

## In Memoriam: Mary Ellen Konieczny, Ph.D.'05

The passing of Mary Ellen Konieczny PhD '05 (Sociology), Henkels Family Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, has moved colleagues and friends from Notre Dame, the University of Chicago, and beyond to share their memories of an inspiring and devoted teacher, interlocutor, colleague, and friend.

Omar McRoberts, Associate Professor of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago, recalls meeting Konieczny when she was a graduate student in sociology at UChicago. “Mary Ellen was probably the first student I ever worked with who would become a true colleague. When we met, she was already well underway with her remarkable dissertation research on congregation-level framings of moral issues among American Catholics. Eventually I joined her dissertation committee. In the many intensive discussions we shared during that time, Mary Ellen embodied a uniquely grounded intellectual brilliance, and an inspiring commitment to sociology as a path of human understanding and transformation.”

Fabio Rojas, Associate Professor of Sociology at Indiana University, and Konieczny were graduate students together. “When I was a graduate student, Mary Ellen was part of a group that would work at the American Journal of Sociology. In that role, I got to meet Mary Ellen and spend time with her. When I was happy, she cheered me on. But she could also listen when you were troubled. For most of us, I suspect, Mary Ellen will be remembered for her beautiful smile and joyful presence.”

Those who met her briefly were also impressed by her intellectual and moral commitments. Robert Vargas, Neubauer Family Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of the Violence, Law, and Politics Lab at the University of Chicago, remembers crossing paths with Konieczny while giving a talk at Notre Dame. “Because of my interest in the role of the Catholic church in preventing violence, Mary Ellen went out of her way to connect me with leaders of the Catholic Church in Chicago who were interested in doing something to address the city's violence problem. Mary Ellen struck me as a true public intellectual – a scholar who was reading your work not only for its intellectual merits, but also for its practical ways for improving the world.”

Konieczny's 2013 book, *The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work, and Religion among American Catholics*, was at the time of its publication one of the only studies grounded in ethnographic research about Catholicism, families, and congregations in the United States. McRoberts describes the impact of the book as located in its theoretical framing of the micro processes of Catholic family life. “She eloquently and convincingly argued that, in the lives of ordinary Catholics, these are not merely hot-button political issues; rather they represent people's ongoing attempts to arrive at effective and ethically consistent modes of balancing work and family and of raising children in a morally complex world. The impact of the book's novel theoretical perspective and sensitive empirical presentation has been, and will continue to be, felt in academic discussions of religion, politics, and family.”

At the time of her passing, Konieczny was working on a second book project on cultural and religious pluralism in the United States Air Force Academy. McRoberts notes that this book too was poised to make a serious intervention in the field, especially regarding discussions of how pluralism may be understood as a mediator between religious identity and citizenship.

Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of California – Los Angeles, Jeffrey Guhin, remembers Konieczny as someone who “knew how to speak to everyone so that they felt heard and

understood, and she did so in a way that was neither superficial nor unchallenging.” He notes her enthusiasm for the progress of her junior colleagues, and her ability to bring intellectual rigor to topics that were often deeply personal. “Mary Ellen’s ability to make a real difference in the Catholic world is proof how much it matters for sociologists to bring our own skills back to our own places.”

McRoberts echoes this sentiment. “Mary Ellen knew that Sociology should do more than make us ‘smart’ -- it should make us ever more wise, generous, and positively impactful.”

Konieczny passed away at age 58 from complications related to cancer on February 24, 2018. She is survived by her husband, Chris, and two sons, John and Peter. Memorial donations, in lieu of flowers, may be made in her memory to: Buffalo Academy of the Sacred Heart, Buffalo NY, 3860 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14226. The original notice from Notre Dame can be found [here](#).