

In Loving Memory

Sister Mary Elsa Bren, SSND



Birth
March 26, 1921

Baptism
April 3, 1921

Profession
July 22, 1940

Death
October 18, 2017

Burial
Our Lady of Good Counsel
Cemetery
Mankato, Minnesota

*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

Sister Mary Elsa Bren, 96, died Wednesday, October 18, 2017 at Mayo Clinic Health System Hospital, Mankato, Minnesota. She had been hospitalized following a fall the previous week. Sisters, family members and her sister friend had been keeping vigil with her in the hospital, and were with her when she died.

Sister Elsa was born on March 26, 1921, in New Hradec, North Dakota, to Frank and Mary (Stranik) Bren, two immigrants of Czech ancestry who came from Russia. One week later she was baptized Mary at SS. Peter and Paul Church, New Hradec. She wrote about her early religious training: "My good mother taught me how to pray as soon as I was able to talk. The prayers were short and sweet, but I'll never forget them." In 1926, at the age of five, Mary started school at SS. Peter and Paul, with School Sisters of Notre Dame as her teachers. She commented about her First Holy Communion, "Words cannot express the happiness which was mine when in 1928 I received my little Jesus for the first time." It was then that she experienced the desire to become a sister.

Following eighth grade graduation, Mary stayed at home to help with the housework on the farm and to care for her grandmother. She did not know how to tell her parents of her hope to become a sister and prayed for courage to tell them. She wrote, "My parents, realizing that I was not yet sixteen, advised me to stay at home another year to pray and think over my plan. The year passed quickly and I was still determined to become a sister. My parents willingly gave their consent and I prepared for the candidature."

On August 27, 1936, Mary boarded the train for Mankato to enter the candidature. Those first days she was extremely lonesome for home, "but with passing time, all became easier." As a second-year candidate she worked in the kitchen at St. Agnes Convent, St. Paul. Since Mary was too young to be received into the novitiate she spent another year in the candidature. Mary became a novice on July 21, 1939, and was given the name Sister Mary Elsa. As a novice, she wrote, "Not only was that day one of spiritual joy, but every day since has contained some special graces for me."

Sister Mary Elsa professed first vows in 1940, and was sent to Guardian Angel Convent, Colton, Washington. She recalled: "Colton reminded me of our farm. We had a large garden, chickens, a cow, pigs and lots of fresh fruit." She spent the next two years at St. Joseph Convent, Spokane. She then served as a home service sister at St. Leo Convent, St. Leo, Minnesota; St. Donatus Convent, St. Donatus, Iowa; St. Pius Convent, Schefield, North Dakota; Good Counsel Convent, Mankato; St. Mary Convent, Shakopee; and SS. Peter & Paul, New Hradec. In 1947, when School Sisters of Notre Dame published a North American Centennial Cookbook, Sister Mary Elsa provided three recipes: Maple Drops, Hawaiian Pie, and Lemon Pie.

continued

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Sister Mary Elsa Bren



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

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD
THROUGH EDUCATION

During the late 1950s, the Mankato SSND Province experienced a shortage of teachers, and some home service sisters were asked to become teachers. Sister Mary Elsa was one of them. She first finished her high school education and then took college classes. In 1959, she began teaching primary grades at St. John School, Dayton. She also taught primary grades at St. Mark, Shakopee, Minnesota. From 1964 through her retirement in 1989, she alternated her service in the areas of teacher aide, catechetical work, home service, parish visitor and home health aide in a number of locations. Included in her service were Holy Family, Clarkston and St. Joseph, Spokane, both in Washington; St. Mary, New England, SS. Peter & Paul, New Hradec, and St. Patrick and St. Wenceslaus, Dickinson, all in North Dakota; and in Minnesota, St. Bonaventure Catechetical School, Bloomington, St. Mary, Worthington, and Good Counsel Academy and Convent, Mankato.

In 1989, Sister Mary Elsa moved to Our Lady of Good Counsel. Reflecting on her life at the time of her seventieth Jubilee in 2010, she described her days at Good Counsel in this way, "To fill my days, I pray, attend daily mass, take daily walks, visit the sick, read, do hobbies, help with a variety of little chores, take naps and keep in touch with all the family who have been so good to me. I will always have good memories about them. God bless them all and take care of them." Sister Mary Elsa was very devoted to her family members and they, in turn, returned that devotion. She spent time daily visiting with sisters and staff and was also known for her sense of humor.

As the years passed, Sister Mary Elsa often expressed the desire to go home to God, especially when another sister died. In her 2010 Jubilee reflection, she continued, "I am most grateful to God for all He has given me. Best of all, I am getting ready as I am on my last journey to heaven. I thank God for all that has been, and leave the future in God's hands."

The Funeral Liturgy, with Father Eugene Stenzel as presider, was held Wednesday, October 25 in Our Lady of Good Counsel Chapel, followed by burial of her remains in Good Counsel Cemetery. She is survived by her sister, Elsie Franchuk, nieces and nephews and their families, friends, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame and SSND Associates. She was preceded in death by her parents, Frank and Mary (Stranik) Bren, her brothers, Louie, Albert, Anton, Charles, William and Jerry, and her sisters, Barbara Mehulky and Eleanore Pavlicek. Two brothers, Frank and George, and one sister, Lillian, died in infancy.

By Sister Mary Kay Ash, SSND