Sister Mary (John Aquin) Dougherty  
(1922 – 2014)

Sister Mary Ellen Youngblood, Chapter Prioress of Adrian Crossroads Mission Chapter, described Sister Mary Dougherty as “a Dominican woman of prayer, dedicated to ministry and continuous learning.”

Mary Cecile Dougherty was the daughter of John Edward and Mary Cecile (Dineen) Dougherty, who called Chicago their home. Born on March 18, 1922, she was the oldest of their five children, followed by John Edward, Jr.; Eleanor; Rita; and Jean.

John Dougherty was a heating engineer. He was the president of a firm that he and his brothers owned, Dougherty Brothers Heating Contractors, which went bankrupt in October 1929, during the Great Depression, because of the stock market failure. The Doughertys did not lose their home or car, however, since John Dougherty had put these in his wife’s name. Still, he must have found other work, because the family was never in need.

Sister Mary wrote, “Our mother’s sisters formed our close extended family. They attended everything that happened at school. We spent holidays together.”

Mary’s school years began at St. Philip Neri School with the Adrian Dominican Sisters. In 1929, because of the danger of chicken pox and whooping cough, her father rented a home in Miami Beach, Florida, and sent his wife and children there from January 1 to Easter. While there, Mary attended St. Patrick School, also with the Adrian Dominicans. Upon the family’s return to Chicago, she continued her schooling at St. Philip Neri. When she was in seventh grade, her teacher surprised her by asking her if she had ever thought of becoming a Sister.

Her high school years were spent at Aquinas High School. Some of the Sisters asked her to help after school in the CYO program at St. Kevin Parish, and there she met several other young ladies who later became Adrian Dominicans. Sister Mary wrote that Aquinas required the students to enroll in a “cultural credit,” and so she enrolled in the orchestra and took up the violin. She wrote, “I’m sure that I was the worst second violinst any orchestra ever had, but I learned to appreciate a great deal of good music.”

At the wake, her sister Rita told an amusing story. Mary was sick and had stayed home from school. When Rita arrived home, she found Mary in bed but practicing the violin. Mary said, “I’m not going to school again until I learn to play this piece!”

Again, when she was a senior, one of her teachers asked her if she had ever thought of becoming a Sister. She told her mother about this; and after some thought her mother said, “I don’t think you’re patient enough to be a Sister!”

Mary graduated from Aquinas in June 1940, and received a scholarship to Siena Heights College (now University) in Adrian. She wrote, “Strange are the ways of God! When I was in Holy Rosary Chapel for Benediction on the Feast of Christ the King, I felt that this is where I should
be.” After a year at Siena Heights, she became a postulant on June 22, 1941, entering with a group of thirty-five young women.

In her autobiography, Sister Mary wrote of a humorous incident that occurred during the postulate. The postulants with college credits were sent to help Sisters Veronica and Consilia in the garden. They were to pick beans and beets. Mary, not knowing that the beets grew underground, could not find them. This caused a good deal of merriment on the part of Sisters Veronica and Consilia.

Mary received the habit and her religious name (Sister John Aquin) on December 30, 1941, and professed her first vows on December 31, 1942. Until February 1943 she was kept in Adrian as a student at Siena Heights College. In February 1943 Sister Mary received an appointment to St. Alphonsus School in Dearborn, Michigan. As Sister Mary was getting ready to leave for Dearborn, she was told that she had a visitor. It was her brother Jack (John, Jr.), who was in the Army Air Corps and going overseas. He had come to say good-bye.

When Sister Mary arrived at St. Alphonsus, she was assigned to teach English and social studies in the high school division. In June 1943 she returned to Adrian for the summer, and joy filled her heart when she welcomed her sister Eleanor into the Adrian postulate. She returned to St. Alphonsus for the next year.

In June 1944 she received a bachelor’s degree from Siena Heights College with a major in Latin and minors in history, English, and education. Also, her sister Rita’s entrance into the Congregation that year was a source of happiness for her. Rita, however, left the Congregation some years later.

In October 1944 Sister Mary was sent to the Catholic University in Washington, DC as a full-time student. She discovered that she, a third grade teacher, was in a class composed of college and seminary teachers, but she managed to survive. In 1945 she was brought back to Michigan and assigned to teach third grade at St. Ambrose School. She spent the next year at Precious Blood School, also in Detroit. In June 1947 she was awarded a master’s degree from the Catholic University with a major in Latin and minor in Greek.

Upon reception of her master’s degree, she was sent to Miami Beach, Florida, to teach Latin, English, and history at St. Patrick High School. There, she found herself with a sophomore homeroom; half of the students Catholic and the other half non-Catholic. This was a difficult year, made even more difficult by the death of her mother. She returned to Michigan at that time, and joined her siblings for her mother’s funeral.

In 1948, Sister Mary was brought back to the Midwest and assigned to teach Latin, biology, and history at St. Edward High School in Elgin, Illinois.

In 1949, Sister Mary experienced a change. She became a parish visitor, residing at Dominican High School in Detroit. Two years later she was again in the field of education, sent to New York to teach third and fourth grades at St. Joseph School in Bronxville. The next year she was back in Michigan, at St. Mary High School in Royal Oak, as a teacher of Latin, English, biology
and religion. This assignment lasted for five years. During these years, in 1954, the Dougherty family again knew sorrow at the death of their father.

In 1957 Sister Mary was appointed principal/superior at Our Lady of Sorrows School in Farmington. It may be, however, that administration was not her forte; for beginning in February 1959, she served the balance of that school year in Adrian, in offices at St. Joseph Academy and Siena Heights College.

From that time on, all of her ministry was in Florida. In August 1959 Sister Mary was sent to West Palm Beach as a teacher of Latin and religion at St. Ann High School. The year 1961 saw her at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale for four years. In 1965 she was at Tampa Catholic High School for five years, as assistant principal for the last three years. Sister Mary moved to Cardinal Newman High School in West Palm Beach for two years, then spent five years as religious education coordinator at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Fort Lauderdale.

All of Sister Mary’s ministry after that was in West Palm Beach. From October 1977 to April 1978 she was with Sister Eleanor at Darcy Hall Nursing Home as activities assistant; from April 1978 to June 1980 in social service at the Convalescent Center; a year as executive dean in charge of boarders at Rosarian Academy; and nearly nine years at St. Mary Hospital, a year as admissions registrar, also taking a course in CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education), and almost eight years as pastoral associate. She then spent eight years in retirement, as a volunteer and Bible study teacher.

In 1998, she and Sister Eleanor returned to Michigan. Because they had two dogs, they could not live at the Motherhouse in Adrian, so they found an apartment in Tecumseh. In 2000 they were able to live in an apartment at the Dominican Life Center/Regina, and volunteer their services. Sister Mary was a volunteer in the Office of Information for several years. In 2009, Sister Mary’s health was poor, and she joined Sister Eleanor in the Maria Building. Sister Eleanor’s death that year was an occasion of trauma for her older sister. Sister Mary remained in Maria until her death on January 22, 2014, at the age of ninety-one.

A wake-remembrance service was held for Sister Mary on January 24, 2014, in St. Catherine Chapel. Sister Mary Ellen Youngblood extended sympathy and welcomed those who had come to bid Sister Mary farewell. These included her sisters Rita and Jean, Jean’s husband Bernard, and Sister’s many Dominican friends. Her brother Jack and his wife Barbara were unable to be present.

Sister Mary Ellen summarized Sister Mary’s life and ministry. She ended by saying:

As I reviewed the Annals forms in Sister Mary’s file, I noticed that she consistently listed her blessings for the year. This list was long, and the challenges were short. That really was her philosophy of living. Life is more blessings than challenges. She ends with the statement, “I have not been sick. I just started breaking my bones. It has been a wonderful life.” ... This past week, Sister Mary grew weaker and quieter. In the presence of her much loved cousin, Father Peter Dougherty, and Sister Mary Pat Dewey, she gradually grew more peaceful until God called her home.
Sister Therese Haggerty, formerly a member of the Good Shepherd Sisters and who was in charge of Mauравood Residence for unwed mothers in 1970, also spoke. She said in part:

I met Sister Mary in 1970. ... She came to Mauравood with some of the other Sisters from Cardinal Newman High School. In 1971 she brought her sister Eleanor, who was looking for a place to live and work. ... When Sister Eleanor was at Mauราวood Residence, there was a dog, Pepper that she fell in love with. Then she acquired another dog. She and Sister Mary took those two dogs with them when they left Florida. After a while the two of them came to Adrian and lived in Regina Residence. When I went to study for spiritual direction, Sister Mary asked me to be her spiritual director. She never let me forget that she was my first directee!

Sister Carol Coston remembered:

I lived with her at Tampa Catholic High School ... and she was a good person to live with, so generous with her time. She was very helpful with the speech contest which was held every year. ... When she was in West Palm Beach, my mother was looking for a companion. Most of her friends had died, and she had no one to visit with. I wasn’t there, so I called Sister Mary and asked her if she knew of any Sisters who could visit my mother. She said that she was about ready to retire, and she would be glad to visit my mother. So she would go to visit my mother once a week, and I would get reports every week. They would go to movies together and out to eat. I was, and am, so grateful to her.

Sister Rose Celeste O’Connell also shared memories:

When I was a prep, the preps went out to Innisfail every summer when the Sisters were here in Adrian. We took classes, and Sister Mary taught Latin I to us one year. Every evening she would take us for a walk around the lake, and the walk would finish with an ice cream cone. One time a few of us asked to take the boat and row instead of walking, and she let us do it. I think she got in trouble because she let us go off by ourselves. ... Later I met her in West Palm Beach, Florida. She was a chaplain, and she was a wonderful chaplain, with compassion and very, very loving. My memories of her are very special.

Sister Marcine Klemm remembered the time in Bronxville, New York.

[I was the driver] and we purchased our school supplies in lower Manhattan. Sister Mary was frequently my prudent companion. She studied the Manhattan map before each venture, so we had an opportunity to do some sight seeing, i.e., St. Patrick Cathedral, the Empire State Building, the United Nations, the Statue of Liberty. . . . Our residence was supposed to be ready by Christmas, but it wasn’t. Sister Mary had the bright idea to save our Christmas tree until the house was ready. We did that. We moved into the house in the spring, but the tree had become a “Charlie Brown Christmas tree,” with very few needles, but lights and ornaments. We celebrated in the community room of our new home, singing Christmas carols and drinking egg nog. I found Sister Mary Dougherty to be a generous and understanding person, with a delightful sense of humor and common sense.

Rita Dougherty, Sister Mary’s sister, also shared. A small part of her presentation:
I have a nephew, Jack Quigley, who has four children. He brought two of his children to visit Sisters Eleanor and Mary. He took them to their apartment and introduced them. He said, “This is Sister Mary. She’s the talker. This is Sister Eleanor. She’s the quiet one.” Sister Mary reminded me of that story the other night. I thank you for all the kindnesses you have shown to my sisters, and to me when I was in the Congregation.

Sister Mary’s funeral ceremony took place on January 25. Her cousin, Father Peter Dougherty of Lansing, Michigan, was the presider and homilist. After the beautiful service, she was laid to rest next to her sister, Sister Eleanor, in the Congregational ce