

Ever a writer, Sister Mary Ann Walsh finding new voice in new role

By Patricia Zapor

Catholic News Service

ALBANY, N.Y. – Over her 50 years in religious life, Sister Mary Ann Walsh's job titles have varied – teacher, reporter for a diocesan newspaper, Vatican correspondent and media editor at Catholic News Service, and spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops – but through it all the Sister of Mercy has been, down to her very core, a writer.

From scribbling away after bedtime as a child – light from a gooseneck lamp under the sheets betraying her to her parents – writing has been Sister Mary Ann's passion. As an eighth-grader, she had so many writing projects for the class that her teacher let her use a vacant nurse's office as her work space.

("There's a teacher," Sister Mary Ann said with an appreciative chuckle. "She isolated me, and had me convinced I had my own office.")

Last summer, Sister Mary Ann left her role of more than 20 years on the staff of the Office for Media Relations at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, including seven years as director, and became U.S. church correspondent for America magazine, writing for the weekly Jesuit publication as well as its online blogs.

That adds to a resume that includes editing three books, writing for a wide variety of paper and online publications, meeting or interviewing popes, presidents and movie stars, producing videos, making television appearances and even landing in The Associated Press Stylebook – in the entries for how to use the term "sister" and how to refer to nuns.

She was the reporter who busted then-TV show host Phil Donahue for using made-up names when talking about the sisters who taught him, and the one whose first foray on the "spokesnun" side of news led to stories about her very public battles with a Colorado sheriff over logistics at World Youth Day in Denver.

But working for America allows her, for the first time really, almost free rein in what she writes.

Her topics for America have, among others, included the rising cost of college; the role of women as teachers of the faith; who she'd like to send a Valentine to; the declining number of Catholic funerals; what Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston said on "60 Minutes"; and why the church should stay in the business of civil marriage.

"It's the ideal job, a job of opinion, after working in an institution that thought opinion was anathema," she said in an interview with Catholic News Service. She

described reporting and her work at the USCCB as “The Joe Friday approach: the facts ma’am, just the facts.”

“Now I’m entitled to have an opinion.”

After decades as a reporter and then in a role in which she wrote bishops’ statements, speeches and press releases, getting to unleash her own views doesn’t come easy.

“It’s an unusual feeling,” she said. “I don’t think of myself as having some great opinion the world is waiting for.”

Response to her work for America has been almost universally positive, said Jesuit Father Matt Malone, editor-in-chief. Sister Mary Ann is the first religious sister to serve on the editorial staff in the magazine’s 106-year history.

Because she represented the bishops for so long, some readers expected her to continue to express institutional church perspectives, he said.

Instead, she writes from her experiences as a vowed religious, as a sibling to two brothers who live nearby in New York, as aunt and great-aunt to their offspring and about news topics that catch her fancy.

“She spent a lot of the last part of her life speaking for the bishops,” Father Malone said. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want to do that anymore.”

“She’s clearly enjoying speaking in her own voice,” he said. “And we’re enjoying listening to it.”

There’s the rub, as the Shakespeare-quoting sister might put it.

Just as Sister Mary Ann is exploring new topics, her own time apparently is running out. Results from a routine physical last summer led doctors to find that the breast cancer that she hoped she had beaten back has instead metastasized in four directions.

“I call it turbo cancer, it’s just charging along,” she said. She began chemotherapy, but her body didn’t respond well, so the treatment was stopped.

She’s been frank with friends and family about her illness and has dropped a few hints to readers. She built a column in September around her own experience of twice receiving the sacrament of anointing of the sick, for example.

“The prognosis is not good,” she said.

Then, early in February, the Sisters of Mercy website posted an article about how Sister Mary Ann is dealing with cancer, part of a series on sisters with serious illness.

The cancer diagnosis led her to hastily change her plan to work for America from the Washington area. Instead, she moved home to Albany, closer to her two brothers and their families as well as to a more extensive support network of Sisters of Mercy.

In fact, she moved back into the Mercy Motherhouse that she entered as a 17-year-

old novice in 1964. She returned in time to celebrate her 50th jubilee there last fall. Now a residence mostly for retired sisters, the motherhouse is home to about three dozen Sisters of Mercy and a handful of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. There, Sister Mary Ann has an office set up in one corner of her room, which is down the hall from the dining room in one direction and in another direction, the chapel, where she attends Mass most days.

Other sisters vie to help her. One 90-year-old sister got the nurse to clear her to push Sister Mary Ann's wheelchair. Others fret about her health when she's not in the dining room for a meal, and know that if there's ice cream on the dessert table, she'll want vanilla or strawberry, not chocolate.

"There are sisters here who taught me in high school. There's nothing like having your 90-year-old teacher offering to do your laundry," she said, clearly uncomfortable at the thought. "That's OK, Sister, thank you."

"It's a wonderful community," she said. "I've never done that much for other people from what I can see. But they tell me 'you did things with your talents.'"

"I am amazed. How did I deserve this?" she said. "Here's how you get through this thing: A few people do a lot and a lot do a little. And they make you feel like you've honored them by letting them."

That kind of support has enabled her to focus on her writing, working about half of each day. She reads all sorts of news pages and blogs, doing her own research. Sister Mary Ann posts a blog about once a week and regularly contributes to the print pages of America.

"Writing is the governing passion in her life," said one longtime friend and frequent visitor from New Hampshire, Mercy Sister Amy Hoey. "It's a wonderful gift and she's given it to the church."

Sister Mary Ann described how on some occasions, the stories she was reporting moved her to tears.

"I remember praying over my typewriter at The Evangelist so I could properly capture the interview," she said, recalling her years at Albany's diocesan newspaper. Not that Sister Mary Ann's work always endeared her to her subjects.

For one, there was the time she caught Phil Donahue making up names.

The talk show host had written an essay about the nuns who taught him. "His people were pushing me to do a story where there was no story. I resisted because it was a story about a story. Then my Irish guilt kicked in and I thought, 'Well, if you're going to do it, do it right.' So I really went after it and found the story didn't exist."

She called his alma mater in Cleveland and asked to speak to the sister he had mentioned. "Sister Mary Andrew" didn't exist and neither did the other nuns he named.

When she called him on it, Donahue acknowledged he had used pseudonyms but

said the teachers he mentioned were based on real people. Donahue's network tried to get the story killed, said Sister Mary Ann. Instead, her story was picked up far and wide.

Father Kenneth Doyle, who hired her as a reporter at The Evangelist, then brought her to work in the CNS Rome bureau when he was bureau chief, said her persistence, along with her gift for writing, stood out.

"In Rome, when I was there in the early '80s, was very much a male-dominated society, so she had to break in and she did it very well," he said. "She wasn't a bomb thrower, she always wanted a straight answer."

Having known and worked with her in multiple roles, including in handling media for papal trips, Father Doyle said her work always reflects "her great love for the church. Whatever she did was either in the interest of improving the church or in building up people's understanding of it."

These days, Sister Mary Ann said she finds herself thinking of the blessings in her life, particularly having the opportunity to write.

"There are lots of people who want to write," she said. "There are not that many who have the opportunity to make a living doing it. That's a grace. That's a gift."

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