

Sister Aileen Cohalan  
September 14, 1900 – May 28, 2000

It was on May 28, 2000 – not very long before her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday – that Aileen Cohalan went quietly home to God. She went home to Him loved by her family, loved by those who knew her well, and loved by those who cared for her at Kenwood. She also went home to Him admired by all of us because of the indomitable faith that was hers to the very end.

Aileen's faith guided her as a child of eleven when her mother, Hanna O'Leary Cohalan, died and she became the beloved, unflinching support of her Father, Judge Daniel Florence Cohalan, and the inspiration of six brothers and two sisters. Within the next few years she also lost her two sisters and a brother. Sorrow may have left its shadow on her young life yet it seemed only to deepen her faith. By now she found in her father a source of wisdom, and it was with her own youthful wisdom that she fostered a loving family life at home.

A mature sense of responsibility and the easily recognized gifts of a musician made Aileen the center of the lively dinner parties called for by her father's position and by the enthusiasm of her loved stepmother. During these exciting years at the family homes in New York and in Glendore, Ireland, she became well acquainted with the celebrities of the time – John McCormack, Fritz Kreisler, Rachmaninoff. Their love of music influenced Aileen's enduring taste for the very best.

After completion of education both at home and at Sacred Heart 54<sup>th</sup> Street, Aileen continued the study of music, travel and a serious commitment to volunteer work in New York hospitals. Although each was a source of happiness, she had been aware since childhood that God wanted more of her. It was in 1930 that she surrendered, entering the Society of the Sacred Heart at Kenwood.

Life as a Religious of the Sacred Heart was never an easy one for Sister Aileen Cohalan. Perhaps it was because she really was a "personality" or because she always seemed a bit "more unique", a little freer than was ordinary. Perhaps it was frail health. Whatever caused her difficulties on the way to holiness, she never slackened her efforts to teach with excellence – at Kenwood, at the parish school at Manhattanville, as Director of the Piux X School of Music there, at Newton College and at Mt. Anville in Ireland. Through it all she knew the incredible joy of incredible gifts. On the very human side, Aileen Cohalan knew frustration and hurt. But she soared above them because of her great human heart. In its depths was the source of her lively faith and her passionate struggle to do the will of God – "nothing but His will".

Aileen came to Kenwood in 1982 determined to live out her life of prayer and to give of herself to her many friends. She never forgot to listen, never forgot to speak to them of God, never forgot to enjoy His Presence as her Best Friend.

At her Vigil Service she was described as:

. . . a lover of Ireland and a sophisticated New Yorker, she was a gifted musician and an actress as well. The fabulous hats she wore with flair were legendary. But, Aileen Cohalan was above ALL a religious of the Sacred Heart, committed to the love of Jesus until the very end of her long life. . .

She clung to Him when "the darkness seemed to hide him" and in the morning sunshine of His glorious presence.

We miss Sister Aileen Cohalan. She lived among us as an RSCJ whose faith in the love of the Heart of Jesus sustained her and she gave that love to many. Hers were 99 years of LIVING. "We can picture her matching the angels with the kind of music she always wanted to hear, always hoped to play before her Beloved."

# Prayers Please...

Sister Aileen Cohalan who died on 28th May

FLASHBACK Times Orion Monday October 20 1930

## Aileen Cohalan to Quit Society for Nun's Veil

Miss Aileen Cohalan, accomplished musician and member of the younger society set of New York city, will begin her novitiate period of six months in the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Kenwood, this week, it was learned today.

She is the daughter of former Supreme Court Justice Daniel F. Cohalan and cousin to the Rt. Rev. Daniel Cohalan, bishop of Cork, Ireland.

Miss Cohalan, since her debut into society six years ago, has devoted herself almost exclusively to volunteer social service.

At the end of the novitiate she will be inducted into the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded in France at the close of the French Revolution by the women of the French aristocracy for the purpose of teaching religion to the poor children of the country. The American branch is directed from Rome, where, at the end of six years, Miss Cohalan will take her final vows in the cloistered order.

Miss Cohalan attended one of the convent schools of the Sacred Heart in New York city. Kenwood is the central home for the entire order in America. During the preliminary novitiate no habit is worn. For six years after the first vows are taken they are renewed annually until, at the end of the preliminary period, the final vows are taken for life at Rome.

The Society of the Sacred Heart is devoted exclusively to teaching, there being 22 schools conducted by the Madames in this country.

Accomplished musician that she is, it is thought Miss Cohalan will

schools. Victor Herbert in 1917 recognized Miss Cohalan's musical talent by producing a musical play named "Alleen" in her honor.

In leaving the secular world for the vocation of religion and service, Miss Cohalan is following the traditions of her family on both the parental and maternal sides. Four of her mother's sisters are nuns, and the Rt. Rev. Daniel Cohalan, bishop of Cork, Ireland, is a cousin to Justice Cohalan, and is the fourth Cohalan to hold the important bishopric of Cork. Father John McCarthy, an Irish missionary priest of Long Island a century ago, was of the Cohalan family.

Sister Mary Margaret, head of St. Joseph's hospital, Yonkers, former business administrator of St. Vincent's hospital, New York, is another cousin, and the Rev. Francis McCarthy, who died last year, the oldest living member of the Society of Jesus, was also related.

Miss Cohalan's uncle, the Rev. Patrick O'Leary, was recently made pastor of the Catholic church at Mohegan, in Westchester county.



Aileen Cohalan, R.S.C.J.

Golden Jubilee of Profession

Kenwood Convent of the Sacred Heart  
Albany, New York February 10, 1989

Homily

Philippians 3: 8-15; John 20: 19-29

"Glory be to God for dappled things," an invitation, indeed a challenge, to view the world and its Creator in a new light, with novelty and freshness. The words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Irish poet and Jesuit priest--and, interestingly enough, an individual remarkably similar culturally, artistically, and spiritually to the great lady we honor today--urge us to continually seek and to discover anew the often hidden and the otherwise overlooked beauty in creation. For Hopkins and for those of us who are privileged to share, because of his insight, even a fleeting grasp of reality as he perceived it, the world is most certainly dappled, not spotted but accented by, highlighted with, basking in, and ever bursting forth from the grandeur of God. To view all of creation in the smallest and the most fragile of flowers and to grasp that the natural inclination of that same tiny bud to open to and incline toward the source of light as the humblest beginning of the hymn of the entire universe to its Divine Artisan is to move from doubt and confusion to acknowledgement and an appreciation of the handiwork of God. But that movement, that insight, gaining that perspective is a special gift and grace. It is the gift of learning to see with the eyes of faith, and it is the grace of humbly noting wonder and thus respecting mystery in our lives. It is to embark on one of the noblest of human aspirations to comprehend our origin, our purpose, and our goal. It is, in short, to seek to understand God.

It involves risk, for it is to believe not only that God creates and fills our world, but, moreover, that in painting subtle hints of His energy and love He draws each part and, more importantly, each person of that reality ultimately to Himself. But as so many who are gathered in this holy place on this special afternoon can attest, the road to that believing is long and arduous; the path is frequently fraught with difficulties, and--at least in human terms--the cost is often great. And for those of us who have stumbled, for those of us who do stumble, and, most assuredly, for those of us who--all good intentions notwithstanding--will continue to stumble, there is such truth, such wisdom, and such hope nestled in the words which Jesus spoke to the Doubter. They are not words of reprimand; they are not words of chiding. Jesus did not think less of Thomas. No, He only urged him to greater faith and subtly suggested emulating those who even without the clear benefit and incontrovertible proof of seeing yet have the courage and the daring to believe. From among those who believe, each of us is offered an opportunity to expand our understanding, to strengthen our own halting faith, and to glean--however seemingly insignificant--a particle of the mosaic which is finally our grasp of the wonder and majesty of God. Sharing the broad spectrum of the faith experience of others, from the poetic distillation of the creative genius of a

Hopkins to the unsullied awe and the innocent rapture of a child, our own believing is enhanced, privileged and decidedly blessed.

People who not only believe but who share their belief in its concrete application in service to others stand out as beacons to all those for whom risking, daring, and hoping appear unmaintainable postures if not unattainable goals. Thomas wanted to believe, but the dross of doubt dragged him down. His eyes were quite literally blinded not by but to the manifestations of the Resurrection around him. His inability to dare to believe blurred his vision. He needed others then, just as certainly as the doubter in each of us needs others now to draw our fingers to the injured hands and our hands to the pierced heart of the Body of Christ in our world today. Thus it is all but understatement, biblical irony, to say of those who have not seen and yet believe that they are indeed blessed, twice blessed: blessed in their own belief and in the belief they nurture in those whose faith is not as sturdy.

It is only one of many manifestations of the love of God at work in our lives that each of us can point to those whose firm leadership or gentle support has assisted us, by way of example and encouragement, in our effort to be Christ-like, in our desire to make Christian a living description rather than an empty explanation for our lives. Many of us have been engaged in seeking the Lord through the inspiration of the spiritual giants with which the history of salvation is peopled. The zeal for God which so utterly consumed an Ignatius or a Madeleine Sophie has captivated those among us who are numbered today as their spiritual sons and daughters. Many of us have been blessed in the examples of faith which were often silently--but no less profoundly--set before us in our parents and families. Still others of us have had the singular good fortune of meeting, perhaps even befriending, those whose very lives speak of the love and mercy of God, lives which dare us to believe in God, and lives which all but force us to expand our vision and recognize--even from afar--that the fullness of God is always more than our comprehension can enfold. For me, and I suspect for many of you who are with me this afternoon, one such person, one such friend, is Aileen Cohalan...Coco.

Not unlike others, Coco reflects the God she has not seen; but quite unlike others, she stands as testimony to the fact that God can and does transcend our categories! From the studied elegance of this woman, who is finally among the most humble and faith-filled I have ever met, one comes to believe--one cannot help but believe--that ours is a God of color, of harmony, of vibrancy, of vitality, a God who asks us only to receive life as a gift--and then to live it to the fullest! From Aileen Cohalan, I have learned that God can, indeed, be seen in beauty just as certainly as He can be heard in music. From Coco I have seen that God can weave into our lives both joy and sorrow and from that fabric deeper faith. For only as one who has been honored by the intimacy of deeply spiritual conversation with her, I know that in her life there have triumphs known by some, tragedies known by others, and tears known only to God. Her infectious love of life raises the fact of being to a sacrament in our midst. Likewise, her love of people richly anoints the bond of friendship. Is it any wonder that her favorite Mystery is the Incarnation in which God literally throws Himself into

the world and into our lives in one another?

It would be simply mistaken to suggest that even against a background of all the unique individuals in the world that Coco did not yet stand out! "Don't change," Mother Bodkin told her, "or you will lose what you have." It is perhaps the one directive, above all other from her novice mistress, which Coco took to heart!

Faith has certainly exacted its price from Coco, but it has also rendered her a remarkably free woman. "I am not complicated," she confided to me recently, "but I am complex." What could be a more accurate self-description for a woman who claims that the greatest love of her life has been God while her greatest passion is--or, perhaps more correctly, was--horsebackriding?

Fifty years, in the estimation of most people, is a long time, a time in which age, fatigue, frustration, and diminishment can worry and weary the strongest among us. But when I look at, talk with, and listen to this woman, I am never impressed by the inexorable ravages of the passage of time. Rather, I sense a serenity, to me a clear and unambiguous indication and affirmation that her life has been deeply blessed because it was generously shared. "All you have is now," Coco told me. "You can pine about the past, and you can worry about the future--and alter neither--but in the meantime forfeit the present." To reach such calm, to feel that at home and at-one with the world and all its beauty which surrounds her is a grace the world itself cannot offer or insure. The search for God, and the belief which generates and sustains that search, has taught Aileen Cohalan to see hints of God in our dappled creation. And that searching, that seeking, has been rewarded. For it is ultimately of people like Coco that the Lord is speaking when He acknowledges how blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. My believing and the believing of so many others whose lives you have touched, Coco, in so many ways in so many places in so many years is easier, perhaps even greater, because of your example. I will never again be able to contemplate the Lord, whose infinity you pondered even as a child, without my images being filled with color, splendor, music, and life!

But for Coco, as for each of us, the seeking continues. It is only fitting that as we leave this chapel, singing the words of Mother Stuart and giving voice to our innermost desire to draw ourselves closer to God, we will utter that prayer as it was arranged for music by Coco herself.

You once told me, Coco, that you never tried to be anything but who and what you are. Would that such honesty and such humility could characterize the efforts of others! "Glory be to God for dappled things," Hopkins wrote poetically and beautifully and correctly suggesting that it is in the dappled things that we can suddenly see--and undeniably so--the beauty and grandeur of our creation. Thank you, Coco; thank you for being yourself, for so clearly and unmistakably believing what you have not yet seen, and for stimulating others to do the same. Thank you, indeed, Coco, for being one of God's "dappled things!"

Daniel G. O'Hare, S.J.