

# REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF STISTER THERESE BURNS

## MARCH 25, 1929—MAY 15, 2020



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton urges us:

*We must be so careful to meet our grace—  
wherever we go, there is a store of grace waiting.*

Sister Therese Burns met “her grace” in many different places and many different ways.

It all started, of course, in Chicora where John Burns and Stella Blatt, “Mum and Dad,” married and raised 14 children. In the Novitiate, Sister Therese, upon request, would sing “Tiny Old Town:”

*Tiny old town  
Filled with memories  
Memories that cling to me . . .*

We knew the town Sister Therese had in mind was, of course, Chicora.

When the family left their home in 2011, there were articles written about the “strong and holy family” who lived in the big house at the top of the hill. Nearly every member of the family had a nickname. The eight boys were Father Jack, Phil, Bernard (who was called Sam), Jim (who was Coon), Tom (who was Skeeter), Rege, Bob (who was Boone), and Chuck. The boys were all altar servers at Mater Dolorosa Church, located next door, while the six girls made up the choir. The girls were: Mary (who was called Med), Agnes (who was Min), Pat, Kate, Therese (who was first Gert, then Sister Dolorosa, then Sister Therese), and Sister Mary Michael (who was Gov).

The Burns children climbed trees (especially the cherry tree in their yard), played games, and watched their mother milk cows. When she was very young, Sister Therese especially liked it when “Mum” expertly directed some milk right to the mouth of the waiting cat. The family was always active in the parish church.

Actually, when something was needed, at any time, the priest rang a bell which sounded in the kitchen of the Burns home and someone would go next door to see what had to be done.

The children learned their religion from the Sisters of Mercy, who came each week for “catechism” class. But “Mum” made sure each child knew the catechism answers ahead of time.

The Burns family had a Scottish Band at one time, the Burns Family Band. “Dad,” who himself had a wonderful tenor voice, was the founder and director. Everyone in the family participated, wearing Scottish dress, and playing various really sophisticated musical instruments. In another musical effort, especially during World War II, the rugs in the Burns’ home were rolled back on many Sunday evenings, as 40 or more teenage dancers enjoyed “sock hops.”

Chicora High School, as it was called, welcomed everyone in Grades 1–12, combining classes if needed. Sister Therese was often in class with a brother or sister. The school maintained a rigorous academic program and Sister Therese was valedictorian of the high school Class of 1947.

At the time, the Spiritan Priests offered a scholarship to Duquesne University to relatives of any Spiritan priest. The oldest in the family, Father Jack, had become a Spiritan priest, and Sister Therese decided to go to Duquesne where she majored in Business Education and Secretarial Studies. When she graduated in 1951, Sister Therese obtained a secretarial job, feeling she had to pay “Mum and Dad” back for whatever expenses she had incurred at Duquesne. But what she really wanted to do was to “meet the grace” of a call to religious life and to enter the Sisters of Charity, where her younger sister, Sister Mary Michael, was already a junior-professed Sister. Sister James Regis Stewart, whose brother, Father Stewart was, interestingly enough, pastor at Mater Dolorosa in Chicora, told the young Therese that entering religious life would be a greater gift to her parents than paying back money. On September 8, 1951, Therese became a postulant at Seton Hill.

Sister Therese said she was never homesick after she entered because the community was “just like home,” with many people around, rules to keep and permissions to ask.

Her first adventure came when she was still a relatively new postulant and Mother Claudia sent for her asking if she would like to go to Resurrection School to teach fourth grade. Before she could answer, Mother Claudia told her that Mr. Bahre would be at the front door at 10:00 a.m. to drive her to Pittsburgh. The principal, Sister Ermanilda, took her almost directly to the classroom, but since “Gert” (Therese’s nickname) was the only name Sister Ermanilda heard, Therese was introduced to the class as Sister Gertrude! When that got straightened out, the children told Sister Therese that they had spelling class after lunch. So Sister Therese taught spelling, and, since she did not know what else to do, the class learned about spelling all afternoon!

After her canonical year in the novitiate, then Sister Dolorosa, began her 21-year career as a high school business teacher. She taught at Saint Luke in Carnegie, but in 1956, the Community opened a high school in Chandler, Arizona. Sister Mary Michael had already lived and worked at schools in Arizona and Sister Therese liked what she heard about the West. The new school that would surely need a business teacher. That summer, Sister Therese was at Seton Hill and she realized that Mother Claudia had a pattern of walking through the community room a few times a day to go to the Chapel. Since no one ever knew how Mother Claudia chose Sisters for various assignments, Sister Therese made sure she just “happened” to be in the community room that summer every time Mother Claudia came through. “Good morning, Mother! Good afternoon, Mother!” she would say. Nothing else. But, she was missioned to Seton High School in Chandler in the Fall of 1956. She stayed there for two years, then moved to Salpointe High School in Tucson, where she worked with Sister M. Ellenita. This was the beginning of a long relationship between the two sisters. In addition to teaching full schedules, the two Sisters ran the magazine drive in the fall and the chocolate drive in the spring. In a school of 1400 enthusiastic, competitive students and many teachers, these were no small tasks.

After stints totaling 21 years of teaching in Ebensburg, (where she first became friends with Sister Miriam Rita, another “business” person), at Elizabeth Seton High School, Holy Innocents, and Mon Valley, Sister Therese was asked to use her financial and business expertise serving as Assistant to the Community Treasurer. This grace Sister Therese met with joy, serving for 16 years, happy with her work and happy living with the Sisters at Regina House and, later, at Marian Hall.

But let us not forget the large Burns Family in Chicora. In 2011, Bob (“Boone”) Burns estimated that “Mum and Dad” Burns, deceased by then, had 46 grandchildren and 84 great grandchildren. All members of the family were in touch through the “Burns Family Bulletin,” published weekly, beginning in 1953, when all eight boys were serving simultaneously in the military. “Mum” wrote to each son every week, and kept writing when they came home. Eventually, her letters were reproduced, and the Burns Family Bulletin was born, moving eventually to the “Online BurnsNetFamilyBulletin.”

Sister Therese had moved on to meet a new “grace,” one she never expected, to serve as co-manager at Saint Joseph’s House of Hospitality in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. St. Joseph’s is a large facility for men who are homeless or who need food, shelter, and hope. The former teacher and financial assistant embraced the opportunity to work in so many ways with those who needed not only material help, but emotional support as well.

Although Sister Therese enjoyed all the ministries to which she was called, she embraced the work at St. Joseph’s in a special way. She related so well with the residents at Saint Joseph’s, helping them in large and small ways. “I see a small ear in your shirt. Just leave it out.” Sister Therese would repair the damage. “How are you today, Joe?” she’d ask with a big smile. “How is the new job coming?” Sister Therese became a co-worker, a great listener, an appointment secretary, and a personal friend in need.

After twelve years at Saint Joseph’s House of Hospitality, Sister Therese met a new grace: assisting in the Archives of the Sisters of Charity here at Caritas Christi. There, among other services, Sister Therese worked with Sister Mary Catherine to secure a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission that was used to purchase materials that assure proper storage and care for community photographs and documents. She also served as treasurer for Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious. During this time, Sister Therese was chair of the Elizabeth Seton Care Fund, participated in diocesan events, and was always a star member of the Sisters of Charity Community Choir.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton tells us to “be so careful to meet our grace,” then says, “wherever we go, there is a store of grace waiting.” Sister Therese “met her grace”

in many different ways: in her “strong and holy family,” in her varied ministries, in her friendships, in her religious community. We all grew in love from the “store of grace” she received, and we will continue to grow in love and grace through the life of Sister Therese Burns.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection*

*Sister Brigid Marie Grandey*

*October 17, 2020*