

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER M. ROSAIRE WILKER
October 7, 1925–February 2, 2020



“A good word.” That’s what a eulogy is—a final, collective good word about Sister Rosaire’s whole life. How is that possible?

Years ago, five sisters wrote to me to say that they did not want anything said at their funeral. I wrote back, and thanked them for their letter. And then I reminded them, “Dear Sisters, the message isn’t for you. It is for us who are living.”

And so it is.

In remembering each sister’s life, we remember with gratitude our community, which each of these women—life by life, one by one, and piece by piece—made us who we are as Sisters of Charity, and all we have done, energized by the Charity of Christ.

Eleanor Henrietta Wilker was born in the West End of Pittsburgh on October 7, 1925 to Joseph and Dorothy Winniewicz. In her oral history, she recalled that the Pittsburgh Pirates were playing in the World Series that day. When the doctor arrived to assist at her birth, he announced, “Hurry up, I have a ticket for the game!” Eleanor was born, and the Pirates won the series!

Eleanor grew up in St. Martin Parish and went to St. Martin School until the fifth grade. Her family then moved to St. Leo Parish on the North Side of Pittsburgh. In 1943, Eleanor graduated from Mt. Alvernia High School. She had thought seriously for long time about becoming a Sister, but she wasn’t attracted to the Divine Providence Sisters or the

Franciscans who had been her teachers. She had hardly any contact with the Sisters of Charity, but she had met our Sister Florian, who used to visit her family, who lived a few doors from the Wilkers. Eleanor's dad used to drive Sr Florian back to the convent, and Eleanor said she was the 'prudent girl of the school' who accompanied her. Through Sr. Florian, Eleanor learned about a vocation retreat at Seton Hill. Eleanor was an only child, and her parents had no objection to her plans. They told her that they had done what they wished with their lives, and so should she. But she decided to wait a year to test her call. She spent that year working at Donahue's in downtown Pittsburgh and at a friend's bakery.

Eleanor entered the Sisters of Charity among a group of thirteen on September 8, 1944, and was sent out to teach after three weeks in the novitiate. A year later, Eleanor received the habit, and her religious name, Sister Rosaire, to honor Our Lady of the Rosary whose feast was also her birthday.

In 1945, our community changed its custom of making vows every year. In 1950, Rosaire's group was the first to make final vows as a group at Seton Hill. In her letter asking to make final vows, she wrote, "It is with deep gratitude that I am permitted to sign a petition for my final vows. ... I have been counting the days when this dream will become a reality. Often in the past I have thought that it couldn't possibly be true. I know that without God's grace that it would be only a dream."

Following her final vows, Sister Rosaire spent forty-one years teaching in nine of our elementary schools. After she retired from teaching, she spent another twenty-one years in various kinds of community service including as sacristan at Caritas Christi. During those years, she and her lifelong friend Sister Mary Paulus also cared for the Grotto of Our Lady

of Lourdes at Seton Hill and of Our Lady of Fatima shrine on the Caritas Christi grounds.

Just an ordinary life of an ordinary Sister of Charity. Sister Rosaire is the nine hundred thirty-third Sister to die since our community came from Cincinnati to Pennsylvania in 1870. (That includes Mother Aloysia Lowe and Mother Regina Ennis.) Along with the 932 Sisters who went before her, Rosaire would probably say that she was only doing what she thought God was calling her to do. (Probably just like those five Sisters years ago, who were reluctant to have anything said about them at their funerals.) Hundreds and hundreds of ordinary Sisters of Charity who led somewhat hidden lives, yet each unique in its own way. But without their grace-filled call and commitment, where would our mission be?

Robert Wicks, a well-known psychologist called this quality “the virtue of ordinariness.” He said it was “what is needed to counter the culture we live in today, mesmerized by image-making, spin, and a desire for power and advantage to fuel our egoism.” He called for a recovery of ordinariness by all of us.

I would say that Rosaire’s life is an image of what Rabbi Abraham Heschel meant when he wrote, “There is no proof for the existence of God; there are only witnesses.” Thank you, dear Rosaire, for showing us in your own unique way how to be such a witness.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection

Sister Gertrude Foley

February 5, 2020