

Sister Mary Louise Lynch, champion of social justice, dies at 89

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A Medical Mission Sister who seemed to have her hand in every social justice movement of the last several decades died Feb. 7 in Philadelphia after years of declining health.

Sister Mary Louise Lynch, a Baltimore native who was the former co-chairwoman of the Baltimore Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission, was one week shy of her 90th birthday. She had been active in fighting the death penalty, promoting a nuclear freeze, opposing U.S. policies in Central America, standing against discriminatory practices and promoting many peace initiatives.

"She was a very happy blend of being compassionate and a good listener while also being a driving force for change," remembered Benedictine Sister Joan Marie Stief, a longtime friend and interim director of the Baltimore-based P. Francis Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace. "She was always engaged in conversation about something that would help the life of someone else, especially the poor."

A 1943 graduate of the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Sister Mary Louise attended what was then the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore before entering the Medical Mission Sisters in Philadelphia in 1945.

After beginning her religious formation, Sister Mary Louise became the first member of her religious community to earn a degree in journalism when she completed a bachelor's degree at Marquette University in Milwaukee. She later earned a master's degree in religion from St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., and a master's degree in counseling from Antioch College in Columbia.

Early in her ministry, Sister Mary Louise helped edit the "Medical Missionary Magazine." She served in India on the Medical Mission Sisters' novitiate staff in Pune and helped with fundraising and publicity for the Holy Family Hospital in New Delhi.

After working in a variety of leadership positions for the Medical Mission Sisters, she returned to her hometown in 1973, working part-time as communications

director for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), assisting in clinical pastoral counseling at Spring Grove Hospital and serving as chaplain for women in the Baltimore City Penitentiary.

Sister Mary Louise also worked as a counselor for the Baltimore Archdiocesan Consultation Center and helped develop the Medical Mission Sisters' Alliance for Justice.

Dick Ulrich, founding director of the P. Francis Murphy Initiative for Justice and Peace, said Sister Mary Louise had a skill for making sure the people in the pews understood the importance of social justice. Both were active in promoting social justice at Corpus Christi Parish in Bolton Hill, a center for much activism.

"She knew the facts of what was happening around the world," said Ulrich, coordinator of ministry to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons at St. Matthew in Northwood. "She was able to engage people in conversation without being overbearing."

Sister Mary Louise helped set up a "draft counseling program" in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1980. Its purpose was to educate young people on the Catholic Church's teachings on war and peace, while explaining registration and conscription procedures, deferments and conscientious objector status.

Working with Maryknoll Sister Helen Scheel, Sister Mary Louise began an annual memorial Mass in Baltimore to remember American religious sisters who were murdered in El Salvador in 1980.

"She made sure that happened every year," said Jean Stokan, a longtime friend who currently works for the Religious Sisters of Mercy in Washington, D.C. "Even 20 years after their deaths, there would be hundreds of people there. She kept alive the memories of the martyrs."

A trusted adviser to the late Bishop P. Francis Murphy, former auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, Sister Mary Louise represented Bishop Murphy and the Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission during a 1982 press conference that called on President Ronald Reagan to cease increased military assistance to El Salvador, according to a Feb. 19, 1982, article in the Catholic Review.

"If we believe, and we do, that the people of El Salvador are our brothers and sisters, family members who are suffering so grievously," she said, "then with great urgency we must speak against this terrible violence."

That same year, she helped promote a petition drive in parishes to halt the American and Soviet arms buildup and the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons.

As long as nothing is done to address mounting arms production, she told the Catholic Review, "I get very concerned about the feeling people have that nuclear war is inevitable." Quoting former U.S. Ambassador to Russia George Keenan, she

said, “ ‘Nothing so contributes to the inevitability of armed conflict as the belief that it is inevitable.’ ”

Sister Mary Louise was involved in the long campaign to end the death penalty in Maryland. She spoke, wrote articles and sent letters to the editor to the Catholic Review well into her later years. She moved to Philadelphia in the mid-2000s.

A wake will be offered Feb. 15 at the Medical Mission Sisters’ North American headquarters in Philadelphia. A funeral Mass will be offered there Feb. 16.

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