



In Loving Memory

Sister Mary [Steven Rose] Serniak, SSND

Mary Elizabeth Serniak was born in St. Louis on March 23, 1929. She was the youngest of three children and the only daughter of Stefan and Rose (Sisak) Serniak. Her mother promised to name the child Mary to honor Our Blessed Mother, if she had a daughter. So Mary wrote, “Even from infancy, I was dedicated to the Blessed Mother who has guided and protected me as only a mother can.”

Mary was baptized in St. Mary Greek Catholic Church. The family membership in this parish may be explained in the ethnicity of her parents. Though her mother was born in St. Louis and her father was born in Austria, Mary described their ethnicity as Russian.

She recalled her first Communion, which took place when she was in second grade: “I remember it as one of the happiest days of my life.” When it was time for high school, Mary told her family she loved the School Sisters of Notre Dame so much she wanted to continue her education with them. Her mother said that Mary was as much at the convent as she was at home – especially when the family moved across the street from the convent.

Mary did thrive, received an excellent education and graduated from Notre Dame High School. “Here, thoughts of entering the candidature took root in my heart. A heartache of those years was the breakup of our family. My parents separated when I was a sophomore. I continued to live with my mother. My unmarried brother went to live with my father. I went to see them often, but the situation was very difficult.”

She offered to leave school and find work but her mother would not allow it. Mary did temporarily put aside the thought of the call to religious life. Following graduation, she told her mother that she was determined to get a job. With the beauty and love that was in her heart, her mom responded, “God only gave you to me for a short time, so if He wants you back now, who am I to refuse Him?”

Mary shared this about her struggles to enter the convent: “The interest and the kindness of the sisters in my situation helped me entrust my mom and my entire family to the maternal care of Mary. Now it was only my dad who was adamant in refusing his permission. So I waited until I was 18 to enter.” Later, when she was a novice, he changed his mind.

In August 1947, Mary donned the candidate’s dress at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis. Here she began her religious studies and college preparation to teach. As a second year candidate she was sent to teach fifth grade children at St. Gerard School, San Antonio, Texas. She noted, “That was the first time I rode a train – and by myself.”

In 1949, Mary received the habit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and was given the name that was a combination of her parent’s names – Sister Steven Rose. Mary described this year, “Here I experienced the joys and blessings of religious life, and I learned to know God more intimately.”

Birth
March 23, 1929

Baptism
May 19, 1929

Profession
July 29, 1950

Death
November 18, 2014

Burial
Chatawa Cemetery
Chatawa, Mississippi

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

continued

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Sister Mary Semiak

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Yet even this time was not without its troubles for Mary tells that there were some worry-filled spaces. The fact surfaced that being in the Greek, rather than the Roman Catholic rite, could prevent her being professed as a School Sister of Notre Dame. Special permission was sought from the Vatican for Mary to transfer to the Latin rite and thus she professed her first vows in 1950.

Having achieved this goal of being a spouse of Christ, Sister Steven Rose launched on another, that of giving young people the kind of education that she had received from the School Sisters. She did this for more than 50 years, primarily teaching middle school children. Her assignments were in the Louisiana communities of Gentilly, Bogalusa and Chalmette and in the Texas locations of Gainesville, Houston, Dallas and San Antonio. Around the time she came back to St. Gerard School, the location of her first teaching experience, she returned to her baptismal name. Her location for the last 21 years on mission was Pine Bluff, Ark., where she served at St. Peter School.

Mary, a woman of few words, said this about her life: “My years were spent in the ministry of teaching. This was very fulfilling to me. As the sisters had taught and guided me during my years of growing up, I tried to do likewise to the many, many children I taught.”

Quiet companionship with the community of St. Mary of the Pines was her experience when she retired there in 2006. Though she suffered from chronic and ever more frequent back pain, Mary found ways to serve the community. She helped out as a typist for the librarian. Though she didn’t particularly enjoy games, she did like to be with people and so was with the community as frequently as possible.

Mary lived quietly and prayerfully. She slipped quietly into eternity on November 18, 2014, as her sisters prayed with her.

Morning prayer and visitation were followed by the Mass of Christian Burial on November 21 at St. Teresa Church in Chatawa. Rev. Thomas Mullally, SVD, was the presider. Sister Mary was preceded in death by her parents and by her two brothers. She is survived by nieces, nephews and the SSND community. May she rest in peace.

By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND