



The Companion

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SPECIAL TRIBUTE ISSUE SISTER MARY LOU KOWNACKI (1941-2023) Founding Mother, Emmaus Soup Kitchen



From Sister Mary

Dear Friends,

My friend Sister Mary Lou Kownacki was an absolute gift to the world. Since her death in January, I've been reflecting on all the good that she did in her life, the huge impact she left on her friends, her community, the city of Erie, and beyond.

One of her greatest legacies is Emmaus Ministries itself. Mary Lou was one of our "Founding Mothers," establishing the soup kitchen when she was a young



Sister Mary Miller (right),
Director of Emmaus,
with Sister Mary Lou Kownacki

Benedictine Sister living in an intentional community in the inner city. There were always hungry people coming to their door, asking for any food that they could spare. Mary Lou envisioned a better way to ensure that the poor and hungry of Erie were fed: a soup kitchen where they would always be sure to receive a good meal, served by people who really cared for them. She organized her friends, called upon a local church and asked to use their space, and got things moving: Emmaus was born, and over the next forty-nine years would grow into what it is today: a food pantry, urban farm, Kids Cafe, women's advocacy program, and of

course, the soup kitchen. The thousands of people who have come through our doors were able to find good food and good company because of Mary Lou.

Really, if there's any way to sum her up, it might be in that phrase: "founding mother." She started several more ministries, including but not limited to the Neighborhood Art House, Monasteries of the Heart, and Benedictines for Peace. Maybe more importantly, she had a way of "finding" the good in people: in her many friends, in the children who she protected, nurtured, and taught, and in almost anyone who crossed her path. And so she became a mother figure, not just to Emmaus but to many people who needed encouragement and her tough—but unconditional—love.

In this issue of *The Companion*, we celebrate Sister Mary Lou, and the ways that her incredible Spirit continues to live on in our work at Emmaus and in the hearts of those whom she touched. I hope it inspires you, as she inspires us.

In peace,

Sister Mary

About Sister Mary Lou

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, a founding mother of Emmaus Soup Kitchen, died on January 6, 2023, the Feast of the Epiphany, at the age of 81. A Benedictine Sister of Erie for more than sixty years, Mary Lou understood herself, first and foremost, as a monk:



a contemplative person in community with others, devoted to celebrating life and beauty.

As a young girl, she witnessed the church bells ringing and people rejoicing in the streets when the news broke that World War II was over. The wonder and hope of that experience carried her through her lifelong efforts to build a joyful society that believed peace was possible. This dream was the foundation of her many ministries.

In 1972, Mary Lou established the Pax Center, an intentional living community of Benedictine Sisters and lay members, committed to radical Christian nonviolence. In 1974, the group

Sister Mary Lou loved to quote her role model, Dorothy Day, who said, “Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes.” Mary Lou did it all.

founded the Emmaus Soup Kitchen, and she regularly served there for many years.

Mary Lou was as concerned about suffering on the global scale as she was about the suffering of her hungry neighbors in Erie. She became heavily involved in local and national peace and justice causes, often participating in civil disobedience actions protesting war and the nuclear arms race. In 1980, she worked with Benedictines across the country to establish Benedictines For Peace, and served as National Coordinator from 1980-1985. She became National Coordinator for Pax Christi USA, a position she held until 1991.

She understood that peace is only possible when people’s souls are fed, and so in 1992, she founded Benetvision, which promotes the writing of Sister Joan Chittister and aims to make contemporary feminist spirituality widely accessible. A teacher by nature, she strove to offer the same kind of hope and beauty to children. In 1995, she opened the Neighborhood Art House, which continues to offer free lessons in art, music, dance, and writing to impoverished children in Erie, giving them a chance to express themselves and see themselves as artists and creators.

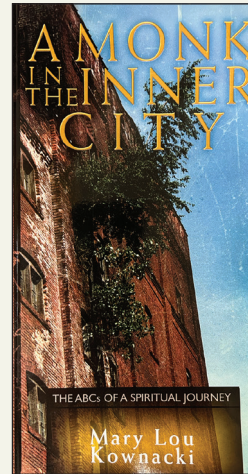
Many of Mary Lou’s ministries continue to live on, but more importantly, she is survived by innumerable loved ones who have been shaped by their relationships with her. This includes the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, her family, and her many, many friends and those who looked to her as a mentor and prophet. Her vision of a world lit up and dancing for joy, a world celebrating the end of violence, is still a source of hope and a reminder of what could be.

In her words

Over Sister Mary Lou’s lifetime, she helped to publish dozens of books, and she wrote seven of her own. One of those books, *A Monk in the Inner City: The ABCs of a Spiritual Journey*, offers meditations on Sister Mary Lou’s life living and working in the city of Erie. In this reflection, with her characteristic insight and compassion, Sister Mary Lou shares a memory of a family from the soup kitchen one evening with Sister Mary.

Resilience

Last evening [Sister] Mary and I were taking a walk for an ice cream cone and we met a family from the soup kitchen. The wife had just had a gall-bladder operation at a local hospital and was walking home—IV bandages



still on her arm. We were incredulous. “You’re walking fifteen blocks after an operation! Why didn’t you get a cab?” Mary asked. “Oh, there was some mixup and we had to walk,” the husband said, shrugging his shoulders in that resigned way that the poor adopt when confronted with those situations they consider their lot in life. “We’ll be okay.” And on they walked.

Like this couple, the inner-city neighbors who pass my front stoop each day are a collage of resilience, perseverance, and profound hope. To experience only the tip of their tragic stories would lock most of us into the gray cell of despair. Yet they still rise each dawn and listen to what poet Czeslaw Milosz in “On Angels” calls the angel’s voice:

“Day draws near
another one
do what you can.”

The founding mothers of Emmaus Soup Kitchen: (L-R) Sister Mary Miller, Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki; Sister Rosanne Lindal-Hynes



In their words

In addition to books, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki wrote countless columns, poems, and prayers. One of her better known mantras goes like this: “Open wide my arms, that the suffering of the world may come in.” Sisters, co-workers, and friends reflect on this question: How has Sister Mary Lou’s life impacted the way you open your arms to the suffering of the world?

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JACQUELINE SANCHEZ-SMALL, OSB
EMMAUS COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

Mary Lou was idealistic and had a sweeping vision of a nonviolent and just society, but she was also very practical. Whenever she thought I was too worried about what would become of people I was trying to help—people who were caught up in poverty, addiction, cycles of violence, and so on—she would remind me, “You can’t give anyone a new life. All you can do is keep on loving them through theirs.”

LINDA ROMNEY, OSB
EMMAUS BOARD MEMBER

I loved the way Mary Lou loved her godson Scott from the time he was a lonely child in a difficult home situation until the day she died. He was 40 by then. Opening one’s arms to hold the suffering isn’t a one-and-done. It’s a lifetime commitment to show up and be there for another made over and over until the day we die.



MARY HOFFMAN
EMMAUS BOARD MEMBER

My first memory of Mary Lou is when I was in high school. My sister, her high school friend, walked in the door and said, “Hey Mom, Kownacki got arrested for protesting the war again!” It was right then that I came to know the depth and beauty of peaceful Mary Lou—she showed me the way to help make a difference in the lives of others. She showed me a mean game of golf as well!



ANNE MCCARTHY, OSB
EMMAUS BOARD MEMBER

I met Mary Lou in 1974 as a new student at Villa Maria College. She invited me to volunteer at the soup kitchen and then to dinners and demonstrations at the intentional community she founded, the Pax Center. Mary Lou’s presence, her gospel witness, and her writing drew me in. I followed her to the Benedictines, to jail cells and celebrations, to Haiti and to East 22nd Street where we lived. She wove a life of compassion and integrity, honesty and acceptance, anger at the sufferings of the vulnerable and absolute delight in being alive that will always be my model for a good and holy life.



FOOD FOR THE SOUL



Everything on earth is filled
with sacred presence —
Let us bow down and worship.

—Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

For the Record: A season of Generosity

“It felt like we received a daily display of goodness and generosity throughout the entire holiday season. The doorbell at the soup kitchen kept ringing, and kindness kept pouring in,” shared Catherine Simon, Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry Coordinator. Here are some highlights.

Patchwork of Love, a quilting group from St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, made over a dozen quilts, by hand, to give away to guests at the soup kitchen. “The women who come to the kitchen are always so appreciative of these blankets, especially when they see that some are made especially for children!” said Emmaus Women’s Advocate, Sister Rosanne Lindal-Hynes.



Erie Day School held its annual Thanksgiving “Bags of Gratitude” event at school. Older students paired with younger students to fill hygiene bags, walking together through the auditorium while teachers handed out toiletries, gift cards, and food items to create bags filled to overflowing. Both Emmaus Ministries and Bethany Outreach were recipients of this generous event. Kids Cafe also received filled drawstring bags for the holidays.

Photos: Top: Sister Rosanne, second from left, receives the annual quilt donation from the Patchwork of Love quilting group; Bottom: Students at Erie Day School team up for a good cause; Page 2, left: Jaimee Black (left) and Drevell Showers of Hamot Health Foundation deliver warming kit bags to the soup kitchen.; Right: Erin Wise (left) and Sister Valerie Luckey, Ministry Assistant, show off Thanksgiving cookies!

For the Record: A season of Generosity



Representatives from **Hamot Health Foundation** delivered 100 “Warming Kits” to the soup kitchen in November. These drawstring bags, put together by volunteer staff members, included gloves, hand warmers, hand sanitizer, blankets, and more.

The staff at **Bayada Nursing** doubled the love, not only bringing 250 bags of decorative Thanksgiving cookies for guests, but returning again a few weeks later with over 300 items from a toiletry drive including hygiene products, shampoo and conditioner, soap, razors, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and combs!



We Remember

We are grateful to family members who asked that memorials be made to Emmaus in the name of their deceased loved ones:

R. Keith Allison
Ann Marie Brookhouser
Donald J. Carone
Sherrie L. Cermak
Lillian M. Chapin
Ruth Earll (volunteer)
Dr. Rudolph (Rudy) J. Lascek, Ph.D
Margaret Carol Litzinger (volunteer)
Priscilla L. (Paris) Peskowski
Allan Christian Ruedy
Richard Vargo
Joann Marie (Criscione) Zipperi

Emmaus also remembers our faithful volunteer who passed away:

Robert H. Haibach

We Give Thanks

Emmaus extends its gratitude to all those who have offered time, energy, and donations including **American Tinning & Galvanizing** for bottled water...**Bethany Outreach** for many pairs of socks...the **8th Grade Class at St. Luke's School** for helping to



(L-R) Catherine Simon and Sister Valerie Luckey, Emmaus Staff, welcome soup kitchen volunteer, Amy Kalie, and her third grade class from Saint George School for a visit.

clean up Emmaus Grove for the winter season...the **3rd Grade Class at St. George School** for coming to the soup kitchen to make Halloween cards and bring food donations...**Fairview School District** for taking up a sock donation and collecting over 1500 pairs...**Debbie and Mark Woods** for donating bikes and other toys to the Kids Cafe...**Sarah Glennon and her neighbors** for taking up a neighborhood-wide food collection...**Marcia Frisina** for her donation of many scarves...**Emissaries at Mercyhurst University** for baking

over 600 bags of cookies for our guests...**Boy Scout Troop #17 at St. Mark's in Lawrence Park** for donating five dozen cookies...the **Team at FedEx Ground on Birkmire Drive** for sponsoring a food drive...the **Team at Rehrig Pacific** for sponsoring a food drive...**MacDonald Illig** for their Christmas donation including food and clothing...**Greenfield Baptist Church** for its donation of winter items to give away to guests...**Kathie Rothrock** for her annual donation of oranges and candy canes for the soup kitchen's Christmas dinner...**Emma Kill** for organizing a team to make peanut butter and jelly at Cathedral Prep...**Sue Wick** for donations of hats, clothing, and shoes for the Kids Cafe...**Kelley Glass, Andrea Hallman, and the parishioners of St. Luke's and St. Patrick's** who contributed to and organized their annual coat drive at the food pantry...**Melanie Shufran and Ralph Edes** for their regular donations of to-go boxes, fresh fruit, and cereal...**Gary Cacchione** for his donations of tickets to the Nutcracker for the children at the Kids Cafe...and **to EVERYONE** who made the Kids Cafe Christmas Store and the holiday season at Emmaus a loving experience for so many. We couldn't have done it without you!



Volunteer Carol Hirsch helps a child wrap gifts at the Kids Cafe Christmas Store.

STAFF: Mary Miller, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Rosanne Lindal-Hynes, OSB; Rita Scrimenti; Valerie Luckey, OSB; Catherine Simon; Jane Wagner
Companion Staff: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB



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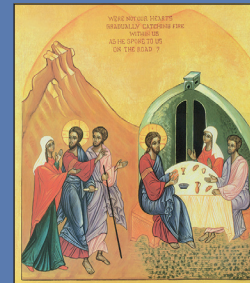
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They came
to know Christ
in the breaking
of the bread.

Luke 24:35