

A MISSIONER'S CALL – SR. MARIA DEL

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Maryknoll Sister Maria del Rey Danforth was best known as a journalist and storyteller. In creating this piece, we, the Maryknoll Mission Archives, play the role of journalist, presenting the facts of this extraordinary woman's life. For the storytelling we turn to our collaborator, Sr. Maria del Rey herself, whose own spirited voice cannot be matched.

Just the Facts: Sr. Maria del Rey was born Ethel Marie Danforth in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on March 25, 1908. She was the daughter of George and Anna Danforth, one of their four children. A graduate of Sacred Heart Parish Grammar School in Pittsburgh and Seton Hill Academy in Greensburg, she attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology and later transferred to the University of Pittsburgh where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music and Journalism. She worked as a reporter for *The Pittsburgh Press*. After entering the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic on June 5, 1933, she took the religious name Sr. Maria del Rey, worked in Hawaii and the Philippines where she survived

PITTSBURGH AND THE MARYKNOLL DECISION

“Certainly Maryknoll got no prize when it got me. I was no social butterfly, no towering genius, neither rich, beautiful, holy nor easy to live with. I had been requested to leave college, fired from my job and thrown from my horse. It was all great fun.

But I had ... a dogged determination at long last to do God's Will for me.

The time it rose up, engulfed me, drove me to the typewriter, happened in a room at Webster Hall Hotel in Pittsburgh.

1932 was a black Depression Year but my father had a very good job with the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation. We lived in a large apartment building in the Shenley district. With five large rooms, it would have been simple to accommodate my sister who occasionally came to visit us from McKeesport, PA.... But I preferred to give her my bedroom and go down to the Webster Hall Hotel for the night. I took my typewriter and got away from the family chatter. I usually took a good book along as well. Tonight I had nothing...in despair I reached into the table drawer and took out the Gideon Bible.

A glance at the index – ‘For one in doubt;’ ‘For comfort in desolation;’ ‘For success in business...’ Nothing at all ‘For light to know God's Will and strength to do it.’ They had left me out. In revenge I started at Genesis and leaped slowly through the Old Testament and up into the New. It took me all night.

I ended St. John's Gospel, closed the book and looked at my watch. 5:30 am. I went into the bathroom and talked to the pasty face that looked back over the sink. ‘Well, my girl,’ I told it, ‘you are going into Maryknoll whether you like it or not. God hasn't said anything audible tonight, but He wants you to go. Go you shall.’

I hoisted the portable typewriter up onto the bed, knelt beside it and

started a letter. ‘This is perfect,’ I smiled wryly, ‘kneeling to write a letter to beg admittance to Maryknoll.’

It was the smartest thing I have ever done in my whole life.

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In an Ossining taxi cab, my father, my mother and I lay prone on the rear seat. Ossining's hills are such that going up to Maryknoll is a ride in a contour chair, well tilted back.

Papa was strangely silent; Mother said not a word. They expected some sort of heart rendering ceremony at the convent door I think. Bolts clanging open, stern looks, a snip at my hair, a last despairing glance.... They half knew it wouldn't be so.

Both Father and Mother were happy enough at my choice, made at the tender age of 25. One night, soon after the bomb had exploded at our dinner table, Mother said to Papa, ‘What do you think of Ethel's idea?’ ‘Always knew she'd do something worthwhile with her life!’ he growled. Up to that point he had had his doubts.

The taxi turned off the road, ran up the incline that thrust us back against the cushions, and stopped in front of a yellow brick building with ... twisted columns supporting the porch railing. My father took the suitcase and started up the steps. The driver helped my mother out. I hesitated a second, remembering something.

Then I fished around in my purse. The pack of cigarettes I had half-finished on the train! I pressed them tight into the back of the seat hoping they would be out of sight. But they weren't. The cabbie looked into the rear seat, easily extracted the cigarettes and stuffed them into his shirt pocket. ‘Thanks!’ he said with a knowing wink. ‘I get a lot of these on Maryknoll trips.’

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January 1928 – At Carnegie Institute of Technology I had been weighed and found wanting. The notice in my hand said, in effect, ‘The faculty has decided that you will not be permitted to graduate in

REY DANFORTH, M.M.

internment in the Los Banos camp during World War II, set up the Congregation's Publicity/Communication Department, wrote extensively about the Sisters' mission work, earned a Master of Science Degree in Journalism from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and returned to the Philippines where she was co-founder of Our Lady of Victory Training Center for the physically disabled. On August 5, 2000 she died peacefully at the Sisters Center in Maryknoll, New York.



Ethel Danforth
Before Entering Maryknoll (undated)

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives

the School of Music.'

Well, I could hardly blame them. The two and a half years past, I had reveled in the arts – piano, organ, singing, interpretative dancing, drama. Very little hard practice but a lot of talk, talk, talk. The solid teaching at Seton Hill and my family background carried me through the general cultural subjects although I opened not a book to study. I spent all day and nearly all night in the School of Fine Arts building, taking extra courses in organ, dancing and drama.

A born poseur, I carried a cane, swaggered around in riding boots and pontificated on Eugene O'Neil, Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandberg and *The American Mercury* as H. L. Mencken edited it. Three things were wanting to me – Greenwich Village, an artist's attic and starvation.

I often wonder what my parents thought of all this. Our apartment was close to campus and everybody drifted in. When my odd assortment of confreres sat around our parlor and pulled to pieces tradition, authority, government and Scriptures, meanwhile eating us out of house and home and smoking the place blue, my parents would look in once or twice and retire to more congenial atmosphere elsewhere. But they showed their metal more than once. A young lad from Warren, PA, remarked that he could not see how 'a dinky piece of white bread' could become the Body and Soul, Blood and Divinity of Christ as Catholics believed. The words were hardly out of his mouth when my mother appeared on the scene. 'In this house,' she said calmly, 'no one will speak in those terms of the Blessed Sacrament.' I was mortified that she should be so intransigent, so bourgeois on this point. I was so proud of her otherwise; she read widely, talked well and studied French at the University of Pittsburgh.

So the typed notice I held in my hand that day in January, 1928, saying that Carnegie Tech felt it could get along without me on the student roster thrust me out of a padded cell into the 'world of bread and cheese,' as we called it with loathing.

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January 1930 – After I left Carnegie Tech, I did what many did –

enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh. At 'Pitt' I took four courses and had to swim valiantly to keep my head above water. One was journalism then taught by Mr. William Maulsby. He had a tolerant view of life, mildly amused by my shenanigans, a great one for drawing out the students so that we haunted his office just for the chance to expound our ideas to his inscrutable smile.

Mr. Maulsby, after a semester of me, recommended me for a summer job on *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. I was to substitute for each woman on the staff during her vacation. It would have been a marvelous chance to do all sorts of jobs. But when I reported to the Woman's Editor, she told me that the ... Managing Editor ... had hired a girl for that job without her knowing it. But she told me of Jack Phillips, then in Pittsburgh ready to start his shopping columns.

I walked out of the Post-Gazette building, across the street to where Jack Phillips was interviewing girls who had answered his newspaper ad, and within five minutes had the satisfaction of telling everybody in the waiting room that the position had been filled.

So! I was hired!

He and I went out selling the idea, first to small newspapers and then to advertisers. We called it 'Shopping with Mary Jane Selwyn....' I worked diligently. At first we had only one newspaper – out in Wilkesburg. Then we had another, the *East Liberty Tribune*. A third, fourth, fifth, sixth came along. I was doing a column every day in different sections of the city. For a year and a half the shopping column appeared in six weekly neighborhood newspapers throughout Pittsburgh.

## Pittsburgh and the Maryknoll Decision (cont)

Then, on a January evening in 1930, I announced that I would no longer be Mary Jane Selwyn's alter ego. She could take herself around to neighborhood stores and write in glowing terms what she saw. As for me, Papa had ordered me back to college. I was to start the second semester and see if I could wring a degree out of Pitt. I went around on my last shopping expedition and said good-bye to all these good substantial people.

The thought of Maryknoll came back again and again. It never stayed long and now I began to think myself too settled in commercial life to ever be a postulant. I had seen them at Seton Hill.... Not for me. I now had a 'career.'

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June 1931 – 'Ethel Danforth,' read the stentorian voice. I rose from my seat in the orchestra of Syria Mosque and became one of several thousand young Bachelors of Arts filing up on stage to get my degree from the Chancellor of the University.

Thus ended another 18 months of school; I was 23 ... thrust out into a world of Prohibition and Depression. But already I was fairly sure of a job.

I struck out for Pittsburgh's dailies, *The Press*, a Scripps Howard paper; the *Post-Gazette* of the Paul Block chain and the *Sun Telegraph*, a Hearst sheet.

The first break came with a story on Joshua Barney. He was an admiral in the War of 1918 ... and was buried in Pittsburgh. I looked up Joshua's grave on the Northside and wrote several thousand words on him. Then I took the story down to *The Pittsburgh Press* and convinced the editor of the Sunday Magazine section that this was just what he

was looking for. He paid me nothing. Remember, Depression?

The story that put me on the payroll was the Washington County Fair. Horses, chickens, blueberry pies, crocheted bedspreads, cows – all of them ornamented with red ribbons and prizes – in a setting of cotton candy, Crackerjack, balloons and lost children. I telephoned in a humdinger of a story and it came out on Page One with a grand by-line.

The story that put me off the payroll was an unemployment demonstration. All afternoon we reporters had compared notes on speakers and estimated the crowd that swelled all over the front of Soldiers' Memorial Hall. I got back to the office and sat down wearied. A small paper I was shown read 'Fire the last person you hired. Everyone will take a 10% cut in salary as well.' 'You're it,' I was told.

It was Spring 1932.

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Out of school, off *The Press*, I found myself at home most of the day. I knew by then that it was Maryknoll for me.

Days fell into a sort of easy routine. Mass at 9:00 am in the Cathedral, only a block away. After Mass I had breakfast ... reading the morning newspaper over my coffee. It was a quiet time. I had fixed up a corner of the sun parlor with typewriter and desk. Here I pounded out short stories which I was sure would sell – well, next time if not now. I made sporadic attempts to get another newspaper job too. Once I wrote a letter to every magazine editor in the country, extolling myself as 'young enough to learn and experienced enough to be of immediate value.' A number of replies came, but all amounted to the same answer, 'So sorry!'

Every Sunday, I went out to mining towns teaching religion to the children. This is called Confraternity of Christian Doctrine work.



Even at Carnegie Tech and Pitt, I had done this work. Now a lady of leisure, I took up the work again. Twenty or so of us met at the Wood Street station around noon on Sundays. We rode southwest through the dreary smoke-blurred towns out to where mine tipples replaced trees. Teams of two or three dropped off the train as we came to our places for class. My classroom was the kitchen of a wretched hut; my hostess, a woman at the end of her rope. Yet she always had the place fairly clean, the 'seats' set in place – meaning a wooden bench and several wooden cartons. We kept our voices low so as not to disturb Pa asleep – sometimes very audibly – in the only other room. Most often we accumulated the class as we went along the road through the settlement, for they ran out of other shacks as they saw us coming. Such poverty I have seen equaled but never surpassed in all the years since in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

I marvel now that I did nothing positive to relieve it. This should have sent me spending my last cent for food, clothing and medicines. This should have brought me to the mine-owner's house to demand decent housing for his workers. Why I did not offer to help those tired women as they wrestled with wood stoves, broken chairs and newspaper-stuffed holes in their shacks? When the temptation comes to wax indignant over similar situations in Latin America, I think of those miners in western Pennsylvania and my own casual acceptance of their condition.

This has always been a real problem for me – to translate emotion into effective action. The following spring, 1933, I came to New York again with my father. My purpose was to visit Maryknoll. 'Look the place over and see if you want to change your mind,' as my father put it. I had already applied and been accepted.

We stayed at the Vanderbilt [Hotel].... At dinner one evening we were seated in the grandiose dining room at a window facing Park Avenue where the homeless men wandered up and down right below those

windows. I was miserable. Should I rush out with my dinner and hand it to one of them? Should I ask Papa for the money he would spend on my dinner and give that to a beggar? Saints have done so. But in me, the impulse was drowned in the comforting reflection if nobody spent money on expensive dinners, then kitchen workers, waiters and other hotel employees would be thrown out of work. Which is better – to give a dole to the unemployed or to furnish honest work to people who need it? Which is true charity? Another question intrudes: Which is easier on me? This is the question that should be thrown out of the discussion. Sometimes one positively craves discomfort; it would be a physical satisfaction to feel some of the poverty, some real sting.

Spring 1933 passed quickly.

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June 1933 – For eight years, I had watched a deadline come closer. Now it was right here. I walked up the steps of Maryknoll following my parents. A brand new life was waiting for me inside the door. I knew, and yet I did not know, what it would be like. I was to walk up to a mountainside, say the password and enter the cave that would open. Like Alice in Wonderland jumping down the rabbit hole. Like Daredevil Dick leaping off the Brooklyn Bridge. Like Captain Morgan walking the plank.

It was certainly a plunge into the Unknown.

I smiled in grim satisfaction.

They didn't know what they were getting either."¹



Sr. Maria del Rey Portrait (undated)

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives



Maryknoll Center

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives

Maryknoll Sister

This unknown quantity revealed itself over the next 67 years as Sr. Maria del Rey helped the Sisters fulfill their vision of making God's love visible in the world through her words and work.

Words – Sr. Maria del Rey used her journalism training in the Congregation's Publicity/Communications Department for 20 years from the late 1940s through the 1960s writing extensively about the Sisters' mission work for a variety of press outlets and in her own ten books. Based on her travels during which she witnessed first-hand Maryknoll Sisters living and working in Africa, Asia and Latin America, her writing captures the reader's attention with its clear, direct voice that is full of heart and a healthy dose of humor. The aim of her words was always to communicate the wonder of God's presence in the world. These three passages from her books *Safari By Jet* (1962), *Pacific Hopscotch* (1951) and *In and Out the Andes* (1955) speak to these qualities of her writing.

Heart – Rosana, Tanzania

*"I spent the day watching Sister Paul Christopher at work in the clinic. She holds forth under a spreading umbrella tree. Her small white clinic is as much a haven on the long dusty life-road these people tread, as the umbrella tree is for the sun-smitten traveler. To us, it is incomprehensible that people will walk ten miles when they are ill... A steady stream of patients arrives each morning ... any and all diseases come to the umbrella tree. There were more than fifty patients sitting along the hedges or spread out on the grass the day I was there... 'These people are so patient,' Sister Paul Christopher said as she examined a woman stretched on the table. 'This woman has walked nine miles, starting out before dawn, to get here. She has waited several hours under the tree. What's wrong? I think malaria is at the bottom of her trouble.' 'She seems very young,' I said. 'Maybe 16 or 17. The serious business of life starts very early out here.'"*²

Humor – Kaying, China

*"A missionary travels by any means he can get, so long as it gets him where he must go. This dictum has earned me many a narrow squeak, but perhaps no means of travel can cope with rear-wheel bicycle for thrills... With all the brash courage of comparative youth, I insisted that I could easily go around the Kaying missions by bicycle. I was not slow in boasting that, 30 years ago, no kid on our block could touch me when it came to handlebar technique... 'I'm as fit today as I was then!' And just to prove it I took out a bicycle and started around the narrow cement walks around the convent. It went pretty well. My ego inflated enormously. A few wild gyrations of the front wheel, a sudden stop in a bramble bush, to be sure – but on the whole the old prowess was coming back. Ah, pride. You know what it cometh before? Bishop Ford and Sister Rita Marie emerged from the convent and stood on the front steps finishing a discussion of mission work... Full speed ahead, I pedaled – easy, graceful command of the wheel, perfect poise on the seat, no worries at all. Then my good angel put a stone on the walk, to puncture that pride. It worked. I tumbled, a heap of humility, at the Bishop's feet. No bones broken, not even a bad bruise. Nothing more was said, but we arranged to borrow the station wagon from the good Maryknoll Fathers... From that time on, I rode bicycles only on the back seat..."*³

Wonder – Guayaramerin, Bolivia

"The candle has paled in the dawn by the time the Sisters have recited office and made a meditation. They then gather their missals, straighten their beds and go off to church... [They] go across the grassy school yard to the whitewashed mud brick church to kneel in adoration before the Lord of Heaven and Earth Who comes to Guayaramerin just as readily as He comes to St. Peter's in Rome. There are quite a few faithful ones there each morning kneeling on the red brick floor. It's wonderful to be one with them. Here alone, in all the world, is a man really and truly a man. Stripped of accidentals like money and position and education, he stands forth as a single unit of humanity ... bringing his individual soul before God and saying, 'Here is the soul you created and put inside of me. I bring it to You every day, just for a little look-see from You, so that I may hand it back to you someday, not



Sr. Maria del Rey visiting Tanzania (ca. 1961)

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives



Sr. Maria del Rey Visiting Ceylon on a Reporting Trip

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives

too much soiled from this clinging world.”⁴



Sr. Maria del Rey at Work in the Sisters' Communications Department

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives

Work – Sr. Maria del Rey’s first mission assignment in 1936 was teaching secondary school in Hawaii. After two years there, her skills were put to good use in the Philippines. During World War II, she and a group of Maryknoll Sisters were interned in the Los Banõs camp for three years. They were among the two thousand internees rescued by American forces on February 23, 1945. In her colorful account of that day’s events she recalls:

“Instead of waiting until the gong rang for roll-call as I usually did, I went slowly to the road and took my place a half-minute early. I turned to the East to see the sunrise.... Then nine beautiful planes flew across the sunrise and – marvelous sight! – tiny specks dropped like pellets; then the pellets bloomed into parachutes....

‘Paratroopers!’ everyone shouted and I ran to the barracks.... I hadn’t reached the cubicle when Hell began popping and I ducked under the beds – pushing Sr. Maura Shaun over a bit and making room for Sr. de Chantal to squeeze alongside.

Several times we peeked over the window sill. Bullets flew past the window like rain, really. In the middle of it, the swinging doors on the front of the barracks swung open and there was a huge American. And the expression on this face as he saw the place full of nuns! ‘Won’t my mother be proud when I tell her that I rescued the Sisters!’ he said. ‘Welcome’ we shouted.

A man went through the barracks then, shouting that we were to pack only what we could carry and go to the baseball field immediately. I looked up then and, looking straight through Barracks 19, saw amphibian tractors pouring down the wide space between 18 and 19. Imagine! In the space of a ½ hour – paratroopers, bullets, guerillas, Americans, and now amphibian tractors that looked like tanks! No wonder the old brain still totters under the shock.”⁵

Liberation from the Los Banõs camp closed the first chapter of her mission work in the Philippines. After more than two decades traveling the world and writing about the Sisters work, Sr. Maria del Rey returned to the Philippines in 1971 and resumed her teaching ministry.

Trouble would find her again in 1973, when she and eleven other Maryknoll Sisters spent sixteen hours immersed in the shark-infested waters of the Pacific. The group was on its way to a two day renewal on Cateel when their boat capsized. They sang, prayed and constantly reminded each other not to sleep as they held onto the outriggers and sat on top of the vessel. Upon seeing the shore, two of the men working on the boat left the group and swam out to seek help. Unaware of their fate, the Sisters and the three remaining crewmen clung to the boat through a storm that brought them further out to sea. As the sun rose the next morning, they grabbed clothes to shield their faces and continued to support one another as the day grew longer. “And then the angels came. A tugboat came along the shore flying a white flag.” The crew had spotted the Sisters’ white flag, otherwise known as Sr. Patricia Marie’s veil, which they had hoisted up the previous day in the hope of being seen by a passing boat. One of the men who had swam to shore for help was onboard and helped bring them all to safety.⁶



Mission Bell, Maryknoll

Source: Maryknoll Mission Archive

Sr. Maria del Rey ended her teaching career in 1976 and began writing a history of Maryknoll in the Philippines. When it was finished, she retired and embarked upon one of the most fulfilling mission experiences of her life:

“It all led to what I thought would be retirement. Foolish idea! A crippled boy, buddled in a fisherman’s net on Mindanao, put me into another job. With help from old friends and new, [he] was operated on and eventually walked to school.

Soon other victims of polio, tuberculosis, congenital defects and broken bones not healed rightly came hobbling or crawling or were carried up to our door. So I hired a jeep, filled it full of crippled children and took them to Davao Doctors Hospital in Davao City every Friday.

Getting polio victims on their feet was going well when another problem arose – what then? How could they go to school, learn a trade, earn a living, do the chores in their own homes? How could they be integrated into normal living?

In 1981, Sister Cecilia Wood and I began our Lady of Victory Training Center for young people who have lost limbs or are paralyzed. They learned to operate power tools – jigsaws, lathes, sewing machines. Now they make toys, furniture, picture frames, candlesticks, surgical braces and even orthopedic shoes. The sunshine of accomplishment brightens each day.

Since that ‘retirement,’ this aging Maryknoll Sister has shepherded more than 400 crippled children back to a new life. It’s a new life for the parents also and that is a large part of the joy.”

For this work she was awarded the Elizabeth Seton Medal by Seton Hill College in 1986.

The Final Word

As the story of this Maryknoll Sister, missionary, world traveler, author, journalist and Pittsburgh native draws to a close, the question of “Why Maryknoll?” still lingers.

In an October 28, 1932 letter to Mother Mary Joseph Rogers, Foundress of the Maryknoll Sisters, Sr. Maria del Rey answers, “as much as I love journalism, I feel that the only pursuit worth spending a life for is enlarging the kingdom of Christ.”⁸ Her many accomplishments demonstrate how she manifested this pursuit in word and deed.

It is a daunting task to succinctly summarize the essence of this extraordinary woman. Luckily, Sr. Maria del Rey did so beautifully in 1980 when she wrote, “I’m a dear old lady with snappy black eyes and grey hair... I’m short tempered but apologize quickly... I speak my mind (what mind I have left) with no punches pulled... For my entire life, I’ve been taking things as they come to me. I leave it totally up to God. He is running the whole works.”⁹

Endnotes:

- ¹ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., *Autobiography* (61/12), Creative Works Collection, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY.
- ² Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., *Safari By Jet* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 59-60.
- ³ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., *Pacific Hopscotch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 9-10.
- ⁴ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., *In and Out the Andes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 82-83.
- ⁵ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M. to Dovie, Ruth, Marian, and Jeanne, February 24, 1945 (4/3), War Narratives Collection, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY
- ⁶ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., “Sixteen Hours Immersed in the Shark-Infested Waters of the Pacific” (61/13), Creative Works Collection, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY.
- ⁷ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M., “Why I am still a missionary” (172/3), in Program Presentation of the Elizabeth Seton Medal, 1986, Personnel Files, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY.
- ⁸ Sr. Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M. to Mother Mary Joseph Rogers, M.M., October 28, 1932 (172/2), Personnel Files, Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, NY.
- ⁹ Maryknoll Mission Archives, “Sister Maria del Rey Danforth, M.M.,” appearing at the website <http://maryknollmissionarchives.org/?deceased-sisters=sister-maria-del-rey-danforth-mm> (accessed July 14, 2016).