

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER CATHERINE TERESA HALLINAN

December 28, 1915—March 2, 2016



One Sister said, “I never really knew her.” Another Sister recalled her baking and seamstress skills; the attractive way she dressed, her love for pretty shoes. Fourteen years after she entered, in 1948, she received a B.Ed. from Duquesne University. Her community teaching record says, “First grade, second grade, first and second grade—year after year after year, in ten of our elementary schools, starting with Saint Joseph, Sharpsburg. For a couple of years in the early fifties, the record says she was “off duty—illness.” Beginning in 1987, and having taught ten years at Resurrection and still living there, her record begins to state, “Volunteer,” a title she held for nineteen years, including four years at Maryhouse. Her name was Sister Catherine Teresa Hallinan. If I hadn’t told you that, would her record alone tell you anything extraordinary? How many Sisters of Charity’s names might you have attached to it? For such is our life, we who follow the one whom people wondered at, since he was only “the son of the carpenter.”

Sister Catherine Teresa was baptized Margaret at Saint James Church in the West End, one of the three children of her parents John and Catherine Mullen Hallinan. All preceded her in death. Her dear cousin Mary Wilson is with us here today. Although she spent her active years teaching first grade, Sister Catherine Teresa knew what was going on around her in the world. In 1982, during Ronald Reagan’s first term in office, she sent the treasurer a savings certificate that had been being held in trust for the Sisters of Charity. Her attached note reads, “Right now, I don’t have much faith in the way things look, so I thought you could find some use for it before dear Ronnie fails us and loses everything. I am a depression kid.”

While reflecting on Sister Catherine Teresa’s life, I thought about the difference between ordinary and extraordinary people and searched the Internet. One helpful

site discussed the “Five Traits of Extraordinary People.” Extraordinary people, the author wrote, are people who have touched us. He had concluded that there is no single profile of such people, but that their lives are likely to include five vital ingredients. I think we will find our dear Catherine Teresa in this profile.

1. Such women focus on things that matter. The extraordinary person knows it’s the intrinsic qualities that count. We saw this in Catherine even while she was a resident in Elizabeth Ann Hall. She was a “night owl” and did not like to retire early, so she often sat with the nurse aide on duty. One evening she told Mary, the aide, that she was going to teach her to pray. And so together they learned the Our Father and the Hail Mary, which they recited together. Then she told Mary that she would teach her how to go to confession, and she told her there was nothing to be afraid of. She would show her.
2. Kindness is the second ingredient named vital in this profile of extraordinary people. These women are special because they have the gift of making others feel special. Last evening, we heard how Catherine saw beyond the “novice status” of a Sister to the person inside. She reached out to her and on her behalf, using her own professed “status” to question rules that today we find baffling. Her kindness, as Sister Catherine Meinert recalled, was justice.
3. Extraordinary people are willing to be seen as imperfect. Most teachers never reach a point where they can’t find something imperfect about themselves. Sister Catherine Teresa surely had such willingness as she obediently began at around age 19—and long before she had studied how—to enter a classroom of six-year olds and begin to teach them. Her willingness to be vulnerable gave her the freedom to create a safe place for those little children in her orbit, so that they could give it their best shot, too.
4. Extraordinary ordinary people like Catherine Teresa know that the only thing that really matters are your relationships to other people. Such women start with connecting with *themselves*, paying attention to their feelings and respecting their own needs. That’s why Catherine could dress up in a red suit and high heels to make banana bread to give away to others. It was her love and concern for her father and his need for assistance that had her write to Mother Richard Ann to be allowed to remain at Saint Philip’s so that she could

continue to care for her 87-year-old father on weekends and prepare his meals for the following week.

5. And finally, the extraordinary ordinary woman knows joyfulness. The writer of this article notes how often we temper our joy by being anxious that the good thing won't continue, the blessing will fail. He suggested that the extraordinary ones among us know that the antidote for this reaction is *gratitude*. They aren't fooling themselves; they know that joy ebbs and flows, but they welcome what they get, allow themselves to feel worthy of their share, and seek it in the most ordinary moments—where it is most often found. I think this is what powered Catherine Teresa's life, joy experienced as gratitude.

Desmond Tutu might have been speaking to Catherine Teresa when he once said, "Your ordinary acts of love and hope point to the extraordinary promise that every human life is of inestimable value." When Father Immekus, pastor of Saint Mary of the Mount Parish, had written his recommendation of Margaret Hallinan to the community in 1934, he wrote of her as a very good girl, of a modest and retiring disposition, and her character beyond reproach. He assured us, "These few lines should, I think, be sufficient, Sister, since they are the absolute truth. In fact, I can guarantee their veracity now, and, in time, you yourself, will be convinced."

And so we have been!

Thank you, dear Catherine Teresa, for being our sister these many years as an extraordinary, ordinary Sister of Charity, focusing on things that matter—kind, vulnerably brave, loving people, and full of gratitude. Help us all to be so ordinary!

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Gertrude Foley, SC
March 4, 2016