

SISTER SHEILA O'TOOLE

(SR MARY LAURENCE)

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| Born: | 9 th August 1929 | Frankton |
| Postulant: | 21 st January 1947 | Christchurch |
| Novice: | 5 th January 1948 | Christchurch |
| First Vows: | 6 January 1950 | Christchurch |
| Final Vows: | 6 January 1956 | Hamilton |
| Died: | 10 th June 2024 | Hamilton |



Sheila was born in 1929 to Irish immigrant parents, Michael Joseph and Doris Elenor. She was the eldest of three children. She had two younger brothers, John and Michael. She inherited a love of the land and nature and grew to be a very outdoor kind of person. She was a keen sportswoman, enjoying many a good tennis game. She became a basketball representative player at both primary and secondary school, and was Sports Captain at Sacred Heart College, Hamilton.

Sheila loved animals and as a child helped her Dad milk the house cows and feed the calves. At this early age, she had a dog as a constant companion. No surprises there! She went to Mass every day and was even an altar girl on occasion. This surely nurtured the great spirit of faith and generosity that was to characterize Sheila's life. Having been taught by the Mission Sisters all her schooling life, Sheila's desire to be a sister grew within her heart. In 1947 she was received into the Novitiate and made her First Profession in 1950.

Although Sheila did not have a particular attraction for the teaching ministry, she taught in New Plymouth and Opotiki, all the while studying for her Teacher's Certificate, and served as Principal in Pukekohe, Huntly and Frankton, Hamilton. Her students loved her! There will be many hundreds of students who were influenced by her love of life and nature by being given opportunities to feed birds, care for animals, and try their hand at building things with Sheila. She had always been interested in tools and carpentry and in her spare time would make shelves and furniture and saw to any repairs the Convent needed. She loved the challenge! These acquired skills would serve her well.

In 1969, the then Sr Mary Lawrence volunteered for Mission in South Vietnam with our Sisters in Thu Duc, Saigon. This was the beginning of an extraordinary six years of working with the Montagnard people, a vulnerable tribal group of people in Vietnam. She left New Zealand in March of that year, complete with her carpentry tools and skills, boarding an international flight for the first time. For the next six years, Sr Lawrence lived in the Phuoc Long Province, working with the indigenous Montagnard people, who had been forcibly removed from their traditional lands. She built a workshop with the men, brick by hand-made brick. They went into the jungle and cut the rattan bamboo, and the men learnt how to make rattan furniture to sell.

As the war situation worsened, the Sisters refused to be evacuated as they wanted to stay with the people. While wandering in the jungle with the Montagnard people, they were captured and interrogated by the Viet Cong. After being released and reaching Saigon, they secured a passage on an Australian flight, and reached New Zealand. Sheila was to return to Saigon immediately, to bring Sr Mary Lea back to Auckland.

Soon after returning to New Zealand, Sheila left for Samoa at the end of 1975. She was to set up an Agricultural Training Centre, but first, she had to cut a track through the bush, to reach the land set aside for this. In Sheila's no-nonsense way, she and some of the boys, armed with bush knives, slashed their way through the bush. When the Centre was built, they learnt the practical things in life – planting local crops, farming practices, and looking after a variety of animals.

Sheila threw herself into this project with her characteristic zeal and determination. With the experiences of Vietnam lingering within her, this time in the bush gave her time to reflect a little on her experiences.

A significant spiritual moment for Sheila was the opportunity for a 30-day Retreat. She wrote: "This proved to be a God experience the like of which I have never known before."

In 1989, a Congregational Renewal program was offered to Sheila in Rome. This was followed by a trip to her beloved Ireland, returning to her roots. Sheila's Irish identity grew even stronger within her. This time was followed by a Personal Growth course in England, where she was able to bring to light many of her experiences that she held deep within her.

1992 brought Sheila the opportunity to return to Vietnam. Why would we be surprised that she found her way back!

With Sheila, if you said to her, you can't do it, she would say – of course I can! Through the Volunteer Service Abroad program, Sheila returned, firstly to teach English to students, and then moved to Thu Duc where she lived on the compound with our Sisters. I had the privilege of visiting Sheila and saw first-hand her love and commitment to those she ministered to. I marveled at a woman with vision, with contacts who enabled her to achieve many things, and who, themselves, were in awe of what she could achieve. Not everyone agreed with Sheila's way of living Mission. Yes, she was a loner. Yes, things were done her way – but her goal was to bring about the reign of God – justice and peace and dignity. People mattered to Sheila, and she took dangerous roads to be with them. Just as Mary did when she visited her cousin, Elizabeth, and just as Jesus did, which led to his crucifixion.

In 2004, Sheila finally left Vietnam, the people, the land and all her hard work. She came to Myanmar, and had two wonderful weeks sharing with the Burmese Sisters, some of whom had been captured by the Japanese.

Sheila's final return to New Zealand brought a wandering spirit, moving from place to place in her car that gave her freedom, and with a dog that gave companionship. She took time to write her memoirs and began to negotiate the challenges of growing old. From this time, until her death, Sheila recovered from ill health and accidents time and time again. We witnessed that zest for life, clinging on to squeeze the most out of every moment. She toughed out moments like losing her driving license, and not being able to live on her own anymore. She used all her diplomatic skills, outfoxing authorities to venture out as often as she possibly could. She was bereft of a faithful companion – a dog - and settled for Bobby, who sat obediently in the armchair. A shopping list she had made, read: 'tissues, birdseed, bread, Just Juice, one special puppy!' Always trying for that elusive puppy that she longed for.

With St Paul, Sheila can now say, "I have fought the good fight to the end."

With special thanks to the Sisters, to the Staff at Atawhai Assisi who accompanied Sheila over these years, and to Robyn, our Health Care Co-ordinator, for just turning up at the right time to whisk Sheila away for a treat at Kelly's, and to bring her health expertise.

Rest in the heart of your God, Sheila, and be at peace.