Blog
Social Justice
Appreciation

Mercy Srs. Pat Murphy, left, and JoAnn Persch at the ICE facility in Broadview, Illinois, outside Chicago, in 2009 (Courtesy of Chicago Catholic)

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I usually try to be philosophical about death. It's part of an amazing cycle, it's when we go to meet our eternal reward, it's just another step toward the Divine. I know that, in its own way, death should be seen as being as beautiful as birth.

But some just hit harder.

In late July, we got the terrible news that Mercy Sr. Pat Murphy had died at age 96. This week, we got the news that Mercy Sr. JoAnn Persch — Murphy's partner in "crime" — had died Nov. 14. She was 91.

Rabindranath Tagore is credited with the thought, "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come." And it is true that there is still much light in the world, and many of the lamps that shine were inspired by the work of Murphy and Persch — or as some friends called them, "Rabble" and "Rouser."

The impact these two Catholic sisters had on the world cannot be measured.

I first met them in 2015, writing about the two houses for immigrants in Chicago run by the Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants, which Murphy and Persch founded. By then, they were veterans of ministering to people seeking refuge.

In 1990, they became two of the founding members of the Su Casa Catholic Worker House in Chicago serving refugees from Central America who were survivors of war, torture and political persecution. From 1997 until 2002, Murphy and Persch ministered at Casa Notre Dame in Chicago, a shelter for women fleeing domestic violence or recovering from addiction.

In 2007, the two sisters began organizing weekly prayer vigils outside the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) processing center in Broadview, Illinois, the final stop for migrants scheduled for deportation. Together they attended the prayer vigils every Friday morning, and in 2008 they were instrumental in the passage of a state law that permitted them — and other faith leaders — access to provide spiritual care for migrants in state detention facilities.

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In 2018, both — by then Murphy was 89 and Persch was 84 — were arrested at the Catholic Day of Action for Dreamers in Washington, D.C., a nonviolent civil disobedience protest in support of immigrants. That led to an interview by comedian and political commentator Samantha Bee on her television show, "Full Frontal," about how roughly these peaceful protesters had been treated compared to the rioters storming the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Which leads to the other thing about Persch and Murphy: They were just an absolute joy to be around. They were fun, they were funny, and all the while deadly serious about living out the Gospel. As Bee puts it at one point in the interview, "I *like* you guys."

In 2022, they founded Catherine's Caring Cause, named in honor of Sisters of Mercy founder Catherine McAuley, to assist refugee families in finding shelter, providing basic necessities and navigating life in a new country. In 2023, the two sisters were the recipients of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Chicago Archdiocese's Immigrant Ministry.

"Throughout all the violence Pat saw inflicted on the many people she accompanied, she lobbied for, or for whom she protested, I admired both Pat — and her dear friend and accomplice Sr. JoAnn Persch — because they resisted evil by taking the Gospel message very, very seriously," Sisters of Mercy president Sr. Susan Sanders said in a statement when Murphy died. "This, I believe, was at the heart of their spiritual resilience, and spiritual resistance. Prayer. Courage. Nonviolence. Persistence. And love."

And then, just four months later, Sanders had to make a statement about Persch.

"When Sr. Pat Murphy recently died, not unexpectedly, the sadness, concern and love of our Mercy Community turned immediately to Sr. JoAnn Persch, Pat's forever Sister of Mercy partner in the ministry of justice, activism, compassion, prayer and love. Now, God has so soon asked us to mourn JoAnn's unexpected death this week," Sanders wrote.

Mercy Sr. JoAnn Persch tells a crowd of worshippers at the ICE facility in Broadview, Illinois, on Nov. 1, 2025, that their request to bring Communion to the immigrants detained there was denied. (Courtesy of Chicago Catholic)

She went on to write that it seems hard to imagine the work continuing without them.

"How will it be for our Mercy Community, and the many communities JoAnn called together in God's name, to continue her work among the poor, the violated, the displaced? Among those running in terror from violence, and those running in hope toward new life? How will it be when we will miss JoAnn's clear voice — quiet, insistent, regular, and respectful — about the new and daily injustices being

perpetrated on already-suffering people?" Sanders wrote, and then answered her own questions: Persch and Murphy's work is *our* work now.

These two sisters had so much influence and carried so much moral authority that they had a list of people in high places they could call when they needed help, whether it was a large check or legislative muscle, including U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois. Durbin, in a statement after Murphy's death, echoed Sanders' thoughts about continuing the work.

"Sr. Pat Murphy dedicated her life to making the world a better, more caring place. She was a voice for the voiceless, and the work she did for immigrants and refugees truly embodies the best of humanity," Durbin wrote in July. "Today I mourn the loss of my friend who was a relentless leader in our fight for immigration reform, and I will honor Sr. Pat's legacy by continuing her efforts."

And he echoed them again Nov. 17 after Persch died.

"For years Sr. JoAnn joined her lifelong friend, Sr. Pat, praying the rosary every Friday for immigrants at Broadview [ICE facility] who faced separation from their families and deportation to an unknown fate. These nuns were often the last to see these immigrants before they embarked on their life changing journeys," he wrote. "Sr. JoAnn's passing is the end of a life of kindness and caring. But it is more. It is a reminder and a challenge to each of us to welcome the stranger and choose kindness over hate and fear."

Which leads us back to those thoughts on lamps and light and life and death: Oh, how the lamps of JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy burned for justice! Oh, what light and life they brought to the world! And yes, the world seems a bit darker now without those two, but we know that for them, the dawn has come.

And we know that thanks to them, there are so many more lamps burning brightly today, chasing away the darkness, spreading light and life as we, too, await the dawn and the light of the world.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.