



In Loving Memory

Sister M. Therese Fletchinger, SSND

Sister Therese wrote of her beginnings, “I was born Alathire Clare Fletchinger—one month premature—on September 2, 1921 in that wonderful city that care forgot, New Orleans.” Her parents were Dr. Frank J. and Albertine Harder Fletchinger.

She continued, “My younger sister, Gloria, and I grew up under the watchful eye of what I consider perfect parents and doting grandparents.” In this harmonious family atmosphere, she thrived and enjoyed the comforts of home and so many material advantages. Dr. Fletchinger’s auditory handicap sewed the seed for Therese’s vocation within a vocation—her incentive to assist the hearing impaired—she remembered his working through a series of hearing aids to find one to satisfy his need.

Therese’s early education was at the Kruttschmitt School. Then, “When I was in the fifth grade, Mother and Dad decided that I should go to a Catholic school so they enrolled my sister and me in Our Lady of Good Counsel School where the School Sisters of Notre Dame taught.”

“Thought of being a religious entered my mind as a very young child, but as time progressed, I found myself wanting to be everything from a doctor to an aviatrix. Mom and Dad did not take me seriously when I mentioned it again as I began the Commercial School at Our Lady of Good Counsel. They took it very hard when I told my plans again a few months before graduation; however they put nothing in my way, but lovingly helped me prepare.” Therese was 15 when she graduated from the Commercial School. To Therese’s surprise, a new publication of the School Sisters of Notre Dame listed the entrance age as 16. She sought an exception and was overjoyed at being accepted with the stipulation that she would spend a longer time as a candidate.

Therese deviated from the timeline of her story to highlight the similarities of her life to that of the recently canonized Therese of Lisieux. “My life paralleled St. Therese’s in so many ways, we were both from materially-comfortable families; had exemplary parents; and were very spoiled. She entered the convent at age 15 with special permission too. This is where the similarity ends! She became the Little Flower; and I, the Little Weed!”

The continued saga is best told by Therese, “As I entered the candidature at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis, in 1937, my family and friends were certain I’d be back in a week or two. I surprised them until the cold weather and homesickness caused illness and the doctor’s advice that I return home to recuperate. It was during this period I began to question my vocation. It was so much fun shopping and partying that I wondered if I should return to Ripa. When I received no reply to the letter I had written to acquaint Sister Paula of the doctor’s o.k. for my return to St. Louis, I took it for granted that I should stay home, but asked God for a sign. The next day as I was returning from Communion, I saw Gloria coming down the aisle with a yellow telegram from Sister Paula telling that they were anxiously awaiting my arrival. What more did I need to know God’s will!”

continued

Birthday
September 2, 1921

Baptism
September 25, 1921

Profession
July 31, 1942

Death
August 29, 1914

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

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**School Sisters
of Notre Dame**
Central Pacific Province

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD
THROUGH EDUCATION

With her special friend the Little Flower as her patroness, she was received into the congregation as Sister M. Therese in 1941. Following the year of novitiate, Therese pronounced her vows in 1942 and was missioned to St. Barbara School in St. Louis. Again the cold weather took its toll so for health reasons and much to her joy, she was sent south to teach the children at St. Mary School in New Orleans.

“I received what I considered one of my greatest privileges—an assignment to teach the deaf in 1946.” In this ministry until her retirement in 1996 her life blossomed. The little weed, like the ugly duckling, flowered and brought much growth to the child who struggled with auditory difficulties. She was the first woman to be selected by her professional peers to receive the Annual Beltone Award.

Sister Therese was prepared for this profession with a bachelor’s from Loyola University, New Orleans and a master’s in special education with clinical competency in audiology. A life-long learner, she earned more than 90 hours beyond her master’s degree. Sister Therese was a member of the Conference of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf and a featured speaker at educational conferences, and the subject of articles on hearing. *Dixie Magazine*, the Sunday supplement to the local paper carried a lengthy article, “Hearing and Caring” about her ministry. She was offered positions on university faculties. To the latter she responded firmly, “That’s not my cup of tea, I want to give everything I can to my children here [at Chinchuba Institute for the Deaf, Marrero, La.] and to the teachers with whom I work.”

Sister Therese was adamant concerning the philosophy of Chinchuba Institute: “We are definitely an oral school. We try to supply all the things a hearing child needs, then, after this—special education. Oralism best prepares them to adjust to the hearing world. Most of our students go on to hearing high schools.”

The sisters’ part in the Chinchuba program terminated in 1979. After a two-year interim of ordinary class schedules at Regina Coelie, Lake Charles and Bogalusa, La., Therese wrote, “Joy of Joys, Sisters Giovanni, Rosarita, and I were back with our beloved deaf kiddies in Lockport, La. That first night I thanked God. Thinking of our ages, I asked Him to give us 15 more years. He must have heard my request because He gave us 15 of the happiest years of our life. Oh! If I had thought He’d grant that request, I’d have asked for 50.”

Sister Giovanni died in May of 1996. Sisters Rosarita and Therese discerned it was time for them to retire and so came to St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Miss., in December, 1996. In retirement, Sister Therese’s prayerful presence, her artistic contributions to the gift shop and her assistance in the library enhanced community living.

She continued active participation until recurring respiratory ailments made it impossible to sustain these efforts. Finally her sisters in community and her niece, Terrie, kept vigil as the effort of living ebbed. Sister Therese died peacefully in the early evening, August 29, 2014.

By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND