



In Loving Memory

Sister Elizabeth (Johnita) Willems

Sister Elizabeth (Johnita) Willems, 85, died peacefully at 2:30 a.m. on November 28, 2022, at St. Francis Medical Center, Shakopee, Minnesota.

On May 22, 1937, John P. and Leodena Willems welcomed their first child, who was born on their farm north of Cologne, Minnesota. Eight days later, the little girl was baptized in St. Bernard Church, Cologne, and named Elizabeth after her two grandmothers. In her autobiography, she wrote that growing up on a farm helped her, “develop a love for God’s wonderful world of nature and for outdoor life. I felt a kinship with the farm animals and a strong attraction to all the phenomena of nature.” When she was 9, she joined the 4-H Club, showed her cattle at county and state fairs, and did demonstration work in home economics.

Birth
May 22, 1937

Baptism
May 30, 1937

Profession
July 17, 1957

Death
November 28, 2022

Burial
Our Lady of Good Counsel
Cemetery

Elizabeth attended St. Bernard School in Cologne where School Sisters of Notre Dame were her teachers, but she wanted to be a missionary sister. When she was in seventh grade, she wrote to several missionary congregations but learned that she was too young at the time to follow a call to any of them. After eighth grade, she was accepted into the SSND aspiranture and completed her high school education at Good Counsel Academy in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1955. She wrote, “The Good Counsel training and spirit and the prayer and camaraderie of the aspiranture made my high school days happy and fulfilling times.” Elizabeth entered the SSND candidature in August 1955, and was received into the congregation on July 16, 1956, when she was given the name Sister Mary Johnita. (She later returned to the use of her baptismal name.)

On July 17, 1957, she professed her first vows as a School Sister of Notre Dame. She then continued college courses for one year, before she began her lifelong educational ministry by teaching primary grades at Immaculate Conception School in Lonsdale, Minnesota (1958-1962) and St. Donatus School in St. Donatus, Iowa (1962-1965). She then taught junior high school students at St. Peter in Hokah, Minnesota, (1965-1966) and St. Felix in Wabasha, Minnesota, where she also began teaching high school students (1966-1968). During this time, she earned a Bachelor of Science in home economics from Mount Mary College (now University) in Milwaukee.

When St. Felix High School was closed in 1968, Sister Elizabeth, together with two other sisters, who had been on the faculty at St. Felix, signed contracts to teach in the Wabasha public school system. She taught home economics there for two years (1968-1970), before moving to Grace High School (now Totino-Grace) in Fridley, Minnesota, where she taught home economics and religion (1970-1976).

After earning a Master of Arts in religious studies from Mundelein College (now Loyola University), Chicago, in 1975, Sister Elizabeth was a campus minister and instructor at North Dakota State University in Fargo (1976-1979). In order to teach religion on the university level, she began graduate studies at the University of Chicago (1979-1981) and then at Marquette University,

*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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Willems*



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Milwaukee, where she earned her Ph.D. in moral theology and psychology in 1986. While writing her dissertation, she accepted a position at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans (1985-2007). She wrote, “I love my work and the intellectual opportunities my job provides . . . moving to New Orleans, to the south, truly opened my world and gave me another perspective on culture and traditions. My students are from many countries.” The rector of Notre Dame Seminary wrote about Sister Elizabeth’s time there, “Her presence on our faculty has been invaluable. She is highly regarded as a professor, administrator and class advisor. I believe that the presence of dedicated women religious like Sister Elizabeth is essential on a seminary faculty.”

Together with other SSND theologians, Sister Elizabeth also used her gifts and educational expertise to further the theological development of School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America and beyond during this time.

Sister Elizabeth lived through Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which she described as “a life shaping event of terror, displacement, insecurity, and anger. It left me with the realization I could weather a storm with the support of SSND, friends and family.”

In 2007, Sister Elizabeth was appointed professor of religious studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, a position she held until 2013. Among other volunteer services, she then continued her educational ministry by teaching senior citizens and serving on the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) team in her parish. In early 2020, health conditions necessitated her return to Our Lady of Good Counsel in Mankato, where she lived until moving to Benedictive Living Community – Shakopee, a few weeks before her death.

On the occasion of her jubilee of religious profession in 2017, Sister Elizabeth wrote: “The art of teaching is, after all, learning about people and how they think. I came to realize how closely learning is related to personal and social development. Society changes as people change through what they learn. Jesus becomes known through learning about him and coming to love him.” For Sister Elizabeth, Jesus was the light of life, and she dedicated her life to sharing that light with so many others. May she now enjoy the fullness of life with God forever.

A memorial mass for Sister Elizabeth will be held on Friday, April 28, 2023, at Windermere Chapel, 1705 Windermere Way, Shakopee, Minnesota. She donated her body to science, and the burial of her cremains will take place at Our Lady of Good Counsel Cemetery in Mankato. She is survived by her sisters, Geneva (Jim) Perrizo, Virginia Huckins, and Patricia (Jerry) Papenfuss; her brothers, Cletus (Patti), Leo (Sharon), Norman (Rosie), and Werner; her nieces and nephews, her friends, classmates, former colleagues and students, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame and SSND associates. She was preceded in death by her parents, John P. and Leodena (Siegle) Willems.

By Mary Ann Kuttner, SSND