

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, woman of faith, writer, spokeswoman, dies at 68

By Patricia Zapor

Catholic News Service

ALBANY, N.Y. - Mercy Sister Mary Ann Walsh, who went from hometown schoolteacher to Vatican correspondent, lived out her drive to be a writer even in her last days. She died April 28 in her hometown of Albany, New York, after a battle with cancer.

Sister Mary Ann, 68, had stepped down last summer from her role of 21 years in media relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the last six years as director. Just as she began a transition to a new job she quickly came to love - writing for America Magazine as the Jesuit publication's U.S. church correspondent - she learned that she had fast-growing metastatic cancer and moved home to the motherhouse in Albany where she had entered the Sisters of Mercy 50 years earlier.

Over the next nine months as her health declined, Sister Mary Ann wrote obliquely about her own impending death, such as in a piece about the "underutilized sacrament of anointing of the sick," shortly after she hosted a gathering of friends as she received the sacrament herself.

Her articles included observations about journalism, politics, civility in society, the effects of youth sports schedules on families that attend church and many other topics. In her last blog, published March 25, Sister Mary Ann tackled the topic of the need for mercy, as Pope Francis declared a jubilee year of mercy beginning in December.

In interviews with Catholic News Service and for the Sisters of Mercy, she talked frankly about the progression of her cancer and the inevitability of its outcome, though never complaining and always with appreciation for the outpouring of

support she was getting.

As word spread of her death, tributes were effusive from people who knew and worked with Sister Mary Ann.

Reporters, colleagues and bishops praised her deep faith, her determination, her trail-blazing as a woman and a nun and her abiding friendship.

In addition to being a good friend and gifted writer, said Susan Gibbs, a public relations professional who was formerly spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Washington, Sister Mary Ann “helped break the marble ceiling for women in the church.”

Phil Pullella, senior correspondent in Italy and the Vatican for Reuters told of his friendship with Sister Mary Ann that began when she was a reporter in Rome for Catholic News Service.

“I always called her ‘Mother Mary’ and she always called me ‘my son,’” he said in a note to CNS. “Mary Ann was an exceptionally generous woman. ... When she moved to America magazine, she wrote some of the clearest insightful, informed and entertaining columns about the U.S. church that I have ever read.”

Archbishop John Wester, bishop of Salt Lake City, who will become archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in June, visited Sister Mary Ann in March, presenting her with the St. Francis de Sales Award, the highest honor given by the Catholic Press Association. He is chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Communications.

Archbishop Wester said he has “the deepest respect for her integrity and her love for the church. She was a clear thinker who could write persuasively and in a captivating manner.”

Like many others, he commented on her “clever wit” and her ability to “read people’s hearts with ease.”

Sister Mary Ann was born in Albany, Feb. 25, 1947, the only daughter of Irish immigrants. After attending local Catholic schools staffed by the Sisters of Mercy, she entered the order as a 17-year-old. She earned degrees in English at the College

of St. Rose in Albany and began teaching elementary and then high school.

But the writing bug, which had led her as a child to stay up late, scribbling under the bedcovers under the light of a gooseneck lamp, soon led her to a reporting job at The Evangelist, newspaper of the Albany Diocese.

She went on to become a Vatican correspondent for Catholic News Service and then its media editor. In those roles, she traveled the world with Pope John Paul II and sat down for interviews with movie stars, including Raul Julia, Gene Hackman and Bruce Willis.

“Rome taught me how to cover Hollywood,” she told CNS in interviews in January. “They’re both complete bureaucracies.”

Her career path led her to the media relations staff of the USCCB, where she managed arrangements for press coverage of World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, for several other visits to the U.S. by St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, and for the ins and outs of news about the U.S. church, from the sex abuse crisis to the annual meetings of the U.S. bishops.

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