

## *Mary Milligan, RSHM, STD*

### *Selvage Leadership within the Fabric of Church*

*But despite the eradication of self through total obedience striven for by religious women, despite their spiritual practices performed to achieve Christian perfection through this erasure, and finally, despite their obedience to clergy and the narrow confines of religious life, these women constituted a powerful social movement.*

– Nelson (2001, 2)

JANICE POSS

**I**n the Roman Catholic Church, women religious across the centuries have sustained the Church's mission. Inspired by vows of service, they spread the faith, ministered to the sick, and educated the masses. However, because they were and continue to be denied advancement opportunities through ordination, their work and achievements take place at the margins or the "selvages" of the interwoven cloth of the constitutional hierarchy of the institutional Church. Today, these unassuming women—many working in the academy, like Sandra Schneiders, IHM, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, and Margaret Farley, RSM—have overcome public oversight and lack of recognition through hard-won expertise, professionalism, leadership, and notable contributions to the Church, academy, and society. These women religious academics teach and lead religious institutions of higher learning, achieving scholarly excellence and activ-

ism in support of marginalized communities. However, most do this essential work without public recognition from the Roman Catholic Magisterium. Nevertheless, they continue working under the Church hierarchy at the margins of power, living lives of service binding the Church together, like a selvage, into a communal cloth.

Mary (Bernard Marie) Milligan, RSHM (January 23, 1935–April 2, 2011) was one such woman—a member and leader of the canonical Catholic order called the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (RSHM) and a respected academic (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary: California and Mexico n.d.b.). In 1953, she felt the call to devote her life to God. She became a member of the RSHM, an order founded by Fr. Jean Gailhac and Mother St. Jean (Appollonie) Pelissier Cure in 1849 in Béziers, France (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary n.d.a.). Within the confines of religious life, she thrived, gradually rising to prominence as an educator, translator, historian, scholar, board and synod member, provost, and dean. She taught at schools in Neuilly, France (Milligan 2009, 18), Marymount High School and College, and, eventually, at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) and St. John's Seminary in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (*Los Angeles Times* 2011).

When I began this project years ago, I envisioned weaving as an appropriate analogy for her biography as an academic woman religious marginalized and relegated to the selvage edge of Church leadership. Later, I was surprised to find this same analogy in her 2009 memoir, *Tell Us Mary, What You Have Seen Along the Way*, where she explains the significance of this metaphor for her life. In 1956, as a young, impressionable novice, she was sent to the congregation's motherhouse in southern France for further formation. She visited the famous Gobelins Tapestry factory in Paris, begun by Louis XIV and Colbert in 1663 to weave royal tapestries (Mobilier National/ Les Gobelins n.d.). Recalling this visit, she saw the master weavers working on their tapestries from the reverse side until completion. "At the end of construction," they finally viewed the front, seeing the culminating result of their craftsmanship. Milligan uses this experience as an organizing motif in telling her life's journey. "It is this visit, this Gobelins memory, that will assist me as I weave in and out the thoughts and experiences that made me who I became over time and who I am today" (Milligan 2009, 3).

This tapestry motif focused her on the present to the end of her life and final struggle with a mixed diagnosis of "Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease" (Milligan 2009, 10, 11). Her doctors, never sure, di-



**Image 1:** Sr. Mary (Bernard Marie) Milligan, RSHM

agnosed it as Parkinson’s-related Alzheimer’s (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). She realized her mission in illness was to “leave a legacy or validation of my life, the story of my soul’s journey in faith and hope and love” (Milligan 2009, 3). Toward the end, she was able to see her accomplishments—the reverse side of her entire tapestry (Milligan 2009, 4)—from the front, interwoven, warp over weft, uni-

fying her richly hued life threads into a totality. She emphasized the positive aspects, always feeling God in her experience of the disease (11).

I use Milligan's tapestry motif as a methodological structure highlighting her metaphorical reference to weaving by exploring her leadership in academia on the selvages of the Church hierarchy. The six tapestry sections woven and bound together represent Milligan's life experiences. First, I explore her early life and answer to the call to become a vowed woman religious. Second, I cover her education and formation as a novice in Béziers, France, where she developed her skills as a writer, historian, linguist, and teacher. Third, I address her service as a representative leader within the RSHMs as General Councilor in Rome. There she gained her Doctorate in Sacred Theology (STD) and revised the RSHM's guiding constitutions, modernizing them in alignment with the dictates of the Second Vatican Council. Fourth, I explore her vocation as an academic at LMU as general superior (1980–85), provost (1986–89), professor of theology (1989–92), dean of the College of Liberal Arts (1992–97), and as a board member and professor at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA. Fifth, I document her work as an academic writer and poet. Finally, I look at her accomplished leadership and frustrations as special secretary to the Bishops' Synod on the Laity (1987–89). This six-paneled tapestry is her legacy left for us as the multi-patterned cloth of a grace-filled, spiritual life lived close to God.

### *Tapestry #1: Early Life*

The first threads of Mary Milligan's life began when her parents, Bernard Milligan and Carolyn Krebs, met in August of 1929 and married during the Great Depression (1929–39). Her father and mother of Irish and German extraction grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and traveled independently to California. Her mother was looking for adventure with her girlfriends; her father was looking for work to support his mother and four siblings. Eventually settling permanently in California, they had four children: Pat, Mary, Jeri, and Mike. Bernard became a well-known columnist and sports writer for the Hearst-syndicated *Herald Examiner*, which became the *Los Angeles Times* (B. Milligan, *Valley News*, September 3, 1968). Carolyn cared for and raised her children at home. They lived in the San Fernando

Valley (Milligan 2009, 5–7). Mary, nicknamed “Mickey” by her family, attended St. Charles Borromeo Church and grammar school, where she met fellow parishioners and classmates (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2020), Cardinal Roger Mahoney, and Fr. Thomas Rausch, SJ. Mahoney and Rausch would become colleagues and friends in her adult life (Fr. Thomas Rausch, pers. comm., Aug. 8, 2020). Milligan contributed to Rausch’s book, *The College Student’s Introduction to Theology* (1993), which became a bestseller. Cardinal Mahoney KGC-HS, a controversial figure in his own right, would become head of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (1985–2011). Mahoney respected Milligan’s work in the diocese and, at the request of Michael Downey—Milligan’s long-time friend and colleague at St. John’s Seminary—the cardinal presided at her funeral (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). These enduring relationships served Milligan in her roles as a leader in service to the Church.

Her family was proud of her as she was of them. She took the name Sr. Mary Bernard Marie Milligan in honor of her father, Bernard, when receiving her first religious vows in 1955 (Milligan 2009, 18). In her memoir, she identified that her mother instilled in her a “willingness to try new things, but maintain a constant, balanced, faithful and quiet presence. She felt privileged to give her mother’s eulogy at her funeral in 1996” (7). These early family threads were woven tightly throughout her life’s tapestry as Milligan remained close to her siblings. At the 2021 Mary Milligan, RSHM, Lecture in Spirituality, friends related that she was closest to Pat Marlowe—her eldest sister—who recently passed away (Abraham 2021). Milligan followed in Pat’s footsteps, becoming a teacher. Pat wrote the foreword to her sister’s memoir. Milligan visited her younger sister, Jeri, in San Clemente when she needed to rejuvenate her spirit in her sister’s restful garden. Jeri was the one to count on in the family. Brother Mike wrote for *The Jeffersons*—an early African American television show featuring TV’s first interracial couples (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021). He encouraged her to write (Milligan 2009, 6). He attended the 2021 Mary Milligan, RSHM, Lecture in Spirituality (Abraham 2021), where he shared fond memories of his older sister, who was already studying in France when he was eight years old.

## *Tapestry #2: Vows and Formation*

At the age of 19, Milligan finished her studies at Corvallis High School, run by the RSHM sisters until 1987 (Braxton 1986), and began her studies at Mount Saint Mary's College. Milligan felt the call to sisterhood and entered the RSHM Eastern American Novitiate in Tarrytown, New York, a year later, in 1953 (Milligan 2009, 17). Many women influenced her in these early years. They were RSHM sisters, mentors, and friends whose lives informed her own. "The women I have known and loved . . . are catalysts for change in religious communities and in the Church itself, particularly as the role of women in the Church struggles to fully evolve to its rightful place in the Church and society." Many Catholic girls felt a call as Mary did in the 1950s. The influx of novices reached its apex in 1965 when there were 179,954 religious sisters nationwide. A steep decline followed this surge. In 2019, there were only 42,544 vowed women religious in the United States (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate n.d.). Mary's career took place in the context of this surge and decline, formed by questions about the place of women religious in the Church after the Second Vatican Council in 1965, which left many issues around married and non-married clergy unresolved.

During her novitiate formation, she earned a BA in French at Marymount College in 1956 (Loyola Marymount University n.d.b.). Fluency in French became indispensable throughout her career and international travels (Milligan 2009, 17). Her extensive education was a natural outgrowth of membership in the community that already had provinces and schools in France, Brazil, Portugal, Ireland, and America. Today, their network of schools includes Mexico, Colombia, Italy, Africa (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary. n.d.a). Since 2006, social justice outreach through the RSHM NGO at the United Nations (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary n.d.b).

The RSHM history and charism became increasingly important to Milligan over time and informed her religious life. Founder Fr. Gailhac felt the action of the Holy Spirit and understood God calling him to collaborate in humankind's salvation. Milligan was influenced by Fr. Gailhac's words, which instructed her how to lead her life as an RSHM member, particularly his words about the founding of the Institute as described in the RSHM four-volume history:

'God in his infinite mercy and for the glory of his name, wishing to show that only he is the Author of all good . . . deigned to choose me, the smallest and least of all, to do his work. He chose me to prove once more, alone is he the beginning and end of all good.' Accepting and allowing grace to work in him, Gailhac became a faithful collaborator in the redemption and co-founding of the Institute whose mission is to know, love and make God known and loved so that all may have life. (Milligan, Sampaio, and McConnell 1992, 5)

In the southern French region of Occitanie, Fr. Gailhac, in partnership with Mother St. Jean (image 2), provided poor, disenfranchised women with a means of survival other than being preyed on by unseemly men who would prostitute them (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary n.d.a). These humble beginnings would become significant to Milligan when she wrote her dissertation on the Institute's history. This history was also essential when she rewrote their constitutions in alignment with the RSHM's charism and the Second Vatican Council's document for religious, *Perfectae Caritatis* (De Vroom and Horan, pers. comm., March 31, 2021).



**Image 2:** RSHM co-founders, Fr. Jean Gailhac (left) and Mother St. Jean Pelissier Cure (right)

While still a novice, Milligan was sent to the International RSHM Novitiate in Béziers, France. In her memoir, she fondly remembers Jeanne d'Arc Lefebvre, the woman in charge who spoke only French to the students. Her message to students guided Milligan's life journey, "*Cherchez-Dieu* (Seek God). God was to be found in all things, in the Church as well as in Scripture, the Eucharist, the community and in the Cross. . . . so in Béziers, the 'ill-matched threads' of [her] life began to take shape" (Milligan 2009, 18). Milligan considered the threads "ill-matched" because, like many women in the 1950s, including those in her Institute, decisions about her life were often made without consulting her. Rapid changes were thrust upon her without the opportunity for her to assert personal agency and come to some understanding of the purpose and connection between these opportunities. Within a short time, she moved from California to New York and soon after to southern France at the direction of her religious community. However, while in France, she began to discover a pattern that made sense of her life as an educator and student of history framed by the RSHM charism.

Milligan took her first vows after the initial novitiate period in Béziers around 1955 (Milligan 2009, 18). Eventually, she translated many of the motherhouse's documents from French into English when tasked to write the community's history from a woman's perspective. After completing her novitiate, she was sent to teach for the first time at American, Irish, and French schools in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris. While teaching in this privileged suburb, her sharp intellect absorbed refined French culture. In her memoir, Milligan recognizes the formative character of her time in Béziers.

And so, my early years of religious life were spent in France along with two novices from each of the Institute's provinces—English/Irish, Brazilian, Portuguese, French, Eastern/Western American. There began my many future experiences in the internationality of the Institute. Not only was an internationality of the Institute taking place for me, but the French language was an indispensable *entrée* into a reality.

As she perfected her French, its nuanced variations from English, such as the use of formal and informal pronouns, provided an insight into how her relationships would emerge throughout her work abroad. "What an extraordinary opportunity I had been blessed with! It would serve me very well later in life as well as in my formative years" (Milligan 2009, 17). Her experiences and the relationships



she built within the Institute's international reach provided a global framework that would make her an international representative and leader for her community.

Always mindful of her religious calling, Milligan was cognizant of her emerging path as an academic teacher and applied to the Sorbonne. There she earned a *doctorat de l'université*—a PhD—in English in 1959. She wrote her first historical thesis on convert Sheila Kaye-Smith (1887–1955). Kaye-Smith, with her husband, Sir Penrose Fry, began the St. Theresa of Lisieux Catholic Church in Northiam, UK (Milligan 2009, 39; Our Lady Immaculate & St Michael with St Teresa of Lisieux n.d.).

Milligan's formative years in France at the RSHM motherhouse and the Sorbonne confirmed her commitment to the RSHM educational mission and its international service to the people of the global Church. Her education at the Sorbonne and her increased facility in French paved her way for educational opportunities that had, up to this point, been reserved for ordained men in the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy. After graduation, she returned to the United States “full of fervor from her spiritual and academic training.” She began teaching at Marymount College, at its 1959 Sunset Boulevard location above UCLA in Los Angeles (Milligan 2009, 39–40).

In 1960, she returned to France before taking her final profession in Los Angeles. She recalls sitting in a park near the Orb River during an eight-day retreat. Reflecting on this lifelong commitment to God, she felt “connected to the community of people” in Béziers that was “broader than my own religious community, but yet part of it,” she reminisced. She describes it as a connection to “a vital dimension of ‘church,’ a church I was called to be part of” (Milligan 2009, 18). In retrospect, Milligan realized that sitting in this park in France allowed her to embrace the spiritual aspect of her apostolic mission of teaching in the Church and provided the space to know this was going to be her entire life's mission. She was called to be an educator lifting up her students' voices, academically and spiritually.

In 1966, she completed an MA in sacred scripture degree at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana—the first university to grant theological degrees to women. Scriptural study was always crucial in her teaching, her prayer life, and as a member of the Church. She deeply felt the presence of God's face there, understanding M. Lefebvre's words said years previously in Béziers—*Cherchez-Dieu*. She had found God (Milligan 2009, 13).

### *Tapestry #3: History and Renewal*

Back in the United States, Milligan was elected general councilor (1969–75) to help in administering the order. In light of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), religious congregations were asked to go through a renewal. Sent to Rome for five years as her community’s representative, she met the institute’s superior general, Sr. Maria de Lourdes Machado, and Sr. Marguerita Maria Gonçalves, who became a mentor well-steeped in the knowledge of these documents. These women aided Milligan in the process of renewing the constitutions of the RSHM Institute based on the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council, specifically the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes* (1965): “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (Milligan 2009, 28). These documents deeply inspired the women working on the renewal because they harkened back to the voices of their founders, Fr. Gailhac, M. St. Jean, and the community’s original writings. Their committee to review these documents was “aptly named ‘Sources’” (Milligan 2009, 20), which emphasized their pledge to “serve from the perspective of the poor” (De Vroom and Horan, pers. comm., March 31, 2021).

Before embarking on this monumental re-envisioning and renewal for the community, Milligan learned Portuguese to understand the needs of her sisters in Portugal and Brazil. Working alongside the Special Commission of members from the other provinces, she gave the revised constitutions their final form. They were accepted and approved by the general chapter of the Institute in August of 1980 and then by the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in their first draft (Loyola Marymount University n.d.b.). Patricia O’Connor, RSHM, reflected at the time of Milligan’s death on the significance of this work:

Mary [was] a giant in the Institute . . . Becoming a general councilor shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, Mary contributed significantly to the renewal called for by the Council. . . . Totally fluent in French, steeped in French history and culture, and deeply knowledgeable of French spirituality, past and present, she uniquely led us to discover anew our mid-nineteenth century French Founder, Father Jean Gailhac, and French Foundress, Mother St. Jean Cure Pe-

lissier, our first sisters and to help us understand them at a depth we had never known before. She helped us to understand the meaning of the communal charism of a religious congregation and what this offered the Church for the life of the world . . . She wrote voluminously on our Sources, translated historical works from their original French and Portuguese with earnest accuracy. She led an Institute-wide process of rewriting our Constitutions, helping us to corporately articulate our experience of living the Gospel . . . under her leadership, our Constitutions were accepted and approved by the universal Church. (O'Connor 2011)

While in Rome, she also studied at the Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianaе (recently renamed Pontificia Università Gregoriana). Technically, she was the first woman to obtain a Doctor of Sacred Theology degree (1975) from this prestigious pontifical university (Loyola Marymount University n.d.b.). Sandra Schneiders, IHM, who would go on to become a prominent feminist theologian in the United States and a long-time friend of Milligan's, is listed as the second woman to graduate that same year (Schneiders, pers. comm., April 3, 2021). Published in 1975 by Gregorian University Press, Milligan's two-part dissertation, *That They May Have Life: A Study of the Spirit-charism of Father Jean Gailhac* (image 3), was the first to document the Spirit charism of founder Fr. Gailhac and his collaboration with foundress M. St. Jean. Milligan documented this history of the community from its founding in Béziers in 1849 to the establishment of the American provinces in Tarrytown, NY, Montebello, CA, and other locations during the early

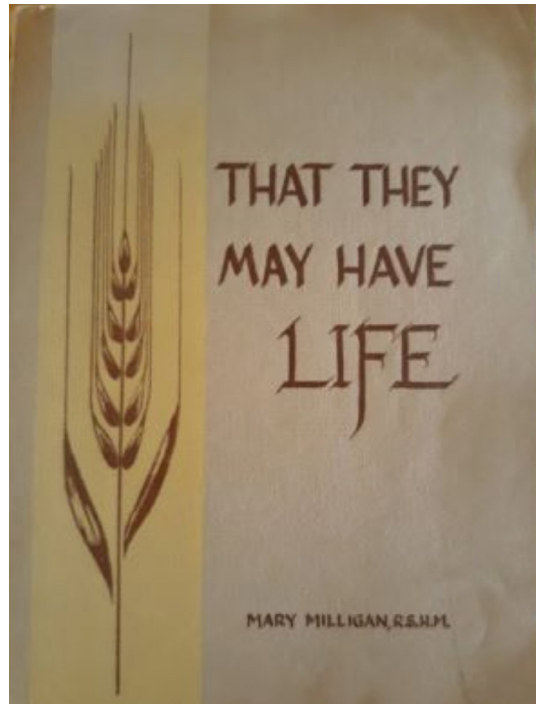


Image 3: Mary Milligan's published dissertation, 1975

decades of the 20th century by Mother Marie Joseph Butler (image 4), an Irish RSHM (Burton 1945, 15, 98, 279). Milligan's detailed description and analysis of the community's history and vows provided solid historical and spiritual foundations for the Institute's future work.



**Image 4:** Mother Marie Joseph Butler

### *Tapestry #4: Leadership in Rome*

We are called to live beyond boundaries . . . to be like Mary, followers of Jesus, open to the unexpected ways of the Spirit. Internationality is a gift from our origins. (Bailey and McMahon 1999, 6, 21, 30, 35)

With her educational achievements and understanding of the Institute's historical and spiritual foundations, Milligan became an international leader and teacher chosen early on to represent her community worldwide—in France and the Institute's other locations in Brazil, Portugal, Ireland, and America. Her formation as a novice in France spent with other novices from provinces around

the world gave her a strong sense of the RSHMs as a global Institute (Milligan 2009, 17–21). Her early training at the motherhouse gave her fluency in French, which was the language of international diplomacy. However, her friends and colleagues suggest that it was her superior diplomatic skills, sophistication, and ability to operate with “grace under fire” that made her a truly effective international leader (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021; Engh, pers. comm., March 29, 2021; Horan and De Vroom, pers. comm., March 31, 2021).

In 1980, Milligan was elected tenth superior general of the RSHM—the first born in the United States. She attributed her training in France and “work learning the spirit in the provinces during the constitutions’ revision” to her selection as superior general. On her return to Rome as superior general, she confronted the urgent need to coordinate their African mission in Mali, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique. Against the backdrop of Vatican II, Milligan identified several priorities which she lists in her memoir: a call to justice, new constitutions, increasing co-responsibility and collaboration among members, recalling sources and the original mission of serving poor and marginalized women (Milligan 2009, 20, 26).

In 1983, as superior general, Milligan entered into dialogue with John Paul II (image 5) and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) around “themes of apostolic religious life; religious women in the local church, with specific attention to their relationships with bishops; and emphasis on new pluralistic forms of religious life” (Milligan 2009, 44). Her frequent lunch meetings with the Holy Father revised her less-than-positive conceptions of him (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021). In her interactions with John Paul II, she comprehended the importance of energetic dialogue, consensus, and the relevance of learning the language of the hierarchy and institutional Church twenty years post-Vatican II.

She realized “the definitions of religious life, of women in the church, of the identity and witness of religious women not being derived from their work alone was still



**Image 5:** Sr. Mary and Pope John Paul II

struggling to be born in the spirit of Vatican II”; dialogue with the Vatican was necessary for progress (Milligan 2009, 45).

In 1981, the RSHM community’s ongoing Sources of Life study group, named for the communities guiding “Sources,” proposed to write a more thorough history of the Institute. As superior general, Milligan asked, “A new history of the Institute? Is one really necessary?” (Milligan, Sampaio, Connell 1992, xi, 1). The members had a new awareness of the role of women in history and wanted to know more about their early sisters. In further conversation with those proposing the project, Milligan realized that a well-articulated connection between their founding documents and their current understanding of their mission had yet to be made. From 1983–90, the community’s members co-wrote and published their four-volume history that previewed on the 100th anniversary of Fr. Gailhac’s death, entitled *A Journey in Faith and Time: History of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary*. Milligan provided many translations of the Institute’s historical documents from French and Portuguese. Aided by sister RSHMs, Rosa do Carmo Sampaio and Kathleen Connell, Milligan’s instrumental contribution to writing this history created a bridge between the original charism of supporting and caring for poor, marginalized women to their newly written constitutions that retrospectively embraced the founding *raison d’être*.

As a chosen and elected superior general, Milligan’s philosophy was underwritten by the old Welsh proverb, “He/She who would be a leader, must be a bridge” (Milligan 2009, 23). She was collaborative, personifying this bridge, connecting her community to their various Marymount schools, RSHM communities all over the globe, LMU, St. John’s Seminary, and the Church hierarchy. She traveled the globe making connections that spread the RSHM charism, “*Ut vitam habeant*—that all may have life” (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021).

### *Tapestry #5: Academic Leadership and Teaching*

Milligan returned to the United States from Rome in 1986 and applied her skills as a formidable leader for the remainder of her career. While still superior general, she became the provost (1986–89) at Loyola Marymount University (LMU). After that, she became a professor of theology and scripture. From 1992 to 1997, she was dean of the College of Liberal Arts. While dean, she served on the board at St.

John's Seminary and was a professor of sacred scripture there until her retirement in 2006 (Loyola Marymount University n.d.b.). Milligan continued to use her spiritual, historical, and theological expertise in the context of her work in higher education and the Church to move the work of the laity, particularly women religious, from the salvaged margins of the Church to greater prominence.

### *Leading*

As provost—a position typically held by a senior academic who oversees the creation and implementation of university academic priorities—Milligan experienced challenges due to disputes with the Jesuits about the nature of their partnership. Although LMU was to be co-equally directed by agreement with the RSHMs, the Jesuits did not identify the relationship as necessarily equal or collaborative in practice. Their complementary charisms brought them together in 1968 when the RSHMs moved their teaching center to the Jesuit Loyola Campus in Westchester, CA, from their Marymount location on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. In 1973, the Jesuit/RSHM partnership was formalized along with the addition of the Congregation of Saint Joseph of Orange (CSJ), establishing Loyola Marymount University (Loyola Marymount University n.d.a). However, the Jesuits were slow to understand that the education the RSHMs offered was not a finishing school for young women but rather serious academic preparation for professional careers.

Michael Downey remembers that, based on this bias, the position of provost was not well-defined by the Jesuits and came with little responsibility. The Jesuits expected Milligan to “go to tea” with Marymount alumni, soliciting donations for LMU’s endowment. Coming from her position of influence as superior general of the RSHMs in Rome, this was a difficult time for her (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). Elena Bove noted that she felt undeservedly disrespected (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021). Nevertheless, Theresia de Vroom and Michael Horan noted that she persevered with grace (De Vroom and Horan, pers. comm., March 31, 2021). She never let this bias get the best of her. Well-grounded in RSHM spirituality and charism, she had what the French call a healthy *amour-propre*—self-love. She was well thought of, supported in her community, and understood she was loved by God unconditionally, which enabled her to continue to persevere in her work for a meaningful, equal partnership with the

Jesuits and the Congregation of St. Joseph. In a conflict with the Jesuits over the continued inclusion of “Marymount” in the university’s name, Milligan advocated successfully that the current name remain. She argued that the full name, Loyola Marymount University, emphasized the unique qualities of this equal collaboration between the Jesuits and the RSHMs. This collaborative, co-directed, male and female religious university is singular in Catholic higher education in that it combines progressive Jesuit, RSHM, and CSJ values in their educational approach (Loyola Marymount University n.d.a). Milligan’s advocacy for the continued importance of this partnership formed the character of LMU as a cooperative endeavor to the benefit of its students.

Milligan stepped down as provost in 1989 and began teaching French, theology, Hebrew, and New Testament scripture (*Angelus News* 2011). At the urging of her colleague Dr. Elena Bove, she applied for the position of dean and served from 1992–97 (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021). As a teacher, professor, and dean, Milligan recounts how she felt about her students by relating a story about a professor from Sudan she interviewed for LMU. She asked “how he would manage the gap between his own teaching and cultural richness and that of his students. He hardly blinked an eye before responding: ‘I will love them.’ That was my goal years earlier when first teaching in Paris, I am still in touch with a number of those students from those early years and I do still love them” (Milligan 2009, 19). One of those first students wrote in remembrance of her passing, “Mary was my teacher for two classes in Paris. I loved her classes. I never knew that it was her first teaching experience but she made a profound impact on me and my decision to enter the RSHM community. She never let her exalted position among scholars change her simplicity and connection with people of all ages and nationalities. She never forgot those she knew (Breda Galavan, April 16, 2011, comment on *Daily Breeze* 2011). James T. Keane, a more recent student of Milligan’s, remembers, “she was a reserved, tactful, classy woman who always had time for young students in her office; she was a seminary professor, teaching Scripture to men at St. John’s Seminary. She had that certain combination of learning and grace that allowed her to mentor professors and lead institutions while also showing special care to the little guy” (Keane 2011). An associate dean, Jeffrey Wilson, remembered their early encounter, “In no way did she make me feel junior or inferior; she was very supportive of me and all other new LMU faculty” (Finster 2011). At St. John’s, her scholarly reputa-



tion preceded her. The young seminarians were impressed with her scriptural knowledge and theology (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). In 1988, Mary was awarded an honorary doctorate from Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia—a testament to her broad teaching expertise in Neuilly, Rome, and Los Angeles. In teaching, Sr. Milligan encouraged others to embody what she called “gentleness of the heart” (Finster 2011).

### *Her Vowed Marginalization*

Milligan did, however, experience marginalization even as a prominent religious leader and long-time teacher. She narrates this particular story that illustrates a practice of exclusion that leads to such marginalization:

I remember one retreat in particular where I and an ordained member had worked well together in preparation for the retreat and had shared in presenting the Scripture and reflected together on the readings. But when the Mass moved to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. I took my place with the non-ordained retreatants. I remember my feelings of rejection at having to move. . . . as if I had been ignored or overlooked. This occurrence has often supplied the context for me to reflect on this situation that continues to this day in the Church that I love. (Milligan 2009, 15)

This clear example of direct marginalization and exclusion is what pushes women to the selvage edge. When needed, one is included, but the emphasis on an all-male clerical class repeatedly sidelines women religious even though, like their male counterparts, they have consecrated their lives to the Church. Milligan’s feelings of rejection and being overlooked touched her to the core. She did not let this go unnoticed because her resistance caused her to write about it in her memoir for others to read and witness.

Not only women religious, but all women remain marginalized in the Catholic Church because they are not male and cannot seek to be priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, or pope! Women academic scholars who are religious sisters value humility over notoriety and service over aggrandizement of individual accomplishments. Taking vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience compels them to lead anonymous lives, ego being anathema to service in Christ. This counter-intuitive self-effacement can be one reason for their marginalization.

Mother St. Jean provides an example of how taking a vowed commitment to God functions for women in the RSHM community. In 1849, she said, “How happy I am that the God of mercy put in my soul the vocation I have undertaken with so much courage. I will work with all my strength and will support you [Father Gailhac] to the best of my ability in this beautiful work” (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary: California and Mexico n.d.a.). She followed this vocational devotion to help others, seeking to be a better person. The self-evaluation of her character, although often false, propelled her to try to overcome slow growth, the idea that she prayed badly, was weak, miserable, of bad character, lacking patience, constancy in her moods, docility, had little enthusiasm, and even coldness in the service of God. This deprecating behavior plagued nuns’ prayer life and contributed to their humility, self-effacement, and rejection of roles in the limelight (Milligan, Sampaio, Connell 1992, 78).

Going a bit deeper into the issue of the self-effacement of women religious, Siobhan Nelson speaks to this self-marginalization in *Say Little, Do Much: Nursing, Nuns, and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century* (2001). She begins with this story:

Some years ago, at a North American nursing conference I delivered a paper on religious nurses and their impact on the . . . health care system. When I had finished, a woman stood to make a statement . . . [S]he was of Boston Irish Catholic stock. She had worked as both a bedside nurse and a senior administrator at . . . Catholic hospitals owned and managed by sisters. Yet when she undertook her MBA and focused her major paper on women in senior health care management, she had found none. The literature told her there were none; she analyzed this deficiency from a feminist perspective and duly received a high grade. After hearing my paper, she realized her error—the women were there, she’d even been working for them at the time. Yet, somehow, she had not been able to see them. (Nelson 2001, 2)

In both nursing and education, Catholic women religious built up the hospitals and Catholic schools in silence and invisibility. Not tasked with raising children or developing a marriage relationship, they could concentrate on building a better world for the families they served. Milligan was imbued with the desire for her students, community members, and all women religious to live a fuller life. As her vowed sisters, Milligan labored for her community in the Catholic schools and college and university systems where she was

assigned. It was her call to educate young Catholics in faith-driven academic knowledge.

Milligan's distinct belief, as a vowed RSHM, was in the Sacred Heart of Mary. In 1982, while superior general, she wrote how the Blessed Mother's example influenced her life as a child of God. "It was in her heart," she wrote, "that Mary discovered her own identity. She was at one and the same time daughter of the Father and daughter of her own people. . . . [This] heart of Mary . . . has been given to us as an Institute[;] let us learn interiority, . . . poverty and gentleness of heart" (*Angeles News* 2011; Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary: California and Mexico n.d.b). This vowed belief in "interiority, poverty of spirit and gentleness of heart" worked to marginalize these unseen women at the edges who freely gave of themselves in the service of God or, as in Milligan's case, to Mary, Mother of God. Milligan claimed that prayer and contemplation in the rich symbol of the heart of Mary were the creative inspiration that added to the tapestry of her life (Milligan 2009, 34). The charism of her order demanded obedience to the service of others with unwitting spirit-filled devotion and love in silent generosity. Nevertheless, while Milligan was constrained, she was not silenced. In pursuit of her vow to service, she taught, wrote, and led her community of sisters and the educational institutions for which she worked.

### *Publishing*

As an author at home and in Rome, Milligan was often asked to publish articles in the United States and abroad on scripture, women in religion, spirituality, and the relationship between feminism and religion (*Daily Breeze* 2011). She is best known for her work on the renewal of her community's constitutions and the revisioning of the RSHM history. This history comprised four volumes attesting to her brilliance as a translator and historical writer. She also contributed to scholarly volumes on theology and scripture. However, closest to her heart was her poetry, which allowed her to explore her spirituality and celebrate her connection to God through her calling as a writer.

In 1992, she worked with colleague Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, on a contribution to the textbook, *The College Student's Introduction to Theology* (Rausch, pers. comm., August 8, 2020; Chapple and Rausch 1993). Her article, entitled "Christian Spirituality," brought in mate-

rial from Julian of Norwich and Dorothy Day, providing a woman's perspective on spirituality (Milligan 1993, 161–74). She writes, “To study Christian Spirituality is to study the manifestation of experience springing from Christian faith. Christian Spirituality studies lived experience rooted in an understanding of God, of self, of others and of the world” (162). For Milligan, women's spirituality is rooted in lived experience.

Much of her scholarly work was focused on the renewal and ongoing evaluation of religious life inspired by Vatican II, including her dissertation work on the RSHM community's charism, vows, and history (Milligan 1975; Milligan, Sampaio, and Connell 1992). Some works appear in French publications (CRC-Conférence religieuse canadienne 1978) or books (Bacq and Milligan 1987a; Bacq and Milligan 1987b; Kolbenschlag 1987, 155–61) for the community and the Church. As one of the appointed special secretaries, Milligan's anonymous drafting of the documents relating to the 1987 Bishops' Synod on the Laity, “The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,” (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 1987; Dart 1987) was a significant contribution advocating for a greater role of women in the Church. This work resulted in the publication of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, of Pope John Paul II. Indeed, perhaps for the first time, a Vatican document was addressed: “To Bishops, To Priests and Deacons, To Women and Men Religious and to All the Lay Faithful” and a sub-heading called Women and Men (Pope John Paul II 1988, sec. 49).

John Kissell noted in his remembrance of Milligan on the occasion of her passing that “She lobbied for a stronger role for women . . . [studying] the changing role of women in the church” (Kissell 2011). Her oral and written contributions in the deliberations in support of women during the 1987 synod carried over as her driving propheticism contribution to the 1993–94 Synod of Bishops when she co-wrote “Women Religious and the World Synod of Bishops” for *America* magazine.

Our lived experience offers us a privileged encounter with women throughout the world . . . four out of every five religious are women, we urge . . . the Synod to take . . . our experience seriously, to dialogue [further through] the synodal process, and to find ways [to]: 1. eliminate the dichotomy often observed between official church statements about the dignity of women and the actual practice of discrimination; [and] 2. more fully include competent women in de-

cision-making roles . . . including key curial positions. (Farnham and Milligan 1994, 22-3)

As a woman religious, she desired to make her religious community, all religious communities, and all women relevant in today's world. She wrote for her community's internal publication, "Like a River," which celebrated 150 years of the Institute. This large-format, colorful publication brought together all the RSHM communities celebrating with joy in uplifting poor and disenfranchised women for a century and a half together (Bailey and McMahon 1999).

Milligan's skill as a writer extended to her love of poetry. She was inspired by poets such as Mary Oliver and used her own poetry, as Oliver did, to explore themes that were leading her to a deeper embrace of the spirit and the reality of God in her life. Her poetic explorations enhance her memoir. Her poetry gives the reader an intimate sense of her personal journey toward an ever-deeper understanding of the movement of the spirit in her own life. Her poem "Beginnings" is such a poem that communicates Milligan's understanding of the movement of the spirit across time that grows the RSHM community from the seed planted by its founders Fr. Gailhac and Mother St. Jean to its good fruit that spreads to distant lands. The poem communicates Milligan's life mission to record and spread the founding vision:

## **Beginnings**

A seed was planted, not a large one but a small one  
Just about the size of a mustard seed.  
It was planted in Béziers,  
In a needy people who did not know the seed was there.  
It fell into a faithful heart and was carefully tended.  
Women tended the seed.  
It was watered by the tears of a weeping widow,  
By the work of her good companions.  
Like all seeds, this one needed to fall into the ground and die.  
And so it brought forth good fruit.  
Blown by the wind of the Spirit to distant nations,  
Off-shoots sprouted.  
The women did not proclaim themselves but  
The one who sent them.  
They lived in harmony,  
they loved in freedom,

they walked in joy.  
“Let us write the vision down,” they said,  
“For there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;  
It will surely come, it will not delay.” (Hab 2:2–3)  
Has the time come? Has the seed grown? Is the vision clear?  
Is their faith strong?  
Another wind arises. Where will it take them?  
“The wind blows where it chooses,  
And you hear the sound of it  
But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8)  
Listen to the wind . . . (Milligan 2009, 21)

Michael Downey asked her, while holding vigil at her deathbed, what she would miss most. She said, “The beauty of this world” (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). She wrote this short poem that expressed the importance of the beauty of all things as a revelation of the spirit in her life to the end:

### **What have you seen, Mary?**

What have you seen, Mary?  
I have seen beauty all around me, a beauty which  
Unveils all things;  
I have seen the joy of expectation; I have also lived in  
Expectation, yet never enough. (Milligan 2009, 53)

### *Tapestry #6: The Synod on Laity*

In October 1987, after Milligan was no longer superior general, she was appointed by the Vatican as special secretary to the International Synod of Bishops on the Laity in Rome on “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council.” She was one of three US experts recruited to assist in the proceedings because of her knowledge and understanding of the future of religious life and the Church. Milligan remembers being given no time to accept or decline and so, without time to discern and



**Image 6:** Mary Milligan on the Grounds of the RSHM motherhouse in Montebello, CA

reflect on this important request, she accepted. She wrote about this experience:

Th[e] refusal to allow some time to those discerning the invitation, should have given me some inkling about the level of true discussion/discernment at the Synod itself. . . . [A] significant number . . . called had strong ties with such groups as Opus Dei and Comunione e Liberazione. I saw “behind the scenes” the methodologies used by . . . these groups. They would often suggest that the Special Secretaries, of which I was one, meet once our whole group had finished its work. Fatigue was a factor and dialogue became difficult as the day went on. Fortunately, Cardinal Hume and Jean Vanier were participants. . . . I could relate to these hopeful voices of the Church. . . . [D]uring the course of the . . . Synod . . . there was a celebration Mass acknowledging the 25th anniversary of Vatican II. I took my hope from that Eucharistic celebration rather than the Synod itself. . . . I see a tapestry not nearly complete, but encompassing “ill-matched threads” being woven by persons worldwide yearning to sustain Christ’s saving presence in human history. (Milligan 2009, 46–7)

The *Los Angeles Times* reported at the time that “Though two other American advisers picked by the Vatican are known as theological

conservatives, Milligan said she is uncomfortable with that label, or any label. ‘I suppose I’m a moderate. It depends on what the issue is, and, secondly, it depends on the perspective of others . . .’” (Dart 1987). Milligan recognized this as a potential impediment to opening discussions about female religious life. Downey described her as a feminist Catholic with moderating views that sought to bridge the conservative tendencies of the hierarchy and the more radical tendencies that might have labeled her a Catholic feminist, as Downey described her long-time friend and colleague, Sandra Schneiders.

Dolores Leckey, lay director on the laity, went as an expert chosen by four American bishops. The Vatican added Archbishops Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Philadelphia and Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles to the US delegation. Mahony cited Milligan’s post as the seminary’s board president as an example of women moving up in Los Angeles Church circles (Dart 1987). Being appointed to this synod was another step up for women’s visibility. At this time, the Roman Catholic Church was only beginning its receptivity to women in leadership positions within its traditional hierarchical structures.

During the Synod proceedings, Milligan became frustrated with the response of Synod participants as the question of women’s roles in religious life and the laity gained attention. Milligan shared in her memoir:

[O]ne Synod member intervened appealing that men not be forgotten . . . one of the only interventions which drew applause. I was disillusioned by this outburst. There was hardly a danger that men would be forgotten with only two women in the Secretaries group and none in the Assembly. Few women spoke to the total group. . . . [D]iscussion effectively came to an end, hardly a clarion call to discernment. (Milligan 2009, 46–7)

This example reflects how clericalism affects women in the Church. Over 30 years after Milligan’s work with the synod, Phyllis Zagano addressed this issue in a recent article. Like Milligan, she identifies women’s marginalization within the Catholic Church hierarchy that affirms a male-only priesthood power structure keeping women at the margins of leadership (Zagano 2020).

Despite attempts to marginalize the contributions of women representatives to the synod, Milligan was very much a part of these deliberations. Downey (pers. comm, March 29, 2021), Bove (pers. comm., April 6, 2021), Engh (pers. comm., March 29, 2021), and De Vroom



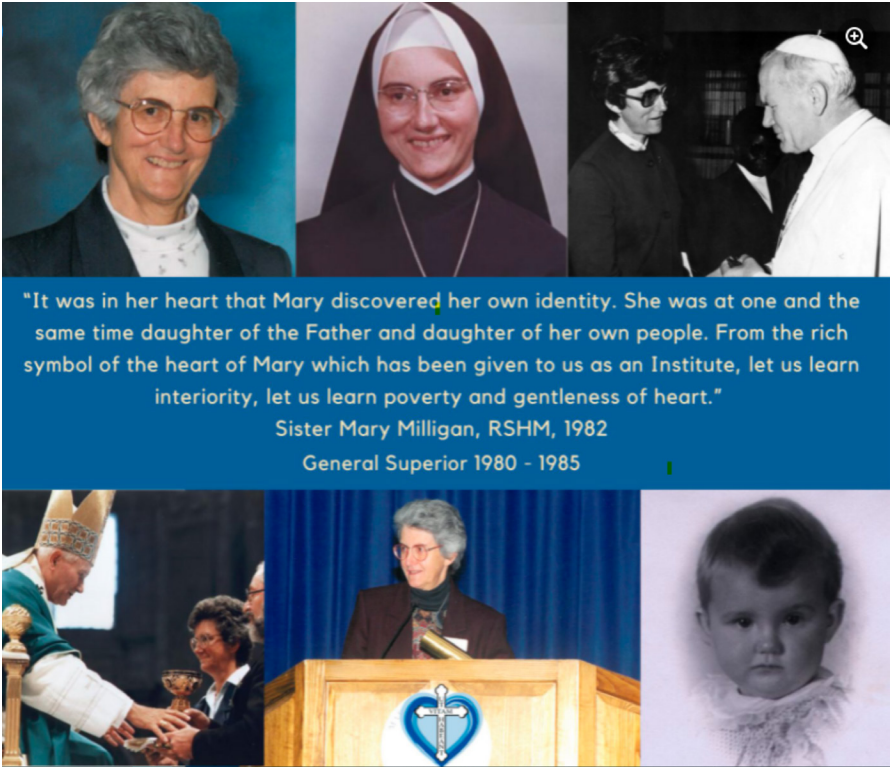
and Horan (pers. comm., March 31, 2021) all spoke to her sharp intelligence and ability to hold her ground, calmly, with equanimity in these discussions. She responded with keen, quick-witted answers when necessary (Bove, pers. comm., April 6, 2021). Because of her skill as a writer on the Synod Writing Commission, she co-wrote the final draft for the document, which outlined the direction of the diocese for years to come (*Angelus News* 2011).

Milligan's resolve in these difficult situations was grounded in her internalized, deeply held image of herself as a free and faithful disciple. "To be free makes one human and situates me in history. To be faithful makes me more conscious of the law of which Jesus spoke: 'the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You should love your neighbor as yourself, Gal. 5:14'" (Milligan 2009, 52). With that as our Christ-given directive, we can, in freedom, choose our apostolic mission each day as a person of the gospel. Her marginalization was felt, but her life in the gospel made her resilient and helped her remain grounded in faith.

### *Tapestry Complete: Legacy*

In 2006, Milligan was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and retired after serving her community for fifty-six years. In 2009, she went to CSJ Regina Residence in Orange, where she passed on April 2, 2011 (*Angelus News* 2011). She wrote her 2009 memoir in light of her experience with her diagnosis. Her sister, Pat Marlowe, who wrote the foreword, noted that Parkinson's was an "unexpected intrusion" and profoundly impacted her life. Often, Milligan wanted to "hang up her harp," but she "believe[d] in the future in spite of the shadows of today" (Milligan 2009, 1). "My own apostolic mission was perhaps once very public and even prophetic. Today, in the circumstances of my life and the illness I live with daily, being a disciple, following Jesus, leads me to hidden and humble service, but it is nonetheless apostolic" (Milligan 2009, 52). In 2013, LMU established the annual Mary Milligan, RSHM, Lecture in Spirituality to create a forum for critical reflection on her visionary spirituality in keeping with the RSHM charism (Loyola Marymount University n.d.b).

Milligan said that she "never sought [to be a leader], but it 'came upon me,' like being baptized again or drenched with a power not of her own making" (Milligan 2009, 23). Her life's tapestry was a jour-



"It was in her heart that Mary discovered her own identity. She was at one and the same time daughter of the Father and daughter of her own people. From the rich symbol of the heart of Mary which has been given to us as an Institute, let us learn interiority, let us learn poverty and gentleness of heart."

Sister Mary Milligan, RSHM, 1982  
 General Superior 1980 - 1985

Image 7: Memorial collage

ney with God. “The color red marks the times when she experienced the grace of the Holy Spirit, the color of the flame within us . . . [to] make us ‘stop’ and take notice. It is also the color of love.” It was her favorite color (Milligan 2009, 23–4). Downey recalled meeting her once for lunch. She was wearing a bright red suit. He was delighted, although he saw a contrast to her usual calmly subdued and reserved dress (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021). Flaming red threads are woven throughout Milligan’s life—a sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence in her entire tapestry.

The RSHM mission and charism remains rooted in the task of uplifting poor, destitute, and marginalized women around the world, and it is still aligned with the belief *Ut vitam habeant*—that all may have life. Milligan personified this charism. Her dependence on God guided her through difficult periods. The Jesuits may have seen the RSHMs as second-rate (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021), but she rose above bias with grace and class, persevering and never los-

ing her cool. Michael Horan said she was unflappable (Horan, pers. comm., March 31, 2021).

Michael Downey described her having “poised spiritual liberty.” His eulogy paid homage to a women’s strength:

If Mary knew how to speak to God, she knew just as well how to speak the language of the angels—French. Over years I would greet her in the words of the angel Gabriel, the opening of the Hail Mary: *Je vous salut Marie! Salut Michel, ça va?* Our conversation would continue and she would outpace me every time. On parting . . . *tout à l’heure* (see you soon) or *au revoir* (see you again). But this night we gather to say “Adieu.” A final farewell. *A Dieu*—to God . . . of 1,000 names, faces—*en plus*—still more. Mary, you have told us what you have seen along the way. And wait for us in that place—which is no place at all—in that name whose name above all naming is love—where we will never have to say goodbye to you again. (Downey, pers. comm., March 29, 2021)

With the internal support of the RSHM community and allies like Cardinal Mahoney—who presided at her funeral—Downey, Rausch, Engh, Horan, De Vroom, Bove, and others, Milligan saw past her experiences of marginalization because her colleagues recognized her as a prophetic woman religious.

Former student James T. Keane wrote in *America* in 2011, “In Praise of Difficult Women,” that someone asked at her funeral, “Where is tomorrow’s Mary Milligan? Who will replace her and thousands of other women religious? Losing exemplars of Christian life, we become less as Church and nation. We are blessed they exist.” We are blessed by women academics and leaders like Mary Milligan, not by their being difficult, but by their forthright, successful, faith-driven leadership as educators, servants of the Church, holy women teaching us to be our best in service to others, living life to the full. Milligan moved off the selvaged margins into the mainstream fabric of the Church as a prophetic exemplar through the force of her lifelong work of binding the Church into an integrated, multi-colored tapestry. Sr. Mary Milligan, RSHM, led an extraordinary life, well-known and loved by her students, the RSHM community, at LMU and St. John’s.



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