The American Association of University Professors in 1997 censured St Meinrad School of Theology for violating McEnroy's academic freedom.

Speaking to Global Sisters Report about McEnroy, Mary Hunt, feminist theologian, described the Mercy Sister as a canary in the Catholic coal mine. "She was a sign to other Catholic women scholars that there is no recourse from the power of a patriarchal church to crush its opposition."



From left to right: Sr. Fidelma Heeran, Sr. Frances Lalor, Sr. Carmel McEnroy, and Sr. Doreen Whitney, pictured in a photo taken July 27, 2018, in Dublin, at a reunion of Mercy Sisters who worked in the U.S. over the years. (Courtesy of Doreen Whitney)

"Her book, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II*, brought the 23 women auditors at the council to public attention," Hunt said. "It was a necessary if embarrassing reminder that none of them were able to vote at the meeting despite their influence around the edges. Little has changed since then as women are still non-voting auditors at Catholic synods."

McEnroy, according to Hunt, paid the price at St. Meinrad for her honesty and persistence. "That seminary, like many others, still has only a miniscule percentage of women on the faculty. Yet her book remains a classic in the field, a gift to a church that did not want to read what she had to say but could not deny the truth of her message."

According to background information from the Sisters of Mercy, Margaret Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy was born May 15, 1936, in Carrickmakeegan, Ballinamore, County

Leitrim, Ireland. She was the third of seven children of Bernard and Agnes (Fee) McEnroy.

According to the Sisters of Mercy, she attended Mercy Secondary School in Ballymahon, County Longford, where she excelled in her studies. She entered the Sisters of Mercy as a postulant in 1955 and made her final profession in 1961. She volunteered for the U.S. mission that year and was sent to the Jefferson City, Missouri, Diocese, where she taught and was principal of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School in Columbia, Missouri, for many years.

She received a bachelor of arts degree in 1967 from Marillac College in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1976 she received a master's degree from the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology and a doctorate from there in 1984.

After she was fired by St. Meinrad, she worked for a while as a visiting Lilly Professor at the Berea College and as an adjunct professor at the Lexington Theological Seminary, both Protestant educational institutions in Kentucky.

McEnroy was "a staunch advocate for justice and women's rights and was direct in expressing her truth with complete honesty throughout her life," said Sr. Doreen Whitney of the Sisters of Mercy, who had known Sister Carmel for many years. "She continued to be involved with current concerns, and often took brave steps to speak out on unjust systems, even at her own expense."

"Apart from her sharp intellect and capable skills, Carmel had many other talents and interests," Whitney added. "She also explored photography and art, and in her later years she produced some beautiful watercolor paintings. Carmel was a loyal and faithful friend to many and was always generous with her time. She was willing to share her knowledge and listen to others. She deeply loved her family and relatives and enjoyed their support throughout her life."

Her cousin, Sr. Rosarii Beirne, also a Sister of Mercy, told Global Sisters Report that Carmel's rural childhood was idyllic. "She was surrounded with love and beauty. It is no surprise that she was a great lover of nature and that she so often reproduced nature scenes in her works of art."

McEnroy joined the Mercy Congregation in Ballymahon when Beirne was a student in the boarding school there. "She was a brilliant teacher. When she was sent to join our fledgling foundation in Missouri we felt she was a great loss to the Irish

education system."

She also paid tribute to her cousin who as a junior professed sister gave her sound advice when Rosarii entered the Mercy Sisters. "She was able to take the broader view and to think outside the box." Of her many good qualities, Beirne highlighted Sister Carmel's sincerity and loyalty. "She was also very good humored, generous and hospitable."

According to Hunt, "Inroads that women make in the Catholic theological world, the ability to speak our truths in that most defended of sanctuaries, we do with thanks to Carmel McEnroy and her colleagues. History will be kind to them."

Advertisement

"Sr. Carmel McEnroy was a modern day example of a true Sister of Mercy," according to Sr. Susan DeGuide, regional superior of the Sisters of Mercy in the U.S. "She was always about further justice issues, especially those that pertained to women in society and the church. Even when things were most contentious for her, she always acted with integrity and with the best intention to further the significant role of women and especially women theologians in the Church. We stand very proud of her."

"My aunt was a fighter," Professor Joyce Smith of Ryerson University's Journalism Research Centre told Global Sisters Report. "When she felt strongly about something, she was all in, whether that was winning a game of Monopoly or challenging a parish priest after Mass about his lack of inclusive language. You wanted her in your corner.

"Somehow, she kept track of all of us and always had a card and often a gift for our important dates: wedding anniversaries, birthdays, graduations. This was no small feat given that she had six siblings, five in-laws, 20 nieces and nephews, and then their kids. She supported our pursuits, always genuinely interested and invested. And she was a lot of fun. I'll always admire her strength of conviction and her generosity. We're going to miss her."

[Sarah Mac Donald is a freelance journalist based in Dublin.]