



In Loving Memory

Sister Rita Garity

Born in Chicago on May 27, 1921, Sister Rita, also known as Sister Marie Celine, was the second of seven children born to Robert Garity and Joan Davis. Her mother came from Ireland at the age of 18, as she joined her sister in Chicago, and made her living as a seamstress for some wealthy families. Her father was from Sullivan, Wisconsin, and worked in manufacturing in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, when he met Joan who was vacationing there with one of her “families.” After they were married, they moved to several places: Racine, Wisconsin; Chicago; South Dakota, Sullivan, Wisconsin; Concord, Massachusetts; and finally, settled in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, where he was employed by the Pabst Farms.

Birth
May 27, 1921

Baptism
June 14, 1921

Profession
July 17, 1941

Death
February 6, 2020

Burial
Elm Grove
Cemetery

The family was influenced by two communities of religious: the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who taught at St. Jerome’s, and the Redemptorist Fathers, who had a college in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. The Fathers came to the Garity home during Christmas and Easter with treats. Eventually, her two brothers, Joe and Frank, became Redemptorists and three of the girls became SSNDs: Mary (Roberta), Rita, and Ellen. The last two, Rose and Betty, had families of their own. The brothers eventually left the Redemptorists and married.

During Sister Rita’s 44 years in mission, she taught primary education through junior high and loved every bit of it, including the extra-curricular work of training altar boys. In her retirement, she missed it so much that she was happy to help out as a substitute teacher for as long as she could. When her mother was a resident at St. Ann’s Nursing Home, she tried her hand at working there as ward clerk. Her volunteer services at St. Ann’s Nursing Home, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, continued until she was 85 years old. She faced all of her challenges in life with joy and gratitude.

Sister Rita shares regarding her first assignment, “A month after her first vows on July 17, 1941, Reverend Mother Fidelis was installed in office. The Motherhouse was teeming with Superiors who came in to celebrate and show their respects to Mother Fidelis. If they were fortunate, or maybe unfortunate, the Superiors may take one of us newly-professed home with them. Each of us watched and wondered if might be the chosen one. The day dragged on until finally, in the afternoon, we were taken to the Chancery where each one of us received our first obedience. There was a tense and excited feeling as we awaited our turn. Mine read, ‘St. Vincent, Oshkosh.’ I was to teach first grade. Not long after this, Sister Mary Bede met me and said, ‘You’re coming with me.’ I needed no getting acquainted because she had been my teacher in 7th and 8th grade in Oconomowoc. This was my first love and it really was a love. I taught first grade for nine years and 2nd grade for one year.”

In her autobiography, Sister summarized each stage of her life with a statement about what she had learned during that time:

Sister Seraphia told her in the candidature, “It’s the effort that counts and not the results.”

*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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Novitiate quote: “During this year I learned many lessons, particularly in humility.”

Leaving her first mission after 10 years: “Our life consists of getting acquainted, learning to love our work and companions, and then obeying God’s call to begin all over again at a new mission.”

Leaving her second mission after only two years: “God never gives us a cross that is too heavy for us to bear.”

Being given a new charge of training servers: “We can do anything we make up our minds to do with the grace of God.” (This charge grew on her and when she was asked to take over the servers at her next mission, it was with eagerness that she did so.)

At final vows: “The day I pronounced my “Forever” was the happiest and most peaceful day of my Religious Life.”

And, finally, Sister Rita says, “So often I’ve been asked if I am a music teacher because of my name and patroness (St. Cecilia). Evidently, these people have never heard me sing. If it’s true that all of our longings will be fulfilled in heaven, then I can look forward to having two of my greatest desires fulfilled, namely, playing the piano and singing. At times, when I feel depressed or even angry, I like to go off to my room, or someplace where I won’t annoy others, and sing till those pent up feelings disappear. Frequently, after Holy Communion, I select a song or hymn that I call my theme song for the day. As I go about my work, I like to hum or sing this, even if it’s just a few lines repeated over and over again. When others are around, I sing it in my heart to avoid disturbing them. This produces cheerfulness like medicine does a cure.

“There have been many ups and downs in my life, but the ups are in the majority. If I had a second chance to choose a life to lead, it would be as a School Sister of Notre Dame.”

Sister Rita’s final home was in February of 2011, when she went to Our Lady of the Angels, Greenfield, Wisconsin. She was one of the pioneers there and enjoyed walking around and greeting people. She always was good on her feet and circulated cheer in the community. And now, she can finally sing praises to God with all the saints and angels in heaven.

Her Funeral Liturgy, with Father Joe Haas as presider, was held on February 17, 2020, in Holy Family Chapel, at 10:30 a.m. Burial followed in the Elm Grove Cemetery. She is survived by nieces and nephews and their families and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame and SSND associates. She was preceded in death by her parents, Robert and Joan (Davis) Garity; her sisters Mary (Sister Roberta, SSND), Ellen (Sister Ellen, SSND) and Betty; and her brothers Joseph and Frank. She is survived by her sister Rose.

By Sister Rose Marie Van Deurzen, SSND

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