

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY AGNES KIRSCH

November 30, 1935—September 10, 2021



What shall I share with you as we celebrate the passing of our dear Sister Mary Agnes? There is much to tell of her long and fruitful life. As I thought about the young woman from Nicktown in Cambria County who entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill on September 8, 1953, with me and over 20 others, I fondly remembered our common threads. Together, we received the habit, pronounced first and final vows, and spent summers studying at Seton Hill. Even though our ministries varied, we often visited and laughed and talked about those days—our days.

When I reflect on her life, really our lives, I made a mental comparison to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, whose story Saint Luke recounts. I thought: Mary Agnes, in a number of ways, was like Zacchaeus. Most of us may have had experiences a similar to the Zacchaeus story when we have been in a situation when we suddenly were invited to engage in something new. We may have received an assignment that challenged us and changed life for us. Zacchaeus was a short man who heard about Jesus and was so curious. He learned Jesus was passing through his town. Because of the crowds, he couldn't see the Wonder Worker so he climbed a sycamore tree. Jesus looked

up, saw him, and told him to come down. Jesus wanted to have dinner with him. Since Jesus was coming for dinner, Zacchaeus immediately came down and defended himself against his critics. We can just imagine his excitement to get everything prepared. What a change of plans!

Many times in her life, Mary Agnes encountered the unexpected twists of fate when God's plans for her turned around. She didn't need to climb a tree but the Lord spoke through the unexpected persons and events that called out: "Zacchaeus, Mary Agnes, come down . . . "We're coming to dinner."

Born November 30, 1935, the second child of 12, to Alcuin and Frances Becker Kirsch, she joined a very large loving, and religious family. The Benedictine Fathers from Saint Vincent served the people of Nicktown, and one priest in particular, Father Otto Wendell, was the instrument God used indirectly to get Mary Agnes to the Sisters of Charity. Mary Agnes thought of entering religious life when she was in high school, but was also drawn to nursing. When she was a high school senior, she went with three classmates to Johnstown to take the entrance exam for the School of Nursing there. They later learned their tests results had been lost and the exam could not be taken again until the next year. Mrs. Kirsch asked Father Otto to take them to Pittsburgh Hospital to take entrance exams. Mary Agnes passed and took two required summer science courses at Seton Hill College where the desire to be a sister resurfaced. With the help of Sister Agnes Joseph and the happy support of her parents, she entered the Sisters of Charity that September.

Her desire and plans to become a nurse shifted by the times. Our schools were full, and most of the postulants were sent to teach. As a postulant, Mary

Agnes taught at DePaul School in the lower primary department. She returned to Assumption Hall for habit day and received the religious name, Sister Mary Otto, in honor of Father Otto who had been so good to her and the family.

Mary Agnes earned her BA from Seton Hill College in elementary education and later the MA in education with a specialty in reading instruction from University of Arizona. She attained certifications from dioceses and states that served her well during her 45 years of teaching primary students in parish schools of the Greensburg, Altoona-Johnstown, Pittsburgh, Tucson Dioceses. She always recognized the Will of God at work in her life and wrote: "God gets you where He wants you . . . even though the road may be crooked. I wouldn't change any of it for the world. I've had my ups and downs like everyone else; it's been a beautiful life and I've reaped many, many blessings."

She repeatedly used her talents in the classrooms, later in her home visiting, and in fund-raising activities. The hobbies included: crocheting, sewing, quilting and photography. The latter, which she especially loved, won her a blue ribbon at the Fayette County Fair. Her classroom memories were many. She recalled that when she taught a majority of children who knew little English, she prepared a Spanish-English dictionary for her first-grade class. It contained 50 pages of objects that would be familiar to the children, e.g., animals, items of clothing. She wrote the English/Spanish word below the object. She always made the children feel special by keeping albums of each class and their activities because she loved to watch how the children

developed in love of God and the basics of our faith. “I never want to stop teaching,” she said, “and pray I’ll have the strength to continue and be a good listener.”

Her desire to remain always in teaching was threatened when an unexpected call came—that surprise again. She was assigned to Immaculate Conception Parish, Connellsville, to serve as Director of Religious Education:

“Zacchaeus, hurry down, I mean to stay at your house today.” Mary Agnes did hurry down. For the next 18 years, she worked long and hard ministering to the people of Fayette County. In classrooms, in homes of the elderly, poor, and infirm, in the churches, and in the sacristies, she never really stopped teaching the love and mercy of God. “Wherever the Church and the world most need us.”

The pastor of Immaculate Conception asked Sister Mary Agnes to help create and implement an idea he had for an archival collection of photos, artifacts, and memorabilia from the Catholic Churches which historically served the people of the Connellsville Region. Mary Agnes did a magnificent job. To acknowledge her work, the pastor dedicated the room as “The Sister Mary Agnes Kirsch Room, Archives of the Connellsville Catholic Community.” A metal plaque hangs at the door:

In recognition of her 18 years of loving service to this faith Community

(A.D. 1999-2017)

Sister Mary Agnes Kirsch

We can’t overlook her connection with the Flea Markets—fundraising endeavors that took place after the Summer Festivals ended. Sister Mary

Agnes organized and managed Flea Markets for 18 years with three held at Assumption Hall, four at Greensburg Central Catholic High School, four at Saint Paul School Cafeteria. The proceeds from the events averaged \$6000 each year.

When Zacchaeus ran ahead to climb the tree in order to see the Lord, he was eager, enthusiastic, and was met by the great invitation to come down. Jesus was to have dinner at his house. As Zacchaeus scrambled down, the crowd murmured and critically judged his past actions. But Zacchaeus stood his ground, explaining and defending himself. Jesus blessed him. I'm sure in her long life of service, Mary Agnes may have been criticized and judged for her long hours of service and devotion (maybe overdrawn) to her assignments. Like Zacchaeus, she also stood her ground and did what she believed she should. Now, Salvation has come to her house, and she has been welcomed eternally into the Lord's house.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection

Sister Jean Augustine

September 14, 2021